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Oral history interview with Andres Serrano,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Andres Serrano on July 29-30, 2009. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Frank H. Goodyear for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Oral History Interviews of American Photographers.

Andres Serrano has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

FRANK H. GOODYEAR: This is Frank Goodyear interviewing Andres Serrano in the artist's home in New York City on July 29, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Disc No. 1. First of all, do you have any sort of questions about this?

ANDRES: SERRANO: I have one question. Is the mike too far? Because I could bring an extension cord if we want it closer?

MR. GOODYEAR: Talk again.

MR. SERRANO: Is the mike too far? Because I can bring an extension cord if we want it closer.

MR. GOODYEAR: It's good.

MR. SERRANO: Great.

MR. GOODYEAR: It's cool. Some of the questions are kind of, what can I say? Just kind of factual information about your biography some hard—we're just sometimes collecting just details about your life. So really what I want to do really today is talk about the first half of your life. Then tomorrow we'll talk about the second half. And, you know, perhaps the place to start is when and where were you born?

MR. SERRANO: You know that's a very good question and a good start. Because there are many things that disturb me as an artist. You know I feel like I've been maligned and misunderstood. But one of the most disturbing things that I have found as an artist is when people think that I'm from somewhere else. You know I was born and raised in New York City. I was born in New York in 1950. You know I've lived in this country all my life, and I've never lived anywhere else except New York City. And, you know, from time to time I've seen in bios and publications, that you know, the fact that I was born in Cuba or that I was born in Honduras or Haiti.

And, you know, I really got upset with Lisa Phillips, you know, who at the time was working as a curator at the Whitney Museum [Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC] when they came out with that big book on twentieth century American artists. And I was horrified when I opened that section to my section, the first line said that, you know, that I was Puerto Rican. I had been born in Puerto Rico. I mean I was livid about that. And I had to send a letter to Lisa and to Max Anderson as well. Because you know to me it's one thing when people, you know, say it out of stupidity and ignorance. But when you're writing a book that purports to be not only a history but factual, you know, about such an important thing as American artists and you get the facts wrong, I mean that to me was unacceptable. Especially because no one else has ever called me Puerto Rican.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] So when you pointed this out to Lisa and to Maxwell Anderson, what was their response to that.

MR. SERRANO: They were very apologetic. But still, I felt like a—there was no excuse for it. Even the *Village Voice* and the *New York Times*, whenever they do anything, they constantly call, the fact checkers, you know, constantly call to make sure you get things right. And so, you know, I was very upset by that. Just like I was upset when I saw a review of my book *America and Other Work by Andres Serrano* that Taschen [Taschen, Germany, 2004] put out a few years ago, some magazine, you know, said something about artist Serrano paying homage to his adopted country. And I had to call up the editor and say: Where the hell do you think I came from? You know.

Again, getting back to origin and getting back to—which brings me to another point: Ethnicity, this thing about ethnicity. As I said, I was born in New York City. My mother was born in Key West, Florida. However, she was raised in Cuba because her parents were Cuban. And so she came back to this country in the late forties, and I

was born in 1950. Now, more than once, I've seen in my bio—and again, it's upsetting to me—where they refer to my Afro-Cuban mother and Honduran father. And I feel like, yes, I can say my mother was Cuban, although I question this Afro-Cuban. And in fact, the one time after a lecture, this man came up to me and, you know, he was a Caucasian man. But when he started speaking to me, it turned out he was Cuban. And he said to me, you know, "What's this crap about your Afro-Cuban mother. She was Cuban, period." You know. And he was right, you know. And so I also, you know, and more than once I've seen it in bios.

I did a lecture at Drexel [University —AS] a few years ago, where they sent me the bios of all the speakers that were doing to be doing something there. And they had something about Betsey Johnson and something about someone else. And then led by Andres Serrano of Afro-Cuban parents and Honduran. And, you know, I felt like, well, you didn't tell me. That would be okay if you told me where Betsey Johnson's parents were, where the other speakers' parents were from, you know, But the fact that you choose to ethnicize it you know, unnecessarily. I feel like, what is that the only thing you can come up with? Is that the only thing that matters to you? And so because I feel like it's a sort of a profiling, meaning, you know, what? This guy, he's an American, but he's from somewhere else. He's got something other than American in him. And I feel like, you know, we all have something else, you know. None of us are true Americans. We all came—or at least our parents came—from somewhere else. But it seems to be only in people of color where that matters. If you're white, it doesn't matter if your parents were Ukrainian or Russian or Polish. You know, once you're white and born here, that's all that matters. And so I have issues with people trying to put that into the bio. I always have said that, you know, I want to be seen as a New York City artist, that's it.

MR. GOODYEAR: That's where you're from.

MR. SERRANO: You know once you meet me, and if you have questions, I can answer your questions. But where my parents came from should not be the most important thing in my life.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure. However, do tell me, tell me a little bit more about your parents. What did they do? And tell me a little about the household in which you were raised in Brooklyn?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. Well, I was born in Manhattan, and we lived in Manhattan until I was about seven years old. And then the family moved to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. I like to say that I'm one of the first artists who moved into Williamsburg in the late fifties. [They laugh.] But my father I didn't really know well. He left us when I was very young; I was probably an infant. And so I was raised by my mother. And in Brooklyn we lived in my grandmother's house on Havemeyer Street, 95 Havemeyer Street. And so, you know, my home consisted of my grandmother living downstairs. She owned the building, so she had the big apartment downstairs with a female cousin who was like an older sister. And then my mother and I lived in one of the apartments upstairs. So I was raised primarily by my mother. Yes, my father was a merchant marine from Honduras. He came to the States in the late forties, met my mother and married her. But then went back, I believe in the early fifties went back to Honduras.

MR. GOODYEAR: So what interested you as a child? I mean what are your memories of growing up in Williamsburg?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I liked the neighborhood. You know I lived on a corner of Williamsburg which at the time was primarily Italian. And a few blocks from me was more Hispanic, Puerto Rican population. And then a few blocks up further than that, you know, on the south side, was the Hassidic community which is still there, of course. But, you know, I think I have very pleasant memories of my childhood; that even though I was an only child and I sort of had a love-hate relationship with my mother, so it meant that I had a certain kind of distance from her. But I was very happy growing up in the neighborhood I grew up in, and also having a lot of time to myself, I spent a lot of time reading in fact. And so I can't say my early childhood was unpleasant for me.

Even though, you know, my mother had several psychotic episodes when I was growing up. And in fact more than once she had to be hospitalized. Even though I felt very bad about that, you know, I felt horrible for her; but still there was a part of me that was relieved whenever she had to go away. You know because I had the apartment to myself. Of course my grandmother was downstairs, and she'd look in upon me. But I can't say that it was not without its benefits. However, you know, I did feel guilty about my mother's illness. Because there were psychotic episodes that would last about a week or so. In my young mind I noticed it as schizophrenia. I thought it must be something like schizophrenia because she goes in and out. And so she would have these episodes that would last about a week, ten days. And then she'd come out of it. More than once actually, we, meaning my cousin, Xiomara, and my grandmother, looked after her and were able to protect her from herself and from others by keeping her in the apartment. And then she would actually come out of it and be back to normal.

But there was one incident when I was about 12, I believe, where she, when she was in one of those states, she sat on the window ledge—we lived on the second floor—and fell. And so she broke her leg and had to go to the

hospital. But normally when she went into those episodes we kept her at home. And I think one of the things— one of the ways that I responded was by being very sensitive to her. As I said, I had a love-hate relationship with my mother. And so there were many times in my life when I didn't want to talk to her, and I withheld a lot from her. But at the same time I learned to read or try to read her very well. And in fact I got very good at it because I could tell, you know, when an episode was about to come on. I could tell when she was about to go off, you know, because, you know, there were just signs.

I remember one time I was outside on the street playing ball, and it was about eight-thirty at night. And she called me in, and she said to me, "I want you to help me look for something." And I must have been like nine or ten at the time. And I went inside with her. Then she looked for a long time underneath the bureau. Then she got a penny, and she said, "This is what I was looking for." I felt like two things immediately: I felt like there was something wrong, and I felt like my mother was going to talk about my father. And sure enough, she said to me, "Tomorrow we're going to go look for your father in Honduras." And we had actually been to Honduras a couple of times when I was about five and six to look for him. And so she said to me, "Tomorrow we're going to go to see your father in Honduras." And sure enough, the next day I was sleeping on the sofa in the living room, and my mother, she pulled open the drapes. And I could see that her complexion had changed, and she looked very different. She looked very sallow. And she was sweaty, and she looked like her eyes were not focused, like she was in another world. And she was hearing voices and you know. So I think that's what, you know, one of the things that it did for me, dealing with her psychosis, is that it allowed me to try to get into her mind and be sensitive to her as much as possible.

MR. GOODYEAR: Did your mother take you to art museums or galleries? I mean what was your first exposure to art? Maybe it was through books.

MR. SERRANO: No, my mother— That was why I always fought with her. My mother was afraid of anything intellectual. She never wanted me to read books about mythology or, you know, archaeology. Anything that I showed an interest in—and I was about seven, eight, nine, ten—anything I showed an interest in she would always dismiss it as not being good for me. And so I took it to mean that my mother wanted for me to be her one and only. And she didn't want me to be interested in anything in life other than her. And so I withdrew. And in fact the first time I got into art was on my own. I was about 11 or 12 years old, and at that time I started to ride in subways by myself. And somehow I discovered the MET [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. And so I remember a few years earlier I had been to the Brooklyn Museum for a lecture. Actually not for a lecture. It was for a concert with the school. But somehow when I was 11 or 12, I discovered the MET on my own. And I had started going there and looking at the paintings -- and just liking it.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you have specific memories of those experiences at the MET or specific works of art that you saw that particularly were compelling to you?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I remember one painting in particular that was at the MET in the early sixties, '61, '62. And it's still there. And that was Homer contemplating—not Homer. Aristotle contemplating—

MR. GOODYEAR: The bust of Homer.

MR. SERRANO: The bust of Homer.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right. By Rembrandt.

MR. SERRANO: Exactly. And the thing was I believed that at that time that painting was the most expensive painting in the world; it was like \$2.5 million [two point five million dollars], you know. So we've come a long way from that. But, yes, a lot of those paintings that were there then are still there now.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes. That's the great thing about institutions like that, you know, is they have permanent collections that are available for your generation, the next generation, you know. And that's very special. Obviously religion plays an important part in your own work. Can you talk about the role of Catholicism in your upbringing? I mean did you regularly go to church with your mother?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, sure. You know my upbringing was as a Catholic. You know my mother was a Catholic, and so I was a Catholic. And I made my confirmation and my communion when I was about eight or nine, confirmation 11 or 12. And I remember at that time when I was confirmed, I remember being told the nuns in religious instruction—because I didn't go to a Catholic school, but every Wednesday at two-thirty, we in public school went for religious instruction for an hour or two with the nuns. And so I remember at the time the nuns saying that at confirmation you were becoming a soldier of God. And so, yes, I like to think that I became enlisted into, you know, God's army at the age of 12. And then shortly after that I stopped going to church. And I've always felt like—

MR. GOODYEAR: Why was that? Because—

MR. SERRANO: Well, I've always felt like there's a real conflict between what the church tells you about your body and what your body tells you about it, the body. And so you have to choose. And I've always felt like, you know, there's a lot of people who become lapsed Catholics and stop going to church around the same time. It's because the Church is no longer valid for them. It's no longer something they could listen to, you know. And that's what happened to me. I stopped going to church around the age of 12 or 13. And then didn't really think about my religious upbringing until 20 years later when I was in my early thirties [30s], and I started to do my photographs. And realized that I was referring a lot to Jesus and doing a lot of work on Christianity.

But again, I just want to say one thing about my mother and religion. Yes, she was a Catholic. But she, you know, she was the sort of Catholic who would go to church and arrive like ten minutes before the Mass ended. I mean we—my mother was always compulsively late. And so I always remember that we never got to sit inside the church, you know, because it was so crowded we were standing in the back. And we'd get there like ten maybe 15 minutes before it ended.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you think that Catholicism was part of your identity as a teenager? Or your lapsed Catholicism? When you stopped going to church, I mean did that upset your mother, and that kind of hung over you as a kind of teenager?

MR. SERRANO: Well, no. I think when I stopped going to church, at that point I'm not even sure if my mother was going to church anymore either. And my mother was in a way sort of clueless and oblivious to most of the things that I did as an adult. But she always adored me as her little boy. And so whatever I did or didn't do in life, it was okay with my mother. But, you know, she really wasn't aware of anything I did. Personally, when I became an artist, she had no idea about any of that. But, you know, I would say that I've always felt like a Christian, if not a Catholic, certainly a Christian. But there was about 20 years where I didn't think about God, and I didn't really feel it, although it was still inside of me. And I think, you know, something that I always thought was that I never liked praying. I always felt guilty about praying because the only times I really prayed was when I needed something, when I wanted something from God. And so it made me feel very guilty that the only time I'm talking to God is when I'm asking for something. And so I kind of stopped praying. But, you know, I would say that religion was still in me. And the fact that it became a sort of not obsession but it became one of the subjects in my work, recurring subjects in my work, it means that there was a part of me that, you know, really is close to religion or to Christ in some way.

As you can see now. I'm a collector now. And what I collect is mostly seventeenth [17th] century, sixteen [16], fifteen [15], fourteenth (14th) century objects and sculptures, and most of them are ecclesiastical. Because, you know, most of these pieces that I collect are of a religious nature. Or even the furniture. Some of the furniture is seventeenth [17th] century furniture that came from churches. Or stuff that was made, you know, in homage to the Church. So I feel like religion has always been in me. But at the same time I am one of those those Christians or lapsed Catholics, kind of like Fellini [Federico Fellini] and [inaudible]; they have belief and disbelief at the same time. They have their love and hate for the Church, you know. But it's obvious that they can't get away from it. And so you know my work sometimes has been spoken in terms of the sacred and the profane. And I always say: Why can't it be both? Why does it have to be one or the other? You know it's like you can't have the sacred without the profane, as you can't have good without evil. So you know I had seen that ambivalence and contradiction in myself and in my work.

MR. GOODYEAR: We'll return to the question of religion and its role in your work when we get to talking about specific series. But I want to just continue to stick right now with your early career and switch over and talk about your early education. And what kind of sort of— It was like going to school here in New York. What are your memories of those experiences? Whether you had art classes in high school. You know, when did you know that you wanted to be an artist?

MR. SERRANO: Well, the only time I really thought about art in elementary school was maybe in the seventh grade. I remember there was a kid by the name of William, who could draw very well, he could paint very well, very realistically. And I was very impressed with that. I guess, you know, I also remember maybe a little after that when I was maybe in the tenth grade, that— Actually, no, even earlier than that. I remember when I was probably around the sixth grade, you sent away for that thing, for that ad that they used to have of a pirate. And then it said, "Draw me." You know. And then you'd send away, and they'd send you the kit, or they'd teach you how to be an artist through the mail. So I just remember, you know, doing some exercises, copying pictures, reproducing pictures.

But once I got to high school—at the time I really didn't think about being an artist. Then once I got into high school, I went at first to Bushwick High. No, I went first to Boys' High in Brooklyn in Bed-Sty [Bedford-Stuyvesant]. At the time— And by the way, I just want to say I attended P.S. 17 which was around the corner from where I lived. It was literally one and a half blocks away from my home. So I attended P.S. 17. And actually I want to tell you a little something about that. You know my mother often did things that horrified me, especially in public; she embarrassed me.

But occasionally, once or twice in my life, my mother did something that I was eternally grateful for. I remember in the third grade she came up to the teacher one afternoon and started arguing. Well, we were in class. And started arguing. I guess you'd have to call it arguing because somehow my mother didn't really speak any English at all. The only thing she could really say was: "Son of a bitch!" You know. But she really didn't speak any English at all. But somehow she talked to the teacher and said that I was not in the right grade. I should go be in the fourth grade and not the third grade. And even though she embarrassed me—the next day they put me in the fourth grade. And so from the fourth grade to the eighth grade I grew up with the same bunch of kids, you know. And I remember a lot of their names: Tommy Napolitano, Mario Puccio.

MR. GOODYEAR: This big Italian-American neighborhood, yes.

MR. SERRANO: Yes, you know. And [Anthony —AS] Salvatore and Christina Brindisi. And I grew up with the cream of the crop. Those kids were the brightest kids that I ever saw, you know. And we were the white class. You know, 4-1, 5-1, 6-1. I mean I guess that was the smartest class in that grade. And so I have to thank my mother for pushing me forward and getting me promoted to that class—or skipped, rather, to that class—because it changed my life. You know I think my life would've been very different if I had not been surrounded by such brilliant kids. I felt very lucky to have that kind of inspiration around me.

MR. GOODYEAR: Were there particular teachers or mentors who were important to you, that you recall?

MR. SERRANO: No, the kids were like more important to me.

MR. GOODYEAR: Just the kids.

MR. SERRANO: Yes, the kids. And one kid in particular was important to me. Now, Tommy Napolitano was a handsome kid. Even in the fifth grade, he was a handsome kid. And he was like one of those kids that was more developed: he was cooler, he had the air. He just seemed more sophisticated, otherworldly, better looking, and smarter than the rest. He was actually a smart kid. And he was not a genius like Mario, his best friend. Mario Puccio was a genius. And in fact I believe in the sixth grade Mario and this girl by the name of Patricia were both taken to a more elite school, special school, because they were so smart. But Tommy Napolitano was a bright kid, a smart kid, a kid that all the girls wanted, you know, and all the guys probably looked up to him in some way. And, you know, I didn't really talk much to Tommy. I didn't talk much to a lot of people. And in fact throughout my life, sometimes people who have been the closest to me are people that I cannot speak to. Like for instance I respected and adored and revered my grandmother a lot more than my mother. I thought my grandmother was smarter, more intellectual. She spoke English, you know. And so I put my grandmother on a sort of higher intellectual plane and pedestal. But I could not speak to my grandmother. I was very shy, you know, extremely shy with her. And barely could just answer her questions. Never tried to—would see her from a distance, but try not to be around her. And I don't know what kind of shyness it is. But sometimes people I feel the closest to and admire the most are the people that I also back away from and like to see them only from a distance. And Tommy was one of those people that I respected, and he was a hero to me, but from a distance, you know.

Then after eighth grade, we all went our separate ways and I lost track of Tommy. And then—I'm just getting ahead of myself. But, you know, I want to say one thing about Tommy is that in my early twenties I got heavily into drugs, and I dropped out of everything and just got into drugs. And I remember being at one of my lowest points where I looked bad and felt bad. And I ran into a kid in the subway by the name of Robert Rodriguez, one of the kids from school. And, you know, I never had any competition with Robert, although I thought he and another kid by the name of Roberto Gonzalez, you know, were a little competitive. Actually they were the only Spanish kids in the class aside from me because everyone else was Italian. There were no African-American kids in my class either in those years from fourth grade to the eighth grade.

But, you know, I ran into Roberto Rodriguez, and I asked him about some of the old friends. You know we were both in our early twenties now. And he told me—oh, I said what about Roberto Gonzalez? Roberto's doing great. He has his own company, this and that. And I said, "What about Tommy? What about Tommy Napolitano?" And he said, "Oh, Tommy. Tommy became a drug addict. And it was like the last time I heard he was on Forty-second Street [42nd] and was pimping. He had a broken leg and stuff, and he's on crutches." And, you know, after I said goodbye to Robert, you know, I thought to myself, Tommy had always been ahead of me. In fourth grade, once in fifth grade. Once I caught up to his level in the fifth grade, he was already to the next level. So I always felt like I was lagging behind intellectually, in all ways, behind Tommy. I felt like he was a role model for me but one that I could never catch up to because he was always one step ahead of me.

And I thought, even now, you know, even when I was feeling the way and going through what I was going through, Tommy had surpassed me. He had already been there. And again, I had new-found respect for Tommy because unlike Roberto and all these other guys who couldn't lick Tommy's boots, I felt like sometimes the best and the brightest, everyone should go through—choose the most difficult path because they have their reasons

for doing so, they have their demons. And maybe because they're so brilliant, that's the only way they can do it. And so I still respected Tommy Napolitano.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you know what has happened to him?

MR. SERRANO: No, no. [They laugh.]

MR. GOODYEAR: Now at that time, were you thinking about going to college or were you thinking about getting a job? And if so, you know, what were you thinking about doing at that particular moment?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I never thought about college. In fact I went to Boys' High in Brooklyn after grade school. And I went for one year for the, you know, what do you call it? It's the first year, the freshman year.

MR. GOODYEAR: The freshman year.

MR. SERRANO: And after one year there, I didn't like it because, you know, it was mostly black, 95 percent black, the students. And all boys. And, you know, I didn't like being in an all-boys school. And so, you know, years later Boys' High became Boys' and Girls' High, and now it's Boys and Girls' High. But at the time it was Boys' High. So I dropped out of school after my freshman year. In fact I would've dropped out permanently but then someone from the board of ed [Board of Education] came to see me—came to see my grandmother. And so I had to go back to school for half a year, and I went to Bushwick High. But after six months I dropped out of Bushwick High, and I never went back to school again until I was about 17, when I applied to the Brooklyn Museum Art School for a scholarship.

The reason I applied was that I had found friends in Bed-Sty, two brothers named Reggie and Dickie Monroe. These guys were older than me. I was at the time 16, and they were twice my age. One was 28, and the other one was 30. But they were like peers for me and great friends. They also applied to the Brooklyn Museum Art School. And, in effect, Reggie applied first; he got a scholarship, but then he refused it and decided not to part of the system. But Dickie and I applied, and we got scholarships. So I entered the Brooklyn Museum Art School at the age of 17.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Perhaps a record. Obviously you had begun to think of yourself as an artist and were creating art. I mean that obviously prompted your decision to go to Brooklyn. What was the kind of work that you were doing as a teenager?

MR. SERRANO: Well, my early influences—I mean the influences that I think have shaped a lot of my work since then was Picasso [Pablo Picasso] and also Mondrian [Piet Mondrian]; and most of all Marcel Duchamp. I felt like Marcel Duchamp taught me—and he taught everyone else—that anything could be art. And that art, you know, was a concept. And more than anything, that the concept was very important. And so those were my real early influences and teachers. And the stuff that I did at the Brooklyn Museum because I studied—[Loud noise in background] I went there for two years, in fact. So I actually studied painting and sculpture and not photography. And in fact I've never learned to print. I've never actually wanted to see myself as a photographer. And so I've never spent time in a darkroom.

But, yes, you know, the stuff I would do there would be exercises, you know, instructors would give us. There was a lot of painting from the nude sort of assignments. And so, yes, in the beginning I did mostly painting and sculpture in school up until the time I left two years later. And when I left, I actually started going out with a woman named Millie Ehrlich who actually worked in the Children's Museum part of the Brooklyn Museum. So Millie and I lived together. And Millie owned a camera, a Konica camera. So at some point I started using her camera. And realizing that I could still be an artist but with a camera instead of with a paintbrush or doing objects. In fact many of the things that I made as a student, all of those things, except for a portfolio that I have from the early days, all of those things disappeared because, you know, I'd make paintings— I remember one self-portrait actually that was stolen out of the Brooklyn Museum. [They laugh.] You know at the end of the year we had to take our stuff, and my painting had disappeared. But, you know, so those sculptures and objects that I had made, they all disappeared. And that's one of the things that, you know, being an artist with a camera, it allowed me to hold onto my work, you know. It didn't get lost with old girlfriends and people like that.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Now were there particular teachers at the Brooklyn Museum school who you remember as having been an influence on your work?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I only had one teacher for two years, and that was Calvin Douglas, an African-American artist, who was a teacher at the time. And the only other name that I remember there at the time was Stephen Antonakos. But I didn't have him. He was in the sculpture class, and I didn't have him.

MR. GOODYEAR: And what do you think you learned from going to art school? Either through the specific teachers or the milieu of other art students there? I mean what did you take away from that experience?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I realized that first of all I liked living the bohemian life mainly. You know you do your own thing.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm.

MR. SERRANO: After school, you know, we'd have three hours of instruction in the morning. And sometimes after school, you know, I would go with one or a couple of students. I remember one in particular, Curtis. He was like a beatnik even though it was the hippy era. He reminded me of a beatnik. You know Curtis would go back to the sculpture garden and smoke a joint. So, you know, I feel like that's the one thing that it made me realize: That I liked being able to do my own thing, first of all. And also to be able to find a job or an outlet, creatively. And you know for a long time, it—it didn't bother me—but it made me feel a little funny that, you know, I felt like I don't have a real job. People see me in cafes. And many people have seen me in cafes for years and don't know what I do. They just think I hang out because I tend to appear at the same places all the time. But, you know, so it made me feel like a little guilty that I don't have a nine-to-five job. And also grateful. But it just made me feel not even guilty, funny about how money comes sometimes.

And, you know, it's not because I'm working. It's because someone has bought my pieces, and that's why I have an income. So in reality I've created so much work over the years, that this is what allows me to live even if I don't do any real work. But still, you know—again, I'm grateful for that, and I wouldn't have it any other way. Because before I started to sell my work—and I didn't really start selling work until I was 40, you know enough to live off—before that I did a number of what I would regard as shit jobs, but they were—I call them shit jobs not because they were shitty and not because I felt bad doing them. But because I knew they were no-end jobs with no future. And I purposely chose them. I mean everything from, well, early on when I was about 20, 21, I went to work for an advertising agency for about six or nine months. And I couldn't decide if I wanted to be a copywriter or an art director. And so they sort of let me do a little bit of both, you know. But later on, in my late twenties, after I got out of drugs—because my drug period was heavily from 21 to 28, and then I was just a drug addict, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: What prompted you to end that?

MR. SERRANO: Well, at the age of 28—and I was now on the Methadone Program—I felt my biological clock ticking and saying to me, you know, you're 28 pushing 30, if you're still on drugs and in this lifestyle when you're 30, you'll never get out of it. That's it. And so, you know, in my head I always had this idea that I would become an artist. And so even though I didn't feel like, you know, I'm going to jump into art right now, I still felt like it's time to quit. It's time to get off this shit. You've had your fun. You've gone—the ride is now over. You have no choice.

So I weaned myself under that program, which was the hardest thing to do. It's like worse than quitting smoking, you know. And, you know, I went from 100 milligrams, down to 80, 50, 60, all the way down to five. And even at five, you know, I still had to wean myself from that. I did. I got off it. And two years later—a year later—I met my future wife, Julie Ault. And then she was already involved in art. She was a member of a group called Group Material, an artists' collective. And so I would say for about a year or two after marrying Julie that I started to do what I consider my early work, at the age of 30, 31.

MR. GOODYEAR: Now where had you met Julie?

MR. SERRANO: I met Julie at a club called Tier 3 in SoHo. Because one of the things that happened when I got off methadone was I couldn't sleep at night, I really couldn't. And my leg was always shaking like that. I had this abundance of nervous energy and drive. And so one of the things that I started to do was started going out to clubs at night by myself. I had never really gone to clubs at all. But I started to go out dancing; I just started going dancing to clubs by myself. One night I met this woman who was with her friends, and we started dancing. And her friends went away. And we danced, and I think we went home that night, and we spent two or three nights together. And by the third day I realized we hadn't exchanged names. So it became a little game to see how far we could stretch it. But so I met Julie Ault, and I lived with her for eight months or so, and then we got married.

MR. GOODYEAR: Were there other artists and/or photographers in your circle of friends during those years? And what impact did they and Julie have on your own work.

MR. SERRANO: Well, first of all I want to say during the drug years, I didn't know anybody. And in fact one of my best friends in the whole world, a man who knew me since we met in 1971, by the name of Michael Coulter, who's a black man from the Bronx. I remember Michael at some point during my drug years referring to me as a photographer or as an artist. And I said to him, "Michael, I'm not an artist." I said, "I'm a drug addict, I'm not an artist." Because I felt that I couldn't wear two hats at once. You know I felt like I couldn't serve two masters at once. For that time I felt don't call me an artist. I don't deserve to be called an artist; I'm not an artist. And so years later when I did become an artist, you know, I would say that the people that I met through Julie were

people like Leon Golub and Nancy Spero and other people that Julie met as a result of being involved not only through Material [Material Group], but she was also involved in a project called "Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America." And actually that was—it was an open-call showroom for artists to show and protest this cause. And was actually that was the first show that I ever was in, the first group show back in '81, I think, or '83.

But, yes, through Julie I met several artists, usually older artists. But, you know, except for Leon Golub, I've never really been close to any artists. And with me I was not that close to him. I mean I would see him—we actually would see him, and once I asked him to pose for me for a photograph, and he did so. He was a very generous man, you know, in terms of his time and his energy. And actually, speaking of his generosity, the first show, the first solo show, that I ever had was through Leon. It was at a gallery called Noirhomme-Hufkens Gallery in Brussels [Galerie Hufkens-Noirhomme], Alan Noirhomme and Zachia Hufkens. They were two young dealers who came to visit Leon, and they wanted Leon and Nancy to show with them. And Leon never did, but they saw *Heaven and Hell* [1984], this photograph I had been making of Leon, and Leon encouraged them to come see me. And so it was because of Leon that I got that, my first solo, in Europe, you know, with them.

And so Leon was one of those people that I was a—I could call a friend. I knew a lot of people in the art world—putting out well, you know. I remember running into Fred Wilson one day ten years ago. And, you know, we said hello to Fred. In fact I believe Fred was one of the first—I believe that the first time I met Fred was I had a show, the very first show I had, which was with a gallery named Leonard Perlson, which was in the Meatpacking district [Manhattan], when there was really meat there. And, you know, it was a storefront type—or above a meat market actually, a butcher shop. And, you know, I had a show, and no one came except for Fred Wilson, Laura Simpson, and Bill Arning from White Columns. In fact Bill made a joke. He said, "This is the smallest opening I've ever seen." And I said, "Oh, Bill, you missed—there were seven people here. You just missed it, you know." [They laugh.] But that was the first time I met Fred Wilson, you know. And over the years I've seen Fred, you know, maybe on five occasions in ten years. And, you know, the conversation would be, "Hey, Fred, how you doing?" He'd say, "How are you doing?" How you doing? Good, good. What are you doing? Not much. And that's it. And then the fourth or fifth time I met Fred—and probably the last time I spoke to him, years ago—I said, you know, after we exchanged the normal—[Thunder? In background.] It's raining. Then I'd go, "You know, Fred, this is the same conversation we've always had." [They laugh.] Two words and that's it. That's the extent of knowing people. So that's the extent of my knowing my peers, a lot of my peers, you know. I don't call up Cindy Sherman on the phone and say— In fact for the first three or four times I met Cindy, I didn't recognize her. And so that's the extent of my relationship with some of my peers in the art world. Hell, I see Ross Bleckman and say hello. Do you remember? And that's about it. [They laugh.]

MR. GOODYEAR: Let's take a quick break.

MR. SERRANO: Oh, my God! It's raining again.

[END CD 1]

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay, I think we're back live with Tape #2. This is Frank Goodyear interviewing Andres Serrano at the artist's home, July 29, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And we're at Disc 2. Everything is recording. Fine. Excellent. I actually want to go back and talk about the collective Group Material, that I know a little bit about. But, first of all, could you just sort of describe what the group was and what your involvement in it was.

MR. SERRANO: When I met Julie [Julie Ault] in 1978, she was—'79, I believe—she had already formed Group Material with Tim Rollins and six or seven other artists. And Group Material was a group of artists who chose to -- Who first of all, you know, they had an agenda as a—but it was not clear if they were acting as artists or curators. Because what they did was they made installations addressing social themes, AIDS and many other problems. And what they did was they did installations where they used work of other artists and displayed them, as well as projects?. I remember for "Americana," which they did for the Whitney Biennial in the early '80s, they had things like the work of different artists. In addition they also had things like a washing machine and a television and appliances. And so they incorporated, they developed this method of doing shows and installations where they incorporated art with objects, everyday objects.

A lot of the artists that they used, whose work they had were artists like Peter Halley and many—Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, many, many artists that later became very prominent. In fact it was Julie who I think discovered Felix Gonzalez-Torres. And she not only put him in shows, but she invited him to be a part of Group Material. So Felix was actually—he became a member of Group Material as well. As well as Tim Rollins. I think that Group Material really—you know Julie and Tim were the core members of the group. And they started the group.

MR. GOODYEAR: Were you one of the founding members as well?

MR. SERRANO: No.

MR. GOODYEAR: No. But you came along because of Julie.

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I never became a member.

MR. GOODYEAR: Oh, really.

MR. SERRANO: I never, you know, went to a Group Material meeting. I was never a member. And in fact, the night I met Julie at Tier 3, she had been hanging out with Tim [Rollins] and Mundy McLaughlin, another Group Material member, and some other members. Because initially Group Material was a group of young people who were friends and who thought let's do, let's form a collective, an art collective, and do things and projects and installations and art shows. And so they were friends first and then they became Group Material. And I remember the first night I was with Julie, I sort of took her away. We met on the dance floor, went dancing. And I saw Tim and Mundy from a distance, said hello. And then I did not see those guys again for another year. Julie and I were in a real relationship for a year living together and we finally got married. And I never saw her friends again. But I always encouraged Julie on two fronts: I encouraged her to have Group Material as something separate from me. And I also encouraged her to keep her last name, which she did, Ault. So I felt like you know — And I had several reasons for wanting to do that: For one thing, I don't like collaboration, you know; it's not my thing.

MR. GOODYEAR: So you never actually showed with the Group Material ever?

MR. SERRANO: No. But I did show with Group Material.

MR. GOODYEAR: Oh, you did.

MR. SERRANO: But, you know, I showed with Group Material like 40 or 50 of the other artists that they invited to show. And so that's the distinction that we have to make. The eight members or so, however members there were in Group Material, they were the members of Group Material. No one else was a member of Group Material. However, Group Material, you know, did use their work and curate them into shows. And so I was one of many artists that Group Material—whose work Group Material used on occasion. But none of those artists were members of Group Material.

MR. GOODYEAR: Interesting. Interesting. And is that collective still around anymore?

MR. SERRANO: You know, no. Julie kept it alive—Julie and Tim. But I think they really stopped doing Group Material stuff about ten years ago. But they had many shows. I think twice they showed at the Whitney Biennial. They showed at Dia Arts Foundation. And so Group Material had a lot of shows and was really active politically in terms of bringing art and politics and social issues together.

MR. GOODYEAR: And just clarify just a little bit. And why didn't you want to be a part of this collective? Is it because you wanted to maintain a sense of independence or autonomy? Or I mean because you were obviously with Julie, it strikes me as interesting that you decided not to become a member.

MR. SERRANO: Well, I think there are two reasons: Because basically I'm selfish and anti-social. [They laugh.] And so I didn't want to be part of something else, you know, other than my own thing. And also I like keeping my distance from people even when I like them.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] So how did you sort of cultivate, sort of contact and establish kind of an early reputation for yourself? Can you sort of describe some of the kind of early projects or series that were important to you, and how those projects were received here in New York?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, as I've mentioned earlier, the first show I was ever in was called "Artists Call Against U.S. Intervention in Central America."

MR. GOODYEAR: What year was that?

MR. SERRANO: That was in '83.

MR. GOODYEAR: '83?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. And then the first show— I must say at the beginning, like every young artist, I tried to show my work everywhere, every gallery, every place, you know, every institution that would see me. But my very first shows were with alternative spaces: White Columns. White Columns was the first place to give me a show, you know, really. And so the Alternative Museum, Indian Museum. Washentoka [sp], who was director of the Indian Museum for many years now, was one of my greatest supporters. As well as Bill Olander who was chief curator at the New Museum. He was also a great supporter. And so you know at first it was the alternative spaces that gave me opportunities to have group shows. But it was a struggle, you know. But at the time, when

you go through these things, you really don't think of it as a struggle. It's just something you need to do.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure. Do you remember early responses to some of the contributions to these shows that you had? I mean were there particular responses to the work that were important to you in terms of sort of encouraging you forward?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know there weren't too many responses. It was obviously a young unknown artist. And so—

MR. GOODYEAR: But surely you got responses from the curators who were organizing the shows. People like Marcia Tucker and—

MR. SERRANO: Well, I guess it was a positive response.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: They must have liked what I was doing. And actually, in fact, my early work had to use a lot of meat in it. It even, you know, also using meat in religious scenes. And I remember one time I had an exhibit of "Printed Matter" when it was a window front downtown; you know, it was south of Canal Street. It was just a window front. And I believe one of the pieces I showed was called *Stigmata* [1984]. And it was a woman with blood coming down, and I believe you could see her breasts. I think I was told that some people got upset, you know, called the gallery about that one.

MR. GOODYEAR: And how did that make you feel, the fact that your work had potential to offend?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, I really didn't think of it in any way. I just thought it was kind of funny because, you know, it was a small incidental thing. And in fact, I didn't think much of it. And in fact I didn't think much of it either when the lab that had been printing my portfolio—You know before I started to show, I printed a lot of small work and got it printed and mounted. Did a lot of early work that no one ever saw. They were still necessary for me to show to people and to feel like I was doing something, to be able to have a record of what I was doing. And I remember at some point that the printer that I went to refused to print *Stigmata*. And was offended by it. So you get—I didn't think much of it, but I thought, oh, this fag won't print my work anymore. But again I really didn't think much of it.

MR. GOODYEAR: By Marcia Tucker was willing to show it.

MR. SERRANO: But Marcia Tucker was willing to show it. And Marcia Tucker and the New Museum, I think—I know—were the first museum to actually purchase one of my pieces. It was called *Octopus Head*. It was actually a self-portrait with me with an octopus completely covering my face. And the museum actually had that piece for a long time downstairs, you know. But, you know, I really didn't think anything of my work in terms of controversy or provocation. And then—

But, you know, I want to tell you a story about Bill Olander. I met William Olander, who became the chief curator at the New Museum, two days after he came into town. I mean I just met him by chance in front of the New Museum. And Julie was with me. And I think Julie knew him so she introduced me. And so years later I submitted an application for a studio at P.S.1. And I remember we had—or at least one of the members of Group Material, Doug Ashford, was actually on the panel deciding who gets studios. And that's why I know this; otherwise I wouldn't have known it. But he said that my work came up, and [inaudible] ... but Bill Olander was on that panel. And Bill said, "Oh, let me see that again." Because initially they were going to pass on it. And Bill said, "Let me see that work again." And Bill chose for the work. And at the time he said, "Andres's such a nice guy. I would vote for him even if I didn't know him. But I do know him, and I think the work is good." And so it was thanks to Bill and Doug and whoever else voted for me I got a studio at P.S.1, you know, in 1985.

MR. SERRANO: Before that time your studio had been in your apartment?

MR. GOODYEAR: Before that I rented a small studio across the street from where we lived. We lived in a tiny place on 18th Street. And Julie worked for an answering service. And the lady whom she worked for at the answering service was across the street from my studio. The lady had control over the basement. And so I rented a studio from Pam, the old lady with the answering service, who rented me the basement. So I had that as a studio at the time. So it was thanks to Bill and the others that I got a studio in P.S.1. Now, Bill, from time to time, as the curator of the New Museum, he put me in one or two shows. I think he might have put me in more than that in the museum; I'm not sure. But I do remember there was one show that he put me in at the Cleveland Art Center in Cleveland. And it was a show with people like, I believe, Cindy Sherman was in it. Haim Steinbach and other people. And, you know, they were all known people. But I was not, and I felt a little funny. I felt very grateful to Bill for putting me in this show. But I felt a little sheepish about it, like wow. You know you're one of the only people who like, you know, thinks that I'm good enough to be in that company. No one else does.

And I questioned whether or not, you know, I was. And so, you know, Bill showed a great interest in my work and appreciation for it at a time when very few people showed it.

Now, back in let's see in '88, Bill got sick, you know. He got sick and actually we went to—Julie and I—we went to visit him at the hospital several times, and Julie was there for him, you know. 'Til the end she went to visit him. And actually it was not '88. It was the very beginning of '89. And Bill said to me, you know—as he was dying he said to me, “Andres, you know, I've always felt you were under known, you know. You should be a lot better known than you are.” And he said—knowing that Robert Mapplethorpe was also dying, he said to me, “You know, maybe you can be the bad boy of the nineties.” Now no one had ever said that to me. No one, first of all, put me together with Mapplethorpe. No one had ever even called me a bad boy.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: Nobody had ever seen the potential for controversy or anything like that.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: But Bill said that. And I probably like—I didn't know what he meant. I had no idea what he meant.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: A few days later Bill died. And a few days later after that, Robert Mapplethorpe died. And a few months later, you know, came *Piss Christ* [1987]. And the whole thing, which started with *Piss Christ* for me, started with the Congress or the Senate in May of 1989. And then about three weeks later, because of the fact that I was getting in Congress from all these politicians, the Corcoran decided to cancel the Mapplethorpe exhibition in Washington. So then it became surrounding Mapplethorpe controversy. Before then I was out there in the cold by myself.

MR. GOODYEAR: And it was almost like overnight your kind of reputation had also ascended to kind of a national level.

MR. SERRANO: Exactly. But I felt two things: I felt like wow. You know Bill had been prophetic about something, linking me with Mapplethorpe. Calling me a bad boy. And also the fact that, you know, he felt like I was under known. And so I just felt very strange about that. That first of all Bill didn't live to see the day when it did happen. But the fact that Bill said that. I just thought it was a very strange occurrence and coincidence.

MR. GOODYEAR: To turn back to some of these early group shows, were you exhibiting with other photographers? I mean you mentioned having that early show with Cindy Sherman and a group of others. Were they artists who were working in a variety of media? And what was your preference? Did you want to be identified as a photographer? Or was your aspiration to be considered an artist who happens to work in photography?

MR. SERRANO: Well, as I said, after art school I felt like I am an artist with a camera, you know. And I felt I made that distinction for myself—and for others if they were interested. And one of the ways I had of bringing the point home was my showing big works, even from the beginning. Once I started to show, I felt like they needed to be a certain size. And that size soon became 30 by 40 in the small edition and 40 by 60 in the large. And so that in itself, I felt, was a way of trying to distinguish what I was making from photographs, so that they could be treated as art objects. And I also tried to show with galleries that were showing all art and practice, not just photographs. But having said that, I also, you know, beggars can't be choosers. And so one of my first shows was at Light Gallery which was on 57th Street, run by a guy named Tennyson [Tennyson Schad]. And actually when I came to Light Gallery, it was Mark Wilson, his assistant, who had taken over the job of running the gallery. And so Mark actually gave Julie and I a show, and we did an installation together. But with my photographs, and we put an object that actually was a coffin that we had gotten. But, so yes, but there's a case of where it was a photo gallery where I showed. But we showed objects as well, I showed primarily photographs.

In addition, one of my early shows was then curated by a guy named Robert Phelan. And the show was called “Thirteen Hispanic Photographers.” Now I don't call myself Hispanic, and I don't call myself a photographer [they laugh]. But you can call me anything you want if you want to put me in a show, especially at that point, you know. So I was very happy to be part of that show, too. And some of the people in that show I remember only two in particular, Geno Rodriguez, who ran the Alternative Museum, and also—and who I became friendly with. And also Sebastiao Selgado. And that was the first time any of us saw Selgado's work actually. And that was probably around '86. So, you know, from time to time I've been happy and have allowed myself—and happy—to be part of photography shows.

Another show that was very important and that I was a part of was in Washington, and it was called—I forget now what it was called. It was a very important show. “New Photography”? It was by a man who was actually

also a collector. And that was late '80s I believe. But "New American Photography"? It was a huge show in Washington. I'm not sure when. But again, I was a part of that. So I'm always happy to be a part of, you know, shows that are primarily photographs. But I feel like I'm a crossover artist in the sense that I've been able to cross over into galleries and museums that show paintings and sculptures.

MR. GOODYEAR: I think I know the answer to this question, but I want to ask you anyway. I mean have you ever been a part of any kind of photographic organization. I mean you're not a documentary photographer [laughs] or a photojournalist. But did you ever kind of associate with any kind of photographic group?

MR. SERRANO: No, not really.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes. I didn't think so. [Laughs]

MR. SERRANO: Now another place I've shown that had photography as its major emphasis and focus was the Resource Center in Boston, Photographic Resource Center. You know I've been supported and championed by many photographic institutions as well as art institutions. And, so yes. When it came right down to it, I felt like if you want my work, you can call me anything you want.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Absolutely. I want to sort of transition and talk a little bit about the importance of place. And you've spoken a little bit about the fact that you, you know, were born, raised and lived your entire life here in New York City. Can you talk about the role that New York City has played in your life and in your art? I mean did you ever think—have you ever thought—about living anywhere else?

MR. SERRANO: No, I've never lived anywhere else or wanted to live anywhere else other than Manhattan or Brooklyn. I've lived in Manhattan, I've lived in Brooklyn. And that's it. Even in 1994 I was in Vienna for a show, and, you know, I was there for 13 days. And someone said, you know, You should go visit Budapest. It's very close by train. So I had never thought about going to Budapest. But decided, well, why not? So I went to Budapest for one day, and I went back to Vienna. And I liked Budapest a lot so I decided to go back there for another two days. And then after the two days of Budapest, I thought to myself, I'd like to come to Budapest someday just to hang out for a month. And, you know, I felt like it's a good place to chill out. And normally I don't go anywhere for vacation because I've traveled so much for work that I mean, there was a point where I would make at least ten trips a— you know, every month I was going to Europe for something or other. I remember I had one passport then. By the time it expired I had over 120 stamps on it. So you know I had been to so many places because of my work.

MR. GOODYEAR: What period was this in your life?

MR. SERRANO: I would say most of my travel was from '90 to 2000. Yes, '90 to 2000.

MR. GOODYEAR: And what inspired that travel? I mean interestingly, it is a year after the whole controversy.

MR. SERRANO: Yes, my work took off. And was in demand. And so I traveled. And even in this country. I think I've done at least 40 lectures, 50 lectures all over the country. I mean I gave lectures in Europe where they don't even speak English. [They laugh.] But the international travel and all the travel really has been for business, for art, for lecture and/or an exhibition. And so I traveled a lot to Europe. And, you know, but this time I thought, gee, it'd be nice for me to come to Budapest and just hang out, just do nothing. But once I decided to go to Budapest two months later, I decided, you know what? I'm going to take my equipment and just go there and see what happens, you know. And I invited Michael Coulter my good friend to come with me as my assistant. And Michael didn't know anything about photography. Michael could only help in carrying the equipment. But the point is Michael was my good friend, and I needed someone not only who could speak English, but I needed someone who was a friend, you know. And I thought, well, Michael will come and enjoy. I invited Michael, and I got him an apartment, and we lived in two different places in town, you know. So I hung out for about a month. And that month became two months and then became three months. And it was only—I think I was there almost four months. And it was only because I had a commitment to work with some children at the New Jersey Museum in two days that I actually came home. But once I got to Budapest, I loved being there. But I also found something to do—work.

MR. GOODYEAR: Did you travel with Julie? Was Julie with you at that time?

MR. SERRANO: No. By that time Julie and I had separated.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: Julie and I were together for ten years, from '80 until '90. And, you know, I would say that that was one of the drawbacks of the controversy. A lot of good came with it, you know, in terms of getting my work out there, in terms of giving me a great opportunity to become recognized as an artist. But also it destroyed my

marriage to Julie. And it had nothing to do with Julie. It was all with me. But I felt like, you know, I had been very reclusive. With Julie for many years we lived in tiny little places. And I wouldn't see anybody. I only saw Julie. And all of a sudden, the controversy. I was part of a big arena. And I felt like I had gone from being a very isolated individual to having to go into this public arena. And, you know, for good or for bad reasons, I felt attacked many times. So I felt like I had been in a cage, and I had been let out of the cage, and now I couldn't go back in that cage.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right.

MR. SERRANO: Interestingly enough, even though Julie and I separated in 1990, and she went on to live her life separate from me, we would remain married until 2005. We remained married all together for 25 years. Ten years together, 15 years apart. And it was only later when she decided for practical reasons, tax-wise and everything else, that we should separate and divorce, that we did so.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes. But my sense is that you remained very close with her.

MR. SERRANO: Very.

MR. GOODYEAR: She contributed a really great essay—

MR. SERRANO: Absolutely.

MR. GOODYEAR: —in the *American Catalog*.

MR. SERRANO: Absolutely. Julie and I have remained close. I barely see her or talk to her. But I email her from time to time. And, you know, unfortunately Julie is almost like Jesus. I only go to her when I have a question or I need something. Because one thing that Julie has, and a lot of people didn't notice it, Julie has a sort of psychic ability. She's got good intuition. And her mother is a psychic in Maine, actually, a professional psychic. And Julie has that in her. So I always relied on Julie for advice and for psychic intuition.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure. Getting back to the question about the role of place and the impact the city has had on you. You know you described how in the '90s that you were traveling a great deal. I mean why did you return to America? And why is it that, you know, you are a New York artist?

MR. SERRANO: Well, first of all, I didn't return to America. In a sense I never left it. All these trips were, you know, temporary.

MR. GOODYEAR: Business.

MR. SERRANO: Yes, business, and only for a few days, you know. I mean it got so bad that, you know, I remember more than once going to Europe for five days, coming home for two days, and then going back to Europe for another five days. I mean it was crazy that I couldn't for whatever reason or program I couldn't just stay there, that I had to be going back and forth. And so four months was the longest I ever stayed out of New York, and that was in Budapest. But I kept my apartment in New York. And so I've never really left New York. As much as I've traveled all over, I've never left New York at all. And New York has never left me. I remember being in Paris and someone saying to me, more than once saying, Oh, you have such a Brooklyn accent. And I'm thinking how the hell do you know what a Brooklyn accent sounds like? But, you know, I feel like the New Yorker in me is always present even abroad, if people like it. And some people do like it because, you know, I think I've been fortunate that I haven't come off across like you know the ugly Americans. It's like, okay, you're American. But we like you, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] I want to transition to ask you a series of questions about your process, your creative process. Not only what kind of cameras you use, but really what happens, you know, in your studio. What happens in your working environment, you know? What happens there? Do you employ assistants? And if so, what roles do they play? You mentioned that you don't necessarily print your images. Who does print your images?

MR. SERRANO: In the very beginning, early '80s when I started, of course I couldn't afford an assistant, you know. And the camera that I used at the time was a 35 mm camera. I always had a 35 mm camera. So up until the time even when I started doing the fluid pictures with *Piss Christ* and all that, I still was working on my own. And in fact I remember many of those immersions and many of those abstract bodily fluid images that I made, including *Bloodstream* [1987], which is a picture where blood and milk are both, you know, coming together, merged together, I remember having to take the picture and pour the liquid at the same time. It never occurred to me to have an assistant. First of all, because I felt like I didn't need one. And probably I couldn't afford one. But more important, I didn't feel the need for one. So up until about 1990, I would say, my work is 35 mm camera—either a Canon or a—yes. A Canon. A Leica I had.

In '90 I decided to get a 2-1/4 by 2-3/4 camera reading format. I didn't want a Hasselblad; I didn't want a square format. So I bought a Mamiya RB67. So from '90 on my photographs then became, you know, they were done on a 2-1/4 inch by 2-3/4 camera. So the sizes, because of that, are different. Before 1990, because it's 35 mm, the small sizes are 30 by 40, and then the large ones are 40 by 60. Later, when I switched the reading format, they became 32 ½ by 40 and 50 by 60. And the Klan work is an example of my early, you know, medium format work, the Klan. Before that actually *The Nomads: Portraits of Homeless People* [1990], they were all done with the Mamiya RB67. And I believe I still have that RB67. I've used more or less the same cameras and the same equipment for decades, you know, for ages.

What really is funny about my work, when I look at a big collection of the photographs like the *American* book, the Taschen book, is that even though the images were very different sometimes, they were all done the same way. With the same three lights, same camera, and with a photographic background. You know even in *The Morgue* [1992], there is a background; it's black. I put a black curtain as a background. Which means that—I mean that's one way of redoing work that I define as art rather than photography, specifically either photojournalism or documentary photography. Even though, you know, I work with real things, real dead people, real clans people. Still, the fact that I isolate them and put them in this artificial environment, the studio, means that it's not documentation; it's art.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right. What was your goal in moving to a larger format camera? I mean what was it that a larger camera—larger format camera—could achieve that you really wanted in the early '90s? I mean was it more detail?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, I think it was that.

MR. GOODYEAR: Did you feel the need to create bigger pictures?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, I think it was detail because I'm not sure if I was really aware of the fact that—at first I really wasn't aware that the prints would be slightly bigger. But I think it was also detail. And also maybe I wanted to see the image bigger. Although I feel like—I've always had, you know, in terms of choosing work, I've always been able to have a good eye for being able to know which will make the best images, even when they're slides, you know. And normally I may shoot a 100, 200 pictures. But even when I see it small and it has a presence and a power; then I know that when I make it big, it's going to be even powerful. But I think I switched to the Mamiya because I like the idea of being able to look at the work in a bigger negative.

MR. GOODYEAR: Now, when you're doing work in the studio -- listening to music? Do you have people with you? You know what's the atmosphere? Can you describe the atmosphere in the studio when you're working?

MR. SERRANO: Well, in the beginning I would work alone without assistants. And later, when I started to have assistants, I also started to have people paint my backdrops. In *America*, for instance, you know, I took over a 120 portraits. There were 114 portraits in the book. But in reality I took maybe 200 portraits. And so I had a few different artists paint backdrops for me because each painting—or rather each photograph—required a different painting. And so, you know, at \$200 a shot, which is what I've been paying for the backdrops, you know, I spent like 20,000 just on backdrops for that show, for that work. So I had different people at the time.

Then I got involved with a woman about six years ago by the name of Irina Movmyga, who was actually Russian-born, but by the time I met her I think she had already become an American citizen because she had been married to an American over the years. But Irina and I met, and we hooked up and became involved. But, you know, shortly after that I realized that Irina was not bad at doing the backdrops herself. So for the last five or six years, you know, I've had Irina doing my backdrops when I need them, in addition to whatever assistance I need.

Because one of the perks of getting old is that you don't have to do everything yourself. You can get lazy. And especially if you can afford it and find money to pay for assistance. And I don't even at this point—I haven't even learned; I wouldn't be able to really set up my flash equipment because I've never done it, you know. The equipment is all in the closet. The backdrops are in the closet. And so the assistant comes in. He or she sets it up. And we do a shot. And then they put the stuff away. And there's no evidence that I've even been working here.

It's the same thing when— actually back in '85, after one year of having a studio at P.S. 1, I lost it. Julie and I at the time were living a studio apartment on 10th Street in the East Village. And it was small; I didn't have a studio. And as a result of it, that's when I started my work on *BODILY FLUIDS*, you know. Because I could do it. I didn't need much room, and I could do it at home. And after I was done, then I'd put it away. So, you know, necessity really is the mother of invention. And sometimes an artist is able to create—or has to create—almost by force. That their circumstances, you know—their circumstances force them to do the work that they do at that moment.

MR. GOODYEAR: Is there a particular manner in which a new series begins? And where do new ideas for you

come from? I observe in your work that you do work in series, and that those series get titles like *Bodily Fluids* or *Immersion*s or *The Morgue*. Tell me how a new series begins.

MR. SERRANO: Well, in the beginning, when I was just doing work for myself, and when I didn't have a gallery or any prospects of having any exhibitions, I didn't do series. I did singular images. And, you know, I think underneath my bed and elsewhere I have hundreds probably, of photographs that I created that never saw the light of day. So ideas were always coming to me, you know. I always have ideas. And a lot of times, you know, I would do them only to be able to see. It's like I have this idea in my head, and I want to be able to see it for myself in person for real. And so I create it just to be able to see it. But once I started to hook up with a gallery—and Stux Gallery was really the first gallery to really take me on back in, well, I think they gave me my first show in '88—once I started to have invitations for actual exhibitions, that's when the idea of doing a whole series began. That's when I felt like I didn't want to create a single image. I wanted to create one image, one theme, one issue, and create a body of work around that one issue or theme.

So that's when I did—because you can see that the *Bodily Fluids* pictures and the *Immersion*s; and I didn't come up with that term. Somebody coined it the *Immersion*s when I came to start to put or immerse objects into the fluids and some blood and the milk and all those I included, including piss. You know in fact those *immersion*s and those *bodily fluid* pictures are actually singular images. It's only the *ejaculates*, really, that's a real series. And then after the *ejaculates*, I did these close-ups of menstrual pads, which I called *Red River*, and that became a series.

And so after that one of the first shows that I had, which was a real series, was *The Nomads*, these portraits of homeless people, which I had a Stux Gallery. And, you know, we included the *Clairvoyant*, which I did a few months after the *Nomad* portraits. And we decided to include it in that. I felt it was the right thing to do to give it a balance. And so we put the *Nomads* in one room and then the *Klan* in another room. So, you know, that's really when I started to work in terms of series, in 1990.

MR. GOODYEAR: Again, in thinking about, you know, where ideas come from, do you keep a journal or ever kind of write about your work and your life and things that you're thinking about? And do you do preparatory studies for embarking on either a specific image or now a larger series?

MR. SERRANO: Well, not really. But once I get an idea for a show, it's a start. For instance, with the *Klan*, the *Klan* came about because I had done these portraits of homeless people, which I found mostly in the subways late at night. And my intent with that series was to be able to give a name and a face to what I regarded as the invisible poor, the people that we see but we don't really see. We don't really want to look at, we don't want to deal with that. And so we pass them by. And so I wanted to not only put a name and a face on them. But I also wanted to put them in galleries and museums and collectors' homes, you know. And so I did the homeless portraits, which in fact were a homage to Edward Curtis and his series on Native Americans. And I felt like, you know—

One thing that I never realized about Curtis is that he was sort of controversial because he gave a lot of his sitters clothing and things to wear. And for me that just means that he was not a journalist or a photojournalist; he was an artist, you know. I mean it's the same thing that any postmodern artist does. They dress up themselves or their subjects. But for me the most important thing, you know, was that, was the dignity and the feelings that I got from the people he photographed. And that to me transcended everything else. And so I really like those portraits. And felt that my—and did my *Nomads* sort of as a homage to what he had done, you know. Because Curtis felt he was photographing a vanishing race. One of his photographs is entitled "The Vanishing Race." Although the poor are not a vanishing race, those people that I encountered were on the brink of some sort of extinction, as individuals. And so that's why I did those *nomads*.

Now, a few months after doing the *Nomads*, I felt like, you know, I really enjoy doing these portraits, and I wanted to do more portraits. But then I thought, you know, I want to do an unusual portrait, something that, you know, it was almost like an anti-portrait. So when I thought of unusual portraits, I thought someone had a mask; that would be an unusual thing. Because you think of a portrait as being something that reveals something about the person either physical or psychological. Whereas a mask, you know, reveals nothing. It does the opposite. And when I thought of masked people, I thought of the *Klan*; I immediately thought of the *Klan*. I thought perfect. And also because I'm not white, it was a great incentive for me to do it, you know. And so that's where I got the idea to photograph the *Klan*. And that's how that began.

MR. GOODYEAR: You know in the photographic literature, you hear about artists who kind of pre-visualize their compositions, you know. They have a sense going into a project what they are looking for. Or maybe that there's something, you know, that they see when they're behind the camera, that they know, okay, this is what I'm looking for. Do you pre-visualize your compositions? Do you know what you're looking for when you're behind—What's the process for arriving at a picture that you're ready to take?

MR. SERRANO: Well, again, getting back to the *Klan*. When I decided to do the *Klan*, I had to go to Georgia, you

know. I got a contact in the Klan. I mean I'd been to Atlanta only for a couple of days for an exhibition or a lecture out there. So when I decided to do the Klan, I decided, well, maybe I should contact some people in Georgia and see if they could—in Atlanta—to see what they can come up with. And so I got two or three contacts, and they all pointed to one man, one person, a lady name Bobbie. And Bobbie had been a friend and a secretary, a helper, to James Venable, who was the imperial—ex-imperial—wizard of the Klan in Georgia, who was an old man.

So I got a hold of her on the phone. And I said, "Hey, Bobbie, you know, I'd like to photograph the Klan. Do you think I could come down and photograph James Venable?" And she said, "Mr. Venable, he's old and senile. He doesn't know which way is up." She said, "But you're welcome to come down here and photograph them. I can introduce you to people." And I said, "Well, you know what, I'll come down. But you know what, I just kind of— But then she said to me also, "You know what?" She said, "If you come down in two weeks for Labor Day weekend, they'll all be here. There's a big Klan rally. They come from all over the country. They pay respects and do their thing. So if you come down, I can introduce you to people." And I said to her, "Well, fine. I'll come down," I said. "I just want to tell you one thing. I'm not white. I'm Hispanic. Is that a problem?" And she said, "Don't worry about it, it won't be a problem at all."

Now, the thing is, when I went down there initially, I met James Venable and Bobbie. The problem with James, though, was that he didn't have his outfit. Bobbie explained that the year before he gave it out to some idiot who never gave it back. And so the old man, the ex-imperial wizard, did not have his robe and mask and hood. And so, I went to the rally. A few days later the rally took place, and I went to the rally. And I show up with two women. One of them worked at the museum down there; I forget what's the name of that.

MR. GOODYEAR: The High Museum.

MR. SERRANO: The High Museum, yes. And the other one was Kennedy, her last name was Kennedy. And the other woman that I was with was Hope Urban. Hope was my girlfriend, driver and assistant for that time. And Hope was like 5' 2" and weighed about 90 pounds, from California [Mr. Goodyear laughs]. And so Hope and I and this girl from High Museum show up. And, you know, it's a hot day. All the Klan people are there waiting for the rally to start. They're just chilling out. And the place is filled with people. And we go there, there's a lot of people sitting around James Venable. He's got like 12 people or more sitting in chairs around James Venable. They come in and— Being the host, the gracious host, he invites us to sit down.

But Bobbie was right, first of all. She was right. James was old and senile, and he didn't remember that I had been there a few days earlier. So he didn't remember who I was. And more important, Bobbie, I found out, does not like to be around the Klan when they come there. And so she was nowhere there inside to offer any explanation or introduce me to anyone. So we sat there in a very uncomfortable way because no one had any idea why I was there. [Mr. Goodyear laughs.] And so instead—so they at some point, they just started talking. No one asked me anything. They just started talking among themselves and acting like I wasn't there. And they would say things, talking about niggers, Jews, and queers, you know. And I remember one old lady at the time getting up. She felt she was getting a little too much sun. She pulled away. And she's like explaining. She said, "If God intended for me to be black—" Oh, no, she said, "If God intended me to be a nigger, I'd be one." [Mr. Goodyear laughs].

And so after a while— and then they started getting, once they found out the girl's name was Kennedy, they started getting on Kennedy and the name. And they said, You seem like a nice girl, you know, how could you have such a name? You know. And badmouthing the Kennedys. At some point, though, we went to the rally. And oddly enough, I think one of James Venable's granddaughters came with us because they didn't have enough room for her.

So we get to the rally, and it was in Stone Mountain City, which is actually a black neighborhood, an all-black neighborhood. And in order to get to the area where they have this three-day rally, and they brought three crosses, huge crosses, that eventually they would burn. You had to go through this sort of, you know, road, and then it's like an enclosed area sealed off. And so we went there. We got past the—I think they have, I forget what they call them. The general police at the very beginning. We got past them there. And as soon as I stepped out of the car with my people, we were surrounded by about 20 or 30 skinheads, who said to us, "You're not white. You don't belong here. And we can't guarantee your safety. So you have to leave." So I had to leave immediately.

MR. GOODYEAR: Can you pause right here. This is a great story. I want to make sure that I capture it because we are at the end of this tape. So let's just—

[END OF CD 2]

MR. GOODYEAR: This is Frank Goodyear interviewing Andres Serrano, July 29, 2009. This is Disc No. 3, and Andres was in the middle of the story about the work that he was doing in Atlanta photographing the Klan. And

where we left off was you had just sort of arrived on the scene with your equipment and your people and greeted by a group of skinheads. Can you continue from there?

MR. SERRANO: Sure. Actually, you know, I didn't have my equipment, just my—because I was there only to find, to make contacts. But, yes, we were thrown out of the rally immediately. And so I had to hang around Atlanta for several days. And thanks to Fay Gold who was showing my work in Atlanta, I was able to stay in one of her apartments. And so I hung out with Hope for about a week or so, waiting by the phone, hoping to find someone who would say yes. Because even though we had met David Holland, who was the new imperial wizard, you know, he did not want to pose for me. He felt like he didn't want to be involved. And so he didn't want to pose for me. So it was difficult to get someone to say yes.

But finally we found one Klansman, by the name of Danny, who was a grand master, who said yes. And so that sort of started the ball rolling. Because once I was able to get one person to say yes, to agree to pose for me, then I could call up others and say, you know, so-and-so posed for me. So in the end I managed to photograph seven or eight people, including a Klanswoman and David Holland. David decided to pose for me eventually. And he posed for me only as a favor to this lawyer who had been working with the Klan on a case there, and who happens to be Jewish. The lawyer convinced David to pose for me. And I remember David saying, when he posed for me, he's saying to me, he said things to me like, he said, "Well, you know, we're going to make a lot of money from this because he's a famous photographer, and he makes a lot of money." And he even made jokes about Jesse Helms being my PR man. [Phone rings.] We'll stop this thing.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

[END OF CD 3, TRACK 1]

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay. We're back rolling again. When you're doing your portrait work, whether it's for, you know, the Klan or the portraits that you did in the America series, you know, who's doing the posing? You know, what instructions do you give to the subject before your lens? And what role does the subject—whether it be a member of the Klan or somebody like George Steinbrenner who was photographed in the America Series, you know—what role does the subject play before your camera?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, my instructions when I'm doing portraits are pretty simple and straightforward. And it's probably the same thing I tell everyone, including the Klan. I tell them to look straight ahead, look to the left, or look to the right. [They laugh]. That's all I tell them, you know. And with the Klan, you know, because you don't see them emote anything, it's a purely cut and dried thing, you know. But with regular people, you know, I might give them a position or a place to focus their eyes. But then it's all entirely on them what I get out of the— You often can't predict what someone's going to give me, the expression, how they're going to look. And so because of that, I photograph as much as possible.

I remember one of the portraits I did for the American Series was Gisela Glaser, who was a Holocaust survivor. She'd gone into the concentration camp when she was like five or six, you know. And she told me this horrible story about being in Auschwitz at the end, when they realized, the Nazis realized, that the final end was coming. They took her younger brother. Gisela was probably five or six, and she had a brother a little younger than her. And they wanted to take him. So her older sister, who was 14, didn't want the boy to go alone. She went with the boy. And she was killed, and Gisela survived. And so, you know, it's really— It's so sad. And I feel like Gisela must have had that survivor's guilt of knowing her little brother—and her sister chose to not let the boy go alone, you know.

And in the course of the conversation about many things, she was talking to my assistant Jill at the time because I told her I wanted her looking in that direction. And sometimes I ask my assistants to be the focus for them to look at and speak. And at some point Gisela started to laugh, very heartily, you know. And that's the picture I chose because I felt like, you know, it was sort of like a symbol showing Gisela laughing in the face of all the hardship and the cruelty and in the injustice. Laughing at death, you know, and her age, and all she had gone through. And so that's the image I chose with Gisela, laughing like that.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you take—or how many exposures do you take with a particular portrait subject? I mean with Gisela, you know, how much film did you use?

MR. SERRANO: Usually I try to do 20 rolls, which is 200 photographs at ten pictures per roll. And so I usually try to shoot 20 rolls of film on people.

MR. GOODYEAR: On a single person?

MR. SERRANO: Yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: And George Steinbrenner I only did three or four because George came in. He was sort of very, you know, bewildered. He was on his way to the airport. But he had signed off on it. Meaning he didn't know who I was. He came in and said, "Look," he looked around, and he said, "So one of you is a famous photographer." All he knew was someone said it's a famous photographer, okay I'm there, you know. So he came in on the way to the airport. But it had been explained that he had just been to the hospital to see a dear friend of his who was dying. So I felt like I wanted to make it easy on George, you know. And so I think I shot three or four rolls. After five or six minutes, I said, "Okay. We're done." So he was grateful for that. And I know he was very grateful because my super [superintendent] said—I told my super that George was coming. And of course a big Yankees fan, he waited for him. And so when he came in, before he came into the apartment, my super decided to chat him up. He said, "Mr. Steinbrenner, can I take your photograph?" He said, "No, no, no. I don't want it." But I think it was because it was a short shoot and because he was grateful that it was short, and he was relieved that he got it done. And my super said that when Mr. Steinbrenner went out, he looked at Ray and said, "You got that camera?" He's like, "Oh, I've got it in the house." He said, "Go get it." And so he allowed him to take a picture. So I felt like I put George in a good mood.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] That's good. That's good. I know this may be hard to describe, but how would you sort of characterize a successful portrait? I mean what are the elements of a portrait that you're aspiring to capture when you are trying to render a likeness?

MR. SERRANO: Well, a good portrait, I think, is a portrait that not only I like, but the viewer, the sitter, the subject, likes. You know when I started [series] America, I did a portrait of a fireman—two firemen actually—and I also did a portrait of a postal worker, who actually was the postal worker for my gallery at the time, Paula Cooper Gallery, although I didn't know that. Anyhow, after we did the portraits, at some point, months later, or a couple of years later, when I did have a show of "America" at Portrait Gallery," somehow both Jonh Tommasian, this fireman that I referred to, and the postal worker got to see the exhibit and go to see their portraits. And in both cases they were overwhelmed. Because, you know, they think a photographer, they don't really realize that it's going to be a big photograph and the power that it's going to have. And so to me that's one of the best satisfactions that I can have: is when the person tells me, wow, I really like what you did, you know.

But usually I get satisfaction from seeing it myself and seeing and feeling that this is the best I could've done. This shows the person in a good light, in a strong light. And, you know, for a while there, for about six, seven years, I did portraits and photographs for the *New York Times Magazine*. Almost on a semi-regular basis. You know, three times a year maybe, they'd ask me to do something. And more than once, actually, I did the cover, which I was very happy with, you know. I was always very happy when it was the cover. And I was doing mostly portraits. And in fact, one of the cover shots was a picture of an elephant. Even though it's a close-up of his eye, I thought that it was a portrait of an elephant, you know.

But I remember one of the last portraits I did for them a few years ago was I had had to fly out to L.A. to shoot a couple of women, a couple of people, including actors, including Penelope Cruz and Eddie Murphy. And, you know, a lot of times people in that world, you know, they'd see a photographer, they know nothing about you. But I like to, you know, sometimes I don't have much to say to the person, if I do have something to say, I like to express that. And of course I think either in words or by how I photograph them, I expressed to Eddie that I was really flattered that I was taking his picture. And Eddie said to me, you know, he said, you know, "I haven't had a picture taken in a long time." He said, "But last year I let somebody take my picture. And I think it was for *Vanity Fair*." It could have been Annie Liebowitz. And he said—although I don't know. But he said, "I let somebody take my picture for a magazine. And I regretted it," he said. Because it was about the Dream Works cast, you know—*Dreamgirls* cast. And he said, "You know, everyone's portrait looked strong, dignified. And my portrait I was like, you know, like clownish." And he felt—he said he regretted having the portrait done. And so when I did my shoot for the *Times*, I did something with them that I had never done before. Usually I shoot the work; I give them all the film. In this case I chose to give only one image. It was the image that I felt I wanted to do of Eddie, and it was the image that showed him dignified, normal, not strange. It was very close up, very tight. So you could almost see and feel every pore. And he's looking straight at the viewer, you know.

To their credit, the *Times* was respectful when I decided not to give them anything else. Because, yes, there were times in the course of the talk, you know, there were times that they could've chosen something where it wasn't as strong, it wasn't—you know he looked clownish before this shoot. I didn't want that, you know, because he loosened up with me. But I didn't want to portray him other than the way I felt he would've wanted to be portrayed. And so that's what I did.

MR. GOODYEAR: What I'm hearing is a respect for your subject, a desire not to caricature that person or to make that person look silly. But to take each person that you photograph, whether it be a Holocaust survivor, George Steinbrenner, Eddie Murphy, or the Klan, to take seriously that person that is in front of you.

MR. SERRANO: Yes. In fact, I remember after a week, Hope left me. She was freaked out by the Klan, by the whole thing, you know. And so I met this photographer down there by the name of Richard Sutton. And he

started to drive me around because I don't drive. And so that's one of the things my assistant needs to do is drive me around. And we had to drive the Klan wherever they asked us to meet. And as I started to do the work and Richard saw some examples, he said to me, "Wow. You know they could almost be recruitment posters for the Klan." And even though it disturbed me, I thought, you know, I don't want to do that. But at the same time, I realized that I have a tendency, whether it be the Klan, wherever it is, I just shoot them from a certain distance, meaning a little bit low because I try to monumentalize them and make them bigger than life.

MR. GOODYEAR: These are very simple sort of technical questions: Do you ever crop your images, or do you do sort of post-production work on them? Or is what we're looking at in the finished print very similar to what you're seeing behind the camera?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, I try to crop in the camera. And more than once, you know, it's happened that in doing a portrait, it was not until the very last picture that I got close enough to satisfy, you know, what I was looking for. And so many times there's only one out of the 200 images, there's only one that I like the best. But I refuse to crop, and so I have to do it all in the camera.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right, right. Great. We're going to get to talking about individual series in a little bit here. But I just, again, want to continue to sort of bring out ideas about your creative process. Have your working methods changed over time, over the last 30 years or so, that you have been a working photographer, you know? Has the way in which you approach a particular subject, a particularly assignment, a particular series, has that changed? And if so, in what way?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, I would say it hasn't changed much. You know the ideas evolve. But like I said, I'm still working in a studio with, you know, a backdrop and basically three lights, you know. Even though the lights have changed over the years, they're three lights. And usually they're in the same position: two in the back and one in the front, you know. So I would say conceptually things have evolved and changed. But it's sort of a circle, you know. What I liked about with the Taschen book was that it allowed me to see and put 20 years of work into one book. And the one common thread that all those pictures have is that they were taken by the same artist, you know. So in that sense the work has changed conceptually. And yet it still remains the same. You know I don't know who it was. I think someone said that every artist paints the same portrait, either himself or herself. And I have to agree with that.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm.

MR. SERRANO: Except where you try to make it look different every time, but it's the same picture.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right. Can you talk a little bit about either the editorial assignments that you've done—or have you ever done advertising work before? And to sort of discuss both the challenges and the opportunities of, you know, doing editorial or advertising work?

MR. SERRANO: The editorial stuff is interesting which— But you know at some point I felt like I didn't want to do it for anyone else other than the *Times*, because they have the bigger magazine. Though now it's shrunk. The *New York Times Magazine* has shrunk.

MR. GOODYEAR: Regrettably.

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I mean I have issues where it's a big cover image that I have; even if it's not the cover, it's a big issue. And so I'm very proud of that work, you know. But fortunately I've not been asked by a whole lot of magazines to do work. So I'm glad about that. Many years ago, though, I did have a contract with a Japanese magazine called *Kut* [sp]. And that was about ten years ago, more than ten years ago. And so for about two years, you know, I had the responsibility of shooting a celebrity for them every month. And then along with the celebrity there would be a still-life. And it was usually something in the house that I would photograph as a still-life with them. But, you know, I got to photograph and meet people like Alec Baldwin and John Waters and Yoko Ono [noise]. Even did a portrait of George Lucas. And so I got to go to the mountains; I did a lot of portraits for them. That was interesting.

MR. GOODYEAR: And did you enjoy doing that kind of work?

MR. SERRANO: You know, I did. I did. I enjoyed it, yes. But what was your original—

MR. GOODYEAR: No, no, no. We were talking about, you know, taking on these editorial projects. And, you know, what the relationship of those projects are to your more independent work. And what are the— What are the reasons why you take on—why you would take on—one of those projects? You know, what do you get out of doing that?

MR. SERRANO: Well again, for the *Times*, it's because it's the *Times*. You know it's the paper of record. And also

it gives me supreme satisfaction that even though many critics, including especially Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of the *New York Times*, trashes my work, that in contrast there are people at the paper who enjoy it and invite me to do things for them. And so that to me is very rewarding. And because it is the *Times* and because it was a big format magazine, and they gave me interesting assignments, you know many times actually they would ask me to do things for them because they know my work. And so they want what I do for myself to adapt it to doing for them. And in fact Eddie Murphy's portrait, you know, if I ever have a show "America Works", I'll put him in that show even though it came much later. You know I asked Eddie if I could use it for that. And he said, "Sure, you want to use it, sure."

So you know occasionally the *Times* has asked me to do something which coincided with my own work. And actually more than once someone has wanted for me to print what I did for the *Times* as a work for them as well, you know. But normally—as far as advertising is concerned, I've never done anything except for one time. I did an ad for Hewlett Packard. I have no idea—I don't remember what I did for them. And I'm glad I was never asked to do anything again. Even though they paid me 15,000 [dollars], I feel like you know what? I don't like that kind of work.

MR. GOODYEAR: Have you ever been asked to complete other kind of commissions by specific organizations or individuals, businesses. I guess, you know, many photographers have had—and artists more generally—have had opportunities to complete commissioned works. And I'm just curious whether those opportunities have come your way, or whether you've ever accepted any.

MR. SERRANO: No, I've never had commissions. And in fact, I feel like, you know, my work would be great for public installations. I feel like billboards or things like that. One of the things that I liked about doing pictures for the *Times* is that Kathy Ryan appreciated my work, one of the picture editors there. And I remember at the time, at some point, showing her a bunch of the American portraits. And she said, "You know what? Some of these would look like great covers." And so I feel like Kathy understood that many times I like to make work that is very memorable, that you can see it, that it sticks with you. And I would love it if I had been asked to do public installations because I think it would've been good for that. But I never have, you know. And so, you know, I mostly do work at the request of whatever comes my way.

Now in terms of commissions, I've done a number of commissioned portraits which is okay, you know. But a lot of times I've done it for charity, you know. So in that sense, you know, I've been an easy touch in that I've donated a lot of work. People come to me for work. I don't know how many times Robert Wilson asked me for something, you know. It was almost on a yearly basis for eight or nine years he's asked me for something. But, you know, people like Guild Hall out in the Hamptons. They'll come to me, and they'll ask me to do a charity portrait for them where someone bids, and you have 15-, 20-, 25,000 [dollars]. And then I do a portrait for the benefit of the institution.

MR. GOODYEAR: And you're doing it because you want to support Robert Wilson. You want to support Guild Hall -

MR. SERRANO: At that time, supporting Robert Wilson. [Mr. Goodyear laughs.] You know? I mean I just felt like Robert Wilson was hustling everyone to build his palace, you know, up there. To build his Neverland. And to do his thing. And no one pays me to do my thing. [They laugh.]

MR. GOODYEAR: Last question in this sort of creative process section; and that is—we've talked a little bit about it already, this idea of influence. Are there particular artists whose works you have admired throughout your career or today? Are there particular photographers whose works interest you? How has the work of others shaped how you think about your own work and your own process? I know you've mentioned earlier Duchamp for instance. But I wonder if you could just talk a little bit more about your relationship with other artists whom you admire.

MR. SERRANO: You know there's a lot of people I admire. But I would say the people who have influenced me, they were the people that I discovered in my late teens, early twenties that were filmmakers like Luis Bunuel, Federico Fellini, even Bergman [Ingmar Bergman], you know, Pasolini [Pier Paolo Pasolini]. You know all of these filmmakers of that time were the ones who truly, really influenced me and made me think about art, religion, and how to express some things. You know, in addition, music has been an important influence on me, specifically Bob Dylan. Bob Dylan, you know, was the man that I wanted to be, like most young men in the '60s and '70s in America. You know we all wanted to be Bob Dylan. And so Bob Dylan was probably one of the most influential people on me—for me—even though I never met Bob Dylan, you know. And so—

MR. GOODYEAR: And what was it about Dylan or his music, you know, his politics, that particularly made you admire him? Can you describe that?

MR. SERRANO: I would say, you know, everyone says Bob Dylan is a great poet and writer and philosopher and thinker. And, yes, it was partly that. But it was also the voice. I liked Bob Dylan's voice; it really spoke to me. It

was a voice like no other voice I had ever heard. And so I felt it was Bob Dylan, like Tommy Napolitano, for me was one of those guys who was ahead of me. Would always be one step ahead of me. And so—and those are the people that you admire and aspire to in some small way. But you know you can never catch up to them. And so Dylan was that sort of person for me, you know. A sort of teacher who was always one step ahead.

MR. GOODYEAR: Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with other sort of artists and photographers of your generation? I mean what are your feelings about people like Peter Hujar or Joel Peter Witkin, Cindy Sherman, Robert Mapplethorpe. I mean you mentioned that, you know, you almost felt a little bit like an outsider and didn't know these people well. But did these artists' work, you know, in any way kind of shape you?

MR. SERRANO: I never met Peter Hujar, and I don't know his work much. I've seen a little bit of his work.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: I never met Mapplethorpe, although I've met Ed Maxie his brother many times in clubs. And we just, you know, we're very chatty with each other just because we like each other. And I've seen his work because Fay Gold also, you know, showed Ed, and he was a nice guy. Cindy, you know, I like Cindy's work. I like it, and I respect it a lot. And as far as Joel Peter Witkin, also, is a guy whose work I truly like. I mean I remember seeing Joel's work probably late '70s or mid-'70s when he was like light years ahead of when I started to make my work. And so Joel, I remember through magazines, seeing Joel's work and being aware of it and respecting it, you know. I met Joel on a couple of occasions. One time I went to—I was in Albuquerque and went by and stopped by. You know he was showing me work. And what I was impressed by Joel, when he was showing me certain works, I'd say, "Oh, that's a great print." And he'd explain, "No, there's something here, I don't like it." And what impressed me about Joel and how he works is that Joel seems to be the sort of artist who knows from the beginning everything that's going to go into that picture. And once he makes it, he makes it happen in the plates.

And it's in contrast, really, to how I work. I have an idea, even a subject, the homeless, the Klan. Or later I would come up with a title for a show, "Interpretation of Dreams," the "History of Sex." But the titles, in a way, are sort of umbrellas under which I can fit almost anything. And I may have an idea of one or two pictures for that series, but it evolves and develops as I start to work it, as I start to do it. That's when it comes about. And so I pretty much, you know, I assign the subject. But I don't know how it's going to turn out. And I don't know what is going to happen. But you had asked me before about ideas and putting down, writing things and notes and stuff like that or making sketches. Sometimes what happens is that I get ideas, and so I start to do pictures. Or sometimes I start to, you know, come up with titles or the images before I've even made them.

When I decided to do "Shit," my last show. I knew even before I did the pictures, I had a list already of the pictures I was going to do. I was going to do good shit, I was going to do bad shit. I was going to go bullshit. I was going to do holy shit. I was going to do funny shit, stupid shit. You know all kinds of shit. And so even before I shot the pictures, even before I knew what the shit would look like, I had some titles already.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] That's good. That's excellent. I actually now want to move on to specific series and have you talk about individual images and how you see these individual images factoring into your larger oeuvre. And I think we should begin with the work that you were doing in the early to mid-80s, in which you employ religious symbols often. You know, what influence has this sort of long tradition of religious art played in your own work?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, it's been very important. As I said, in the beginning, when I started to do religious images, it's almost like I really wasn't aware of how many of them I was doing until at some point I realized, oh, wow, you know, I'm using Christ a lot. And so I think it was something that was inside of me that had to come out. But, you know, it was—again, it shows how important religion, and specifically the Catholic and Christian faith, you know, how it's been a part of me for a long time and has informed my process. But for a while I wasn't even aware of it until I actually saw so many religious images. And I've always felt like, you know, in a way kind of part of the tradition of religious artists. You know I'm also a secular artist, but I'm also a religious artist. And I feel an affinity with some of the religious artists of the past, you know. And I always say that I believe the Vatican should collect my work someday.

In fact, I remember about ten years ago, maybe a little less, I had a show in Rome in a church. Now it's not the first time I had a show in a church. I had a show in a church in France, two churches in France. I've shown in a church in Spain. I've shown last—a year and a half ago, two years ago, I was invited to be part of a photographic fair in Colombia, and I showed in a church there. I've also show at St. John the Divine here in Manhattan, the biggest neo-Gothic cathedral in the world. And so I've shown in churches before. But at this particular time, I was showing at a church in Rome. At the time a monsignor higher up in the Vatican said that—gave an interview for *Le Stampa*. And he said that, yes, I was a transgressive artist but not a blasphemous one. So that made me feel good.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] One of my favorite early religious works is *Blood Cross* [1985]. Can you tell me a little bit about how that came about and your feeling now almost 30 years later about that picture?

MR. SERRANO: Well, *Blood Cross*, it's white and red, right?

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm.

MR. SERRANO: It's just abstract. You know that was when I was doing the Bodily Fluids pictures. And initially—I'll explain how that came about. Initially what happened was, again, Bill Olander, my friend from New Museum, was about to do a show at the New Museum called "Fake," and it was about artists who were referring or mimicking art in some way. And he came to visit me. And I felt like my work didn't fit, although Bill made it fit. He chose something that he felt fit. But his visit made me think about, hey, about doing a body of work that would mimick painting in some way, abstract painting, monochromes, you know, action painting. And so that's when, after that visit, my first image was *Milk Blood* [1984] and a split white-on-red image. And that was a reference to Mondrian, you know.

But that was the first Bodily Fluid image that I did. And it was because of Bill's visit and putting this idea into my head to make photographs that looked like painting. And one of the things that I enjoyed about doing those, creating those works, was that I felt like I was doing something that was going against the grain of photography, in that I was eliminating—you know because usually you think of photography as being about space, spatial relationships, perspective. And so with the images, those images, I flattened the picture plane. There was no subject, there was no background, no foreground, particularly with the monochromes, you know. The idea also of doing just a photograph of milk, photographing milk, as a monogram. And then also doing that with blood and piss. You know just all yellow, all white, all red. You know I felt like I was doing something new and creative. And that's one of the reasons why I did the Bodily Fluids pictures, because I felt like I was certainly covering new ground for myself.

MR. GOODYEAR: Was it difficult working with these different liquids? And, you know, what was the kind of—what were you seeing that really attracted you to photograph milk or blood or piss?

MR. SERRANO: Well, first of all I'll say this: Working with the fluids was not nearly as difficult as working with shit. [They laugh.] But one of the things that attracted me about the fluids was the color. I mean I have a lot of ideas, you know. And I feel like ideas are one thing. But it's another thing to make an interesting image out of an idea. You know I've seen many ideas or many works, a lot, that have an explanation on the wall. This is a picture of this and this and this. You read it, and you look at the image, and you say, "So what? I don't care." You know? And so I felt like, you know, I needed to make interesting images. And to my great surprise, the blood looked great. It was a bright red. The yellow, the piss, gave me great bright colors, particularly printed in sepia chromes. And so that made me realize I had something, and that I was on the right track. So, you know, it's one thing to have a concept. It's another thing to make a photograph where that concept comes across the way it is in your head—or even better.

MR. GOODYEAR: Was the HIV/AIDS crisis in the back of your mind as you worked on this series? Or is that the people who evoke that issue in interpreting your work, is that just kind of a latter-day interpretation?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I wasn't thinking of AIDS because when I was doing my fluids pictures, I was not actually thinking About AIDS. I was not thinking about AIDS. But I can see how it makes sense, and it could refer to it. But that was not my initial, you know—

MR. GOODYEAR: Motivation.

MR. SERRANO: Yes. But I feel sometimes, you know, things are in the air. Unconsciously, you know, we're all affected by things. And so, yes. But, you know, even though when I did the fluids I was not aware of AIDS, I have to say now in retrospect that I believe I saw the first case of AIDS in about '76—'75, '76, even though they say it came about later. I think in the beginning it was there; it was just that no one noticed it. But I knew a guy by the name of Les who was a drug addict. And he became very weak and very skinny. And when he died, he looked like any AIDS victim I've ever seen. So I believe AIDS came about in the mid- to late 70s, except no one in the beginning— It was isolated, there were just a few people dying, and no one really took notice of it until enough people died, that scientists said, You know what? We have something here.

MR. GOODYEAR: And the relationship between the Bodily Fluid pictures and the Immersion pictures: How do you see those—what's the relationship between those two particular series?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I would say the Bodily Fluids pictures are very abstract, you know. They're all about painting and abstraction. And that's the thing, that my work consists of abstraction and representation. It comes about, you know, in and out, in and out. So whereas the Bodily Fluids pictures are very abstract; the Immersions have representation. But, you know, like I said earlier, usually with me one picture turns into another. And one

series into another. And so the process is very linear and, in a way, obvious, you know. Like for instance *Piss Christ*. You know *Piss Christ* was a means of coming together with the representation of body in one image and, more importantly, you know, bringing all this work that I had done, you know, referring to religion and specifically to Christ and Christianity in one image. And at the time I did the image, again, not only was it not meant to be provocative. I really had no idea or no clue and didn't think twice about naming it *Piss Christ*—often people have said to me it's because of the title. Because to me it was just descriptive.

And that's the thing I want to say about my titles. I think one of the things that I've learned working in the advertising agency, realized in only a short period, was that, you know, the power of words. When I tried to do a little copywriting, I realized that I had to sell an idea, a product with words. And to be as brief as possible, especially in the headline. You have to get people's attention. And you have to be able to say everything you want to say in a few words. And so when it became clear to me that photography would be my art practice, I titled things in such a way that people would know what they were looking at. So that when you see a picture that's all white, you know it's called Milk, it's called Blood. Rather than just, you know, just color. And so the images are often titled in very literal or descriptive ways. And that's why *Piss Christ* was titled the way it was.

MR. GOODYEAR: Again, speaking a little bit further about *Piss Christ*, I mean were you deliberately trying to be provocative by bringing together a crucifix and urine and a title such as this one?

MR. SERRANO: You don't need water, do you?

MR. GOODYEAR: What's that?

MR. SERRANO: Do you need water?

MR. GOODYEAR: No.

MR. SERRANO: No, not at all.

MR. GOODYEAR: I mean did you— Of course *Piss Christ* is one work in a larger series, and you're immersing different objects into different kinds of fluids. And so there's a real sort of conceptual project there going on. But I want to tease out a little bit further, you know, really what you were hoping to achieve with *Piss Christ* and other works in the Immersion Series. And how perhaps your goals in creating that work, how that perhaps got overlooked when it came to how the works were received.

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, *Piss Christ*, like I said earlier, was not meant as a provocation. It was not meant as a protest against a commercialization of religious values, which is what Ted Potter, the director of the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art [Winston-Salem, NC], said— He asked me at some point when the controversy erupted, and Congress and the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] started to breathe down Ted's neck— Actually it was the NEA who felt like they needed to offer an explanation. And so they went to Ted, and they said, "What can we say about the image to defend the image and ourselves?" He said, you know, can we call it a— He asked me, "Can we call it a protest against the commercialization of religious values?" And I said to him, "You know, Ted, it's not language I would use. But you can say that." [They laugh.] But I felt like— Again, *Piss Christ* was just one of many images.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: If it had not had happened, I would not have thought twice about that image. In fact, it doesn't stand out for me except for what happened. But otherwise I prefer *Madonna and Child* [1989] or other images to that one. So I feel like that image, had it not happened what happened, it would not stand out for me at all, and it wasn't meant to. And the funny thing is that if I had to do it over again, even if *Piss Christ* never attracted any other attention, even if the controversy didn't happen, I would still name it that because that's what it was. [Laughs] I mean sometimes it's just like—it's obvious to me. It's there. That's what it is, you know. And there's no other title. And it's very fortunate that I never really had problems coming up with titles. They sort of come up very spontaneously.

MR. GOODYEAR: Can you describe from your own perspective the controversy that subsequently ensued over that image? I'd be interested in your memories of that controversy. How you responded to the attack by Senator Helms [Jesse Helms] and Alphonse D'Amato and other individuals from the far right. And then a follow-up, what type of impact the controversy had on you at the time.

MR. SERRANO: Well, first of all, that image was part of the exhibit that SECA, Southeastern Center for Photography—Southeastern Center for Art—put together. And it was a show that was meant to highlight the winners of the Ava Award, the AVA Award, which I had won. And I remember getting a call in '88 when Julie and I lived in this small studio apartment on Tenth Street. And being told that I had won the Award in the Visual Arts for Manhattan. Now I was blown away. And immediately I said, "You mean this is the award that Ross Bleckner

won last year?" I was a complete unknown. And to be given that award, you know, following Bleckner the previous year was to me like incredible. I later found out that how they did it is that they would ask curators and art professionals all around to nominate three to five people. And Marcia Tucker was the one—bless her soul—who had nominated me for that award. So I got the award, and I submitted, for that award, I had submitted ten images, ten slides. Then when it came time for them to do the show or the traveling exhibition that came along with the \$15,000 grant that they gave you, I put *Piss Christ*, which was one of the images that got me the award in the first place, in the show.

Now the show traveled three different places. I think it started at the Los Angeles County Museum in California. And then the last stop went to Carnegie-Mellon, and then the last stop was at the Virginia Museum [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA] in Virginia. And I remember going to that one. Someone asked a question about the work in general. And I think it was about the—I forget what it was about. But somehow I gave an answer—maybe it was about an ejaculate; maybe there was an ejaculate there—and I gave an answer that amused the person. She was very, you know, a little bit shy about it because she turned out to be the wife of the director of the Virginia Museum.

But apparently, I think someone was there either for that moment or—but someone saw that photograph, and they wrote to the paper, the Richmond paper there, about *Piss Christ*, a little thing saying *Piss Christ*, objecting to it. Now, Donald Wildmon, the director of the American Family Association, a right-wing fundamentalist group, saw that. And, you know, I've seen him interviewed saying—this one little item I saw in the paper. And, you know, it got him in such a frenzy that he wrote letters to, by their own admission, 180,000 people, including their constituents, urging people to write to Congress and to the Senate to protest the use of taxpayers' money in this way, you know. So the first time I saw anything of it was in the *Post*, page six. You know, "Furor Over *Piss Christ* Photograph." And shortly after that Ted Potter contacted me and said, yes, that things had been brewing up in Congress and in the Senate. And all these politicians were up in arms and demanded to know what had happened. So, yes, you know, it was because of Donald Wildman and what he did that *Piss Christ* came to light.

And so by May of '88, '89, I'd seen that I was already being denounced by several people in the government, you know, like Jesse Helms, Alphonse D'Amato. Actually what I learned in a *Vanity Fair* article years later was that Alphonse D'Amato knew what was coming, and he was trying to make a big political show, and he did. On the Senate floor he rips up the catalog with *Piss Christ*. But an aide to Jesse Helms found out what Alphonse was up to. And he quickly fed Jesse some information so that Jesse would be out of the room and wouldn't be able to grandstand himself. And so that's how Jesse became aware of it.

You know Jesse said something about me which made me proud in a way, in a very, you know, he didn't intend it that way. But he made me proud when he said that, and I felt empowered. And what Jesse said was, "Andres Serrano is not a jerk—no, an artist." He said, "Andres Serrano is not an artist. He's a jerk who's taunting the American people." And I was a complete unknown. And the idea of me standing—it's like I had this image of me standing in front of the American people just taunting them, you know. And going Ah ah ah! You know. And that made me feel like, wow. I'm a powerful human being that I can taunt the American people and still be standing, you know. I'm not going to go away, I'm still here. I can take it. And so once I realized that I could take the heat, that's when I decided I'm going to stay in the kitchen.

And in more contrast, I felt like the NEA fumbled it from the beginning. All they had to do was say, you know what? We did everything according to our mandates and guidelines, you know. We gave these professionals, they decide; it's up to them. They chose this. We have nothing to do with it. And instead they became very apologetic, very defensive, like they did something wrong. So I felt that in doing that, it gave these right-wing politicians a major victory. And it was only, you know, sort of that victory became 20 times more powerful once the Corcoran gave in and cancelled the Mapplethorpe show. So I felt like the NEA had the ability to be able to if not stand up for me, stand up for themselves, defend themselves and just brush it off. That's all they needed to do. And instead they acted in a very cowardly manner.

MR. GOODYEAR: Which ultimately added fuel to the fire.

MR. SERRANO: Fuel to the fire, and it weakened them. You know ever since then they've lost almost every battle, you know, as far as the NEA and its budget and their not being able to fund artists directly anymore. And, you know, one of the things that is a lot of misconception about that grant is that first of all, it was not 15,000 of the taxpayers' money. The SECA, the Awards in the Visual Arts Program, was funded by three organizations: Rockefeller Foundation, the Equitable Life Assurance, and the NEA. So technically only \$5,000 of that money came from the NEA. And, you know, I just want to say, without getting into details, that to this day, people hold me up as the poster boy of why art should not be funded in this country.

And what nobody really thinks about, realizes or cares about is the real truth behind everything. And the fact is, when I got that grant, I made very little money, so I paid very little in taxes. In the time since *Piss Christ* and because of all the controversy and because of that grant, I've made millions of dollars, and I've paid millions of

dollars in taxes. I mean I've paid so much in taxes, 40 percent of my income. And so I am in a higher tax bracket, and I've paid a lot of money to the government because of what happened and because of the fact of that money. So in a way that \$5,000 multiplied a thousand times over for the government, and it was a good thing, you know. It was a very good thing. And they should be so lucky as to discover another Andres Serrano that could do that for them.

MR. GOODYEAR: With that I think we're going to end today. This provides a nice dividing point, I think. When we start tomorrow, we can talk about, you know, your response to the outcry, you know, the impact that the controversy had on you and how it affected your career. And, you know, how your sort of standing in the larger art community was affected by all this, which, I think, very much sort of shaped not only the work that you would create right after the Immersion Series, but how your work was being received in the early '90s.

MR. SERRANO: We'll save it for tomorrow.

MR. GOODYEAR: We'll save it for tomorrow [They laugh]. I'll turn this out. Look at this, 54 minutes, perfect.

MR. SERRANO: Oh, wow!

[END OF CD 3, TRACK 2]

MR. GOODYEAR: Day two. This is Frank Goodyear interviewing the artist Andres Serrano at the artist's home on Thursday, July 30, 2009, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is Disc No.4. Okay. Here we go -- First of all, you know, are there any answers from yesterday that you'd like to just return to sort of briefly, add further comment on. I mean one of the reasons we do this in the course of two days is if there's things overnight that, you know, like, gosh, I should've said, told that story. Is there anything that you want to add on from yesterday? Or we can just move right into new questions.

MR. SERRANO: Actually I don't remember the questions or answers from yesterday. [They laugh.] So we'll move on.

MR. GOODYEAR: So we'll move on. I actually do have one sort of follow-up question regarding the influence that film has had on your work. You mentioned several filmmakers. Could you just go a little bit further in describing, you know, the impact that film has or provide an example or two of specific films or filmmakers who have shaped how you approach a particular project or issue?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I would say that, you know, most of the films by Luis Bunuel that I've seen have influenced me greatly. Because, you know, Bunuel deals a lot with Catholicism and religion. And you know he also, you know, dances between the sacred and the profane in a very ironic and funny way. So this is something that, you know, has always been very important in my work as well. And I think I got a lot of it from Bunuel. I mean I got in the sense that I shared his sense of humor. And that's what it is I think. Bunuel is especially funny sometimes. To me that's his genius, almost as a comic genius, you know. I can think of many films, *Simon of the Desert* [1965] and *Viridiana* [1961], you know, *Nazarin* [1959]. And there are other films of his that don't dwell on religion so much that are just as poignant and strong, like, for instance, *The Forgotten Ones*, or *Los Olvidados* [1950]. I mean that's a classic.

But one of my favorite Bunuel films is an early film that he did in Mexico actually, in I think 1949, and it's called *El, or This Strange Passion*. And it's about a guy who becomes sort of fixated on his wife to a psychotic degree. You know he's very jealous of his wife, and he imagines all kinds of things. And in the end, you know, he has to be put away. But you see that when he comes out of it, he's still kind of the same. Well, not that he comes out of it, but in the monastery where he is sent, you know, he still remains sort of the same. I mean I like that one a lot because it's about how crazy people get. And I think Bunuel has a Spanish sensibility that's particularly good at fleshing out these characters. And, you know, I would say the work of Bunuel is, I would say, my most—my favorite director and one of the biggest influences on my work. And you have to remember I was about probably 19, 20, 21—actually 18, 19, 20—when I saw a lot of his films. So it was right after art school. So you know it was at a time when I was greatly influenced by the things that I saw.

I mean in a way, I think, many artists become the most influenced and are the most impressionable at the very beginning of their careers, even before they start their work. That's when you start to not only, you know, formal education, but also you start to be the most inspired by what you see around you. And a lot of times, I think, that inspiration, you know, it prepares you for what's to come later. But the initial impact, the things that you respond to, things that make you feel something, that to me is the most important influence.

And let's see, who else? Also, the other thing that was particularly poignant for me as far as Bunuel is concerned is that he's a Spanish filmmaker. And because of that, I actually prefer the Spanish films, the Mexican films, as opposed to the French films. Even though I like *Belle du Jour* [1967], I don't speak French. So I don't feel as close to those films as I do to the Spanish ones. With the Spanish films, I can understand them, you know, without

reading the subtitles. And that makes a difference, you know, because of the fact that I have my Hispanic background, it made me feel even closer to the films and to the filmmaker. Because when you speak a different language, when you speak more than one language, I find that you sort of have different feelings depending on which language you speak. For me the Spanish language is very expressive. And you feel a lot more emotions sometimes in speaking it than in speaking English. And so some of the things that happen in Bunuel films—not that they get lost in the translation—but when you speak Spanish and when you come to understand their culture, there are certain nuances that you get from the film that you don't get from the subtitles.

MR. GOODYEAR: You mentioned Bunuel's use of humor and irony being something that was really important as you, too, confront some of the very weighty issues that he's grappling with and you're grappling with. Can you just share with me some examples in your own work where, you know, you purposely approached a subject with a sense of irony or a sense of humor?

MR. SERRANO: Well, there's a scene in *The Exterminating Angel* [1962], for instance. You know *The Exterminating Angel* is about a dinner party of the upper classes that somehow the dinner party gets stuck in time. You know people arrive to the house, and they, for some strange reason, can't get out. And they're stuck there for several days. Finally when they do get out and toward the end of the film, they go to church to give thanks and to attend Mass. And as soon as the church ends, you know, for some reason, they stop and they hesitate before going out. And it seems like there's a repeat of the same thing, where these people are now stuck in church. And then you see the final scene in that film is you see a flock of sheep running. The connection is obvious: the flock, the Chosen People, to the people who go to church, the people who believe.

So I remember one image that I did called *The Rabble* [1984] early on. And it's one of my early works. And it's a crucifix. And then you see a bunch of claws, and they're chicken claws reaching up to it. And it's the same thing. It's the same thing. Yes, the rabble are like the sheep that go to church and follow, you know, the dogma. And it's not even the sheep. I believe that the sheep in Bunuel's film and certainly in my picture, they're not necessarily people following Jesus. They're people following the church, and there's a big difference between following Jesus and following the church.

MR. GOODYEAR: Absolutely. Absolutely. Well, when we ended yesterday afternoon, we were talking about the *Piss Christ* and the controversy, and you were describing for me, you know, the events that transpired there. I'd like to use today —well, use that particular episode as a jumping-off point for our conversation today. And specifically to begin by asking, you know, —how did this make you feel? I mean how did it make you feel that all of a sudden there was this like of national, indeed international, attention on you? And not only how did you feel about, you know, being all of a sudden in a national spotlight, but how did you respond? I mean what was your decision in how to address the critics who attacked you; and, likewise, the people who came to your defense.

MR. SERRANO: Well, it was very surreal, to say the least. Because, you know, I went from being a complete unknown to being not only in the spotlight but also in the hot seat at the same time in a very big way. I always said that it felt very like a Kafkaesque experience. That one day you wake up. And, you know, you find yourself literally overnight being all of a sudden being denounced in Congress by Senators and Congress people who have no idea who you are or what you do. In fact I remember reading in the Congressional Record of '89 on four different occasions, '89, '90, where different people referred to me, and they all spelled my name differently, you know, every one of them.

So it just made me realize that I was just a symbol, a political football, and it didn't matter who the person was. They really weren't talking about me. They were talking about this—they had this character or this issue that they were going to—and this agenda, they had this agenda. I became part of an agenda and not a real human being. And my response really, my initial response, was to try to hide as much as possible. And I did that by not allowing anyone to take my picture. I didn't give my picture out for at least six months from the time it happened. I would respond to people's questions. I remember in fact one time someone from the *New York Times* came to interview me. And I agreed to it, but with the understanding that they wouldn't take my picture. They took a picture of a window in my apartment instead and had a kind of cross looking through it.

I did that for several reasons. First of all, I felt vulnerable. You know I felt vulnerable and attacked. But I was being attacked for a photograph. And I thought, gee, you know, I've done much more terrible things in life than this photograph. So I was really paranoid that people would try to scrutinize me even more and delve into the kind of life I had had, particularly when I was on drugs, you know. So my initial reaction was to try to protect myself by concealing myself, by hiding, but not giving— And also I felt like people were attacking me and my work, and I didn't want to give them a face to attack as well. So I preferred to stay in the shadows as much as I could and in my own way. And lastly I also felt, you know what? If people, the art world or anyone sees my —if they saw my picture too many times, they'd get sick of me. And just to make sure that people understood that this media circus was not something that I created, and I was just simply a victim of it. So I chose to stay in the background as much as possible.

MR. GOODYEAR: Were there people who came forward to defend not only you, but the idea of freedom of creative expression; whose thoughts not only resonated with you but you really took quite personally and appreciated at the time?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, but that happened only after Mapplethorpe was dragged into the picture. I remember before it became the Serrano-Mapplethorpe controversy, I felt like I was taking it all along, and no one was defending me except for Ted Potter and SECA, the people who gave me the award. No one was coming to my defense, you know. But after Mapplethorpe was dragged into it, I felt like, okay, now it was more of a cause for the art world to rally against. And then I found support. And, you know, most of the support I found from people that I had never met, people who were just outraged by Jesse Helms in general. And so it was easy for them to rally against Helms. And in doing so, you know, they were supporting me. I remember being in San Francisco, being in Atlanta, Georgia, as well, at a time when all of this was going on, and seeing exhibitions where more than one person had made an artwork referring to Jesse Helms and referring to *Piss Christ*. So, you know, people were up in arms and mostly against Jesse, you know.

But I also remember the lack of support from people who I felt should have supported me. From people who were either knowledgeable about art or art professionals. I remember Helen Frankenthaler writing a letter to the *Times* saying that my work was not good. I shouldn't have gotten the grant. And she was all upset about that. I also remember an editorial in the *New York Times* defending Mapplethorpe by saying, you know, well, Mapplethorpe, even though he's gay, you know, he's got 20 years of work behind him, he's got a lot of books, he sells a lot of work. But a crucifix in urine, what were they thinking? And, you know, it's also interesting to note that paper, the *New York Times* did not have the courage to print *Piss Christ* for almost ten years. It was only ten years after the fact that they finally were able to put those words together.

On the other hand, by contrast, I think one of the most exhilarating moments—if I can use that word—during the *Piss Christ* episode was when I saw Ted Koppel on *Night Line* refer—say the words—*Piss Christ*. You know I felt like, gee, wow! I broke new ground. He actually said it, and it was on TV, and he was not embarrassed by it. And so I felt good about that.

MR. GOODYEAR: Interestingly, the period, the couple of years immediately following this controversy, is a period where you do a lot of work, a very prolific period for you. And you do some of the most important work in your career. I thinking about your series on the Church, the Klan, Nomads, all come out in the couple of years after 1989. Can you talk about that period and the kind of creative work that you were doing? I mean you mentioned that you sort of tried to become invisible publicly. Did you see this as an opportunity to pour yourself into your work more fully?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. You know as I said yesterday, I realized that I could survive this attack, you know, this onslaught on my work. And so at that point I had nothing to fear anymore. I felt like I survived it. I can keep going, so I'm going to keep going, you know. And also I was feeling my most creative perhaps at that time because of the fact that I had an opportunity to show. I remember Stephan Stux, after I had finished with the fluids and was working on other things, saying to me, "Well, you know, you don't have to finish with them. You can always go back." And I thought to myself, why would I ever go back? I don't go back. I've got too many ideas to become fixated on something or to try to go back to something because the dealer wants to make money. And so I completely ignored him. And that's when I did *The Nomads* and then *The Klan*. And I remember, you know— And I think when I first told Stephan Stux about doing the Klan, he warned me that he was nervous about me going down there. But soon after that, I told him about it again. And he started to tell me—Oh, I said, I've already done it. We're going to show it at my next show, and we did show it. Right away we showed *The Klan* and the homeless portraits, *The Nomads*, together.

Yes. Then shortly after that I embark on the Church, and a year later I did *The Morgue*, you know. And I actually did *The Objects of Desire* in between that, too. And it's funny because I did *The Objects of Desire* in '91, and I did them in Atlanta, Georgia. No, I'm sorry. I did them in New Orleans. And the reason I did them in New Orleans was because a few months earlier I had been there to do a lecture. And I met a kid by the name of Blake Boyd, and he was a really nice young man, an artist. And he and his girlfriend, Dawn, they invited me to their house, to stay at their house if I ever wanted to do anything in New Orleans, you know. And I sort of said, yes. Then I went home.

A few months later I thought, well, what would I do in New Orleans? And then I thought, well— what was also of interest to me was that Blake had mentioned that his father had a gun collection. So I thought, you know, guns, yes. It would be a perfect opportunity for me to have great access to many guns and photograph them. And so I thought, you know, I'll go down and do it. So I went down there. And ironically I went down there, and I was busy doing my work. I had photographed Blake's father's collection. His step-father's collection, and his step-father was a sheriff. And I had photographed other gun collections. And then all of a sudden, in the middle of it, I spoke to my wife, Julie, on the phone. And she mentioned something about riots. And I said, "What are you talking about?" I didn't hear of any riots because I was so engrossed in my work that I didn't look at any papers or I

don't even think Blake had a television. And she said, "Didn't you hear? There were riots in L.A.? Rodney King was attacked, this man was attacked and beaten by the police. And there are riots all over."

And sure enough, the next day, when I went to re-photograph a gun collection, I was told they didn't want me to photograph the guns anymore. So not only did I get those pictures in the nick of time, but also it was very ironic that, you know, I was working on something on this gun exhibition when the Rodney King event unfolded.

MR. GOODYEAR: What is it about guns that you like as a subject?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I call them The Objects of Desire.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes, I wanted to ask you about that title, too.

MR. SERRANO: And it was because in speaking to these gun collectors, and in seeing how they handled their collections, I realized they treated them as precious objects. They treated them like works of art. They polished them, they were very careful with them. They cleaned them. And they revered them. Not only did they respect them, but they revered them. And so it just made me feel that they were objects of desire. Now, having said that, it was also ironical, maybe obvious, that I never met a woman with a gun collection. It was all men. [They laugh.] And so I thought that there was a sort of—not that it's a sexist thing. But that there's just certainly a phallic connection as a symbol of the web of power.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure. Yes. It's in a sense an examination of a particular sort of male culture. Have you ever fired a gun yourself?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, when I was there, I fired some guns, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: Oh, did you?

MR. SERRANO: I mean it was okay. But it's not a sort of thing that I would get fixated about.

MR. GOODYEAR: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Let's go back to *Nomads*. If I'm correct, is this the first series that you completed outside of your studio? I mean, I know that you worked in the New York City subways. What was the experience like of, you know, bringing your equipment, bringing your cameras down into the subway to work?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, that was the first time I've worked outside of the studio. And I did so because, as I mentioned, Edward Curtis was the inspiration for that work. And Curtis did the same thing. He had a traveling studio with him; it was a wagon. And so I realized that in doing that, that I was able to make my studio anywhere. And the reason I did that was very obvious to me. Well, first of all, I didn't have a studio at that moment. But more important, even if I'd had a studio, I think it would've been very difficult to convince homeless people to go with me to a studio, you know. The homeless are guarded, and rightly so. And they also, you know, even though they don't seem to be doing anything, a lot of times they have their own schedules, and they don't want to waste time, their time. So it was much easier and made sense for me to take the studio to them.

You know the good thing about *The Nomads* was that I also felt part of me wanted to do studio portraits of the poor. And I felt like—well, the homeless, I should say; they're not just poor, they're homeless. Because, you know, I feel like studio portraits—I've taken studio portraits, something that most of us have done at some point in our lives. When we were quite young, in school, or later in life. Wedding pictures. But the homeless can't have their studio portraits done. And so that was one of the reasons why I liked being able to assemble a studio and take a studio portrait of the homeless person, even if it was in the subway, wherever it was, you know. And that's the thing that also—I learned from that. Later on I did the same thing in *The Morgue*, where, you know, with my equipment and with my backdrop, I realized I could declare any space my studio.

MR. GOODYEAR: Edward Curtis's projects, not unlike Jacob Riis's or Louis Heinz's projects are documentary in nature. There is an attempt to record for posterity's sake, to publicize and bring to wider attention, you know, a particular community. Did you see *The Nomads* as a kind of documentary project as well? And if so, that in a sense represents also a break from other kinds of work that you've done in the past.

MR. SERRANO: I see it as a document only as a document in terms of those individuals. It's a record of those people. But unlike the work of Heinz or even Curtis, I was not trying to politicize an issue. I mean I didn't feel that I needed to take pictures of homeless people to remind people that homelessness is a problem in America.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: But I did feel that it was a specific documentation of each individual that I found. And I remember one time having a show in Chicago. It was a big show. And the curator of the show later told me that she was standing in front of one of the Nomad portraits, the one of Johnny, one day. Actually, no. She said that she was alerted to the fact that there was a lady crying in front of Johnny's portrait. Johnny being the homeless man that

I photographed who looks like a sort of fur trapper. [Loud whining noise in background.] And so she went over to the lady, and she asked her what was wrong. And the lady explained that Johnny was her son. And she said, "That's Johnny." He had been a nomadic character. He didn't like having any roots. And she was crying because Johnny had died. She was moved by the picture.

And I felt like that was the intent, that these people not forgotten. And I also, you know, I feel good sometimes that I would think that a lot of these portraits would become very meaningful to people who collected them. I remember one dealer being very fond of Renee's picture. And he had, over the years, he had bought two or three Renees. And he always spoke of Renee so lovingly. And I felt like, you know, here's [inaudible] pay respect to one of the best dealers France has ever known. And he's in love with Renee. [Whining noise continues.] But he refers to like a family member. And I remember also seeing the Nomad portraits at the Castello di Rivoli in Italy. And there, you know, the Castello is this delicate palace that still in its unrestored state, it still has a magnificent quality. And these portraits of the Nomads were there like regal portraits. And I thought again I had accomplished far beyond what I thought I could, I had accomplished. This thing where I was able to elevate these portraits, and they could stand there like kings and queens.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm. Did you—how long had you known the subjects that you photographed? Did any kind of relationship grow out of that? I mean were these people that you had seen in your particular neighborhood and that you knew? Or were these people that you just encountered, approached. I don't know whether you paid them to pose or not. But tell me a little bit more about your interactions with those subjects.

MR. SERRANO: Well, first of all, once I decided to do this project, I asked my friend Michael Coulter to assist me. And Michael came along with another friend because we needed a couple of people to help us. I didn't know any of the homeless people that I met. And I encountered most of them in the subways late at night. I went to the subways after a certain hour because I wanted to be able to photograph people without interference. And I found that pretty much worked out. Every now and then, a Port Authority inspector would come up to me and tell me I had to go away because I didn't have a permit. And so then we'd have to move on. And the police would sometimes come along and say the same thing. But the police are always [loud whining noise beings again] very lenient. They would say to me, [inaudible] you're going to have to go. As opposed to the Port Authority inspectors who were very rude. I remember one time, one guy, he just got in front of the camera and blocked it. And they had the police with them.

But I felt like, you know, I was not about to apply to the city for a license, a permit. Because I feel like these people live outside the system. So I have to operate in the same way, outside the system. So no. And so I encountered people on the spot. And I didn't have much communication with them in setting up a portrait in 15 minutes or less, you know. [Whining noise continues.] And so a lot of times I'm trying to focus. But what I would hear Michael and the other guy would speak to them. So every now and then I'd hear some conversation. I remember a man by the name of Gator who said that—you know Michael was asking him what he did. And he explained that he had been the hook in a Harlem theater, on amateur night. When they don't like the act and they pull them off stage, they do it with a hook, and he was the hook.

Another man that I remember because I saw him after I did the portrait was Rene. And Rene contacted me by phone about a year later. I don't know how he got my number. But somehow he got it. And he said to me—he wanted to speak to me. So I met him. And he explained to me that at the time that I photographed him, he was, you know, he was doing very badly. But his picture had appeared in [inaudible] magazine along with other examples of my work. And several of his friends contacted his family because they inquired about him; they didn't know he was homeless. And he said at that point in his life he decided to turn his life around. He went back to college. And now he was calling me because he was a counselor at the Port Authority. At Port Authority he was a cop, a counselor for the homeless. And so the reason he had called me was because he wanted to ask me for a small picture for his office. Which I gave him. A few months later Rene called me again, left another message on my machine, saying that he was going to be getting married in June. And he said, would I be coming as a guest or as a

photographer?

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] It strikes me that a number of these series: Klan, Nomads, Objects of Desire, The Church are, in a sense, commentaries on power in America. How power is wielded, how power manifests itself visibly in public culture. Were you thinking about creating work that commented on how power is exercised? And if so, you know, was there a larger sort of political and social commentary behind your work?

MR. SERRANO: No. But one thing I did realize. When I photographed the Klan, I realized that— You know I met all those Klanspeople before they would put their hoods and robes on. [Whining sound starts again.] for me, you know. It always struck me how, you know, they were just regular individuals, you know. But once they put on—they were sometimes very poor or very old—but once they put on that hooded mask, they became somebody else, you know. It was like there was a real transformation that I saw. And I felt the power of the robe. And it's

the same thing when I photographed the nuns and priests and monks that I photographed in *The Church*. I felt the distance that for whatever reason, those clothes, that clothing, that garb, sets them apart. And I remember trying to get a nun to pose and to turn her head a certain way. And she said to me, "You can touch." Meaning, you can position my head, and it made me realize again how I would never think of touching her except as she told me I could. But that's what we're intrigued and impressed by. The fact that they are different from us.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure, sure. How did you get access to the nuns whom you photographed?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I asked them. You know I mean I—

MR. GOODYEAR: Was this a local group?

MR. SERRANO: Yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay.

MR. SERRANO: I did *The Church* in three countries: in Spain, in France, and then in Italy, you know the three most Catholic countries I could think of. And you know it was just a matter of showing up at the church and asking permission. So that's pretty much it. The only time— And people were really cooperative, I must say. I mean almost everyone was extremely cooperative. I remember even taking a picture of a priest, a monk priest, in Venice. And as soon as the picture finished, he said, "I've got to run." He had to start the Mass, you know. [They laugh.] But you know people— I remember another one in Spain. He gave me three minutes because he had to go to Mass. But they were always very—they would try to accommodate me as much as possible. I mean I even tried to photograph the Cardinal of Paris, the Cardinal Lustiger. And I had to go through his PR person. And the first thing she asked me was, "Why *Piss Christ*?" Now I had to submit a resume saying I was the creator of *Piss Christ*. But obviously they look you up, and they—

MR. GOODYEAR: And they were reluctant in light of that to welcome you in.

MR. SERRANO: Well, I never got to photograph the cardinal.

MR. GOODYEAR: Oh, okay.

MR. SERRANO: She said to me, "You know," and questioning the work. She said, "You know *Piss Christ* is not so much a problem as the ejaculates, onanism." So that was an even bigger problem: the fact that there was this sperm flying in the air going nowhere, the sin of onanism. She said that was an even bigger problem. And then the last thing she said to me was—and I had two meetings with her—and the last thing: In the second meeting I had photographed the Bishop of Chartres, and I showed it to her. And she said, "Oh, yes, he's looking old." But she said, "You know what? It would make our job easier if you could get another Cardinal first." And it reminded me of the Klan. No one wanted to be the first. But once you got one—

MR. GOODYEAR: They'd follow along.

MR. SERRANO: And there was another funny incident actually in Rome where I went to the Vatican. A friend of mine had told me, her family was—an Italian friend here, a married lady that I knew, told me her family knew this monsignor at the Vatican. And she said, you know, he's a higher-up. And I think he was a Bishop. She said, "You know you can—"

[END OF CD 4]

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay. This is Frank Goodyear again, Thursday, July 30, 2009, interviewing Andres Serrano for the Archives of American Art. This is Disc No. 5. We move on to the series *The Morgue*, which follows closely on your exhibition of *The Klan*, and *The Nomads* and your series, *Objects of Desire*. Again, can you describe a little how that series relates to the ones that had directly preceded it?

MR. SERRANO: Well, the series -- the *Objects of Desire* was the work that I did right before *The Morgue*. And so I definitely see a connection between that, between the guns and death. But, you know, sometimes there are very simple explanations for why things happen and why I do the kind of work that I do. And the reason I did *The Morgue* at that moment was because I had access to a morgue. And what had happened is I had a friend who knew that I had been interested, a couple of years earlier, in going into a morgue. And initially my idea was to photograph John and Jane Does. But I was in California at the time. And I tried making some calls inquiring about getting into a morgue. And it just seemed like a lot of red tape, a lot of hassle, a lot of bureaucracy, and it wasn't worth the effort.

So I forgot about it until a couple of years later when a friend, who knew that I had once been interested in

getting into a morgue, said to me, “Do you still want to go into a morgue? Because my mother knows someone who runs a morgue.” I said, “Yes, sure. Go ahead.” And she said, okay. She said, “I’ll ask her, my mother, and see what she can do.” A few weeks later she said to me, the girl, my friend, said to me, “You know the only big drag is because I had to have lunch with my mother, and that’s always a drag,” she said. “But my mother went to see the man in charge of the morgue. And he said if you want to go in, you can.”

So I went there, and I met the man. He explained to me that—he said over the years two people, a man and a woman, came at different times, both asking if they could photograph in here. And he said to me, “Even though I said they could,” he said. “After the first day they never came back.” Harry then asked me, “Have you ever seen dead people before?” And I said, “No, not really.” You know. And he said, “Well, you know, I have to warn you, some people can take it, some can’t.” So I went inside the morgue, and I went in there with my equipment and everything else. And the first thing I saw was a doctor, you know, in the room. Well, the first thing I saw was a little girl on a table. She was about eight years old, you know, red freckles, reddish hair, curly hair. And as soon as I walked in, I saw a doctor taking his knife, and he opened her from the neck to the groin, and then he started to take out her organs. And, you know, I was immediately shocked. But I immediately put on my robe and my gloves and everything and started working. Because I felt like— You know I felt like I had a job to do just the same as they had a job to do. Just the same as the doctors and the technicians who worked there. They had their jobs, and I had mine. So I felt like I had no choice but to do my work.

And it was interesting that you had the doctor gave me permission to photograph. And he said just as long as people— I wouldn’t photograph anyone’s face or identify them in any way, that was the understanding; that I wouldn’t identify them in any way. He said, to me, you know, he said, “There was a doctor here, a woman doctor, who worked here for two years.” And he said, “One day she came in, and she saw someone on the table that she knew.” And after that she didn’t come back. So I took that to mean that there’s a sort of professional or clinical distance you have to have in order to be able to operate under those conditions.

MR. GOODYEAR: Beauty, it strikes me, is an important element of your work all throughout your career. What did you find that was beautiful about the dead?

MR. SERRANO: Well, it’s not exactly that I found them beautiful. It was more like I tried to find beauty in them, you know. I remember specifically one lady that I had seen, and she had died of AIDS. Her forehead was very large, and her throat was also swollen. At first I didn’t want to photograph her because I thought there are more beautiful people here than this one, you know. But then I came back in a couple of days, and there was no one else around. So I decided to take a second look at this lady. And what I did, in order to find the beauty that I was looking for, what I did was I covered her face with a red cloth and photographed her very close up. And that became one of my favorite photographs. In fact I used that for the cover of one of my books. And so that’s a case where—and it often happens—where at first I don’t find the beauty I’m looking for. And then I have to force myself to find it, to see it. There was another instance like that, not with the morgue, but another case that I remember that was almost exactly the same thing. Where I could not bring myself to photograph my subject.

MR. GOODYEAR: Was this the first time that you’d ever had that experience, unable to really do a project about a particular subject? Because you’d certainly tackled many difficult subjects before, certainly with the Klan and other projects.

MR. SERRANO: I guess, you know, sometimes, yes. Sometimes it’s not easy to find what you’re looking for. And what I’m looking for is beauty, really. I mean that’s the bulk—that’s the gist—of what I’m looking for, beauty.

MR. GOODYEAR: Did you learn anything either about yourself or about photography or about the body in the course of doing this Morgue series?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. Well, I discovered that first of all, most of the people who—[Brief side conversation with other people who come into the room.] Well, there was something I was going to say. What was I going to say?

MR. GOODYEAR: The question was about what was sort of the takeaway from this project?

MR. SERRANO: Oh, yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: You know what did you learn about yourself, about, you know, the process of—your own process? About the body itself and the kinds of changes that occur.

MR. SERRANO: Well, about myself, it was something that I had already learned thanks to Jesse Helms and the controversy, that I could do my work no matter what, under any circumstances, under whatever stress, I could work. And so in that sense I had learned that lesson during the whole *Piss Christ* controversy. So that was not a determinant at that point. But one thing I did learn in the morgue was that, you know, the people that were there, they died all kinds of deaths. They died by accident, on purpose, suicide, homicide, disease. But very rarely did I find people that died of old age, you know, natural causes. Most of the people that I found there had

died unexpectedly. And they always looked like victims. They always looked like they didn't deserve this. So I mean that's the one thing I learned from the morgue, that in the end we sometimes die an uncertain, an unexpected, and undeserved death.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you hope that those pictures demystified death and sort of unsettled a taboo in American culture about an avoidance of talking about and looking at, thinking about death?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I'm not sure that they demystified. Because I think in a way they do the opposite. You know I've been asked many times, which morgue was it? First of all, you know, I had the permission of the man in charge of the morgue with the understanding, to photograph there, with the understanding that the people wouldn't be identified, and I wouldn't say where the morgue was. But to me that's not important because it's the morgue. It's just the place we go to after we're dead. It doesn't matter which morgue because they're all the same. It's *the* morgue. And it's the same thing. It's the dead, you know. And it doesn't matter who these people are. They are symbols of what's to come. But having said that, I must say that even though sometimes, many times, the people that I photographed in death did not look the way they had looked in life, I still felt there was a presence there, a sort of, I don't know, a soul? There was an entity there that was still very much that person.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Moving forward to *History of Sex*, which I believe was begun around '95, '96. Seems to be in your larger body of work an appropriate subject to tackle. But tell me a little bit more about how the series came about. And why in the mid-'90s this became a subject of interest for you.

MR. SERRANO: Well, I think the *History of Sex*— Oh, a *History of Sex* came about as a title. Sometimes I think of the title first. And I thought, you know, I thought to myself, well, I've tackled death and race and homelessness. And so, you know, I felt like sex, why not sex? And I particularly thought of this title, a *History of Sex*. Not *the* *History of Sex* because it wasn't meant to be *the* *History of Sex*. A *History of Sex*. Although years later, I saw that the Discovery Channel tackled *the* *History of Sex*.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] And they've done it now.

MR. SERRANO: They were bold enough to do the whole thing, *the* history. But mine was only a history. [They laugh.] A personal history, you know. And so once I started that work, I started it in Rome in '95. And then I remember being in the middle of it and getting a call from Mark Wilson, a curator at the Groninger Museum. And now Mark was an American that I knew. Mark was actually—I first encountered Mark in Light Gallery. He had taken over Tennyson's job. And later on, you know, he let Mark handle the gallery, called Greenberg Wilson with Sarah Greenberg, Clement Greenberg's daughter. In SoHo they had a gallery for years, Greenberg Wilson. And now years later Mark in '96 was a curator at the Groninger Museum. And so Mark was organizing a big retrospective of my work for the museum.

So at some point in early '96, Mark called me. And he said, "The museum would like to invite you to come to Holland to do some work here that we could show in connection with your show." And I said, "Well, you know, Mark, thank you. Love to come. But I'm working on a new show. It's called a *History of Sex*. So I don't have time to go to Holland to make work about the Dutch." And he said to me, "Wow! If you're doing sex pictures, why don't you come to Amsterdam?" And immediately I thought, you're right, you know. I never thought of it. And so not only did Mark invite me, but Mark also—the museum also gave me \$40,000 to do the work. So that was extraordinary. I mean no museum in America would ever give me \$40,000 or any amount of money to do a show about sex. And so immediately when I got to Holland, Mark had provided me with people to show me around, show me everything I wanted to know about the sex scene in Amsterdam. And so pretty much that's how, you know, the sex show finished. I mean I'd started a few images in Rome. But I finished the bulk of it in Amsterdam.

MR. GOODYEAR: At the foundation of a history is some type of narrative, some type of story that you would like to tell. Can you kind of encapsulate the story, what sex is, in this series? I mean what's the narrative behind it?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, they were just sexual scenarios that I imagined. And for me, you know, a *History of Sex* is more like—I think of it as like a tapestry, like a medieval tapestry, where you just have different scenes related and unrelated. But somehow they weave together into one piece. But I felt like— first of all, it was good to work in Holland. It was good to live and work in Holland, and I spent five months there. In fact I remember that I got there, you know, probably in—was it in June or even in May. And the last picture I took was in November. And I had two guys named Hans and Frans, and they were, you know, naked over by a beach. And it was so cold they were turning purple, and then they were trembling. And I thought, okay, this is it. I can't shoot anymore. I can't put people through this, you know. And the reason most of the pictures in that series, *History of Sex*, were done outdoors because, you know, I didn't feel like painting backdrops, and I didn't find interesting interiors where I was. So it was much easier to just use a neutral background of a sky or a sea behind as a background.

But I would say -- to me, that show it all came down to one picture. That picture is called *Leo's Fantasy*. Now *Leo's Fantasy* [interruption by others] was a photograph that I had named after a guy named Leo. And what

happened was while I was in Holland doing the sex pictures, again my assistant was my friend Michael Coulter. And one of the things that Michael and I did was we went to as many sex or fetish parties in Amsterdam as far as possible. The fetish parties were basically dress-up parties, S&M parties, where people—you know there's a strict dress code. And the dress code was rubber, leather, or nothing. You had to wear rubber, leather, or just come naked. And I remember being on the guest list of several parties and showing up with Michael in a black leather jacket and black jeans and black—and it wasn't good enough. We were not in fetish. So finally after getting rejected several times, we had to break down and go to the fetish stores. There was one in particular there called The Masque, a very well-known fetish shop in Amsterdam, where you would see people, and particularly the night before a party or the night of, the day of a party. We'd see people there shopping for clothing to be able to wear to the fetish party.

And so, you know, the fetish parties were—sometimes the parties were in places that had so many rooms where different things were happening that Michael and I could be at the same party and not see each other for the whole night. And he would be seeing other things and doing other things, and I wouldn't even see him. And he started to tell me about a guy named Leo who ran one of the parties. And he would tell me some of the things, these freaky strange things that Leo would be doing. So I thought—I said to Michael, I want to talk to Leo. Because, you know, I was there doing sex pictures, so I wanted to know everything about sex, everything, ideas, you know, what makes people tick, you know. And so I had a conversation with Leo. And I remember not being very impressed, that Leo was not very forthcoming. He wasn't very articulate. And afterwards I thought, well, Leo's first language is Dutch. He doesn't really speak much English.

But when I got home, Michael called me up, and he said to me, "Listen, Andres," he said, "you know when you left, Leo said something very good, very funny." He said, "I always get an erection whenever I see a picture of a woman pissing into a man's mouth." And when Michael said that to me, I said, "Why not? We do requests. We play the hits. Let's do that." And so I did this photograph of a woman pissing into a man's mouth, and I titled it *Leo's Fantasy*.

Now, by the end, when I finished my work and submitted it to the museum, they decided to call my retrospective "A History of Andres Serrano." And within that show they had another show, "A History of Sex," where there were like curtains; so that you went in there, you know, knowing that you were going into an X-rated area.

MR. GOODYEAR: Was that your idea, to divide it like that?

MR. SERRANO: No, no. Their idea.

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay.

MR. SERRANO: But about a month before the show, I went to the Rotterdam Film Festival where there was a film being shown. Actually it was a documentation by this lady of me doing the sex pictures. But what struck me when I went there was that there was a huge poster saying *Leo's Fantasy*, a huge poster. And eventually I remember the poster got stolen a few times. But what happened was that the poster, which came out about a month before the show, the poster outraged certain people, in particular a lawyer representing several schools and churches, went to court to try and get an injunction against the poster being shown publicly. And even though the judge said that the poster could go up, the prosecutors in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and Groninger all said that they would prosecute anyone who put up the poster. So in the end the poster did not go up. But the show and the work got so much coverage and media attention that a day before the show opened, the museum instead put up another poster, black-and-white letters, and it just said: "Groninger Museum: You Decide." And it was obvious everyone knew what they were talking about.

The day of the opening, there were like 10,000 people that showed up. And in fact the poster, instead of being displayed publicly, was sold as a collector's item. [Mr. Goodyear laughs.] So for me *Leo's Fantasy* sort of like—you know, it really encapsulates what the show did and the impact it had. And I remember, you know, Michael and I would be trying to get recruits to pose for me, models. We would go around with one of my books and show it to people and say this is the kind of work I do, you know. And I remember one girl saying to me, she said to me, "I don't mean—" She was Dutch, and the Dutch are very polite. She said, "I don't mean to offend you, but I've never heard of you." And I laughed. I said, "There's a lot of people who haven't heard of me." I said, "But if by the time I leave Holland you haven't heard of me, then I'll feel like I've failed." And so I felt very good that when I did leave Holland—

MR. GOODYEAR: People had heard of you.

MR. SERRANO: People had heard of me.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Potter Stewart I think was the name of the Supreme Court justice back in the '30s and '40s who when asked about the difference between sort of pornography and art of the nude said, "I know it when I see it." [1964]. And that's where he left it. Do you—can you define the boundary line better than Stewart in

terms of the difference between something that is perhaps a provocative work of art and an obscene piece of pornography? Do those borders exist for you?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I feel like I know when I see it, in the sense that I know when I'm looking at pornography, and I know when I'm looking at art. But to me there's not much of a difference. I mean the big difference is that art is a lot more expensive than pornography. [They laugh] I mean that's the main difference. Other than that, I feel like they have different purposes. They function differently. It reminds me, by the way, of a cartoon that appeared, you know, at the time of this controversy in Holland. And there was this cartoon. And you see someone at the reception desk of the Groninger Museum about to enter my show. And he's sort of wearing a— he's got a raincoat. He's got sort of a beard. He's a really shady-looking character. He's got some magazines that say "Sixteen" and, you know, "young girls". And then in the distance you see an art-loving public, you know, gallery-goers, they're all dressed up looking at *Leo's Fantasy*. And the man, this character says to the receptionist, "And here I thought I knew nothing about art." [They laugh.] So I mean that sort of says it all for me—is that there is a difference, but I can't say it's a difference between high-brow and low-brow, although that was the joke of that cartoon, you know. But, I mean, it's a very fine line.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: You know, pornography can be art. There's a photographer that I know— And that's another story in itself, you know, by the name of Roy Stuart, you know. And to make it very short, in the '70s—yes, in the mid-'70s at some point—I knew this lady by the name of Brenda who lived on Sixth Street in the East Village. I mean I knew her because even though I was dealing drugs at the time, pot and pills and stuff like that, she liked me and she trusted me enough to babysit for her kid, you know, Justin, a young beautiful little boy who was about four or five at the time. And Justin's father was a guy named Roy who lived down the block; he didn't live with Brenda, and he didn't live with his son. He lived on another block. So I knew Roy. Then years later when I moved out of that scene and got off drugs, the first place that I went to live was at Roy's place in a loft in Manhattan on Thirty-eighth Street. You know, he had a huge loft where he rented out to several people, and I lived there for a few months. But then that was the '70s, and I lost track of Roy.

And then one day Taschen, Benedict Taschen, came to visit me. Then by the strangest coincidence, I'm here, and all of a sudden I get a call from Roy Stuart who was one of Benedict's photographers, you know, beautiful erotic photographer, does great work. And I'm talking to Roy on the phone saying—and he says how much he likes my work. And I said, "I like your work, too, you know." And he says to me, "You don't remember, but we know each other." And I said, "Really?" And my mind was blown away that Roy Stuart the guy that I knew who didn't have a job, who wanted to do a band, who didn't seem to do anything all day, you know, had become this extraordinary erotic photographer. And it was the same Roy from my past, you know. But, yes, Roy Stuart is an example of guy who does beautiful, erotic work that can be classed, you know, is it art? Is it photography? Or is it both?

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes, yes. These are the sort of ambiguities that exist. Before we move off of History of Sex, I'm curious as to how that series was received back here in the United States. My understanding is that the first exhibition was in Europe where it was a great sensation. How was the series received when you exhibited here in New York?

MR. SERRANO: Well, it was a real contrast. In Holland, that exhibit not only drew the attention of a lot of the media, television, print media; it was also on the cover of their version of *Time Magazine* in an article about posters and whether or not controversial posters, whether or not they'd gone too far. And, you know, it was all over the place. And a lot of those images, including some of the most hardcore images, were in some of their daily newspapers. In contrast, when I had a show of that work in New York at the Paula Cooper Gallery, there were no—hardly any reviews. One of the only reviews was a short little item from Michael Kimmelman saying, "Doesn't anyone realize Andres Serrano's 15 minutes are up?" You know. And there were no images. And in fact one of my friends called me early in the morning, a friend of mine by the name of Snuky Tate, and Snuky said, "You know, Andres, there's a review of your show in *Time-Out*, and they really put it down." I said to him, "Oh, what did they say?" And he said, "Well, first of all they say that it's kind of tame. It's not really that provocative." And I said, "Well, did they run a picture?" He said, "Yes. They showed the picture of the priest tied up." I said, "Okay." In other words, they call me tame. And the image that they chose to run is the one image with no nudity at all. [Mr. Goodyear laughs].

So I mean that to me signifies, you know, the sharp contrast between how sex is treated in this country and abroad. Here we're afraid of it. We're afraid, we're shocked. The nation is absolutely shocked when we see Janet Jackson's nipple pop out. And yet in Europe, all of Europe, you can see, you know, pictures of breasts publicly. You can see women nursing their babies in commercials. So there's a big difference how we see sex, how we treat it. I mean it's big here, but only under the sheets.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right. Moving on to the Interpretation of Dreams, which I think is your next important

body of work. Obviously the title of that series is drawn from Freud. And I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about Freud's influence on your thinking about societal taboos, sexuality, you know, other issues that you developed in that series.

MR. SERRANO: Well, I started reading Freud from *Interpretation* when I was very young. And the reason was I was trying to understand what made my mother crazy. So I was trying to get some psychological insight into what makes crazy people crazy. And, well, you know, I also understood that there were things that Freud was saying which made a lot of sense to me.

MR. GOODYEAR: For example?

MR. SERRANO: For example, you know, this idea that a lot of what we get, both good and bad, comes from our parents. You know the Oedipal Complex, all of that stuff. And you know whether or not it's true or not, I believed it. And so when I chose to do *Interpretation of Dreams*, I was just using Freud's title as the kind of umbrella that I like to use. A big title which, you know, the show starts as a title. And with a title like that, I felt like I could just be as imaginative as possible and be as— You know, anything I did I could put because, I mean, who was to question what kind of dreams that I was having. So that to me was just the ability to sort of give free rein to my imagination and not have to focus on any one subject. And again, it's going back to my much earlier work before I started working in series, where I was just creating singular images.

MR. GOODYEAR: Is there a particular favorite image in that series that you like?

MR. SERRANO: I like the *Other Christ*. I like the black Christ and the white Mary. I find that one particularly strong. I like *Lorrie and Dorrie*. Now here, earlier, I spoke about not being able to find beauty in infectious pneumonia that the picture in the morgue where I put the red cloth to find the beauty. And that simple little trick is what made that picture beautiful for me, and what made me find the beauty in that lady. So I decided I wanted to do some—I knew these twins, identical twins. And I thought, well, I could take a picture of them and make them into Siamese twins. And then I thought why fake that; why not get real Siamese twins. And so I asked Cynthia Karalla, an artist friend of mine, who was helping to do the project, to find me Siamese twins. So she found Lorrie and Dorrie, well-known Siamese sisters, Siamese twin sisters in New Jersey. And I went to see Lorrie and Dorrie. And I was shocked by what I saw. First of all they're poor. And also they had a little dog that was crippled. And, you know, one of them is a lot shorter than the other one. And so one of them has to be on a little table, moving table, at all times. And so I was very shocked.

And I felt like, you know, I don't find beauty here. And so even though I said I would photograph them, and I gave them a check, you know, as the fee, as soon as I got downstairs, I said to Cynthia, "Cynthia, listen. Tell them they can keep the check. But tell them I'm not going to do the picture. I've decided not to do the picture." And so Cynthia, two or three days later, she called me up, and she said, "Listen, I don't have the heart to tell them you're not going to do the picture. They really want you to take the picture. Why don't you take the picture, please. Find a way."

So I decided, well—I decided to look for a costume, look for costumes at the costume store that I would go to in Long Island City. And then I saw some costumes, and I thought, well, you know, maybe I can dress them up, and, you know, turn them into sort of fantasy. And then I called this makeup artist with whom I had been working with by the name of Tatiana. I said to Tatiana, I said, "Listen, can you work under pressure?" And she laughed. She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, I was thinking of photographing these Siamese twins." Now Tatiana Shoan was her last name, was a very good-looking young girl, and she worked a lot with fashionable people. So I said, "I was thinking of photographing these Siamese twins." And Tatiana said to me, "What? Lorrie and Dorrie?" And she got all excited. I said, "Yes. How'd you know?" She said, "I love Lorrie and Dorrie," she said, "I tried to get them for this cosmetic company that I was working for. You know I can try to get them a job, to get them to use them, but they wouldn't do it." And she said, "I'd love to."

So the fact that Tatiana knew and wanted to work with Lorrie and Dorrie made me feel like Cynthia was right, I had to take this picture. So I dressed them up, and I love the picture. But there's a case where more than once I've hesitated because I couldn't find beauty there. And then, you know, decided to take another look. Or someone said to me, "You've got to do this. Find a way." And then I find a way.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you have dreams yourself or fantasies that then you want to stage in subsequent work? I mean tell me how active your dream life is. [Laughs]

MR. SERRANO: Well, I don't have that many dreams.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: That really—I only dream when I'm in a feverish state or sick. Or when I'm traveling and I'm in a strange hotel. But the one dream that I used to have a lot, probably up until ten years ago, was that someone

was trying to kill me. So I had to kill them instead. And I mean that was the only dream I really had. And I think maybe that's the competition in the artist, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure.

MR. SERRANO: The sense of competition. I mean even though I don't think of myself as being competitive, you know, and I never tried to compete in school, I do recognize that the reason I'm not competitive or don't feel competitive is because I don't want to compete, you know, on someone else's terms. And that's why I try to create my own terms, my own world, where I'm just competing against myself.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm hmm. Moving on to America. First of all, where were you on September eleventh. Were you here?

MR. SERRANO: I was here. September eleventh, I was woken by a friend of mine, an ex-girlfriend, by the name of Barbel Miebach, who said to me, "Turn on the television." She woke me up probably a little before nine-thirty. So I turned on the TV.

MR. GOODYEAR: Were you living here at the time?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I turned on the TV, and I saw that, you know, the World Towers had been attacked by a plane going into it. And, you know, the commentator was speaking, and they were showing a picture of the two buildings. And then something happened that it's one of those things that happened that for many you think you saw something, and then you could have seen it, it was like just something. You know they were talking, and just before they pulled away to something, I saw the buildings go down. And I thought I didn't see that. I must have imagined it because the commentator kept talking like nothing happened. And it was at least ten seconds later before even he realized maybe. And then he started screaming, "My God! The buildings have gone down!" You know. And so that was an extraordinary moment for— You know immediately, Barbel and I had decided to go downtown because Barbel was actually a photographer who was working for magazines, German magazines. And so she—

MR. GOODYEAR: And she was your girlfriend at the time?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. And so she said she was going to go downtown. And so I went downtown with her. But, you know, we got there too late. It was already around noon, and it was sealed off. So I couldn't get past Fourteenth Street—past Canal Street, you know. Couldn't go farther down than Canal.

MR. GOODYEAR: You didn't carry your camera by any chance, did you?

MR. SERRANO: I did, yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: You did!

MR. SERRANO: Yes, yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: And you were hoping to take pictures.

MR. SERRANO: Yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: But it was too late. I mean we should have gone down there maybe immediately after I woke up. Maybe I had a chance to get down there. But by the time we went, it was probably noon, and already they had sealed off that area. But, you know, my super, Ray, told me that he stood on the corner at Twelfth Street and University, and he saw the buildings go down from that distance, you know. And I remember someone explaining to me, someone who lived downtown, explaining to me what it was like. She said she looked out the window. And all of a sudden it was white, you know, the whole window. And she said before that she had seen it was like people— You know I'd pictured it like a cartoon. She said people were running down the street. And then this huge cloud was coming behind them. And that cloud soon came over everything, and everything was white. You couldn't see anything, you know.

But that same day, you know, the *New York Times Magazine* called me and said they were about to prepare a commemorative issue ten days later. And they asked me if I would do something for them. And I said okay. So when I was with Barbel downtown, Barbel said, you know, she was going to interview some Muslim people for her magazine in Germany. So when the *Times* called me, they said, "What are you going to do?" I said, "Well, I was thinking of interviewing some Muslim people—photographing some Muslim people." And they were like, really? And I said, "Yes, You could maybe put words together, you know." And about an hour later they said, "That's great. We've assigned you a writer, we're going to give you a writer." And so I did a piece called, you

know, "The Looks They Get." Where, you know, I photographed these people in a mosque in Queens, these Muslims in a mosque in Queens.

But actually I also created a piece specifically for the *Times*, but I didn't get it in the *Times*. It was too late. And that was called *Blood On the Flag*. This image where there was a picture of the flag close up, and there was blood coming down. Because I felt like we had been attacked and in a sense America had been wounded. And so that's why I did that picture.

MR. GOODYEAR: Let's stop right now and take a—

[END OF CD 5]

MR. GOODYEAR: This is Frank Goodyear again. This is Thursday, July Thirtieth 2009. Frank Goodyear interviewing Andres Serrano. This is Disc Number 6. So just tell me about how the events of that morning, how they affected you and how a series which you went on to build—ultimately called America—how that series addressed that particular historic crisis.

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, I think it affected me like it affected most Americans, most people, particularly New Yorkers. I think New Yorkers were really hit hard by it. And I think the most painful thing about September eleventh was when I saw, when I would walk around, and I saw—particularly, there was a place on Greenwich Avenue and Seventh Avenue—there was a fence where someone had started putting up pictures of missing people, small little pictures. And I mean that was always very hard for me to go look, close-up, to look at those pictures. I think that was the hardest thing that I felt; that you know all these people that were lost, and they had put their pictures up, you know. That was particularly hard for me to look at.

But here in Union Square, right up the block, there was almost a memorial every night. There were people out every night, late at night, candles. There wasn't a lot of pontificating. There wasn't a lot of speech. It was just sort of quiet and mourning. And I felt this was one of the feelings that I felt about immediately after September eleventh in New York, that there was a real mourning. You know it was, like, mourning because it was like everyone stopped their shit. Even the criminals. It seemed like everyone was really together on something. And for a moment we were united by this sense of loss and grief. And it made us not only equal; it gave us a certain solidarity. And in fact I asked somebody in the building who was a seamstress. I had asked her to do a sort of bandanna, small bandanna, for me with a flag. And I had a few done, and I gave them to friends. One friend, one of my great friends, Solomon Avital, he took it, he put it around his leg. So you could do anything with it.

But I remember seeing a lady in Chelsea that I knew, who had worked at Paula Cooper Gallery once. And she's Austrian. And she said, "Andres, what's with that, the flag there?" And I thought to myself, if you don't understand it, I can't explain it. But, you know, yes, it was—I would never wear the flag otherwise. I mean, you know, even though I feel like I'm as patriotic as everyone else, I'm not the sort of person to show the flag. But in this case I felt like I wanted to wear the flag.

MR. GOODYEAR: And is the America Series, can it be called a direct response to those events?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, immediately after that, the events of September eleventh, I said to a friend of mine by the name of Aaron Olshan, I said to him, you know I said, "Aaron, I would like to enlist in the Army as an artist." Now I had no idea what that meant, you know. It's just I felt like I want to do something. And so about a month after the eleventh, two women came from two different London galleries. They came to me, and they said, you know, we've just come from Paula Cooper Gallery, and we've arranged for you to have a show at four or five galleries next year. And I said, okay. And then the next day I thought, I know what I'm going to do for them. I'm going to do a show of portraits and call it "America."

And so when I started America, I started with the obvious symbols of September eleventh. I photographed a postal worker. I photographed two firemen. I photographed a soldier. I photographed an airline pilot. Now, it was not just any airline pilot; but it was an airline pilot that was very close to me. You know I had lived with a woman by the name of Tracy Thompson for several years. And Tracy, when I met her, had just begun to take flying lessons. And then eventually—Tracy was also a flight attendant at the same time, but she wanted always to be a pilot. So Tracy started taking lessons, and then she became a flight instructor. Then she started flying small planes. But by the time of 2001, Tracy and I, first of all, were no longer together. And not only that, Tracy now was working not only as a pilot, but she was a captain for American Airlines. And so that's why I decided to use Tracy as the pilot. And I photographed Tracy. And then I put her next to a man who was actually a Sikh. But because of his turban and his beard, he looks like a Taliban. And in the Taschen book, I have Tracy facing this man.

And so that's how it started. And I took, in the Taschen book, you could see the story line of America. And, you know, it's not only chronological. But it's also how the events happened with the very beginning of September eleventh, there's even Thomas Buda, an FBI agent, in a Hazmat suit. He's in there. But then I moved on from

that period, and I started then to photograph the people who represent certain issues, certain not only professions, but issues. Then I finished with celebrities. And so in the end, America took me three years to do. And I realized that, as I was doing it, I realized halfway through I had more than enough work for the show. But I couldn't stop, you know, it's like I was on a mission. And I couldn't finish it until I felt it was finished. And so it took me three years to finish America.

MR. GOODYEAR: How many subjects in all did you actually get to photograph? I know that the series itself is about a 100.

MR. SERRANO: 116. I photographed maybe 150 people.

MR. GOODYEAR: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Were there people whom you wanted to photograph, certain celebrities, that you weren't able to attract o the project?

MR. SERRANO: Only two people.

MR. GOODYEAR: Only two people.

MR. SERRANO: Paris Hilton and Martha Stewart.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Ha!

MR. SERRANO: And, you know, it's funny because I had been in touch with Paris Hilton's publicist.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: And she said to me, yes, Paris is coming to New York for Thanksgiving. So you can photograph her. Two weeks before Paris came here for Thanksgiving, the sex tapes came out. Then, first of all, the publicist that I had been working with was fired. And somebody else came in, and they wouldn't give me to Paris. The same thing with Martha Stewart. Now, Martha Stewart, right—I actually got a call from Martha Stewart. It's the only time anybody ever called me. And Martha called me, and she was like—because everyone went through Cynthia or one of my assistants, and for some reason Martha called me directly. And she said—she asked me what I was doing, and I explained. And I explained about my work. And she said to me, "Yes, I know who you are." Oh, I had told her you can ask Agnes Gund about my work. She said, "I don't need to speak to her. I know your work." And she said she wanted to do it. And she even said I, oh, I have a hand person, you know, a makeup person, that lives in your area. But three weeks later her publicist nixed it.

MR. GOODYEAR: Huh. Huh.

MR. SERRANO: And I thought, you know, first of all, it was a few weeks before Martha went to jail. And I thought to myself, you know, I mean Martha's going to jail. How could posing for me damage her in any way, you know?

MR. GOODYEAR: Did the portraits—I mean you said that these were done over a sequence of about three years. Did the portraits change in any way during the course of that time?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. They changed in more than one way. First of all, in the subjects, you know, in the end I photographed. And I wanted to look at America in a very neutral way. So along with all the good people that I photographed, the upstanding citizens and normal people, I also photographed a neo-Nazi, a Klansman. But they changed in one way, and that is that the more I photographed, the more I found myself getting closer, physically closer, to the subjects. And it was a very subtle thing; it happened gradually. And then toward the end I realized what was happening. And so the last portraits, and one of the very last portraits was of Anna Nicole Smith, she's very close up against it.

MR. GOODYEAR: Close-up.

MR. SERRANO: Yes. And so was Joy-Jewel Stevens, this little girl that I'd heard about. They're also very close up. And so, yes, toward the end the portraits, you know—

MR. GOODYEAR: Was that a deliberate decision to continue to get a little bit closer to the subject?

MR. SERRANO: Only— It was like not deliberate. And I think it was only in the last year when I—

MR. GOODYEAR: That you realized that—

MR. SERRANO: That it was happening. And then yes, it became — Because now at this time, when I was finishing America, I was—I had this agreement with Taschen to do the book. And so I was not thinking in terms of singular images, as much as in terms of pairs, meaning one image would face another. So that's how I was doing it now

toward the end, where I was deliberately choosing images and positions. So the photographs then needed to be more or less the same size so they could balance each other.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure, sure. When you went to recruit people to sit for you or stand for you, how did you explain the project that you were working on? Did you suggest that this was, you know, an artist's response to September eleventh? How did you characterize what you were trying to do?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, you know, pretty much so.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: And I remember trying to get Snoop-Dog. But before I—at some point before then, *Newsweek* asked me to photograph P. Diddy. And so he came over with his entourage. Then I asked him to sign the picture. I asked him to sign the model release. And he didn't want to. He said, "Eh I need a picture for my kids and uh— And let me see it first". And it was such a drag, I thought fuck this, you know. The hell with this. I don't want to bother with this. And then a few weeks alter Snoop-Dog, the man that I wanted in the first place, agreed to do it. So when I met Snoop, I said, "You know, Snoop, I appreciate you doing this for me." I said, "It's not for some magazine. It's for me. I'm an artist, and I'm doing it for me." And he said, "Well, you know, I'm an artist, too. I understand. And that's why I do it." And Snoop, bless his soul, he did exactly what I do when I'm given a model release to sign. He signed it without looking. And it's like I feel the same way. If I'm going to give you permission— First of all, if I'm going to let you take my picture, I'm going to give you permission. I'm not going to, you know— But some people they read the fine print, and they get very nervous. I mean I remember Yoko Ono whom I'd known for years. Yoko, you know, her lawyer three weeks in advance sent me a three page model release to sign, that they had written up, which was fine. But Snoop, he did it the way I do it, without even reading it.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right, right. You talked a little bit about the sequencing, that it's done chronologically. So that the earliest pictures of the EMS workers and the postal employee, those are the earliest pictures. Does that chronological arc continue throughout the whole series? Or is the sequencing mixed up at a certain point?

MR. SERRANO: No, it was pretty much—for some reason, you know, it just came into play. I mean, it just came together in the right way. Meaning the way I showed it in the book is pretty much a chronological order. It's the way in which I shot them.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you think it's fair to call this series patriotic?

MR. SERRANO: Yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: That's such a loaded word.

MR. SERRANO: Yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: I was just wondering, you know, would you use that adjective to describe this? And the follow-up, you know, what then does that sort of suggest about the country—your own feelings about the country where you live?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, it all depends. I certainly see it as a patriotic response, a call to duty.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: You know, on my part. But some would question the patriotism behind it when you have the Klan and when you have all kinds of people in there. Even though I finished *America* in 2004, from time to time since then I've taken portraits of different people. And I feel like you know— and I did them specifically again close up to be able to fit them into *America*. Like for instance, I mentioned yesterday, I took Eddie Murphy's picture for the *Times*, and I asked if I can use this for *America*, this series that I did. He said "Sure". A few years ago I photographed Son of Sam, David Berkowitz, you know, New York City's biggest mass serial killer.

MR. GOODYEAR: Most hated man.

MR. SERRANO: I'm going to put—I'll put David in *America*, too, if the time comes, if I ever have a show in *America*. So, you know, *America* is patriotic in the sense that I'm trying to show the people. But I'm also trying to show all the people.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Moving on to I think what is—what I think is your last or latest series, is the Shit Series that is currently— It's still up at Yvon Lambert?

MR. SERRANO: [Laughs] No, that would be a long show if it was still up. I did it a year ago.

MR. GOODYEAR: Oh, a year ago. Excuse me. And tell me where the idea for this came about.

MR. SERRANO: Well, I have to say first of all, you know, I've always said that since I push the audience's limits, I like to push my own, too. I like to see how far that I can go. And I've said more than once that I don't see anything wrong with provocative work. And I look forward to the day when I can do something that would even disturb me.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm.

MR. SERRANO: I've also said, you know, during lectures—I've been asked more than once—what wouldn't you photograph? What are your limits? And I said—I always replied, "Children and sex." And shit. I said I wouldn't do shit. It's not fun, I wouldn't do shit. So now what happened was—I'm going to tell you the whole story, whether or not people like it or not.

About a year and a half before I did Shit, Peter McGill came to me. And I've known Peter for a long time, you know, from just to say hello. And Peter said to me, "Oh, what are you working on?" He had seen one of the covers that I did for the *Times*, and he liked it. And I said, "You know, frankly, Peter, I'm not working on anything right now. You know, I don't have a show scheduled with Paula. So I mean I've got ideas, but I don't have anything scheduled." And he said to me, "Well, what about, you know, would you like to do something else?" And I said, "Sure, I'd do something." So he said, "Let me talk to other people, and I'll get back to you."

Now, two days, three days later, Peter got back to me. He said, "You know— Okay," he said, "you can do something in Chelsea if you want. And you can get February, the month of February 2008." He said, "You can do February 2008." And that was, like, one year—so it was like a year before that he had come to me, one year. And I said, "Oh, great! Okay, great!" So, you know, I was thinking about it for months. And then finally I thought—started to think—where am I going? And then I started to think about doing the unthinkable, doing a body of work that I didn't think that I could ever do. And it's a funny thing that once I started to process the idea, you know, I realized that I'd be working much like a scientist, doing something that was very clinical. And in my head I knew what I would do if I needed a gas mask so I wouldn't smell it.

But I decided I'm going to do Shit. I'm going to do Shit. And I decided not to do it here in New York City. I decided I would like to have access to lots of different kinds of shit. So at that time, you know, in August, or rather around July of 2007, I started to—I had an exhibition in Colombia for a photo festival. So I thought, well, maybe I can go to Colombia. But I didn't want to go to Colombia and do that work because I felt Colombia's still very dangerous. I didn't want to be there with Irina, with my sister, with the equipment.

And so I talked to my printer for 20 years. [inaudible] had been printing my work for 20 years, who is actually from Ecuador. And I said to him, "Do you know people in Ecuador, like farms and things like that, zoos, that I could go to photograph animals?" Initially I told everyone I was going to photograph animals. And so he said, sure. And he came back to me. He said—he gave me a lot of contacts. He said, "I've got the zoo, the director of the zoo. You can contact him. You could contact my friend, Mariella." And so he gave me a lot of different names.

So I decided I was going to do the shit pictures in South America—in Ecuador. And so I went to Colombia for the show, and then I had the equipment and my assistant meet me and Irina in Ecuador, in Quito. And so that's where we did most of the work, in the zoo in Quito. And I had access to all kinds of shit. So finally I finished the work. And I called Peter McGill. [They laugh.] This was in September of 2007. I said, "Peter, I finished the work." And he's like, "Oh, great". I never told him what I had been doing. Just like I had never told anyone, not even Irina or my assistant, what I was going to do, you know, until we got there.

In fact I remember there's a funny incident where we were driven up to the mountains, in the country to the mountains, a three-hour drive from Quito by Mariella and her friend. And I was going— Because I had told everyone I needed to photograph animals. So we were going to her friend's farm; she had some animals. So we get to the farm, and then we would leave the equipment in the house. And I said, "I want to see the bulls." So we go down and see the bulls. And then I asked the lady that—the lady, the owner of the farm—to step out of the car. And I leave Irina and my assistant, Matt Alcock, in the car. And I said to her in Spanish, I said to her, "Listen, I'm going to tell you something they don't even know." I said, "I didn't come here to photograph the animals. I came here to photograph the animals' shit." And she looked at me first of all like I was crazy. And I could see that once she realized that, yes, I was crazy but I was also serious, she said to me, "Okay. This is not where we're going to find this. I'll take you to the shit." And that's how it started, from thereon. And I spent, you know, about two weeks in Ecuador photographing all the shit I could possibly photograph.

MR. GOODYEAR: All animal shit?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I had done --

MR. GOODYEAR: No human shit?

MR. SERRANO: Not in Ecuador.

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay.

MR. SERRANO: The human shit that I did do was here, starting with the first image. You know I felt like the first image I was going to do—I was going to call it self-portrait, no matter what. But, you know, I had been thinking about doing this show, you know. And in my head, I thought this is the way I'm going to do it. But then just before I started to do the work, particularly the first image, I thought to myself, what if it doesn't look good? I mean I have this idea of what I want it to look like. But what if it doesn't look good or interesting? And so I had a moment of panic and fear. So I appealed to my Corpus Christi, my Jesus, and I asked Him for a sign that everything would be all right. And so the next day I photographed "self-portrait." And after I did the photograph and it came back to me, I realized that I saw a face in the self-portrait; I could see eyes and a nose, you know. And so I felt good. Then the next thing I did, the next shot I did, was my dog, Lucas' shit. And lo and behold, the picture comes back, and I see a dog's face in that. So I felt like, yes, these are the signs that it's going to be all right.

So back in September of 2007, I called Peter McGill, and I tell him I've got the work here. And he's like "Great". And I said to him, "I have to warn you. It's kind of strong." And he said, "Oh, good. We like strong." You know. So Peter holds onto my portfolio for about a week, two weeks, three weeks. No word. Finally I call him up, and he says, "Okay. I'm going to return the work." He says, "There are one or two people I've got to work on right now, you know." And I said, "What? It's a matter of convincing someone?" And he said, "No, it's just a matter of getting the job done."

Well, November comes, and still, you know. I thought I was having a show in February. November comes, and it's like no word from them. So finally I tell them, "Listen, I've got to take the work and show it to Paula, you know. Time's a wasting, you know." He said, "Okay. Tell me what Paula thinks." I showed it to Paula, and Paula said—she liked it. But then Paula offered me the small space. And I felt like I can't show this in a small space. So I offered it to Yvon, and Yvon said, "I'll show you."

MR. GOODYEAR: Interesting. Interesting. Do you think that—is the work deliberately harkening back to your earlier Bodily Fluids Series in the sense that there's an interest in the materiality of some of these bodily substances?

MR. SERRANO: Yes.

MR. GOODYEAR: Were you thinking about creating a series that connected back to earlier work?

MR. SERRANO: Actually no, and I really— Even though a couple of people thought that the piss and the shit were related, I didn't think so. And it took 20 years obviously for me to go from one end to the other end, to put the two together. But again, Shit, for me, is a Freudian show. And in fact Helene Cixous, who wrote the catalog essay, you know, describes it in Freudian terms as well. For me Shit is Freudian in the sense that I also believe, like Freud, that shit, the baby's shit, the child's shit, is the first act of creation. He or she, it's their universe. It's what they control. It's what they created and what they have power, dominion, over. And so, you know, in that sense I feel like it's a very basic show. It's about— and also, you know, it's saying, in essence, almost in a childlike way, is everyone thinks their shit is the best shit. And that's exactly what I was saying. So I'm saying but if you want to see some real shit, I've got the real shit, and I've got some good shit. Yeah.

And the show also became a very linguistic form, conceptual and linguistic. It's about language. It's about, you know—and I realized how much the word shit is used in language. And so, as I said before, many of the titles for the show were conceived of before I did the pictures. I knew I was going to do good shit, bad shit.

MR. GOODYEAR: And holy shit.

MR. SERRANO: Not only that. Good shit and bad shit are also bullshit, meaning— You know one of the things that I did while working there was I was able to do different images sometimes of the same shit. I'd just turn it around, make it look different, put on a different backdrop. So in fact bad shit, good shit is actually bullshit.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right, right.

MR. SERRANO: And again, that's calling into play how subjective everything is. So good shit, bullshit, bad shit, they're all the same shit, bullshit.

MR. GOODYEAR: Your feelings about—That's marvelous. I want to transition now to some sort of concluding questions that get to the response that the public had about your work. Also interested in some of your

relationships with your gallerists or with your collectors, people who have written about your work. And then just a couple of questions about photography more generally. But to begin, do your own thoughts about your own work, as you have looked back over 30 years' worth of work, have your thoughts about your work changed over time? Do pictures that you created in the '80s take on new meaning or resonate in different ways today?

MR. SERRANO: No. You know in fact I think I feel the same exact way about all of them. You know it's not like I feel, oh, this one I should have done it differently. Or this one is not as good as the other. I feel the same about—I feel the same way as I felt about them when I did them. Meaning I felt they were good. I should do them. And more important, show them. Because I've done a lot of work that I didn't show. So the work that I have shown is the work that I felt was good enough to show. One of the things that I've realized in doing the America book is that it's a real compilation of 20 years' worth of work. And, you know, I'm very proud of it, and I stand by it.

MR. GOODYEAR: Absolutely. Are there series that we haven't talked about today that you'd like to talk about? I mean, less successful projects that you haven't show that maybe you'd go back and revisit? Are there other particular series that we haven't had a chance to discuss these last two days?

MR. SERRANO: No, not really.

MR. GOODYEAR: Okay.

MR. SERRANO: And you know I felt like, when I did *Shit*, I almost felt like, you know, I'd be happy if this was my last show. Meaning this is all I can say about it. I've gone not only as far as I can go, but more important, I've said it all. This is how I want to end it, with this show. But I also—I mean I'd be happy if that's the last show I ever do. But I also have ideas, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right. For future projects.

MR. SERRANO: For future projects. But you know, I have to be offered—

MR. GOODYEAR: An opportunity.

MR. SERRANO: And opportunity. Exactly. I don't want to create for the hell of it. But I have an idea for an Obama show. [They laugh.] Just an explanation with 12, 13 portraits of Obama.

MR. GOODYEAR: Have you had the opportunity to photograph him? No.

MR. SERRANO: No. But you know I approached someone recently who—I think it was, you know, I don't know. I thought they were going to get into the White House. But I haven't heard anything. You don't think the Smithsonian could help me or the National Gallery could help me approach Obama, do you?

MR. GOODYEAR: We can ask—we could ask, absolutely. So why would you want to photograph Obama? I mean what is the interest?

MR. SERRANO: First of all, portraiture has always been, you know—

MR. GOODYEAR: A singular focus.

MR. SERRANO: A singular focus, exactly. You know, even when I did the *shit* pictures, even when I did the cycads, which I did for the *New York Times*, for me portraits or plants, rare plants, it's all about portraiture. It's always, you know, portraits. And so I mean, you know, even *The Morgue*, it's all portraits of the dead. The Klan, portraits of Klanspeople. So I mean Obama is probably one of the most photographed people in history. And he's not only the president of the United States, he's probably the most powerful man on earth. So why wouldn't I want to photograph Obama? So, yes. I mean that's the one portrait I would like to take.

MR. GOODYEAR: We'll see what we can do to help you [Laughs] I want to talk about some of the people who are important to you, especially in the art world. Can you describe the relationships that you've had with different gallerists? I know you've shown in several different galleries. Do you want to just talk about those experiences?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, they've all been very important to me. I mean Paula Cooper has been very important for most of my career. But I would say that Yvon Lambert is the most important person—dealer—in my life. Yvon has been, and I've been with Yvon, Yvon has been behind me for more than 20 years. And now Yvon is still there for me. So I would say Yvon is the most courageous dealer I know and my biggest supporter.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. What about some of the earlier gallerists? I mean people—I'm thinking of at the Light Gallery or Stux?

MR. SERRANO: They were good. I mean I appreciate everyone, including Leonard Perlson who was this unknown

dealer who gave me my very first show above the meat market in the meat market district in '85. And it's funny because in my resume, when I would have a resume—I haven't even seen my resume in many years—I would list everything, you know, particularly the solo exhibitions. Because to me it's all important; they were all steps. You know without that first step, I couldn't have taken the second or third or the hundredth step. So all those people, I acknowledge them and I appreciate them.

MR. GOODYEAR: Do you take an active hand in the installation of your work when it's on exhibition? Or do you really turn that over to either the gallerist or the curator at the museum who's doing that?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. No, I never do it. And the reason why because I realized early on that the gallerist, the curator, whoever's doing the installation, feels a closeness, an affinity to the work. And not only do they have their vision; but they also have their ideas about how to hang the work. And so I always leave it to them. Because also I know that—you know it's like, for me, it's like when they get those works and they're wrapped up, they unwrap them and it's like children at Christmastime. They want to play with the toys. So I let them.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right, right. How is the gallery world that you've known sort of changed over the last 30 years? Especially in regards to how photography is treated?

MR. SERRANO: Well, I didn't get into the gallery system—

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: —until '85, '86. Well, it starts really in '88. I wasn't really part of the gallery system until '88. And I've never really been part of the system in the sense that, you know, I've never really surveyed it. I've never really had much dealings or contacts with other artists, other galleries. In fact I've had very little contact with other galleries, you know. I was with Yvon, I was with Paula, for many years. So, you know, it's almost like they say, Caesar's wife must be above reproach. So I won't even talk to other dealers. And they wouldn't talk to me. They knew that I was not interested in them.

And also I'm one of those artists who had his own agenda, you know. I'm not one of those people who you see at galleries and museum openings and they're standing with who they regard as the most important in the room. I would talk to anybody, hang out with anybody. And I was going to look at the people, the girls, as much as the art. And so if I missed an opening, I wouldn't bother to go see the art. And I have to say in the last few years, I've even stopped going to see anyone's work, you know. I barely make it to see my own. There are many of my own shows that I've missed, particularly abroad, you know. And so at this point I have to say, you know, I have one foot in and one foot out. But I've always been like that.

MR. GOODYEAR: My sense is, as a curator myself, that the photography market financially is very healthy. Certainly relative to the late '80s when photography was still being questioned by some as whether it's a sort of legitimate art form. Would you agree that over the course of the last 20, 25 years the kind of status of photography has dramatically changed?

MR. SERRANO: I would say that in the course of the last two years photography and the economy has changed.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: So photography is a great deal now compared to some paintings and sculptures.

MR. GOODYEAR: Right.

MR. SERRANO: I mean photography is dirt cheap. [Laughs]

MR. GOODYEAR: Right, right. For sure. But what you are now realizing for the sale of a work, you know, today or two years ago is dramatically different than what you would have seen 25 years ago. Obviously because you're now a famous photographer. But also because the larger market has grown itself as well. There's more collectors.

MR. SERRANO: Well, again, I feel like I've only been in business really 20 years, you know. Because even when I was—I mean I was a naïve artist. I was not a Jeff Koons or a Peter Nagy or any of these savvy artists who knew the value of market and the collectors, you know. I've never known any of my collectors.

MR. GOODYEAR: Really.

MR. SERRANO: Practically. Have never— You know I remember even when I had a show with Saatchi, you know, years ago that—I went to the show. He spoke to me. He called me on the phone. We had a three minute conversation. And that was it. I never met him. We never went to the show. And all of my work usually has always been sold through dealers and galleries. And so I don't know who my collectors are. I mean I know a

handful that I've heard names, you know. But I've never met my collectors. I never had any contact with them. And so I've been very distant from the actual marketplace, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: Interesting. Are there particular writers, critics, you know, essayists who have written about photography, or about your work more specifically, whose work you've really admired.

MR. SERRANO: I think the most astute writer I've ever had write about my work has been Eleanor Heartney. I think Eleanor really gets it. And she's very simple with it. She sees it for what it is. Also Michael Brenson gave me one of the best reviews of my life in the *New York Times*. And Lucy Lippard has written well about my work. But I have to say that I've not read a whole lot of what's been written about me. There are many catalogs and even books where people wrote essays on my work that I never read.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Interesting. And again, speaking on another kind of audience, there is the public. You know have you gotten, received, you know, letters, correspondence, calls, from individuals whom you subsequently developed a friendship with that you feel is important?

MR. SERRANO: Very rarely.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: Occasionally, I remember for the Morgue, and a couple maybe for the Shit show, the galleries have put out a book for people not only to sign, but they write comments. Sometimes the comments are interesting. It's funny because I've always said that I'm an artist of the people. That the people understand, meaning the common people understand my work better than the critics sometimes, you know. And, you know, I'd always feel really good when I did shows that attract people who don't normally go to galleries. And I've gotten a lot of that. I've gotten people who say—they call up the gallery, they want to know how much does it cost to get in. Obviously they're not your regular gallery goers. But they see something in the newspaper that excites them and makes them curious. But last year when I had the Shit show in New York and in Paris with Yvon Lambert, I started—

You know a friend of mine years ago put me on a Google alert, so every time my name comes up, you know, Google sends me something. And some of the shit that I began to read on the blogs from the people was like, wow, is that what the people really think? You know. So I felt like, well, at least it got them excited whether or not they've seen the show. I mean it's like people who don't even know much about art, know my name. Or in the case of the Shit show, I told Yvon and everyone else, you know, I said, "You know, a lot more people have heard of shit than of Andres Serrano." So that's how I wanted to push it, as a Shit show. And sure enough, a lot of people were talking about it. Have you seen the Shit show, you know? You've got to go see the Shit show.

I remember there was a review in *New York Magazine* of "Shit" in New York, written by Jerry Saltz. And Jerry said, the caption above it, he said, "Yes, Andres Serrano's show is shit." Now the first line of Jerry's show, he says that 80 shows opened on the night of my show. That was in September of 2008. And even though he put my show down, the only picture that he had representing those 80 shows was an installation of "Shit" at Yvon Lambert Gallery. And so it makes me feel sometimes that— and then the shows that he did describe that he liked, sounded boring, and there was no picture. So what does that say about my work, you know?

MR. GOODYEAR: Let me change the tape. Just a couple more questions, and then we're done.

[END OF CD 6, TRACK 1]

MR. GOODYEAR: This is Frank Goodyear interviewing Andres Serrano, Thursday, July thirtieth, 2009. This is the seventh and final disc. It's interesting the way people respond to work, especially provocative work, work that's meant to elicit a response, and meant to touch people who are, you know, beyond just simply the art world. But of course there are those instances, as you've experienced on numerous occasions, when you've been attacked for the work. Or critics have been critical of the work. And I know we've talked about *Piss Christ*, and I don't want to necessarily go there. But, you know, can we talk about other occasions when your work has been physically vandalized? I know in Sweden in 2007 somebody went after one of your pictures. Can you describe what occurred on that occasion and other instances of either censorship or attack in the recent past?

MR. SERRANO: Well, you know, in 2007 I had a show at the Kulturen in Lund, Sweden. The show was attacked by five neo-Nazis, probably, who ran into—five hooded men later identified themselves as being members of a neo-Nazi organization. And they went in there, and they—not only did they attack five or six pictures of the History of Sex in two separate galleries of the museums; they also made a video, and it was well done and well planned. You see four of the men running, and obviously the fifth is the cameraman trying to— And they're running into the museum. Then you see them split open—they split into two different groups, and they go into separate galleries and start destroying the work with sledge hammers. The film was on YouTube and Google until they brought it down. My lawyer, Peter Stern, asked them to bring it down. And later I said, "Peter, why did you do

that? You should have left it up. It looks great.” You know. It’s a great video. They put heavy metal music to it as well. But to their credit, the Kulturen, you know, just—they backed the show. They got security. We reprinted the damaged pictures, and they put them back up again.

The same thing— Well, something else had happened in Australia in ’97. Meaning that the show—I had a show with the National Gallery of Victoria. And even before the show opened there—and it was the same show that was coming from the Groninger Museum. And the Groninger Museum had been very controversial because of this picture, *Leo’s Fantasy*. However, when the show went to the National Gallery of Victoria, it became controversial for another reason. It became controversial because the archbishop of Melbourne tried to get an injunction against *Piss Christ* being in the show. And even though he failed, he attracted so much media attention, and he got so many people excited, that the second day of the show a kid went in there with a hammer, and he attacked *Piss Christ*, and he destroyed it. Now, that in itself was not so shocking to me.

What was really shocking was that Ted Potter—or rather not Ted Potter, Timothy Potts. Timothy Potts, the director of the National Gallery, cancelled the show. I mean not only did I think it was an act of cowardice which I promptly scheduled a press conference the next day and denounced him. But, you know, not only did he fail me, but he also failed the museum itself, the people, who had worked hard, and the curator. You know even the people who installed it. They were proud of this show. And so for him to, you know, react in this way was unbelievable, you know.

I don’t know why he reacted that way. The show had gotten a lot of attention. It was a stupid thing to do, first of all, because the show had gotten so much attention. I remember getting off the plane when I arrived in Melbourne. And immediately this lady came up to me. She said, “Mr. Serrano?” I said, “Yes.” She said, “Please come this way.” And so she took me to an area. And when I went there, there was somebody from the museum. Also these guys I was having an exhibition with in their private gallery; they were there. And they explained that there was a lot of press outside. And so they wanted to escort me to a more private area. When I got out there, there were like 20 paparazzis, cameramen, TV people chasing me, trying to get comments from me because obviously the archbishop had really made a big fuss of my show. And so my arriving there only fueled the situation. And it’s funny because the day that it happened, you know—this is the second day of the show opening—I was in a church. Sometimes I go to churches. Not for spiritual reasons, but because they look very nice. They’re old. So I go to them for aesthetic reasons.

And as I was coming out of church, this young boy, he’s about 12 years old—I’ve never met the kid in my life—he says to me, “Have you heard what happened to *Piss Christ*?” And I said, “No.” He said, “Somebody just destroyed it.” I mean this kid on the street—I mean that’s the extent to what, you know, everyone knew who I was from the moment I got there. And so, you know, I was really shocked that he did that. And in the end, though, I would say because of the fact that there had been so much publicity before the show, during those two days of the show and afterwards, in the end, a lot more people probably heard of the show than would have seen it. But still, you know, I would have preferred for the show to have been able to take place like it was supposed to.

MR. GOODYEAR: These instances obviously can be upsetting, shocking, you know, very disappointing to you. Do you ever feel actually afraid about how—on the eve of an exhibition? I mean do you ever feel that you have stepped over a line, and that somebody is going to come after you, either physically, verbally? Has that experience happened to you?

MR. SERRANO: No.

MR. GOODYEAR: No, no.

MR. SERRANO: I remember doing lectures in ’89 in San Francisco, you know, a few months after the controversy where during the lecture they had a Sheriff posted behind me. There were times, especially early on, when they would have extra security.

MR. GOODYEAR: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. And the final question is what’s the best thing and the worst thing about being an artist?

MR. SERRANO: You know the best thing about being an artist is to be able to do your own thing. The worst thing about being an artist is that no one really cares. And by that I mean that I realize that even the most famous artist in America is not as well-known as any third-, second-rate actor. And so in that sense, you know, being an artist is like being on a totem pole that doesn’t go up very high.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] I understand. I understand. Are there things that you would like to do that you can talk to me about, with me, right now, about things that you’d like to do in the future? You mentioned Obama. Are there kind of subjects that you’d like to investigate?

MR. SERRANO: Yes. Well, I'm working on a project now. But when does this come out? When is this coming out?

MR. GOODYEAR: Well, this will, when the transcript is written out, it'll probably be a month or so when it's actually available to researchers.

MR. SERRANO: Okay.

MR. GOODYEAR: —who come to the Archives, yes.

MR. SERRANO: Okay, good.

MR. GOODYEAR: You don't need to necessarily speak with me about new projects.

MR. SERRANO: Yes. I'm working on something now. But I never talk about things until I do them.

MR. GOODYEAR: Yes.

MR. SERRANO: You now that's the thing. You're always very superstitious, and you don't want to— You know you just don't want to count your chickens before they're hatched.

MR. GOODYEAR: Absolutely. Are you ever going to do a self-portrait, or another self-portrait?

MR. SERRANO: Yes, in a way I will do a self-portrait. But it's a different kind of self-portrait. I am working on a different kind of self-portrait.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Okay. I won't ask you. And I guess the final thing is you've got a sixtieth birthday coming up.

MR. SERRANO: Not yet, 59.

MR. GOODYEAR: Oh, really!

MR. SERRANO: I was born in '50. So August fifteenth is my birthday. So I'll be 59.

MR. GOODYEAR: You'll be 59. All right. Excellent. Happy birthday.

MR. SERRANO: I feel at this point it's like—it's a good time to end something and begin something anew.

MR. GOODYEAR: Sure. Yes. No question. Listen, Andres, you've been fantastic.

MR. SERRANO: Really?

MR. GOODYEAR: This has been really enlightening, and I've come to appreciate your work even more. I know that in the weeks before coming up here, I spoke with a number of people in Washington, and I told them that I was going to be meeting with you. And you've got a lot of fans in Washington. A lot of people who respect you.

MR. SERRANO: Well, maybe you've got somebody at the National Gallery.

MR. GOODYEAR: Gallery. [Laughs] Yes.

MR. SERRANO: And the White House. I wish Obama was a friend, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: Well, we— Do you know how many people have approached us about getting to Obama?

MR. SERRANO: A lot. I guess [Shepard Fairey —AS] didn't approach him; he just used the image, you know.

MR. GOODYEAR: [Laughs] Do you know Martin Schoeller by any chance? He's a photographer who works for *The New Yorker*. And he photographed Obama in 2004. And then he photographed him during the campaign last summer. Yes, I think it was last summer. And he wants very much to like photograph Obama every year of his presidency. Sort of track how, you know, Obama changes over the course of his presidency. And I've been told that, you know, even though Obama likes Martin, it's unclear whether he's going to permit that project to go forward.

MR. SERRANO: Oh.

MR. GOODYEAR: But I'll put in a good word.

MR. SERRANO: Well, here's the thing. I remember one time reading about this photographer, a photojournalist,

who explained that he had spent five days with Frank Sinatra in order to get the soul of Frank, you know. And I looked at those pictures, and I didn't see Frank's soul. I saw Frank there, but I didn't see his soul. And I feel like sometimes— I've only got five minutes to get someone's picture, you know. And I feel like I can get their soul in five minutes, too. So all I need is 15 minutes of Obama's time. [They laugh.]

MR. GOODYEAR: I'll keep that in mind. There are two quick forms that I've got to get you to sign.

MR. SERRANO: Okay.

MR. GOODYEAR: The first one is just a—

MR. SERRANO: Where do I sign?

MR. GOODYEAR: Well, we need to have you put your full name here, your current residence.

[END OF CD 6, TRACK 2]

[END OF INTERVIEW]