
VISUAL ESSAY

Leaking Bodies in the Anthropocene: From HIV to COVID-19

Tess Charnley

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought leaking to the forefront of our minds. Not just in terms of our individual leaking – the virus moving between our bodies in an invisible seeping – but also our collective leaking; the leaking on and into the planet that has engendered the Anthropocene, and now the Virocene. We cannot disentangle the Covid-19 pandemic, with its zoonotic origins, from the Anthropocene, the human mixing of species, alive and dead, creating the perfect environment for viral transmission. The idea of leaking can be traced through a number of theoretical avenues. Through feminism and the patriarchal desire to seal up women's bodies, to the AIDS crisis and the stigmatisation and fear of the bodily leaking of gay men, to the leaking of greenhouse gases and the destruction of the environment, to Covid-19. In this essay, I trace these ideas discussing imagery including Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Nicole Eisenman's *Sloppy Bar Room Kiss*, and the land art of Richard Long and Judy Chicago, to consider the fine border between leaking and containment, a knife-edge on which we now live.

Keywords: leaking; Covid-19; bodies; HIV; art

Bodies leak. They cannot be contained. Our skin, inherently porous, expels and receives; society, a mingling of cells. This, as has become all too clear throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, is how viruses spread. They spread through our leaking, through our fundamental inability to shore ourselves up. Two metres (or one metre plus), apparently, is the sweet spot. An invisible line we draw around ourselves to prevent our fusion with others and to 'stop the spread'. This cordon may be new, but our permeability is not. We have been leaking throughout time and not just in terms of our fluidity as a species. In the age of the Anthropocene, and with the advent of the Virocene, we see the detrimental effect of our leaking on(in)to the planet, as we spill into the oceans and spread across forests, in ways that bring our own extinction closer than a pandemic ever could.

When I think of bodies leaking, I think firstly of patriarchal panic and the violence that ensues, including non-physical forms of violence, such as the censorship and disciplining of art and bodies that do not conform to the heteronormative (frequently white, frequently male) model. This censorship and disciplining has functioned using strategies of governmentality, (a term coined by Foucault and described by Judith Butler as a set of tactics that operate 'to dispose and order populations, and to produce and reproduce subjects, their practices

and beliefs, in relation to specific policy aims' (2006) the manipulation of language, and the othering of sections of society in order to cloak its brutality. During the AIDS crisis, in America in particular, there were continuous attempts to 'seal up' bodies that existed outside the heteronormative model, building invisible dams against whatever transgressive matter might ooze out. This was exemplified by the US Congress imposing the so-called 'decency clause' on the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1990, an amendment that led to the censorship of many artists.

The bodies (of both artists and work) that were disciplined during the US culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s were those that did not conform to what Cristyn Davies describes as 'the hegemonic representations of the American citizen' (2012: 278) which is to say: white, heterosexual, monogamous people who subscribe to middle-class family values. One of the most pivotal moments of the culture wars was the case of the NEA Four, comprising performance artists Tim Miller, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes and John Fleck, who sued the government in a case that ended up in the Supreme Court in 1998. In *National Endowment for the Arts vs. Finley*, 524 U.S. 569, the artists claimed that their First Amendment rights were being violated by the 1990 decency clause, which meant that grants could be refused or withdrawn on the grounds of 'decency'. The four artists initially filed a suit against the NEA and its chair, John Frohnmayer, in 1990, claiming that their grants were denied for political rather than artistic reasons. This was settled by the NEA out of court.

However, when they decided to go to the Supreme Court in 1998, the ruling was that the NEA's decency statute was constitutional and not a violation of the artists' First Amendment rights (CCR 2007). The NEA also subsequently altered their policy so that they stopped offering funding to solo performance artists. As Davies argues, the National Council on the Arts' recommendation to the NEA to disapprove the projects of these four artists was 'a result of a moral panic manufactured by the New Right, and [...] this panic was orchestrated to prevent the representation and circulation of alternative narratives about gendered and sexual lives' (Davies 2012: 292). Although each member of the NEA Four was white, three of them were homosexual or queer (Karen Finley, the only heterosexual member of the NEA Four, became the namesake of the case *NEA vs. Finley*), and certainly none of their work aligned with 'middle-class family values'. Their art was often labelled 'obscene' or 'blasphemous' for its use of nudity or subversive handling of religious themes.

It is worth considering that this kind of censorship emerges ultimately from a fear of the abjectness of death (to engage with Kristeva's theories of abjection), which is projected onto marginalised groups and manifests in a desire to seal and contain bodies, ensuring definable edges and boundaries. Lynda Nead discusses this containment particularly in relation to women's bodies, writing about the motivation 'to shore up the female body – to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body from the outside' (1992: 6). There is a fear that women will mutate, transgress our boundaries and spill out of our orifices, infecting those around us with our fall. This societal desire to discipline and shore up orifices is equally applicable to the bodies of LGBTQIA+ people. During the AIDS crisis, the message projected by the US government and media in particular was literally that to prevent death was to close your orifices. As Jasbir K. Puar writes, 'The lexicon of contagion and disease suture the etymological and apolitical links of terrorist infiltration and invasion to queerness and the AIDS virus' (2007: 52). The queer person and the PWA (Person with AIDS) were positioned as the ultimate threatening 'other', invading and endangering the self. The censorship of queer bodies and queer art during this time was engendered by fear of the porosity of bodies and the fear of the transmission not only of HIV, but also the transmission of ideologies that did not align with the homogenised ideal of the white, heterosexual, middle-class citizen produced by a conservative right-wing government.

While we now know that HIV is spread through the exchange of blood, semen and vaginal secretions, at the time of its emergence there was an enormous amount of fear-mongering and moral panic surrounding its transmission. All bodily fluids were deemed potentially dangerous. Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (Serrano 1987), a cibachrome print face-mounted to Plexiglass, is particularly relevant here. The photograph is of a plastic crucifix suspended in a transparent container of the artist's own urine. It provoked an enormous amount of anger particularly among the religious right when it was

first shown, and still proves controversial (the work was vandalised in Paris in 2011). The photograph generated controversy in 1989 when it was exhibited as part of a group show at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Reverend Donald Wildmon took particular umbrage to the photograph (labelling it as 'sacrilege') and mobilised protests which culminated in 23 senators writing to the NEA (who had partially funded the exhibition), demanding changes in procedure (Carr 2012). The photograph itself at no point visually signifies the presence of urine, or even liquid. The work, tinted red, presents the crucifix obscured, as though bathed in a divine light. It is the work's title that informs the viewer that it is the murkiness of urine obscuring the crucifix's outline.

The interpretation of *Piss Christ* as blasphemous, sacrilegious and desecrating, although understandable in terms of the immersion of a religious icon in excrement, is reductive. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Serrano discussed his work as an attempt to remind people of what death by crucifixion actually entails: '...for Christ to have been crucified and laid on the cross for three days where he not only bled to death, he shat himself and he peed himself to death. [...] if *Piss Christ* upsets you, maybe it's a good thing to think about what happened on the cross' (Holpuch 2012). In this work then, Serrano debases the divine not out of disrespect but to emphasise the trials that Christ faced, through humanizing him. He presents Christ as an abject body, like any body who had suffered the same indignities. The issue at the heart of the offence caused by this work is not necessarily its blasphemous nature, but the fear surrounding the porosity of the body at the time of AIDS, fears that are perhaps even more amplified in today's Virocene. If the most sacred figure in Western religious iconography could be desecrated and polluted through such a commonplace liquid as urine, then what hope did the average citizen have in the face of HIV transmission?

In Julia Kristeva's essay 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection', she defines excrement as marking the boundary between life and death:

If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. [...] The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. [...] Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (1982: 3–4)

In *Piss Christ*, then, the figure of Christ is doubly abject, both immersed in excrement and presenting the abjectness of death. This reminder of the humanity of Christ's death brings the abject into uncomfortable view. AIDS had the same effect: it made people uncomfortably aware and fearful of the abject, encroaching upon their sense of the binary division between self and 'other'. The association of death and bodily fluid that Serrano

makes here, particularly in relation to a holy figure, threatens the right-wing's carefully constructed border between the self and the abject reality of death, playing into anxieties about the proximity of death in a society being culled by AIDS. Indeed, as Marilou Gagnon argues in her 2010 essay on the bodily experiences of HIV/AIDS, one of the predominant socio-cultural responses to the epidemic was to construct the infected body as an embodiment of contamination, of the uncertainty of boundaries, and as a site of abjection. According to Gagnon, the HIV-infected body (and particularly its visual representation) was disturbing because it 'embodied the unbreakable relationship between life and death as well as the dangerousness of AIDS' (2010: 135–136). Just as Serrano's photograph reminds the viewer that no one is exempt from the humanity of death, the HIV-infected body reminds the viewer that death comes for us all, and our bodily porosity and permeability is our vulnerability. Although this work speaks to the AIDS crisis more than Covid-19 because of its contentious position during the US culture wars, the anxieties around bodily leaking that it engenders are still relevant today.

Today, with the impressive advances in science, the fear and paranoia surrounding AIDS transmission have lessened significantly. We know how it is transmitted, and the fears of catching the virus by shaking someone's hand or accidentally sharing saliva are no longer appropriate. To put it in the language of leaking, we know that the virus is spread through an internal leaking as it were: the exchange of fluids through penetration rather than a leaking outside of the body. Unlike HIV, COVID-19 is spread through the general porosity of our bodies; the leaking of the virus from one body to another, whether that be through a cough, through touching a contaminated surface, or through intercourse. The overarching policy of the UK government has been to lay the emphasis on personal responsibility, a divisive means to evade the blame. If we contract the virus, it is not because of the government's delayed action as it took hold globally, or an ineffective test-and-trace system, it is because we are too 'relaxed'. Stay at home but go to work; eat in a restaurant but don't gather indoors. The messaging has been confusing at best, catastrophic at worst.

Although the rules have relaxed for the time being (I write this in September, a week before the introduction of the rule of six¹), I wonder if we will ever be able to forget our leaking again. I wonder if it will be possible to stand next to a stranger, shoulders brushing perhaps, and not think about the transferal of those spiky viral particles from one body to the other. To touch a public surface and forget about what might be living on your hands. To kiss a stranger without the weighted responsibility of extending your 'bubble'. There was art that I looked at again and again during lockdown, marvelling at how unusual its previous normality had become. Nan Goldin's photographs, for example, which document real, public intimacy. I'm thinking of her photographs of Suzanne and Philippe in particular, included in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. In *Suzanne and Philippe on the Bench, Tompkins Square Park, New York City* (Goldin 1983), the couple's bodies

are entwined on a park bench; you can hardly tell where one begins and the other ends. Their legs are wrapped together in the same way that sea horses wrap their tails, for fear of drifting apart in their watery sleep. I remember the benches being taped off in my local park during the virus's springtime peak, and then gradually becoming units of separation for socially distanced meet-ups – one at one end, one at the other. Similarly, images of people kissing became fascinating to me. In Nan Goldin's *Philippe H and Suzanne Kissing at Euthenasia, New York City* (Goldin 1981) and Nicole Eisenman's painting *Sloppy Bar Room Kiss* (Eisenman 2011), we see celebrations of leaking. Where the fleshiness of a mouth, the wetness of saliva, is something exhilarating, not something to be feared. In recent weeks, I've seen couples perform the gesture of kissing through their respective face masks, their leaking prohibited by a fabric seal. A hurried kiss goodbye before stumbling onto a crowded bus is something I never knew I'd be nostalgic for. Our intimacy is covert now, stopped in its tracks by the stigmatisation of fluidity.

The one positive I could draw from lockdown was noticing birdsong again, even in London. There was hardly any traffic noise or sounds of aeroplanes but at 5am on several days I was woken by birds, rather than the sound of people coming home from a night of dancing. It was a pleasant change. It felt appropriate. This virus, with its zoonotic origins, is no doubt a result of our interference with the planet. This leaky Virocene, where bodies' inherent leakiness makes them vehicles for contamination, was brought about by the Anthropocene, an epoch defined by our leaking into the environment. For example, forest fires caused by climate change, in turn leak greenhouse gases into the environment and worsen the situation, symptomatic of our inability to coexist with the world around us but rather to intrude upon it. The zoonotic origin of Covid-19, spread through our leaking, is the result of our interference with other species and environments. The consequences seem almost biblical: as punishment for our atrocious behaviour, the Earth was set alight and we were sent a plague. We stayed inside, we contained our leaking, and we allowed the world to begin to heal. But as, in England, we come out of lockdown, we find new ways to leak and reignite some of our old methods. Planes are flying again, cars are back on the roads. But now we also have a new kind of pollution to add to our continual plastic leaking: coronavirus waste (disposable masks, gloves and bottles of hand sanitiser littering the seabed). The lockdown was introduced to curb the range of our bodily leaking and stop the virus's spread, so surely we could learn from this to curb our leaking in other ways? To contain humanity's leaking into the earth through our oil, our plastic, our gallons of wasted water, and curb the progression of a crisis that will claim far more lives than this pandemic.

We are instructed to contain our individual leaking in order to slow the virus, by governments that freely leak their waste into the ecosystem, taking little responsibility for the containment of our global leaking upon the Earth. As Astrida Neimanis writes, 'humans are leaving a planetary mark that will be clearly legible in the planetary archive of

the future' (2017: 11). When I think about a visual parallel for this, I think of land art and the differences between the work of Richard Long and Judy Chicago, a comparison between the way in which we do live and the way in which we should. In Richard Long's *A Line Made by Walking* (Long 1967), we see a photograph of the trace of a body on a landscape. Long walked back and forth across a field in Wiltshire, his footsteps flattening the turf until this flattening could be recorded photographically. Although it is unlikely that a trace of Long's line remains, that his mark upon the earth is 'legible' any longer – the work was made in 1967 – the undeniable fact remains that Long was consciously imprinting the earth with his bodily presence, choosing to leak his weight upon it, to flatten the grass (a living thing) for the sake of his art. Although this action is by no means the most intrusive of land art, it is the decision to prioritise oneself over the earth that is a defining factor of the Anthropocene. Judy Chicago's photographic series *Atmospheres* (Chicago 1969) proposes an alternate route, documenting a series of 'actions' using pyrotechnics that occurred in the Californian desert between the late 1960s and 2019. The timing of the actions' documentations are fundamental because the vivid plumes of coloured smoke, Chicago's intervention in the landscape, disappear almost as soon as they've arrived. Chicago's work is ephemeral here; unlike Long's, it leaves no trace other than its photographic imprint. Chicago creates this land art without leaving a mark upon the earth; coexisting with the landscape rather than intruding upon it, providing a blueprint for a way of leaking without putting our lives and our planet in peril.

Note

¹ This essay was written in early September 2020, before the introduction of the 'rule of six' and the subsequent UK lockdowns.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Artwork Credits

- Chicago, Judy.** 1969. *Purple Atmosphere*, 1969, fireworks, Santa Barbara, CA. Credit: Judy Chicago, Through the Flower Archives.
- Eisenman, Nicole.** 2011. *Sloppy Bar Room Kiss*, 2011, oil on canvas, 99 × 122 cm. Credit: Nicole Eisenman, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

- Goldin, Nan.** 1981. *Philippe H. and Suzanne Kissing at Euthanasia*, New York City, Silver dye bleach print, 39.4 × 58.7 cm. Credit: MoMA and Nan Goldin.
- Goldin, Nan.** 1983. *Suzanne and Philippe on the Bench, Tompkins Square Park*, New York City, Cibachrome print, 23.2 × 34.9 cm. Credit: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and The Nimoy Family Foundation.
- Long, Richard.** 1967. *A Line Made By Walking*, Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper and graphite on board, 1967, 37.5 × 32.4 cm. Credit: Richard Long, Tate.
- Serrano, Andres.** *Piss Christ*, 1987, Cibachrome print face-mounted on Plexiglas, 101.6 × 76 cm. Credit: Stux Gallery, New York.

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