

Lectures and discussions

Redefinitions of abjection in contemporary performances of the female body

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My paper deals with the recent profusion of the “question of the body” in the visual arts and the recurrent use of the category of the “abject” in its representation. My question, put in its simplest terms is the following: why this insistent resort to abjection? Is the use of revulsion and disgust a shock strategy elaborated in response to a cybernetic age where the body is threatened with disappearance into virtual reality? Is it merely a desire to “return to the body,” a way to affirm the roots of the self in a time where traditional categories of identity (nation, religion, the family, etc.) are being radically challenged? In the specific case of the representation of the “female body,” does the abject simply reaffirm the metaphysical definition of the woman as a dematerialized body? The hypothesis I want to develop here simultaneously asserts and refutes these conjectures, for what I believe is at play in the contemporary use of the abject is indeed a “return to the body,” but one that produces an excessivity that problematizes the absence/presence duality and opens up new cybernetic definitions of subjectivity.

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), Julia Kristeva uses the notion of abjection to describe the revulsion and the horror experienced by the child as it attempts to separate itself from the pre-Oedipal mother in the passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic Order.¹ Abjection, in its most archaic form, is an oral disgust, a refusal of the mother who is experienced as abject so that the child might expel itself from the mother-child dyad and become a subject. But for Kristeva, the experience of the abject doesn't stop there, for the abject never ceases to haunt the borders of identity; it constantly threatens to dissolve the unity of the subject. It is in fact an *integral* part of the identity process; as one attempts to ensure his or her subjectivity through the abjection of the other, one never quite

succeeds in differentiating the self from this abjected other. The abject belongs to the category of “corporeal rubbish,” of the incorporated-that-must-be-evacuated, indicating the incapacity of Western modern cultures to accept not only the mother but also, as Elizabeth Grosz underlines, the materiality of the body, its limits and cycles, mortality, disease, corporal fluids, excrement, and menstrual blood.² Following this definition, Kristeva asserts that the bringing into play of the abject, especially in modern literature, as in the writings of Mallarmé, Céline, and Genet, is a critical practice that puts subjectivity into crisis; it is a work by which categories of identity are abruptly questioned, disrupted, and challenged.

In a discussion entitled “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject,” Rosalind Krauss states that Kristeva's project of abjection fails to effect what it should be producing and what Georges Bataille's *informe* succeeds in producing; that is, it fails to undermine *categorization*.³ In other words, Kristeva's naming of the abject (as waste, excrement, menstrual blood, etc.) negates the potentially destabilizing effect of abjection; once it has been defined, the abject cannot be the means by which one undermines definitions. For Krauss, it is Bataille's *informe* and not Kristeva's *abject* that is subversive, it is the *informe*, as a project that puts into play the dissolution, decay and rotting of form that is the closest to abjection *as it should be*, a nonreifying and nonliteralizing process.

If indeed, the undermining of categorization is contradicted by Kristeva's definition of the abject and seems to be more in tune with Bataille's “undoing” on form, a closer examination of the abject permits one to see how it can (precisely when its act of categorization

1. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

2. See Elizabeth Grosz, “The Body of Signification,” in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 80–103.

3. Rosalind Krauss, “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the *Informe* and the Abject,” *October* 67 (1994):3–21.

is experienced by the viewer as an ambivalence) undermine some of the categories we perform to construct identity. This can only be understood if one acknowledges that categorizations are not only unavoidable, but that they can also be critical when they succeed in revealing how the identity of the viewer (and not only that of the represented body) is itself constructed through nominalist acts that never cease to abject the "other." So, in the 1990s, why should one still persist in favoring (as Krauss does) the work of Jackson Pollock and Cy Twombly to the detriment of John Miller and Kiki Smith, all of whose works were presented in one of the key exhibitions responsible for the labeling of "abject art," the Whitney's 1993 exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*?

What I want to argue, as I examine abject performances of the "female body" in the work of Mona Hatoum, Céline Baril, Kiki Smith and Jo Spence, is that this specific use of the abject can and should be understood as a strategy that seeks to disrupt the Kantian definition of aesthetics as pure pleasure, to produce a "body" that elicits other forms of unpredictable pleasures.⁴ Aesthetics as pure pleasure corresponds to what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called a "renunciation of pleasure, pleasure purified of pleasure"⁵ by which the aesthete distances himself not only from the naked female body but more generally from the contingency of human corporeality, both of which threaten to disrupt the "disinterestedness" of Kantian aesthetic experience. Abject performances of the female body, of a body that is like "noise" to the picture (as in Cindy Sherman's *Madonnas* of 1990 and "bestial" performances of the mid-1980s), bring back the uncontrollable body inside the frame of art.

It is to this construct of the "uncontrollable body" through the use of categories of the abject that I want to refer here. Let us start by examining a video installation by Mona Hatoum entitled *Corps étranger* (a title that should be translated simultaneously as *Strange body* and *Foreign body*; see fig. 1). *Corps étranger* was originally produced for a 1994 exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou and was shown subsequently at the Venice

Biennale and at the Tate Gallery in an exhibition titled *Rites of Passage* where Julia Kristeva explicitly designated the work as productive of the abject. A space partially closed upon itself, it consists of a circular area delimited by two semicircular partitions with two openings. On the floor, under a circular sheet of glass, one can see video close-up images of various internal and external features of Hatoum's body. Immediately upon entering the space, viewers are placed in a situation of exteriority vis-à-vis the images of a body that they must apprehend at a distance equivalent to their own body height, a distance measured from their feet (where the images play upon the screen) to their eyes and ears. But tactile contact with the images is also established through their feet; this is a crucial point to which I will come back later.

The most disturbing images of *Corps étranger* are surely those that show the visceral body, here defined by two types of optical instruments (the endoscope and coloscope) used to scan certain parts of the digestive system, colon, and intestines. This visual sequence is accompanied by an ultrasound recording of heartbeats echoing throughout different parts of the body, punctuated at regular intervals by the sound of Hatoum's breathing, which returns when the camera resurfaces. The body's deep cavities are illuminated and examined by the camera in its continual search for orifices. Deeper and deeper it moves, probing these visceral tunnels until, unable to advance any farther, it reemerges only to wander, compelled to go on solely for the sake of videotaping the interior of the artist's body.

One of the most striking ambivalences of this installation resides in the production, by the body, of effects that may be described as simultaneously incorporating and incorporated. In the space between the viewer and the images, a gradual oscillation develops between these two poles. In the first instance, the body is represented as incorporated (as much by the camera that penetrates it as by the viewer who follows its movement); in the second instance, the body becomes an incorporating power to the extent that, by following the intrusive action of the camera, viewers end up feeling themselves absorbed by what they are looking at so intently, as if they themselves were being pulled down into the profound darkness of the body's cavities. This ambivalence assumes its full meaning when one realizes that the body is the body of a woman. For it is the female sex in its cultural ambivalence—as both a body and a threatening sex—

4. On the feminist revision of aesthetics, see Amelia Jones, "Feminism, Incorporated: Reading 'postfeminism' in an Anti-Feminist Age," *Afterimage* 20, no. 5 (1992):10–15.

5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 491.

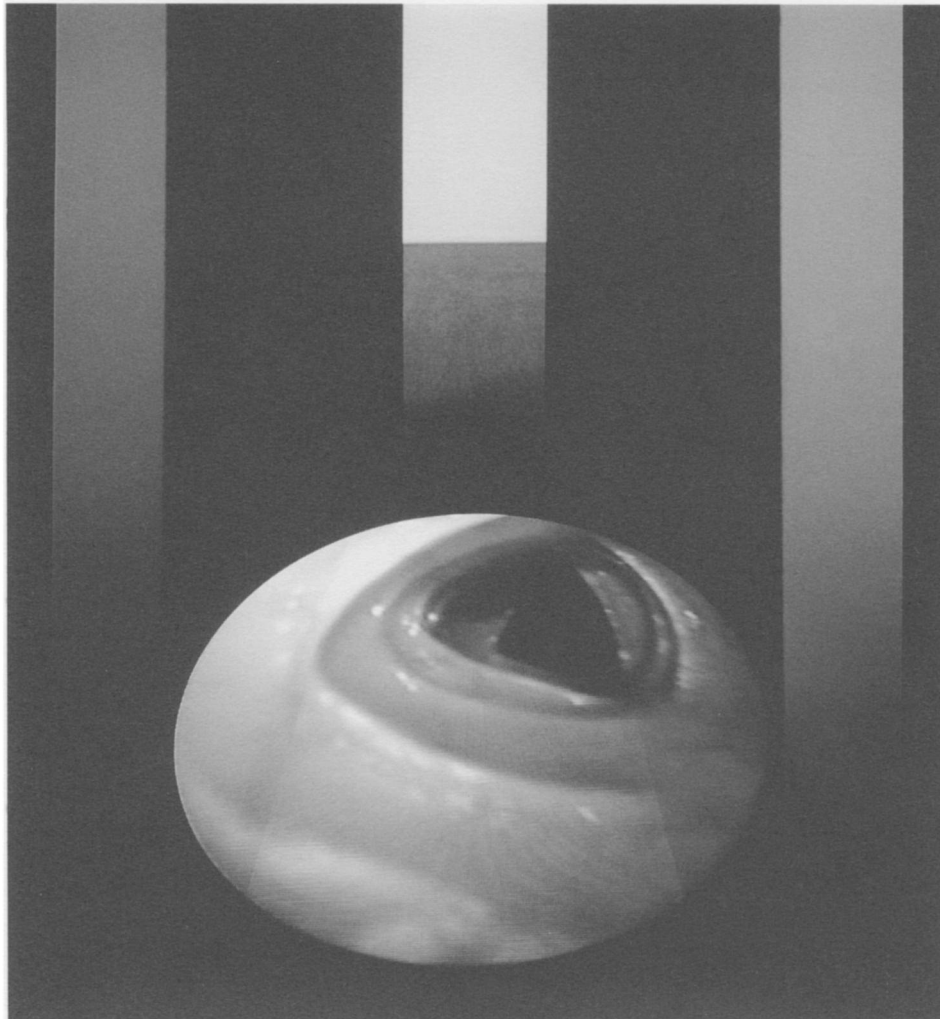


Figure 1. Mona Hatoum, *Corps étranger*, 1994. Video installation, 350 x 300 x 300 cm. Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

that comes into play at this point. Thus the images we see here show a female body that reinscribes the link that Freud established between the death and life drives; in other words, *Corps étranger* reinscribes the fantasy of the *vagina dentata*, of the woman as vampire or animal equipped with a sexuality that is identified as devouring, enigmatic, dissembling, and castrating for men.⁶ This fantasy is one that is also played out in the 1992

collages by Kathleen King that stage isolated, opened mouths, the teeth ready to bite anyone who dares to enter, protecting and locating the lips, fetus, or stitched up body parts in the inside. But instead of being kept outside by the threatening vaginal teeth, the viewer of *Corps étranger* is attracted towards the inside that he or she must resist so as not to be completely sucked into.

The installation also performs what recent phenomenology, particularly that exemplified in Drew Leder's *The Absent Body*, designates as the recessive visceral body, that is, the whole set of organs hidden under the skin, which functions as an absence,

6. On the *vagina dentata*, see Elizabeth Grosz, "Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death (Short Version)," in *Space, Time, and Perversion: The Politics of the Body* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

independent of the subject's awareness or control.⁷ By exhibiting this phenomenologically "absent" body, the installation transforms the recessive into the ecstatic, producing an abjection effect insofar as it points to the fact that the use of endoscopy in medicine is prevalently associated with the diagnosis of illness, that is, with the existence of symptoms indicating that something, some "it," is acting in a dysfunctional manner. Endoscopy and colonoscopy are hermeneutic practices that bring out what Drew Leder has dubbed an interiority in "dys-appearance," a visceral body that appears, that one becomes aware of, precisely because it is dysfunctional. Thus the foreign body is not so much the visceral body that tends to be absent from my consciousness as I move about in the world; it is also the dysfunctional body, a body both threatened and threatening, an "it" that reveals itself as something different from me, something stranger and harder to control. "Absent" and yet present in the manifestation of the *symptom*: a negative presence.

One can see here how Mona Hatoum brings together the visceral body, technology, and the female as incorporating threats, making each category a metaphor or metonymy of the other, projecting them over each other in order to consolidate an abjection effect. Being herself a foreigner living in London, a Palestinian in exile, she invests in the position of the stranger speaking about strangeness. Like in her videotape *Changing Parts* (1984), where Hatoum appears in a transparent box and smears the surface with blood so as to contaminate the protective screen that separates the viewer from the performer, *Corps étranger* is a work about the "other" as it starts to threaten "me" (the Westerner) because this "other" is out of place. The woman, the Palestinian, the visceral or dysfunctional body, that is, what *has to be abjected* by the Western subject to construct his or her identity, is now in the viewer's space, externalized, in proximity, indicating how the "difference" or the "distance" between the I and the other, the mind and the body, the healthy and the ill, is not so clear or predictable anymore. One is not in complete control of the situation. This is what disease is about; the body acts independently of your will, even from your consciousness.

It is interesting to note that the work of another important "abject" artist, Kiki Smith, also puts into play a similar sense of loss of control. Her bodies are usually represented not as a whole, but in parts; these parts often seem to have been torn off from the trunk as though following a catastrophe. Body fluids (such as semen and blood) are represented dripping out of a multitude of corporeal orifices, and organs are falling from the body, as though the skin is not functioning anymore as "container," like in the skinned *Virgin Mary* (fig. 2); the beings are constantly being defined by a corporeality that is in a state of ruin. About her work, Kiki Smith says:

When people are dying, they are losing control of their bodies. That loss of function can seem humiliating and frightening. But, on the other hand, you can look at it as a kind of liberation of the body. It seems like a nice metaphor—a way of thinking about the social—that people lose control despite the many agendas of different ideologies in society, which are trying to control the body(ies) . . . medicine, religion, law, etc. Just think about control—who has the control of the body? Does the body have control over itself? Do you? . . . Does the mind have control over the body? Does the social?⁸

The loss of control or what should be called the contingency of the body and its failure to be what it is supposed to be in contemporary Western society (productive, healthy, and young), is also at play throughout the work of Jo Spence. And yet, this doesn't mean that the photographs of her *Cancer project* series are self-representations of a victim. On the contrary, they are part of a daily struggle to regain health, representing what she calls the "abject loneliness of the long struggle for health" so as to counteract the "narrative resolution of illnesses like cancer" that people usually expect.⁹ Abject art, in the work of Spence, Hatoum, and Smith, is precisely this desire to break with resolution and categorization through the paradoxical use of categories of the abject. This strategy is subversive insofar as it manifests the failing of a subject to correspond to the predictable, disciplined, coherent body of contemporary discursive formations such as medicine, law, and psychology.

7. Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

8. Kiki Smith, in Robin Winters, "An Interview with Kiki Smith," in *Kiki Smith* (Amsterdam: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1990), p. 127.

9. Jo Spence, *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 122.



Figure 2. Kiki Smith, *Virgin Mary*, 1993. Bronze and silver, 167.6 x 68.5 x 48.2 cm. Collection of the artist.

As a result, what is being produced here is a more performative conception of the body. As Judith Butler states, the body is a materialization of a norm, it is the performance of an ideal construct, which one *has to comply with* to ensure his or her subjectivity so as not to be abjected, excluded, and marginalized into the spheres of nonsubjectivity.¹⁰ But, as Butler also affirms, one *never quite succeeds in complying with* the norm he or she is supposed to reiterate. So abject performances of the female body are those where the failing to reproduce the norm is made manifest, where the spectre of abjection is being played out. Abject art is saying to the viewer: this failure is not necessarily unproductive, for it can have the effect of complexifying the body. When failing, mortality, catastrophe, noise, unpredictability, loss of control, nonorganicity, and contingency become *the* predominant components of the body, this means that a major redefinition of subjectivity is at play, one that seeks to displace the conception of the subject as presence to the detriment of the abjected female body, which represents lack and absence, to a conception of the subject as *both* presence and absence, pattern and randomness.

This means, as Katherine Hayles would argue, that what Lacan has called the floating signifiers of the modern sign are being troubled by the flickering signifiers of the computer age.¹¹ For Lacan, the meaning of things is never accessible but always constituted by the continuous sliding and displacement of the sign; subjectivity, like language, is founded on an absence, on the loss of the plenitude of the pre-Oedipal mother-child dyad forever broken as one becomes a subject. In this presence/absence dialectic, the abjected (the mother, body fluids, the female body, etc.) represents what has been lost and what *has to remain lost* to maintain one's subjectivity. In the case of abject art, this law of absence and lack has been somewhat subverted in order to produce a form of presence that is not founded on an absence, but *coexists* with absence. The body is not merely lacking. Its lack, failure or loss of control is productive as it brings into play unpredictable disorganizations and reorganizations that could lead to its deterioration but also to its increase in complexity. The flickering body as pattern *and* randomness is one

that cannot be completely programmed, one that can be defined as productive noise.

Randomness is a theoretical notion used in the study of complex systems to indicate the incapacity of the observer to predict the changes of the system under observation. It is defined as the agent that actualizes the unforeseeable potential of the system to adapt to "noise," that is, to what seems to be a distortion in the transmission of messages or a catastrophe within the environment.¹² When the system is able to adapt itself (to complexify itself or even to mutate), this means that it was able not to *resist* "noise," but to *use* it as an element of self-reorganization; for the observer, "noise" is an error, but when it has been integrated by the system, it loses this error quality. What is noise then, if it is not a form of abjection "produced by a complex dance between predictability and unpredictability, repetition and variation," (p. 78) a process by which the system under observation has perhaps ceased to properly signify for the observer, to the extent that it is now threatening the observer's identity boundaries, but that signals the unguaranteed possibility of a reorganization of the system which could lead to a higher level of complexity.

This specific way of thinking about social, aesthetic, and identity change is what is at play in the multimedia installation *The ant and the volcano* by Canadian artist Céline Baril (fig. 3). In this work, the abject is represented in the three giant ants installed on the floor. Carrying a video monitor in their abdomen that diffuses images of active volcanos, these ants are mutants of an era of telecommunication; they are science-fiction or horror-movie prehistoric dinosaurs of the future producing rumblings, magma, smoke, vapor, and sulphuric gas. But these monsters can only be understood once they are read in the context of the Chinese Diaspora that is depicted by the two other components of *The ant and the volcano*, a small video installation hanging from the ceiling composed of three monitors projecting images of Hong Kong and a feature film dealing with the 1997 retrocession of Hong Kong by the British Crown to China, a film that stages a young girl named Lihua, who will finally migrate to Iceland thirty years after her grandmother left communist China, but whose "new home" is disrupted by the eruption of a volcano.

10. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

11. N. Katherine Hayles, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," *October* 66 (1993):71.

12. See Henri Atlan, *Entre le cristal et la fumée: essai sur l'organisation du vivant* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1979).



Figure 3. Céline Baril, *The ant and the volcano*, 1992. Multimedia installation, fiberglass, steel, and video, length of each ant: 300 cm. Collection of the artist.

Such a cultural contextualization provided by the film and the video installation has the effect of stereotyping “Chinese” as intrusive “ants.” But if we are attentive to the film’s narrative, it becomes clear that this categorization is one that occurs in the reception of the sign: the Chinese in diaspora is abject insofar as it is perceived as invading “our” territory and weakening “our” identity. For the Western observer, these three ants are like “noise” in his or her space. However, in the film, we are brought to listen to Lihua’s story, which is one of a constant *unwriting* of the Chinese nation where individuals are continuously disorganizing and reorganizing their homes, territories, and identities following a series of geographical or political catastrophes. The year “1997” is *the sign par excellence* of uncertainty and unpredictability; it is, like the volcanic eruption, an anticipated catastrophe of the (yet uncertain) loss of democracy. Thus the monstrosity of the ants is a strategy elaborated in order to inscribe catastrophe in the construction of identity. As it indicates

the Westerner’s fear of the other, it seeks to propose “noise” as constitutive (and not necessarily destructive) of more complex territories which do not have to be *preserved* to exist, but negotiated, unwritten-to-be-rewritten.¹³ Territories are present, but as uncertainties.

Hence, the use of the abject in the representation of the body is one that recategorizes, that renames the other (that is, the “Palestinian,” the “Chinese,” the “female body” as *vagina dentata*, the visceral body) but only in as much as this renaming activates the desire or the need not to suspend categories as in the utopian “informe” but to re-orient them into a new logic of production where organization and disorganization, pattern and randomness coexist. This means that if, at first glance, the abjected bodies of Mona Hatoum, Kiki Smith, Jo Spence, Céline Baril, Cindy Sherman, and

13. On preservation versus negotiation, see Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

others produce the horror of loss, decay, and illness, they are bodies that state that this loss is not necessarily a death, a lack, or an absence from oneself but a pattern indissociable from the randomness that has shaped it. For the twenty-first century, what becomes important is not the recovery of the lost body or the discovery of a new body, but the quest for random "interrelationships between them."¹⁴ However, this shift to a pattern/randomness dialectic can only be made possible if the absence represented by the "abjected," that is, if the lack of the feminine in the eyes of the masculine, is overrun. This is precisely the process that is at play in the abject performances of the body of the feminist artistic practices I have just examined.

14. Ilya Kabakov, in Robert Storr, "An Interview with Ilya Kabakov," *Art in America* 83, no. 1 (1995):67.