

ABJECT ART

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It. *Arte abietta*; Fr. *Art abject*; Germ. *Abjekt Kunst*; Span. *Arte abyecto*. The word “abject” derives from the Latin word “abdicere” (English: “to throw away” or “to cast off”) and the term “abjection” literally means “the state of being cast off”. So, the “Abject” refers to supposed unsavoury aspects of life, especially concerning functions of the body assumed as impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion. In general, the concept of the abject, if applied to art forms, explores themes that challenge and disrupt our notions of cleanliness and propriety consisting of those elements, particularly of the body, that transgress and threaten our sense of decency and decorum. Abject Art is therefore an art form that obtained a widespread diffusion during the 1980s and 1990s, which usually refers to works containing abject subjects, materials and substances, corporeal fragments, and physical residues. In 1993 the Whitney Museum of New York presented an exhibition titled *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, which consecrated this new season of art and gave the term a large circulation in art and culture.

The Abject represents a complex psychological and philosophical concept, introduced by the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (first published 1980), as the ground of a basic differentiation between the self and the non-self. For Kristeva, abjection is tied to concepts of boundary and transgression playing a fundamental role in differentiating the self from the other. Her ideas were partly influenced by the works of Georges Bataille and by the thought of Jacques Lacan.

The roots of Abject Art can be traced back to the early twentieth century. The Surrealists authored the first abject artworks, particularly pronounced in the disturbing project *Die Puppe* (1934) by Hans Bellmer. However, it is only after the coinage of Kristeva’s original notion of abjection that this concept has become profoundly influential on the visual arts and has inspired new ways of thinking about art and aesthetics in the late twentieth century. Abject Art often raised religious and political debates, one key example being Andre Serrano’s famous work *Piss Christ* (1987), which shows a crucifix submerged in the artist’s urine, considered as an icon of Abject Art. Also, female artists made significant contributions to Abject Art, especially in connection with feminist debates and an increased focus on the body (see BODY ART), since female bodily functions in particular have been considered ‘abjected’ by a patriarchal social order.

Among others, Cindy Sherman is considered a key artist to the abject in art, as well as Louise Bourgeois, Helen Chadwick, Paul McCarthy, Robert Gober, Carolee Schneemann, Kiki Smith, Sarah Lucas, David Nebreda, Damien Hirst, Jake and Dinos Chapman.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: THE STATE OF THE ART

If, as said, the German artist Hans Bellmer can be considered a precursor of the Abject Art, with his work anticipating the contemporary artistic concerns about issues such as bodily integrity, hybridity, polymorphism, and sexual identity, one of the most influential figures on abjection in the visual arts was Georges Bataille, initially close to Surrealists, who wrote extensively on eroticism, cruelty, transgression, and the *informe* (formless).

The notion of abjection in Bataille's thinking is not explicitly theorized (except a short essay he drafted in 1934), but it plays anyway an important role in his central theory of the sacred, strictly connected with his critique of Western reason (Bataille 1934). Within his larger theory of the sacred, the abject can be compared to the impure (left) sacred. The sacred is defined by Bataille in terms of the excluded part of a system that cannot be assimilated, and this corresponds, in part, to the abject. So, the abject as the rejected and the excluded is a necessary part of social ritual and it is essential in the formation of sacred community and considered necessary in activities such as eroticism and sacrifice.

Bataille's theory connects directly to contemporary Abject Art, particularly in the work of artists like *Cindy Sherman* and *Carolee Schneemann*. In their hands, categories such as abjection, formlessness, and the monstrous are used not just to challenge our traditional representations of the body, gender, and sexuality, but also to dismantle patriarchal and male-dominated cultural structures.

As said, however, it was Kristeva's theory and the cultural impact of the Whitney Museum exhibition that contributed to the widespread acceptance of abjection's concept. In her book, *Powers of Horror*, within a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, Kristeva starts analyzing the concept of abjection identifying it as a process that initially prefigures the mirror-stage in the psychic development of the infant. In this period the child begins to separate from the figure of the mother and abjection is exactly the process of differentiation from the maternal. Abjection represents a necessary step for the infant to build its own subjectivity. "Even before being *like*, 'I' am not but do *separate, reject, ab-ject*" (Kristeva 1982: 13). So, paradoxically, on the one hand the abject is fundamental to the understanding of human nature, while on the other hand it also appears disruptive to the normality of everyday life, thus explaining why it is denied. Psychically, it both endangers and protects the subject: it threatens us by destabilizing the boundaries of the self and evoking our animal origins, yet it also protects us by allowing the expulsion of the abject through different mechanisms. The ambivalent nature of abjection explains the precarious nature of our sense of the self, attracted and at the same time repelled by the experience of abjection.

According to Kristeva, abject materials – such as bodily excretions like menstrual blood, urine, feces, mucus, or saliva – can reactivate memories of an archaic phase of psychic life associated with abjection.

She examines personal items of disgust, but also places them in social contexts, examining them as taboos. As she notes, “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 1982: 3). These materials, by passing from the interior to the exterior of the body, disrupt the illusion of stable bodily boundaries and reflect the instability of the self and making such materials psychically disturbing. As she writes, the abject is “the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck” (Kristeva 1982: 3). She refers to the abject as that which is borderline to the body and society; a corpse is an example of the abject, as it reminds us of our own mortality; so do other functions like vomiting, excreting and menstruation. As a response, cultures often institute rituals aimed at regulating and containing encounters with the abject. Kristeva argues that religion, in the context of the Judeo-Christian tradition, historically functioned as a mechanism for safeguarding against the abject. With the advent of modern secularism, she contends that art – particularly avant-garde literature, like that of Céline, for example, to whom a chapter of her book is dedicated – has assumed this regulatory function, helping Western culture to confront and manage the abject.

Kristeva’s theory of abjection has also attracted some criticism, which we do not have the space to dwell on here, in particular about the legitimacy of the theory – for example by some art critics such as Hal Foster (1996), Rosalind Krauss (1996) and Yve-Alain Bois (1996) – and about her ideas on the maternal and the feminine. In any case, her theory is far-reaching and has been applied in many disciplines including psychoanalysis, anthropology, religious studies and the arts.

Another issue concerns the relationship between abjection and disgust (see DISGUST) – whose concept has been brilliantly examined from a phenomenological perspective by the Hungarian philosopher Aurel Kolnai (2004) – since they tend to overlap having some similarities, both involving expulsion, similar reactions and same elicitors. Kristeva (1982: 11) describes disgust as a “symptom” of the “sign” of abjection. In general, the concept of abjection has been overlooked in studies on disgust, even though in Menninghaus’s study abjection is described as “the newest mutation in the theory of disgust” (Menninghaus 2003: 365), thus suggesting that disgust also includes abjection in its manifestation. Korsmeyer and Smith (2004: 18), on the contrary, believe Kolnai’s notion of disgust is different from Kristeva’s notion of abject, because while abjection entails disgust, it also involves fear, but the reverse is not true. In any case, what is certain is that abjection involves the emotion of disgust as part of its manifestation, thus concluding that “abjection is a proper subset of disgust”, having the two phenomena “the same presentations and phenomenology but different theoretical roots” (Arya 2014: 39).

Now, perhaps it is clearer what is at stake in the season of contemporary art called Abject Art. In visual arts, the abject became an area of great interest for artists such as Andres Serrano’s *Shit* and corpses photographs, Cindy Sherman’s vomit-strewn images, Kiki Smith’s visceral, intimate representations, Mike Kelly’s sculpture, Damien Hirst’s quartered animals in vitrines, and Paul McCarty’s abject characters including Pinocchio and Santa Klaus. Although encompassing all sorts of styles, Abject Art tends to shock by incorporating and using unpleasant, repellent, disgusting materials. Sculptures might be made of shit, hair, or blood and there is a definite confrontational and sexual content in much of the work, rejecting

aesthetic conventions of beauty and purity. The artists working in the field of Abject Art employ organic materials, bodily fluids, decay, fragmentation, and contamination to disrupt the viewer's sense of distance and control. They lay bare the sanitized surfaces of conformist spectatorship, revealing the social exclusions upon which taste is built.

In conclusion, the abject has become increasingly important in art from the twentieth century onwards and in different ways it continues to occupy the works of many contemporary artists. The reason is that the abject calls into question the unity and the identity of the subject, thus representing a challenge for many artists even today.

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