

a recent history of the ephemeral found object in contemporary art

The Abject Object

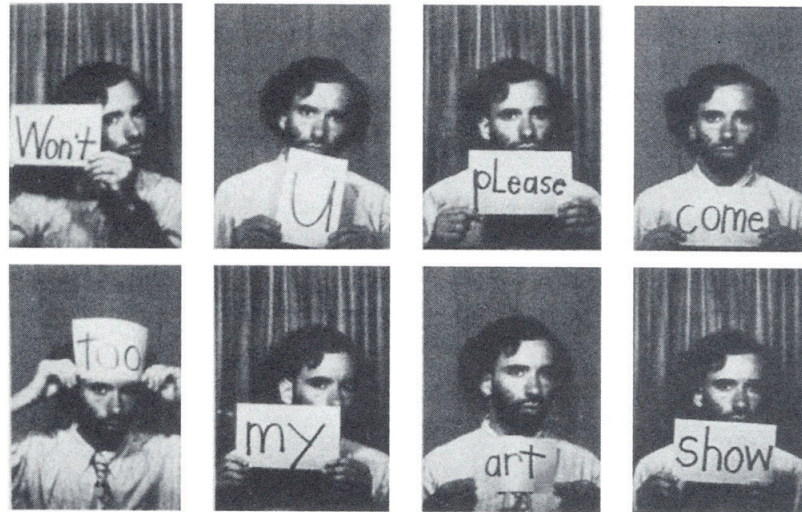
Karla kept on talking about bodies, her obsession “When I was younger,” she said, “I went through a phase where I wanted to be a machine I didn’t honestly want to be flesh; I wanted to be ‘precision technology’—like a Los Angeles person; I listened to Kraftwerk and ‘Cars’ by Gary Numan.”

More body talk: Karla believes that human beings remember everything. “All stimulation generates a memory—and these memories have to go somewhere. Our bodies are essentially diskettes.”

—Douglas Coupland, *Microserfs*

You can declare: a work that exhibits the correct political tendency need show no other quality.

—Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*



Cary Leibowitz/
Candyass
Invitation, 1989.

The Body is everywhere in contemporary art practice. This interest in the body—rescued as it has been from a pre-symbolic purgatory, no longer simply a developmental stage on the way to the higher, cerebral, Platonic—is founded on an undoing of *negations*. Such negations deny the value of corporeal sensation, of memory and experience stored in the body as well as the mind, in favor of the cerebral and intellectual. This form of undoing, brought into the artistic realm, asks, what practices have been excised from the art-historical canon in order to establish a neatly linear, logical art history? And importantly, who has been excluded from the pantheon of artistic achievement in the process? The body’s value is disruption, disturbing and contaminating a unified history. The body introduces the possibility of the not-logical, the not purely optical, retinal, and cerebral.

by Jennifer L. Riddell

An omnipresent manifestation of these concerns is the abject, present in full force in the 1993 exhibit “Abject Art” at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Essentially, that which is abject can be thought of as a metonym for the body itself, indexing an array of historically seated privilege, repression, or *negation* of specific forms of art practice (painting over craft, sculpture over fiber, the permanent over the ephemeral, the precious over the pedestrian). These negations have been countered by practicing artists wishing to assert an identity not subsumable to the whole—lesbian, African-American, Muslim, Jewish, rural, female, etc.

Materially, asserting the presence of the body in art frequently takes place via the use of “non-art” objects, which firmly occupy the realm of *lived* experience, as opposed to the purely metaphysical or optical. Much of this abject found-object work takes the form of installations that convey a lack of deliberateness (although not intentionality). Such art appears as if by accident, viewers stumbling across it as if, perhaps, it is not supposed to be seen or named. The abject elaborates the heretofore unseen, unheard. The work is often small, on the floor, without a pedestal, of a scale over which the viewer can dominate.

Since the Whitney’s “Abject Art,” explorations of the unwanted, the excluded have dominated slacker/loser culture, encompassing visual art (Cary Leibowitz/Candyass’s ingratiating pleas to “please come to my art show”), clothing/hygiene (grunge), music (take your pick), and certainly film (*Clerks*, *Kids*). These explorations have segued into the bravado of the New Museum of Contemporary Art’s “Bad Girls” exhibition of 1994; and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s Duchampian “Cheap Art” exhibition of everyday ephemera transformed into art, but art without intrinsic value, durability, or collectability.

A work such as Belu Simion-Fainaru’s 1991 *Il faut toujours commencer à nouveau* exemplifies the humble and unprepossessing aesthetic characteristics of much ’90s cultural production. An ordinary drinking glass filled with water is supported by two metal rods attached to the wall. The glass contains an egg, above which floats a tiny boat, such as a child would make to sail in the tub. Simion-Fainaru’s accompanying statement discusses a sense of crisis which he feels permeates late-twentieth-century life, a directionlessness and disorder. He calls for “a return to a world without order, to go back to the unknown, the primal formless matter, not in order to remain there, but to reorient ourselves and search for the roots of our forgotten urges and the possibilities of developing our being.”¹ Simion-Fainaru captures the pathos and melancholia of the ephemeral found-object work that exemplifies abject art, that departs from Modernist paradigms, and implicitly critiques the egotism of the artist as messiah. Such work stems from a dissatisfaction with traditional means of representation and the lack of relevance Modernist art

practice and ideology may have to those who strive to rescue their subjectivity from the Modernist steamroller.

The force of a monolithic world narrative has been a compelling and nearly indomitable one throughout history. And in Darwinian terms, what is weak or impotent will, of necessity, retreat into invisibility. By contaminating that narrative, abject art claims and asserts what has been made invisible. It is often imbued with an oppositional, feminine sensibility, irrespective of the maker’s gender. Its materials are associated with roles and tasks constructed as feminine: household items, fabric, food, and other found ephemera. The temporal dimension of some of these materials connotes decay, impermanence, and process, presenting acts of “mere” making, and tasks that are cyclical—never truly finished. In the abject object, tasks that have been systematically devalued in society and culture resurface to challenge socially constructed and arbitrary assumptions about what constitutes worth.

What is Abject

*Abject 1: sunk or existing in a low state or condition; 2a: cast down in spirit: SERVILE, SPIRITLESS; b: showing utter hopelessness or resignation; 3: expressed or offered in a humble and often ingratiating spirit.*²

The central articulation of “the abject” is Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, published in English in 1982. The Whitney’s “Abject Art” exhibition catalogue describes the popularized concept of the abject a decade later. Society generates taboos having to do with sexuality and waste which are, for the most part, hidden from view, not discussed lest they fracture sanitized behavioral constructions, like a Derridean exposure of the fissures in a text where ideological inconsistencies and falsities lurk. Kristeva conceives of a socially “clean and proper” body as a container that clearly demarcates an outside/inside border. Unsettling feelings arise when the repressed is

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resurrected. This is the abject, usually silent and unseen, normally hidden in order to stabilize power relations and support a prevailing ideology. In this way, an oppositional framework of clean/unclean, outside/inside, right/wrong, proper/improper is established.

Ricardo Brey's 1992 untitled installation for Documenta IX in Kassel, Germany addresses this outside/inside construction. The walls of the room-size installation are violently smeared with muddy brown paint (dried blood, excrement, dirt?) and hung with mangled, slatted blinds. On the floor lies a similarly besmirched bed comforter and pillows, with a fan blowing nearby. Several glass panels lean against the walls and two clean ones suspended from the ceiling act as room dividers. The viewer is situated as voyeur in this place of intimacy, struck by a scene reminiscent of an aftermath of domestic violence or sexual depravity—unleashed in a private space made public. The clean glass panels suggest a view onto that which would be normally obscured; the fan creates movement and a dull noise, adding to the anomie, and cools the bed, which looks recently abandoned.

Kristeva gives three categories of the abject: food; wastes, such as excrement and menstrual blood; and signs of sexual difference. None of the above are inherently abject, but rather become so when they are taken from a hidden state and brought to the forefront of our consciousness. The abject potential of food is kept at bay only by the rituals of preparation and serving.

Repugnance results when we are confronted directly by the unadulterated, taboo item. Kristeva posits that this unitary rejection of the unclean maintains order in society, and is pervasive in establishing so-called normative standards regarding appropriate public and private behavior.

Fred Tomaselli, whose work was recently seen in "Better Living Through Chemistry" at Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery, comments on how we

manipulate our bodies in order to maintain these behavioral standards. *Behind Your Eyes* of 1992 takes the form of a vascular diagram of a man's body, recalling those found in biology textbooks, which floats on a black ground peppered with "stars." On closer inspection, the stars are revealed to be an assortment of common, over-the-counter substances: aspirin, antacids, saccharin, ephedrine, and acetaminophen. Much human biological functioning has become dependent on this array of pharmaceuticals, which regulate the clean and proper social body. At the same time, as suggested by the substances—legal and controlled—that Tomaselli and others in the "Better Living" show incorporate into their work, chemical dependency takes various forms, some socially sanctioned, others—sometimes inexplicably—not.

For Kristeva, this unspoken consensus is formed at the expense of "I," or autonomy. It occurs at the moment we enter the realm of language and the symbolic, identifying the clean/dirty, the good/bad as we learn their names. At this moment, we abject, or cast off, "I" in order to adapt to these rules and learn the proscriptions.

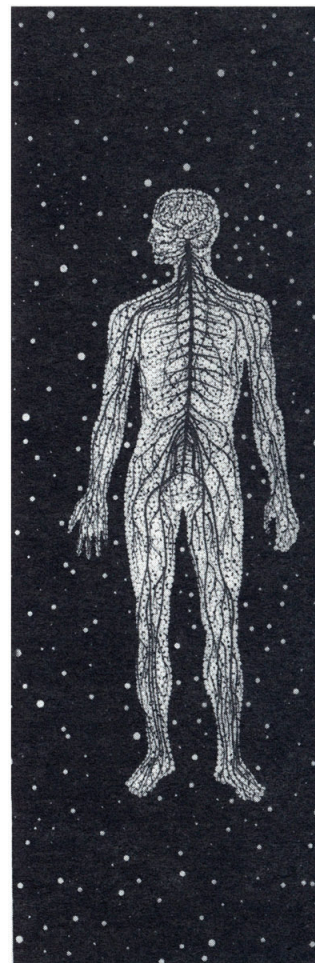
Identity, Subjectivity, and Grime

Defilement is an element connected with the boundary, the margin, etc., of an order.

—Julia Kristeva³

The abject throws the nature of identity into question. Proponents of its presence in art, such as Simon Taylor, one of the curators of "Abject Art," claim that abjection, constituting a return to presymbolic animality, or simply the state existing prior to socialization into the dominant order, "undermines the metalized fascistic body which armors itself as a defensive reaction against bodily impurities."⁴ Taylor writes that the act of transgression via the abject draws attention to the power of the norm and destabilizes it.

The "subversive," as contained in Taylor's statement, seems overly romantic. Can a truly subversive element exist in contemporary art, or does this notion of transgression simply return us to the Modernist avant-garde? Initially claimed by contemporary artists as subversive and perhaps an implicit refusal to perpetuate fallacious Modernist art practices, the idea of an abject art seems lately to have turned inward to feed upon itself. Rhonda Lieberman writes that artists working in a designated "loser-art" mode



Fred Tomaselli
Behind Your Eyes, 1992.

The abject is allowed to exist, but only as a function of dominant ideology, a sort of "Pet Art."

may not be the “Mother Teresas of the art world,” but that “their constitutionally deflated style is a breath of fresh air after the generally humorless, self-righteous, and/or slick critiques of mastery so prevalent in the ‘post-Modern’ masterbashing of the ’80s.”⁵ What is problematic about this assessment is that the expression of a desire to combat powerlessness employs the very stratagems of those who hold the keys: that is, lobbying for a prevailing style and content more “genuine” than others. The result is that instead of the abject effecting an empowering and subversive means of asserting identity, it has become a limiting and essentialist structure in which art becomes one-dimensional and merely illustrative of theory.

The act of articulating the body as a site of subversion is, in this way, limited as a strategy. Reinforcing the power of the norm by operating entirely within conventions, it lays claim to what it is not, further dichotomizing society into distinct, adversarial groups, e.g., the powerful and the powerless. This strategy tends to be reactionary and fascistic in its exclusion of certain art practices as irrelevant, politically incorrect, less effective, or again, inauthentic. In so doing, it only demonstrates the lack of space in either art world or society where an individual can operate free from reductive labels, outside the boundaries that the abject is *supposed* to transgress. It is true that the limitations of language are difficult to surmount, and that the possibility of carving out a space removed from the system that oppresses a plurality of voices is remote. The remaining option is to surrender the tactics of subversion to a more fluid art practice that draws its life from both inside and outside. A truly “pure” art practice is untenable.

The claiming of the abject by marginalized groups also provides fodder for its critics. It’s as if the margin only deserves culture’s “leftovers,” dominant society already having consumed the main course. Again, attempts to eke out an untainted space while supporting and operating within a binary oppositional system are futile. In a conversation among art critics on the politics of the signifier, Hal Foster commented that the problem with the act of naming and defining an abject is that “it allows for a referencing of the abject that right and left tend to agree upon,” in other words, that the abject *is* defiled and disgusting. Or, as Helen Molesworth stated in agreement with Foster, “It’s as if in the [“Abject Art”] exhibition, the religious right and Kristeva could all agree that John Miller’s sculpture really is a pile of shit.”⁶ It is inescapable that a work such as Miller’s 1989 *Natural History*, a small-scale sculpture of a mini-city of archetypal buildings and figures from various periods of history, appears to rise organically out of a mass of what looks like excremental substance deposited on the floor.

In these terms, the abject can be considered complicit with the power relations it attempts to decenter. It’s allowed to exist, but only as a function of dominant ideology, a sort of “Pet Art.” Byron Kim’s 1992 *Cosmetic Portrait*, a gridded arrangement of foundation-makeup samples on handmade paper, alternatively points to the highly subjective nature and private interiority of identity-construction—a process not based on an extant culturally or societally produced

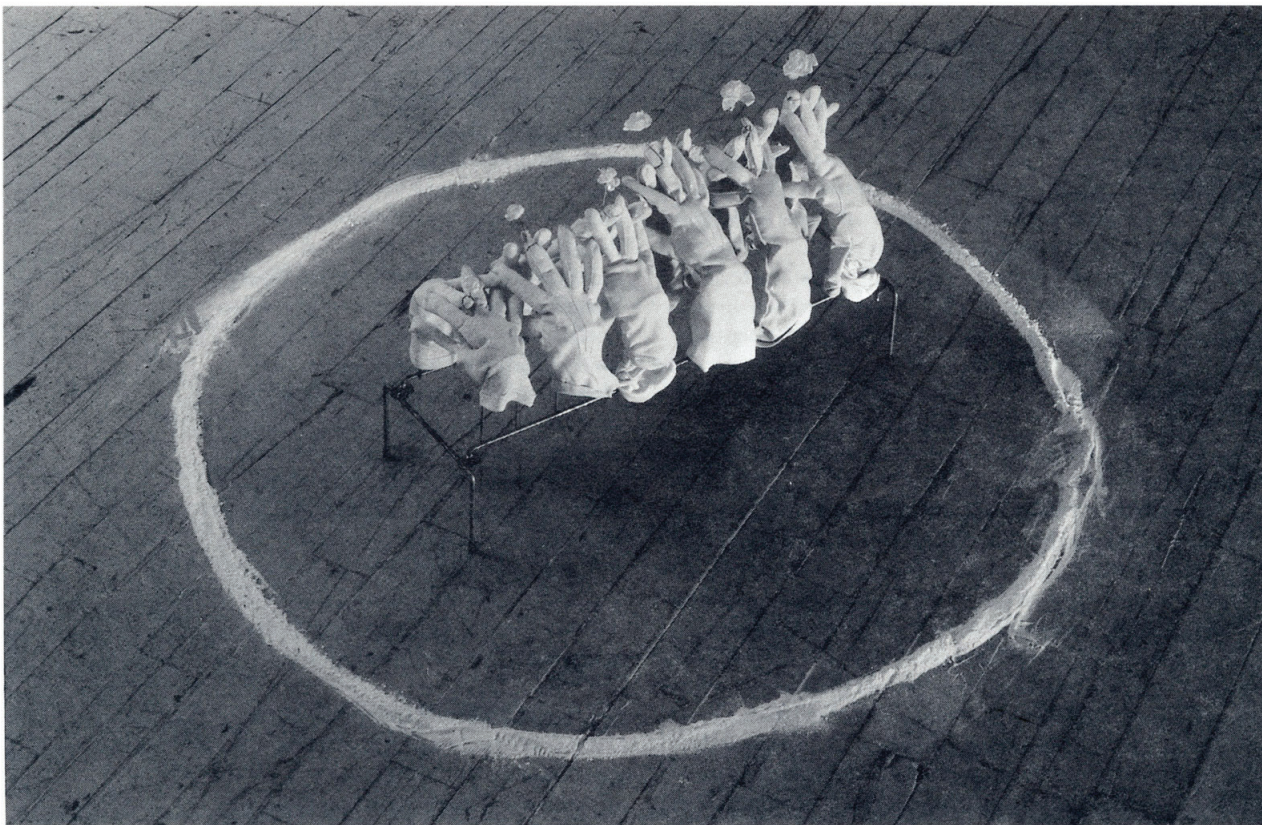
structure. Kim’s ironic use of custom-blended foundations instead of standard hues points out the infinitude of existing skin tones, but also reminds us that skin color is only part of identity—albeit the most visible part, from which a variety of stereotypes and assumptions spring. His use of makeup, which becomes “secondhand” when removed from the sterility of the bottle, also supports the idea of this kind of identity-construction as an afterthought, put together *a posteriori*. Kim stresses the superficiality of such assumptions by arranging the samples in a decorative grid, like paint chips—as if you could select and apply your skin tone as you would paint for your living-room walls. This is the kind of superficiality located within the multicultural debate, which speaks of only token acceptance of heterogeneity.

While the power of the abject in contemporary art to assert identity is questionable due to the dissemination of critically reductive writing (e.g., from balkanized apologists for gay and lesbian art, African-American art, Latin-American art), the abject *can* be effective in provoking readings that function not to debunk dominant ideology but to add complexity to cultural discourse.

Mourning and Melancholy

I had accepted the transience, the dribbling away, the brevity, the impermanence, the fading, the withering, the spookishness of our existence. Not only had I accepted it, I had even welcomed transience into my work as it was coming into being.
—Jean Arp⁷

What Arp had to say about Dada in early part of this century resonates uncannily with respect to the abject, to contemporary found-object art that employs ephemera. Many Dada and contemporary artists alike share a sense of disillusionment, reflected in their choices of materials and processes. Ava Gerber’s 1993 *untitled* lies innocuously on the gallery floor, a soft assemblage of pillows, plastic bags, feathers, tissue paper, rosettes



Ava Gerber
Angel, 1993.

from sheets, and yarn. Works such as Gerber's are unlikely to become records of the culture machine, preserved and sanctified in a museum. There is nothing sacred about this piece—the materials are not valuable, just everyday stuff transformed and imbued with spirit—not transcendence, but spirit in terms of the resonance the artist brings to the assemblage and the viewer's process of

looking down upon and experiencing this small memorial. This work is not about being monumental and aggressive; its value is its anti-materiality, and in locating spirit in the processes of everyday life, things often accidental or mundane.

What lingers behind this work is a sense of failure, failure to achieve parity in a world where a certain kind of art and ideology will dominate and prevail, just as the early-twentieth-century avant-garde failed to effect a politically potent art. It's the failure itself that is central to the success of this ephemeral found-object work. It is a pathos, a

melancholic acceptance and even resignation to "art's limited power in the world," as Donald Kuspit notes. "Once it is recognized that the world cannot be completely transformed for the better," he continues, "what remains is the will to be creative. It is a position of retreat, seemingly invincible, in a darkening world."⁸ Kristeva considers the creative act to be excremental, a casting off and rejection. Thus abjection is sustained by negation—by "transgression, denial and repudiation."⁹ The abject is founded on an aesthetic of negativity.

Reasserting the Repressed Feminine

It is always to be noticed that the attempt to establish a male, phallic power is vigorously threatened by the no less virulent power of the other sex, which is oppressed. . . . That other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed.

—Julia Kristeva¹⁰

Suppression of the feminine in identity formation plays an important part in Kristeva's theorization of the abject. What is considered feminine takes on the power of the abject, with its reappearance serving to disrupt patriarchal power relations. She maintains that the initial suppression of the feminine takes place during maternity, which she regards as territorialized by the father as the woman is "branded" by the child's father's name. The child carries the father's name forward, while the mother's is denied,

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establishing an oppositional order privileging the male. The state prior to the child's separation from the mother, the Freudian "ego-split" stage, is abject because the oppositional order has not yet been imposed.¹¹

This is not to say that a feminine presence has to operate as a threat to phallic power. The work of artists such as Jessica Stockholder, Janine Antoni, and Rona Pondick presents an alternative feminine sensibility that effectively transgresses the boundaries which dictate that the feminine be of lesser value in our society. Antoni's 1992 *Chocolate Gnaw* brings a subject with a particularly feminine association into view: obsessional binging/purging. This is a large work, suggesting the power that the desire for, and repulsion by, food holds over women, as do the ideals of beauty and thinness propagated by women's magazines. The physical presence of *Chocolate Gnaw* is also repulsive; it is covered with teeth marks, half-eaten. The work is continuously in process, as the chocolate changes composition, awaiting a return of the gnawers, whom viewers tend to identify as women.

The scale of *Chocolate Gnaw* may appear anomalous in context of the ideas of resignation and "thinking small" already discussed. However, the scale of this work suggests the specter-like looming of social constructs of femininity and the pressures they exert over women. Antoni's chocolate is a nightmarish and monstrous reification of hidden, often shameful personal eating habits and accompanying attempts to control one's body in obeisance to beauty norms. The work's scale makes a confrontational encounter unavoidable.

the proper living quarters, often take place in the contemporary American home. Wires and cables suspended from the concrete ceiling pool on the floor and deliver power to fuel the performance of the chores. The downward/outward orientation of the installation suggests its imposition on the viewer, who becomes overwhelmed, unable to stand in the installation without being encroached upon. The environment is that of a Postmodern sweatshop.

Pondick's 1990 *Double Bed*, bound with rope and plastic baby bottles, also suggests the imposition of universally accepted and promulgated notions of the female. The constrictions and limitations related to female sexuality, maternity, and societal expectations thereof lead to an almost performative carrying-out of activities such as child-rearing. By conflating the arena of rest/sexual pleasure with that of demand and lack of sleep, Pondick comments on women's bondage to such activities.

The Multivalence of Art and Identity

Perhaps the quintessential challenge in the post-Sartrean age is to invent new forms of life based on an ethical stance of endlessly disengaging itself from all forms of discourse based on the familiar and accepted.

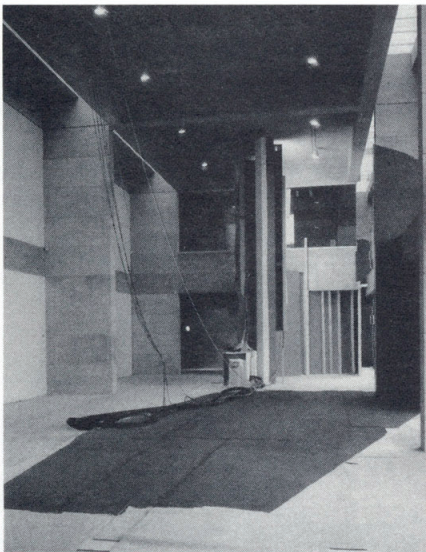
—Michel Foucault¹²

In his "Abject Art" catalogue essay, Simon Taylor takes the moral high ground in his definitional "ideology of dirt." He states, "As a positive, non-judgmental attitude toward hybrid states, dirt reflects the everyday environment and offers itself as a critique of antiseptic polish and anality."¹³

The danger of such a position is stated well by Rosalind Krauss, in a debate with Benjamin Buchloh about what she sees as the declining importance of the signified in contemporary art. Krauss warns against "the tendency of recent art criticism to avoid talking about the art itself and instead just to name a set of ideas that the art might

continued on p. 53

Jessica Stockholder
Untitled Seepage, "Sandwashed, Sundried, and Shrinkwrapped," 1991.



Stockholder's 1991 *Untitled Seepage "Sandwashed, Sundried, and Shrinkwrapped"* makes uncomfortably visible the obsessional and secreted nature of domestic chores, devalued "feminine" activities. Our compulsions to systematically clean, bag, and sanitize items such as clothing or food that threaten our clean and proper selves are also evoked by this

installation and its title. Dominating the piece is an expanse of fuchsia, painted on constructed walls and spreading uniformly over a lighter pink fabric on the floor. Cinderblock and wood walls with exposed beams are painted a Florida turquoise, suggesting a basement space where laundry and other chores, not to be carried out in

invoke The work is never thought to be layered, to be involved with a multiplicity of ideas, to be worked on.”¹⁴ In our relentless drive to package every idea and artwork as cleanly as the marketers of any consumer product, to stake out an airtight position protected from inroads from the Right, the work’s interpretive fluidity is lost. While a common language or vernacular is needed in order to establish a site where viewers may meet to assess the work, it often crosses the line into leftist political dogma to become a blockage of further examination and analysis.

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The process of naming thus becomes insidious, in that it generates “authoritative” readings which can be tremendously difficult to shift in a non-hierarchic way to allow for other critical analyses. The strength of Kristeva’s theory of the abject is in her identification of the power of the unnameable and the presymbolic as radically opposed to the hegemony of the signified. Elizabeth Gross, in her examination of Kristeva’s occupation with the subject and signification, notes, “The abject demonstrates the impossibility of clear-cut borders, lines of demarcation, divisions between the clean and the unclean, the proper and the improper, order and disorder.”¹⁵

This impossibility excludes glib and essentialist formulations of identity or of art. The question now is whether Kristeva’s project has failed as the abject becomes subsumed under yet another system of signification, or whether such work is capable of maintaining its visceral power to disturb and evoke the uncanny, the unnameable.



Rona Pondick
Double Bed, 1990

Jennifer L. Riddell (JLRiddell@aol.com) has gone underground to finish writing her M.A. thesis. She would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Lisa Wainwright at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago with this piece.

notes

- 1 Belu Simion-Fainaru, *Documenta IX: Kassel 1992, A-K*, exhibition catalogue (Stuttgart: Edition Cantz in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York), p. 157.
- 2 *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*.
- 3 Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1982, p. 66.
- 4 Simon Taylor, “The Phobic Object: Abjection in Contemporary Art,” from *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program), 1992, p. 66.
- 5 Rhonda Lieberman, “The Loser Thing,” *Artforum*, September 1992, p. 79.
- 6 Benjamin Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois, Hal Foster, Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Helen Molesworth, “The Politics of the Signifier II: A Conversation on the Informe and the Abject,” *October 67* (Winter 1994), p. 7.
- 7 Jane H. Hancock, Stefanie Poley, eds. *Arp 1886-1966*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 123.
- 8 Donald Kuspit, “Breakfast of Duchampians,” *Contemporanea*, May 1989, p. 72.
- 9 Kristeva, p. 6.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 12 Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, & Hall, Inc.), 1988, p. xxv.
- 13 Taylor, p. 79.
- 14 Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Silvia Kolbowski, Rosalind Krauss, Miwon Kwon, “The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial,” *October 66* (Fall 1993), p. 4.
- 15 Elizabeth Gross, “The Body of Signification,” in John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin, eds., *Abjection, Melancholy and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 89.