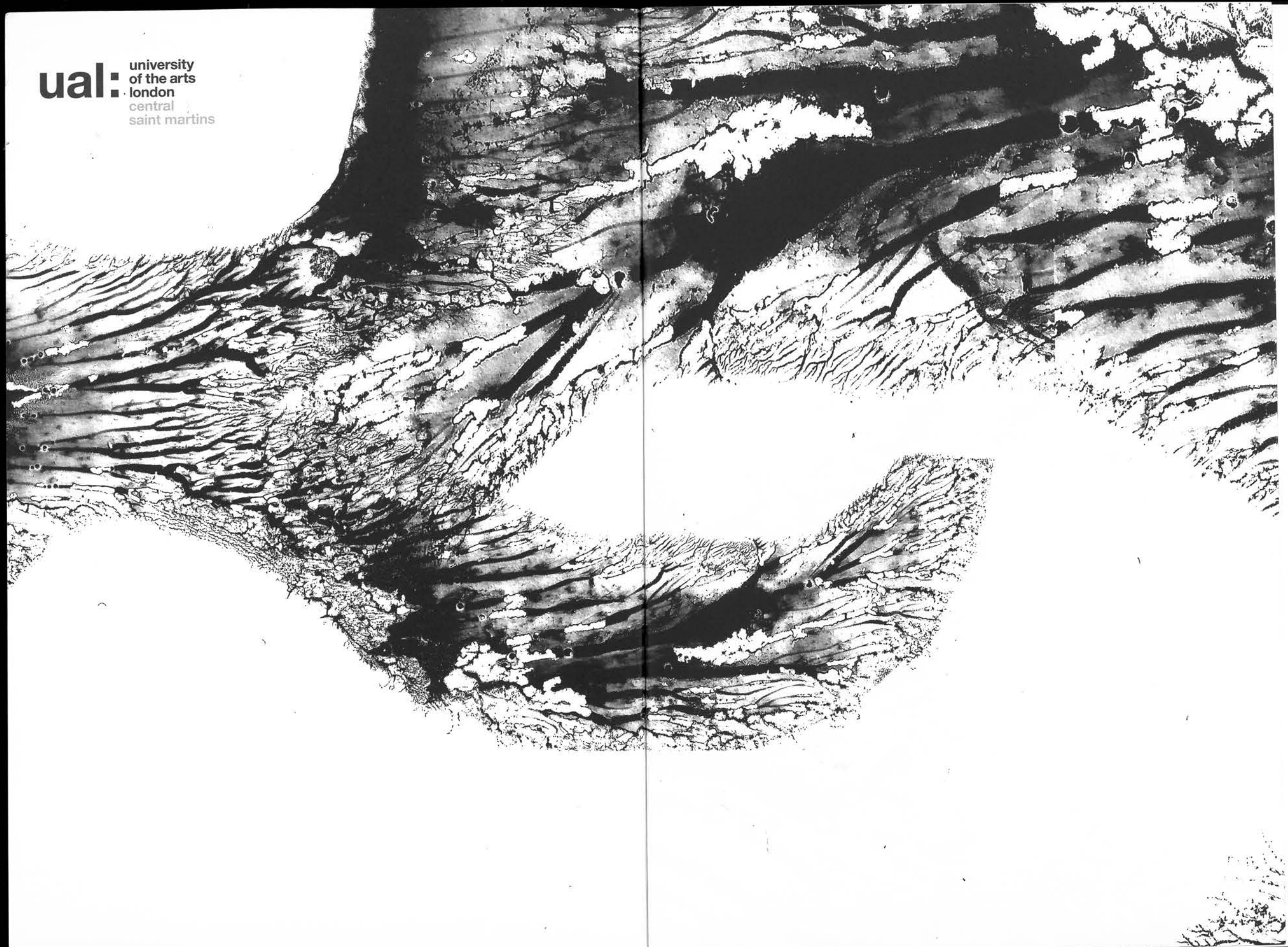
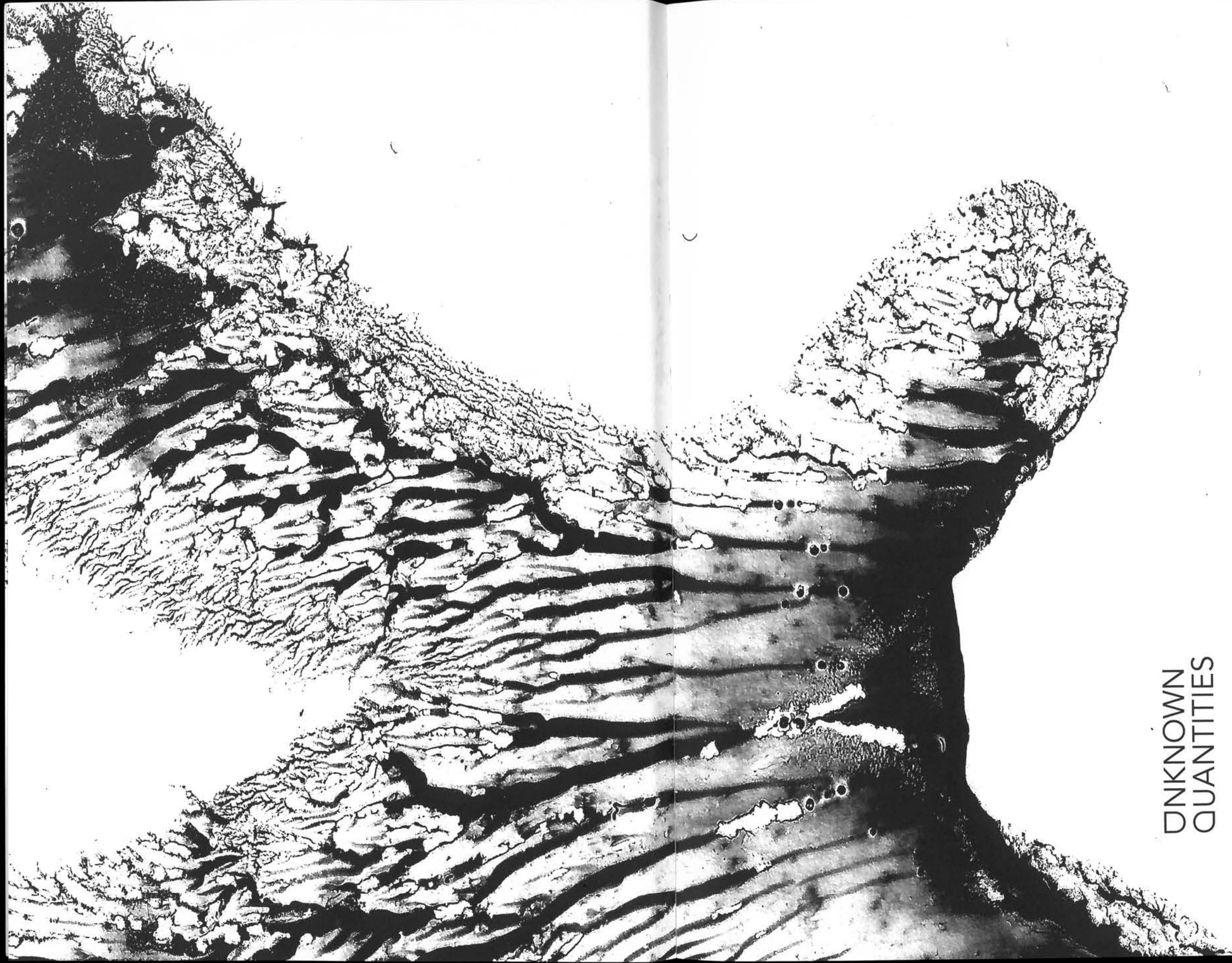


UNKNOWN
QUANTITIES

THE ABJECT 2014 / 2015 SECOND ISSUE

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DNKNOWN
QUANTITIES

EDITORIAL

UNKNOWN QUANTITIES

There is that wonderful moment before one settles down to read perhaps a "meaty new novel"¹, the newest glossy magazine issue or an intriguing new journal – of anticipation, expectancy and possibility. In *Unknown Quantities* we explore the possibilities, expectancies and anticipations of reading by distorting them. Through these "crisp pages that beg to be thumbed"² we traverse the avenues of transgression and taboo as the abject "reveals itself with every turn of the page".³

Unknown Quantities presents to you its second incarnation in an on-going series of annual student-led publications, merging the written words of MA Culture, Criticism & Curation with the design philosophy of MA Communication Design at Central Saint Martins.

Playing with reading conventions through image and text, *Unknown Quantities* bridges the theoretical abject and its literal nature: typography is diluted in water or melted with acid. We invite the reader to explore new ways of absorbing the written word.

From the outset, our aim was to provide a conversational platform to discuss those subjects we at times forget to consider. For this second issue we explore "the abject" as a state of being cast off. We shed light on how abjection moves beyond theory into the real world of social and cultural transgression through an exploration of personal experiences, cultural practices and everything in-between. This dialogue examines how being cast off shapes our individual and collective identities as well as informing the spaces we inhabit.

We welcome you to this second edition of *Unknown Quantities*.

¹ Editorial, *Unknown Quantities* 1 (2014), 1.

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

INTRODUCTION TO THE ABJECT

"One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it."¹

The abject is a contradiction. It is part of the foundation of our identity, but at the same time reveals how fragile and unstable that foundation is. The literal meaning of the abject is "cast-off" and it is this theory, at its core, that represents this contradiction: as much as we want to get rid of it, we cannot. It is essentially a part of us, inseparably connected to the fabric of ourselves.

The abject, as a theoretical concept, is largely credited to Bulgarian-French philosopher, feminist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva and her book *Powers of Horror* (1982). She describes abjection as physical manifestations, the facets that are understood to be impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion: "refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live."² For Kristeva this is a mechanism that is necessary for protecting the autonomy and coherence of the self: the subject can abject and be made abject at the same time.

The abject does not merely represent what we must cast off for our own sake and for that of society, but it feeds into a much stronger need. We have learned to ignore and forget this desire, yet it remains so strong that it compels us to transgress boundaries and disobey rules to fulfil it. The abjection lies in our reaction to the breakdown in meaning that results from our transgressions; the loss of distinction between subject and object, between self and other. All of a sudden we have lost sight of ourselves, and must re-evaluate and re-negotiate who we are in regards to the boundaries we have crossed and the rules we have broken.

Elizabeth Grosz extends Kristeva's definition beyond the physical body and writes in "The Body of Signification", "this waste can never be definitely and permanently externalised; it is the subject; it cannot be completely expelled."³ We must understand the abject as part of a larger structure, in which it has a specific function and

place, allowing us to extend its meaning beyond the body into the larger world, both physical and non-physical.

In creating this issue of *Unknown Quantities*, we, designers and writers, have embraced Kristeva's notion of the subject itself performing abjection and have carried out a type of abjection ourselves. By writing about societal and cultural taboos, we have transgressed boundaries, exploring how they inform and shape our individual and collective identities as well as the spaces we inhabit. *Unknown Quantities* takes an abstract subject and sheds light on how it moves to a concrete space, how it changes shape along the way as new meanings and associations are constantly added. This issue of *Unknown Quantities* is an attempt, through text and image, to unveil the spaces the abject inhabits, both real and imagined, within history, society, culture and art - and, most importantly, within ourselves.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans by Leon S Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 9.

² *ibid*, 3.

³ Elizabeth Grosz, "The Body of Signification" in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, eds John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1990), 91.

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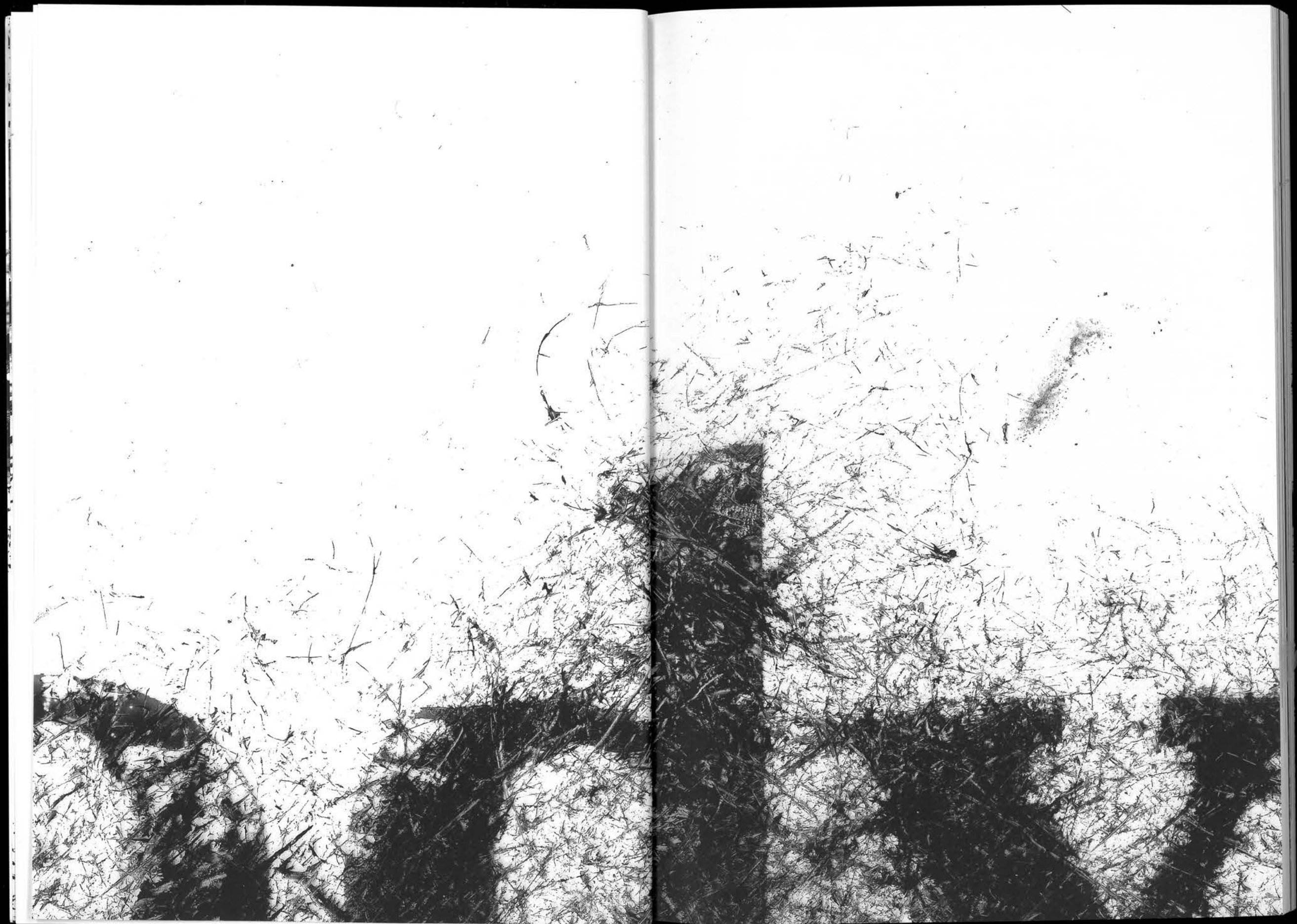
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THE (W)HOLE PICTURE

by Janice Mitchell
& Kelly Worman

I

In May 2014, a performance artist from Luxembourg entered the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, sat down on the floor in front of Courbet's most infamous painting, *The Origin of the World* (1866) and exposed her vagina to confused and shocked visitors. The stunt was part of artist Deborah de Robertis's performance piece *Mirror of Origin*, through which she aimed to draw attention to what she understood as a gap in art history: "the absent point of view of the object of the gaze".¹ To her, this was symbolised in *The Origin of the World*: "In his Realist painting the painter shows the open legs, but the vagina remains closed."²

De Robertis's point is valid. There is, not so much a gap, but barely any representation of women within art history that is not dominated by the male gaze. Depicting female nudity in art was an act of appreciation of feminine shape and form, but it was also a source of unease and danger. It was always presented in a way that portrayed a woman's sexuality as the place where good men are led astray or that placed women themselves in vulnerable positions as in the biblical story of Bathsheba.³ The female body and female sexuality are always potentially dangerous and abject. The message is simple; a woman's power lies in her sex. It is both powerful and dangerous, inferior and abject, in need of regulation through others. But what is forbidden is often the most desirable, and especially in 19th-century Europe the female nude was a favourite subject in art.

Gustave Courbet
L'Origine du Monde (1866)
© Musée d'Orsay, Paris



The Origin of the World is an example of how Courbet refused to adhere to the standards of his time. His refusal expresses itself in his highly politicised paintings, in his nudes and subject matter as well as his choice of composition. As seen in *The Origin of the World*, the composition erases all possibility for the viewer to construct a narrative or to place the painting within a context. As such it is a refusal of the socially accepted representations of the female, forcing us into a position where we are face to face with a vagina, which Julia Kristeva describes as the ultimate symbol of abjection and subjectivity.

The abject symbolises the fear and the power that simultaneously lie within the unknown; through this experience our identity is formed. Abjection is a process through which we constitute both a subjective and a collective identity, but we also use it to exclude, marginalise and attempt to regulate what we perceive as threatening to this identity. A woman's sexuality is a symbol of the abject. Even today, we still understand female sexuality in that way, but it is not such a taboo as it was in Europe in the 19th Century. Then, the ideal woman was modest, pure and chaste, sex for women was to happen only within marriage and female sexuality needed to be monitored and controlled.

Within the context of such a conservative and repressed society, *The Origin of the World* can be understood as the ultimate act of rebellion and transgression and also as a celebration of female sexuality. By confronting the viewer with the vagina, the defining symbol of femininity and female sexuality, we could assume that Courbet is trying to celebrate woman as the giver of life and pleasure. But at the same time, the vagina represents man's eternal fear of castration: as Freud wrote, "Probably no male human being is spared the terrifying shock of threatened castration at the sight of the female genitals".⁴ Within this fear and danger that the vagina represents to man, it is also the space in which woman is always defined as lacking and always in

opposition to man. But the vagina does not only symbolise female sexuality, it also represents birth, life and motherhood. For Kristeva, the forming of the subject is based on an abjection of the maternal body, crucial for both the female and male subject to fully develop. Without distancing ourselves from it and refusing its warmth and protection, we cannot assert ourselves within society.

If we follow this path of thought, *The Origin of the World* in itself is an act of abjection; not just for the viewer, but also for Courbet himself. Kristeva understands art as a way of resolving and negotiating abjection. Both the creation of art and the aesthetic experience of it are part of the establishment of a subject and an object. They are a way of navigating the loss of distinction between both, represented in the vagina. This would make the painting not a celebration of female sexuality, but an allegory of a repressed sexuality that must be controlled by man, as it represents to him his greatest fear. Neither female agency, nor woman herself (with or without a head⁵) is represented in the painting. What it represents is the space where meaning collapses; where we cannot decide between subject and object, we can be neither male nor female.

Within this fear and danger that the vagina represents to man, it is also the space in which woman is always defined as lacking and always in opposition to man.

This is where much of artist Tracey Emin's work begins. It begins with the need to separate, to create a distinction between mother and self, mother and child, mother and daughter, for the sake of her agency, to be able to define and express herself on her own terms.

II

"When I was born, they thought I was dead. Paul arrived first, ten minutes before me. When it was my turn, I just rolled out, small and yellow with eyes closed. I didn't cry. But at the moment of my birth into this world, I somehow felt a mistake had been made. I couldn't scream or cry or argue my case. I just lay motionless, wishing I could go back where I'd come from." Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* ⁶

In the opening pages of Emin's autobiographical *Strangeland*, she describes her first moments upon entering the world, her multiple attempts at dying as an infant, and her mother's planned abortion of her and her twin brother Paul. These descriptions illustrate psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage"⁷, which is the point at which we differentiate between self and other. Christine Ross describes this as "a refusal of the mother who is experienced as abject so that the child might expel itself from the mother-child dyad and become the subject".⁸ This refusal of mother and otherness is a re-occurring theme throughout Emin's work.

Emin explores multiple dichotomies: sexual promiscuity and abandonment, abortion and guilt, success and childlessness, sensitivity and rage, empowerment and depression. Emin has become something of a celebrity poster-woman for exploring the feminine internal and external, such as masturbation, menstruation, and other workings of female genitalia. She deploys the abject, both the biological (excrement, menses, semen) and the cultural (abortion, female promiscuity, sexual taboos), by challenging and confronting these subjects, through the body as medium of her work and her life.

In a recent interview on BBC's *Newsnight*, Emin mentioned that her mother had told her not to have children, and that she herself believes that you cannot have children and be a female artist today.⁹ Because Emin adopts this traditional gender stereotype, her authority as a feminist torch-holder is called into question. Perhaps this is another example of the polar opposite dualities that compel her as both woman and artist. Yet these thematic conversations, manifesting both in her work and her life (which could be conceived as the same), are familiar to contemporary women in Western society.¹⁰ As a woman, must you choose between career and childbearing? Explore your sexuality without shame? Can you have it all?

© Tracey Emin
Suffer Love XXI (2009)



Suffer Love XXI

Tracey Emin 09

© Tracey Emin Terribly wrong
(1997). Courtesy White Cube.
Photo: © Stephen White

first planet
SOMETHING 92



WRONG 9

© Tracey Emin
Harder and Better (2007)
Photo: © Prudence
Cumming Associates



*Harder and better than all of you fucking
Bastards*

© Tracey Emin
I've got it all (2000)
Courtesy White Cube



The iconic image of Emin's *I've got it all* resonates with the omnipresent tension experienced by women today around professional success and childbearing. Emin poses with her legs spread, clutching money close to her crotch. Is the money forced into or out of Emin? Is she excreting, birthing, or consuming? The image blatantly evokes a discourse on consumerism and female sexuality. When examining this artwork in the context of the *Newsnight* interview, and in comparison to Courbet's *The Origin of the World*, her pose (legs spread, gazing downward, one hand holding her abdomen, the other hand clutching near the crotch) evokes childbirth, or rather, in Emin's case, childlessness, as the price to pay for professional and financial success. Her pose is staged, yet there is self-absorption, empowerment and vulnerability here.

Emin consistently uses her body as performative storyteller and medium, considered both as self and separate from self. Her exploration of contemporary female sexuality, along with the physical medium of the female body, explores cultural and physical abjection, allowing her work to be seen as both smutty and trailblazing. Emin's work challenges us to explore these dichotomies within ourselves: repulsion and desire, internal and external, self and other.

1 Benjamin Sutton, "Artist Enacts *Origin of the World* at Musée d'Orsay – And, Yes, That Means What You Think", *artnet news*, 5 June 2014. Accessed 25 August 2014, <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/artist-enacts-origin-of-the-world-at-musee-dorsay-and-yes-that-means-what-you-think-35011>.

2 *ibid.*

3 Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, who fought in King David's army. King David lusted after her, coerced her into having sex with him and then had her husband killed (Samuel 2:11, New King James Version).

4 Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism", in *On Sexuality* by Pelican Freud Library Vol 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 354.

5 In 2013, an art collector discovered the "upper half" of the painting in a Parisian antique shop. After examining the painting, he realised that the painting had been cut from a larger canvas. Due to the style and the woman depicted, the collector thought it to be the upper half of *The Origin of the World*. Courbet expert Jean-Jacques Fernier has confirmed this, while others refute it.

6 Tracey Emin, *Strangeland* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 2005), 3.

7 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans Alan Sheridan (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1997), 1–7.

8 Christine Ross, "Redefinitions of abjection in contemporary performances of the female body", *Anthropology and Aesthetics* 31 (Spring 1997), 149. Reprinted in: Leisha Jones, "Women and Abjection: Margins of Difference, Bodies of Art", *Visual Culture and Gender* 2, (2007), 64.

9 "Tracey Emin interview on *Newsnight*", BBC 2, London, broadcast 6 October 2014, 11.10pm.

10 Recently there has been a widespread popularisation and adoption of feminist discussion, and a redefining of the term in popular culture (see Cheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, Emma Watson's UN speech and campaign for *He for She*).

A CONVERSATION WITH A SPACE FAIRY

by Natalie Baerselman le Gros

The art of body modification has enjoyed acceptance among new diverse audiences in recent years. Piercings – even those more exotic than the standard lobe piercing – are increasingly commonplace, and if you don't have a tattoo yourself it is likely you know someone or are sitting near someone that does. Body modification has thankfully begun to lose its reputation of rebellion and transgression. Speaking as someone with multiple obvious tattoos and piercings, I have spent numerous business meetings comparing "mods" with many a hotshot CEO; even my grandparents like my tattoos. As the modded community expands it seems that no part of the body is safe from the needle and there are numerous artists out there who are demonstrating this. But are there still procedures that even the modded would be reluctant to venture into?

Grace Neutral is a sought-after and world-renowned tattoo artist, a self-confessed fairy from another space and time: *Things and Ink* magazine describe her as a "Kawaii Space Elf Princess."



© Grace Neutral

Interestingly, Grace is famed for her abjection of popular images into the medium of ink, including Disney princesses, My Little Pony and Totoro, to name but a few. These images are primarily commercial products of consumerism that are most likely subject to copyright. However, the rendering of these previously soft and childlike images indelibly on the skin changes their meaning and associations. Their commercial nature sits apart from previous ideals of the one-of-a-kind tattoo. Grace, however, describes this as an act of flattery: "People love their art so much they want to permanently put it on their body." We can assume, therefore, that this is little different from the tattooing of film or musical tributes.

Grace is recognisable among the body-modification community, as the space fairy with purple eyes, a face patterned with scars and no bellybutton. Clearly she is not afraid of her own body and the physical procedures that would make many recoil. She details how her motivation lies as much in the final aesthetic as it does in the abilities of the practitioner. Thus she pushes the importance of researching your artist and safety over results. As a reaction to her unique look, Grace is often championed for her approach to her own body. Many applaud her for challenging the mainstream concepts of beauty, femininity and female sexuality through the sabotaging of conventional forms, thus inspiring some to reassess the female body and its associated norms. Grace however, in her own individual aesthetic, encourages individuality in others, not wishing those who admire her to become "doppelgangers". She has stated that her own engagement with her body is a personal exploration, as everyone's own modifications should be.

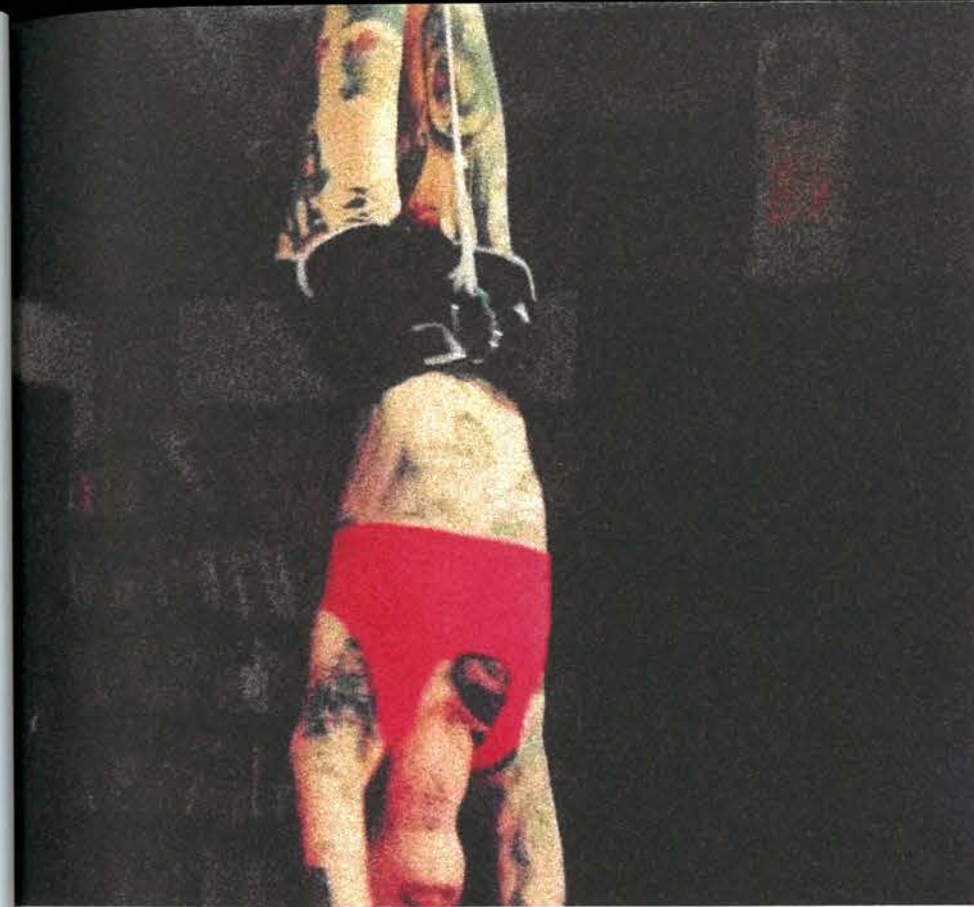
Grace is also a keen participant in the more extreme activity of body suspension. This involves suspending the body, often to great heights, from cables attached to large hooks pierced through the skin.¹ It is an activity that is often regarded, mostly mistakenly, as dangerous and which receives the odd wince from non-participants in reaction (even from this heavily modded individual). However, abhorrence is often a symptom of misunderstanding or lack of knowledge, as body suspension has also been discussed as a spiritual or therapeutic practice.²

Historically, body suspension is associated with religious practices. As described in the paintings and diaries of anthropologist George Catlin, its origin is often attributed to the O-Kee-Pa (Oh-Kee-Pa) ceremony of the Mandan Indians. Catlin's observations describe what he refers to as the "torturing scene" or "pohk-hong" which details the act of suspension as a rite of passage for young men. He writes:

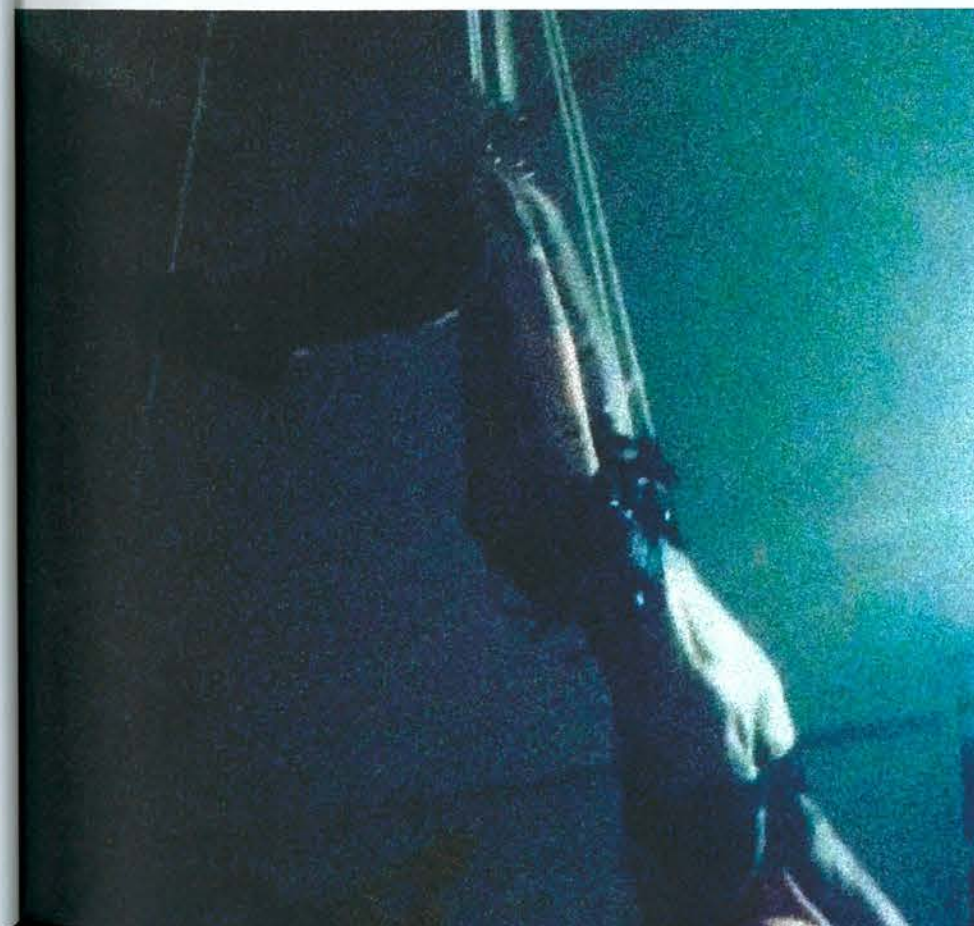
"The young men [...] commenced to submit to the operation of the knife and other instruments of torture [...] Two men, who were to inflict the [torture] [...] one, with a large knife [...] and the other, prepared with a handful of splints of the size of a man's finger, and sharpened at both ends, to be passed through the wounds [...] one of the emaciated candidates at a time crawled up, and submitted to the knife [...] on each arm, above and below the elbow, over the *brachialis externus* and the *extensor radialis*, and on each leg above and below the knee, over the *vastus externus* and the *peroneus*; and also on each breast and each shoulder [...] most of these young men [...] sat, without the apparent change of a muscle, smiling at me whilst the knife was passing through their flesh [...] When these incisions were all made, and the splints passed through, a cord of raw hide was lowered down through the top of the wigwam, and fastened to the splints on the breasts or shoulders, by which the young man was to be raised up and suspended [...] some three or four feet above the ground [...] when another man [...] began to turn him around [...] The turning was slow at first, and gradually increased until fainting ensued, when it ceased [...] [These] young men submitted [...] without a perceptible murmur or a groan; but when the turning commenced, they began crying in the most heartrending tones to the Great Spirit, imploring him to enable them to bear and survive the painful ordeal they were entering on [...] [Each] body lowered to the ground appeared like a loathsome and lifeless corpse [...] they were here enjoying their inestimable privilege of voluntarily entrusting their lives to the keeping of the Great Spirit, and chose to remain there until the Great Spirit gave them strength to get up and walk away."

It's simple for me, indispensable,
because it makes me feel like I'm flying.

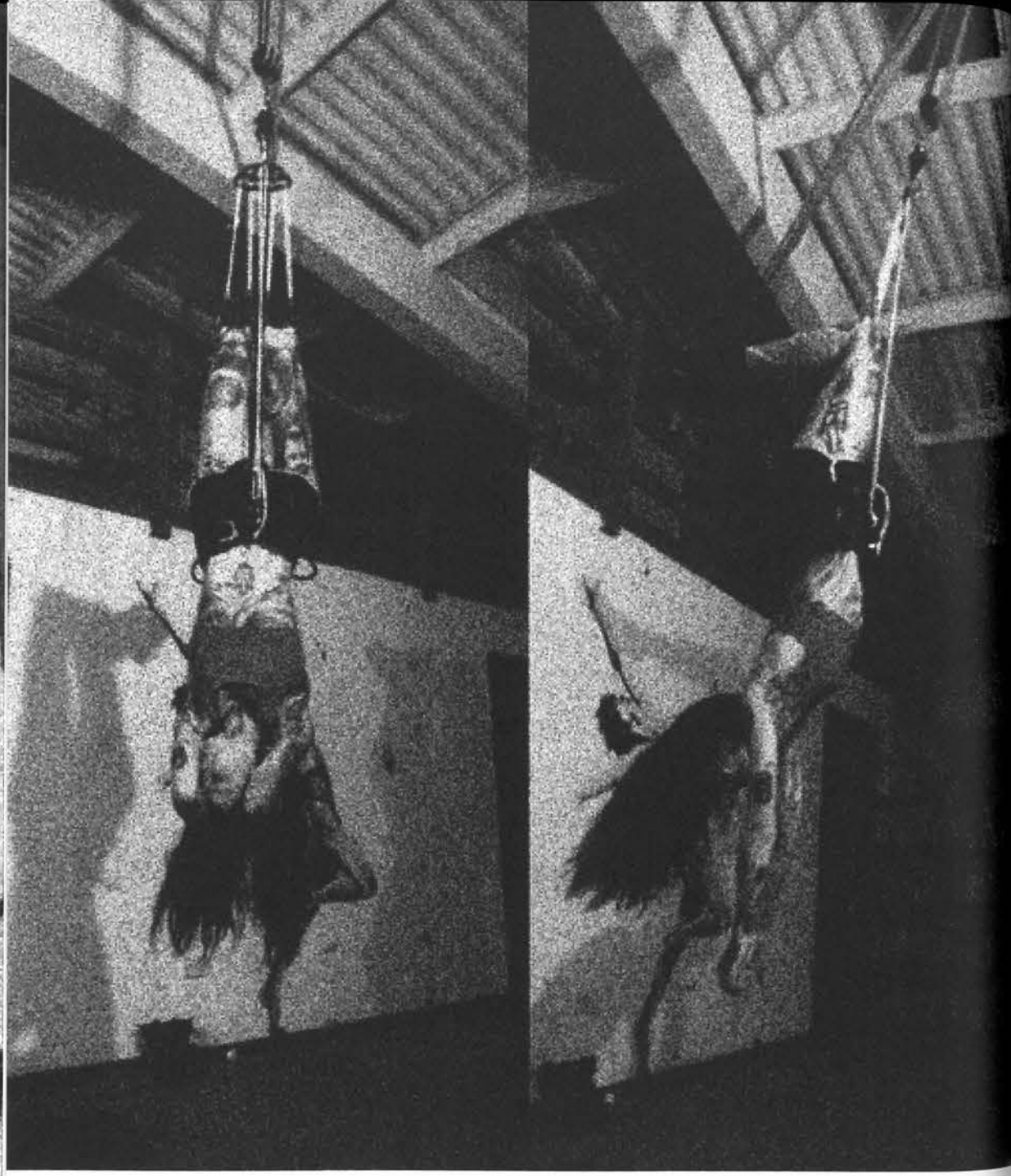
This type of body modification shares many of the socio-anthropological origins and associations that tattooing and body piercing do. For example, the Samoan ritual *tatau* is a practice that is maintained today. Men and women receive the *pe'a* or *malu* respectively, a large hand-poked tattoo, as a sign of courage, marking man/womanhood. For the Mandan Indians the above passage posits body suspension as a rite of passage, a method for the proving of character. If successfully performed the prize is an earned rank in battle. The "Modern Primitive" movement celebrates the historic associations of body modification and it is here that some modern participants find their motivation. This is a term coined by Fakir Musafar, dubbed the authority on body suspension and the "undisputed father of the Modern Primitives".⁴



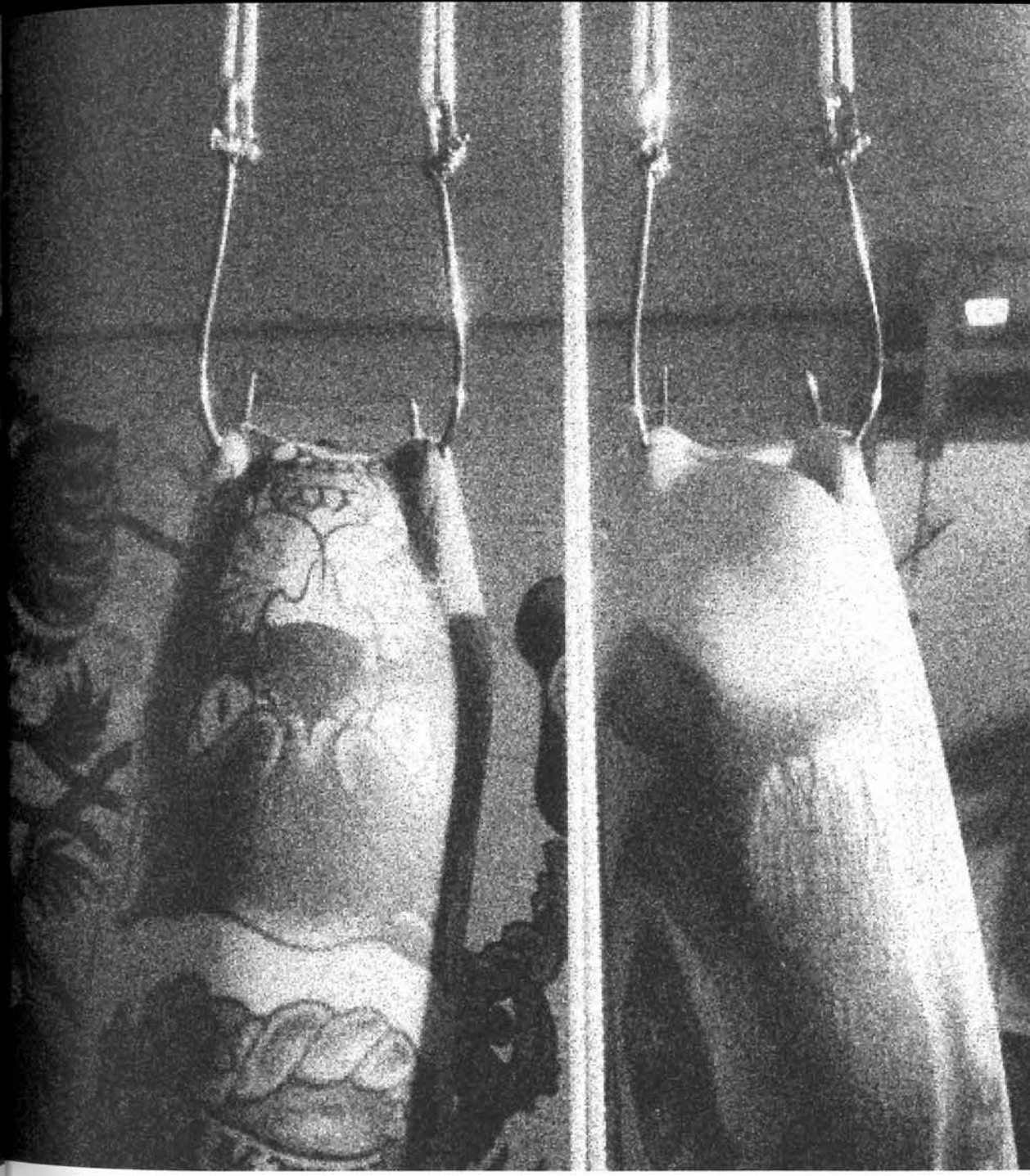
© Grace Neutral



© Grace Neutral



© Grace Neutral



© Grace Neutral

Today body suspension is as much a method of spiritual attunement as it is a secular hobby. Many associate it with the cultural and social scene of body modification, aligning it with those who have already subjected their bodies to more extreme customisation, such as that exhibited by Grace. However, Grace cites this as a misconception, stating that people from all different backgrounds, pierced or not, like to suspend.

It seems that the act of suspending the body has in fact far more to do with the mind than it does with an exploration of the physical limits of the body, as Grace explains:

It's simple for me, indispensable, because it makes me feel like I'm flying. It's the most intense natural high I have ever experienced. The adrenaline and romance of the whole experience makes it all mind-blowingly beautiful! [...] It just makes me feel grounded and brings surges of love through my body. It's like going to the fairground and having all the rides to yourself.

Grace's suspension performances are largely private, only performed among a few close friends, documentation exists largely as short iPhone videos and photographs. Her practice is for herself only. Her favourite position, pierced through the knees and suspended upside down, demonstrates her command over her body but also a desire to see the world from a different perspective, from the bottom up. Her motivations resonate much with that of Musafar's, described as seeing suspension, in fact body modification in general, as, according to writer and photographer Wyatt Marshall, a "form of self-expression and spiritual exploration, a way to move beyond the body into a higher spiritual plane."³

However, there is a growing trend for what Marshall describes as "hang[ing] for the sake of hanging". Psychologist Dr Lawrence Rubin writes of body suspension as a pure performance, comparing it to the Cirque du Soleil's sword swallowers, as mere spectacle for an inquisitive crowd.

There is indeed a comparison here, however, far from any spiritual motivations. Artists such as Marlo Marquise have made fame with acts such as *Burlesque on Hooks*, claiming to combine "beauty, glamour, and gore". It seems this small subset of artists has embraced the potential shock-nature of these acts and the exaggerated reactions of horror from audiences, often paying ones, to thus capitalise on its economic potential. Grace explains that she loves watching suspension performances but admits that she does not know if she could perform herself as she is motivated by her own private experience.

Despite her thoroughly recognisable aesthetic, Grace's body-modifications are for no one but herself. She is an advocate of body confidence, claiming ownership of her whole self, both physically and mentally, through the customisation of her flesh. Grace's suspension practice demonstrates her personal journey and gives us a new understanding of an art often regarded with horror.

1 "What is suspension?" Suspension.org. Accessed 7 November 2014, <http://www.suspension.org/faq.htm#Q1-2>.

2 Wyatt Marshall, "The Therapeutic Experience of Being Suspended by Your Skin", *The Atlantic*, 21 September 2012 & Dr Lawrence Rubin, "Body Suspension—Extreme Piercing, Spiritual Act or Something Else Entirely", *Psychology Today*, 16 August 2009.

3 George Catlin, 1867, O-KEE-PA: *A Religious Ceremony and Other Customs of The Mandans* (Philadelphia: JB Lippincott and Co), 25-29.

4 "Fakir Musafar," BME. Accessed 7 November 2014, <http://news.bme.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/pubring/fakir-all.html>.

5 Wyatt Marshall, op cit.

BODY MEETS DRESS, DRESS MEETS BODY

by Bethany Rose Lamont

It is said that god created man in his own image.

Yet, when comparing one's own reflection to the angelic figures of fashion runways and movie posters, you can't help but draw the conclusion that god is either very cruel or rather ugly. This is the dead space between "should look like" and "actually looks like", which can be identified in the profound sense of loss that undercuts the act of getting dressed. It is the gap between the item we want (the designer dress) and the item we can afford (the high street knock off), the physical body (how we are perceived) and the dream body (how we wish we were perceived), the clothes on the hanger and the clothes on the "ordinary" person, the clothes on the "ordinary" person and the clothes on the model.

A particularly powerful case study for understanding these tensions between ideal self and actual self, beauty and "deformity", liberating high school movie make-over versus horror film mutilative revenge, can be found in the Comme des Garçons Spring/Summer 1997 collection, *Body Meets Dress, Dress Meets Body*. One of the most commercially unsuccessful offerings from the label, colloquially known as the "lumps and bumps" range for the tumour-like padded growths and built in hunch backs that warp the "ideal" forms of the young, white, female models on the runway.¹ In distorting the traditional boundaries of the female form, by blurring the safe space of the untouchable, eternal, beauty of runway collections, questions are raised of the pre-existing ideals of the "beautiful" body and the "beautiful" dress within high fashion.² The viewer wonders: where does the dress end and the body begin?³ Is that arched silhouette the handiwork of Rei Kawakubo (who is the head of Comme des Garçons) or does her model have scoliosis?⁴ Is that girl on the runway "one of them" or "one of us"?



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We can understand such questions by locating the collection within the existing history of "deformity", disability and the grotesque in the visual culture of post-World War II Japan. This can be achieved through studying the *ero-guro* (erotic grotesque) genre and the avant-garde dance movement *ankoku butoh* (dance of darkness).⁵ To focus this comparison, I have selected one particular case study, the 1969 film *Horrors of Malformed Men*. Directed by Teruo Ishii (1925–2005), a prolific Japanese film director, who created a number of *ero-guro* films, *Horrors of Malformed Men* was adapted from a collection of stories by the Japanese horror writer Edogawa Ranpo (1894–1965), an avid fan of "freak show" culture. Ranpo's work, from the 1930s onwards, serves as an earlier example of the *ero-guro* genre in literature.⁶ The film exists as both a powerful example of *ero-guro* and a showcase for the *ankoku butoh* dance form. This is due to Ishii's casting of dancer and choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata (1928–86), who founded this movement, starring in the film with his dance troupe.

It should be stressed, however, that this comparison is not an attempt to either homogenise or essentialise the works of *ero-guro* literature as inherently "Japanese". It is a model of writing which has its own uniquely grotesque history in Western journalism, with its portraits of warped Orientalism being every bit as lurid and disconnected from any lived reality as an Edogawa Ranpo story. This is the work of publications such as *Women's Wear Daily*, whose bizarre prose includes quotes such as: "Ah, the delicately winning ways of Rei Kawakubo, the samurai geisha of fashion".⁷ This is an outlook so obsessed with "the glib generalisation about the impact of post-Hiroshima deprivations" that red lipstick was mistaken for open

wounds. The designer's own explanations of her collections were ignored, with Western writers favouring their own idea of a "tragic Orient" producing "post-atom bomb fashion" and "Hiroshima chic" collections.⁸

Butoh underwent a similar fate, with many reductive readings of the work as a simple product of post-war trauma.⁹ This was despite the fact that Hijikata himself did not see the dance style as "exclusively Japanese", arguing that it "could as well emerge from Northern England as from Northern Japan"; a point illustrated by his cited influences of the post-World War I Surrealists of Western Europe and transgressive French authors such as Jean Genet.¹⁰ (A parallel to Rei Kawakubo choosing the French lilt of a Françoise Hardy song over her own supposedly "Japanese" name when christening her label.¹¹) The cultural critic Mark Holborn emphasises this issue of Western misunderstanding, arguing that, by exposing *butoh* to a Western audience, "the change of context, like all translation [...] may have distorted the original meaning. It confirmed the accessibility of *butoh* as spectacle, even if the translation dampened the subversive fire".¹²

The phrase "distorted" is key, particularly in relation to the question of "mistranslating" Japanese culture. Perhaps, the Orientalist school of fashion journalism, with its butchered Japanese, its misreading of collections and references to "samurai geishas" is a model of "deforming" and distorting the *Comme des Garçons* collection in and of itself. It is a "freak", created not by birth, but by the white superiority complex of colonialism. And while the notion of the "freak show" is an important part of this essay, this particular "freak" is one I do not wish to take over the paper.

With this existing model of Comme as sign for the "warped", "broken" "Orient", and the positioning of Japanese designers as "inadequate imitators of Western fashion and racial threat" in place, it is possible to interpret this collection as a revenge of sorts.¹³ A parallel could be drawn to the finale of Tod Browning's film *Freaks* (1932) where the so-called "freaks" enact revenge on the beautiful Cleopatra. She has "Othered" them, mocked them, and even planned to murder one of their own – her supposedly "beloved" husband – by turning her into a quacking "human duck", tarred, feathered, legless, with webbed feet in place of hands, one eye gouged and her tongue cut out. Cleopatra, whose very name denotes physical perfection, and who once cried "Freak!" in horror of their likeness, now finds herself, in a twist of fate, the most frightening "freak" of all.

In the same way, Rei Kawakubo has taken the "flawless" form of the white, Western ideal of the female hour-glass figure, tall and curvaceous, and, using her expert craftsmanship, she has (metaphorically) skinned it alive and given its mutilated remains to her young, white girl models to wear down the catwalk. By "freaking" this Western silhouette, through turning desirable curves into grotesque tumours, in turn rendering her perfect white girl models grotesque by association, the designer seems to simultaneously mock, both the stereotype of shapeless Japanese clothes draped over "small", "petite" East Asian bodies and the seemingly natural, neutral space of white womanhood.¹⁴

This is revenge as a redistribution of power, drawing a parallel to Lindsay Lohan's character Cady in the 2004 teen comedy *Mean Girls*, who in an attempt to dethrone "the fascist dictator" Regina George – the cruel queen bee of her high school steals her "hot" body by tricking her into "unknowingly eating 4000 calories a day". Castrated of her Western beauty queen physique, she is left humiliated, alienated and powerless.

Too bloated for her pale pink dream dress, she bulges uncomfortably out of maroon sweat pants (a playful parallel to the Comme models' unsightly dress protrusions) and is now mocked by those who once feared her. Barbara Kruger once proclaimed that "your body is a battleground" and in this case, it seems victory is declared by destroying the opposing territory.

In distorting the traditional boundaries of the female form, by blurring the safe space of the untouchable, eternal beauty of runway collections, questions are raised of the pre-existing ideals of the "beautiful" body and the "beautiful" dress within high fashion.

The question of the unwanted transformation, identified in both *Freaks* and *Mean Girls*, returns us to the ero-guro film *Horrors of Malformed Men*, and specifically how these forms of representation intersect with the lived experience of disability in Japan (an important factor to consider in the contextualisation of this particular Comme collection). The question of disability is evident from the title in Japanese alone, *Kyoufu Kikei Ningen*, which roughly translates to "those filthy invalids."¹⁵ The critics of Japanese culture Patrick Macias and Tomohiro Machiyama explain this, stating:

"Simply put, you cannot call someone, or something, Kyoufu Kikei Ningen anymore. The English translation *Horrors of Malformed Men* sounds a bit too polite. In Japanese the words strongly imply that the deformed are inhuman, but also that one should be afraid of them."¹⁶

With this issue of ableism in mind, it is significant to consider how the seemingly subversive work of the creative avant-garde fits in with the existing power structures of able-bodied culture. In a *New Yorker* magazine article, Rei Kawakubo was quoted as saying that she “likes tradition and history” but also “wants to break the rules”. What better compromise than a freak show, in its confirmation of existing power structures through its exhibition of those that, by mere dint of their existence, radically defy it?¹⁷

This complements the “sometimes shunned but at times made special” position that disabled people occupied in Japanese culture at the time.¹⁸ The idea of disability as a mouthpiece for the “unique” creativity of the able-bodied, found in the Quasimodo dresses of Comme des Garçons and Hijikata’s polio-inspired dance moves, is revealing in its irony.¹⁹ For the mission of institutions was to make disabled bodies conform as much as possible to ableist ideals, with children pressured into walking, even if it was physically too difficult for them to do so.²⁰ By contrast, outside of the institution, many disabled people paid the “high psychological price” of passing as able-bodied in everyday life to avoid being discriminated against and mistreated in so called “mainstream” society.²¹

In contrast to these lived experiences, Rei Kawakubo and Hijikata appear to offer disability to their audience as a form of liberation, challenging pre-existing notions of beauty and elegance for an alternative model of being. This is the idea that an able-bodied person’s occupation of a vague notion of difference through “deformity” provides them with a seemingly “radical” sense of agency.²² The notion of “deformity”, as a subversive

and empowering tool in the hands of the able-bodied creative, is another revealingly ironic point, considering how little control disabled people actually had of their own bodies in institutions such as The Fuchu Ryoiku Centre (with its consent-free use of invasive, experimental surgery).²³ For much as *Horrors of Malformed Men*’s leading man is stabbed in an institution by one of “the crazies”, only to be pleasantly surprised that the weapon was merely a novelty retractable knife, the tumours in the Spring/Summer 1997 collection are removable, giving the wearer the option of taking them in and out at will, an option that, needless to say, the disabled person does not have.

But perhaps these subjects are not binary, with prettiness at one end and freakishness at the other. Beauty, particularly in the fashion industry with its warped distance from reality, is in so many ways an acceptable form of “deformity”, begging the questions of whether such themes are as reactive as they appear on the surface. The film critic Peter Bradshaw continues this idea, viewing *Freaks* “as a provocative comparison with the alienated condition of women and the freakish nature of all showbiz celebrity”.²⁴ If glamour is freakishness, then Cleopatra was a freak already and Rei’s models too; the transformation was simply a gentle reminder to the audience. It is certainly a plausible explanation that is not without grounding in the context of these cultural works. But surely we can go further. For this “as ugly on the outside as they are ugly on the inside” model still feels too reductive, too closely tied to an idea of an ugly-pretty binar where disabled bodies may act as canvases for the able-bodied artist’s elaborate metaphors.

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I find atonement, not in the original Comme collection, but instead in its recreations online. *Time* magazine was quick to deride the selfie, shared online as an object of narcissism.²⁵ But what is interesting is the discarded selfie; blinking, mouth open, the ones instantly put in the recycle bin, the images that expose rather than conceal, but in that exposure form armour to keep the author safe. I see such images as the meeting of medical photos and model test shoots. And I see one of the most powerful examples in the work of fashion blogger Arabelle Sicardi, a queer Taiwanese-American writer, whose \$15 recreation of a "lumps and bumps" dress, made as a teenager and shared with her blog followers, navigates these tensions so expertly.²⁶ She has blacked her own eyes out, confronting Jeffrey Eugenides's medical photography model as "the black box; a fig leaf in reverse, concealing identity while leaving shame exposed".²⁷ For, in Arabelle's writing on chronic illness, queerness and mixed identity, all against a backdrop of *Comme des Garçons*, we find that ideal self and actual self are not the proverbial rock and a hard place.²⁸ Instead, these tensions between model, mannequin and mortal body can be creatively explored in a model of thought that does not exploit those marginalised by ableism, providing the critical tools that allow this very community to speak more boldly.

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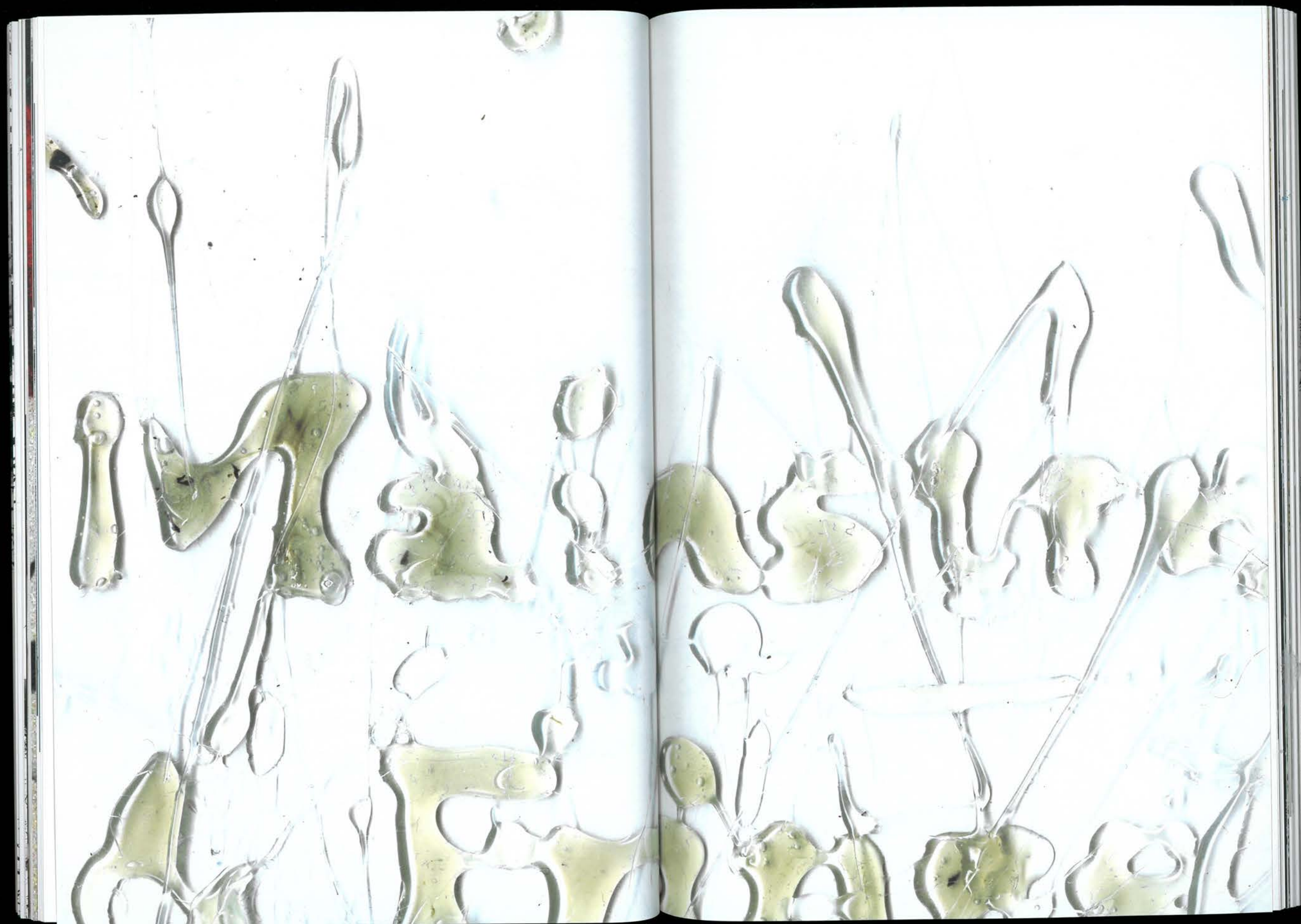
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MAINSTREAM & FRINGE

You Have Shamed Us by
Tara Aldughaither.
The abject within the society and
culture of the Arabian Peninsula.

Rejecting and Accepting
Abjection in Mainstream Art
by Natalie Baerselman le Gros.
The existence of the abject within
contemporary mainstream art.

A Knee-Jerking Re-Education
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An interview with Jake and
Dinos Chapman by Natalie
Baerselman le Gros.

YOU HAVE SHAMED US

by Tara Aldughaither

The duplicity of a ruptured modern life in Islamic monarchical nations is maintained within a culture of honour and shame. This article explores the ways in which the abject manifests in the bodies and minds of citizens of patriarchal societies, namely of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the Arabian Peninsula. Due to its unique theocratic system of socio-political governance, I have drawn on important texts that inform abjection in this context.

"Paradise lies at the feet of mothers."¹

Even if your mother is a pretender.

What Arabs call *aih*, or shame, is a term that positions a common testament to patriarchal principles, striving to disturb the more liberal doctrines of a modern world. For any who are not entirely familiar, the Gulf nations constitute Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Saudi Arabia, commonly popularised in the West as nations that have prospered from the commodity of "black gold", and that portray an image of wealth as well as an oppressive society. Although many Eastern cultures can be described as being built upon values of honour, the Gulf nations' proximity to the heart of the Islamic cradle renders another complex, albeit unique, position.

"[The abject] is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that the 'I' does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence."²



© Shurooq Amin
The King of Hearts (2014)
Mixed media on canvas
200 x 150 cm
Ayyam Gallery, Dubai

Living in the Arabian Peninsula, I have observed, through both heritage and citizenship, the increased double lives which grow out of its social dichotomy. Between those who are fixated with the sublime status of being "people of the prophet" and those who are weary of the pressure to sustain this type of honour, lies the sublimity of a "fortified existence". Both the broadcast prayers of the clerics and the silent prayers of the poor ask for access to eternal paradise. But as prayer and hoping applies to all ruptured people, the ever-growing human desire to taste liberty as it is experienced by the rest of the world has found its way into the private, shame-drenched activities of Islamic citizens. For an Arab, there is always a "we" in the public "I", thus the "I" can only exist where there is no public.

Partly because of the Peninsula's harsh environment and its role as an important route for a variety of ancient civilisations and because of its socio-political distance from the modern ideas of democracy, the lasting need to sustain a uniqueness of morals and identity is extremely powerful. As the advent of Islam has been the Peninsula's most precious historical event, its morals and social guides reverberate through its cultural and political workings of the population. The more modern causes for "sin" that arise, the more strict the interpretations of religious texts. And as most ideological teachings eventually affect the mind of followers, so too will it affect the treatment of their bodies. Abjection grows through the constant act of balancing the desires of each.

"The *halal* is clear and the *haram* is clear, and between them are matters unclear that are unknown to most people. Whoever is wary of these unclear matters has absolved his religion and honour. And whoever indulges in them has indulged in the *haram*. It is like a shepherd who herds his sheep too close to preserved sanctuary, and they will eventually graze in it. Every king has a sanctuary, and the sanctuary of Allah is what He has made *haram*. There lies within the body a piece of flesh. If it is sound, the whole body is sound; and if it is corrupted, the whole body is corrupted. Verily, this piece is the heart."³

Islam's teachings rely on measures of historical moralising in a region of political deliberation and what is today a place of fragmented identities. Kristeva's idea of sublime alienation exposes the pretext of a pious mass of holiness, which is subverted in the private escapes of this intense honour up-holding society. Within its "forfeited existence", the abject describes not only a frontier but also a place of phobic frustrations. The abject manifests in the horrors of societal conundrums, and in fear of not only death but also an everlasting damnation. Madness, a state that Kristeva calls "today's milestone", is expressed in the Gulf nations as what I simply term a pool of humanoid neurosis.

What makes this state of neurosis even more unique, and indeed complicates it, is that the majority of Islam's moralising agents are discursive. And while such discourses pertain to the desires of a tangible world, escapism can only lie in its abject materiality, which for the people of the Gulf is ministered through wealth, and in extreme cases, through the obscure practices of dark magic. As the materialism of the Peninsula links to the rest of a democratising world – a thing that has never happened before the last century – the worshiper wants to extend his or her desires towards a more solid thing. Yet the very "stuff" that defines today's youth in popular culture is strongly prohibited in Islam. Consuming intoxicating substances and engaging in lustful activities are two of the major acts that Islam labels sinful pleasures of a temporary earthly life. A Gulf Muslim, in the majority of cases, has been repelled by the opposite sex since birth. Material consumption and the private indulgence in both sex and intoxicants are contrasted to the depravations that secure access to an everlasting Paradise. This is the socialising agent of the abject. As the feminist scholar Kelly Oliver observes when analysing Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, "corruption is its [the abject's] most common, most obvious appearance".⁴



© Shurooq Amin
Blind New World (2013)
Popcornography Series
Mixed media on canvas
mounted on wood
170 x 150 cm, sold at
Royal Automobile Club
auction, London, 2013

Steering away from complex social analysis, a further introduction to the culture of the Gulf nations is necessary to comprehend the results of its social governing systems.

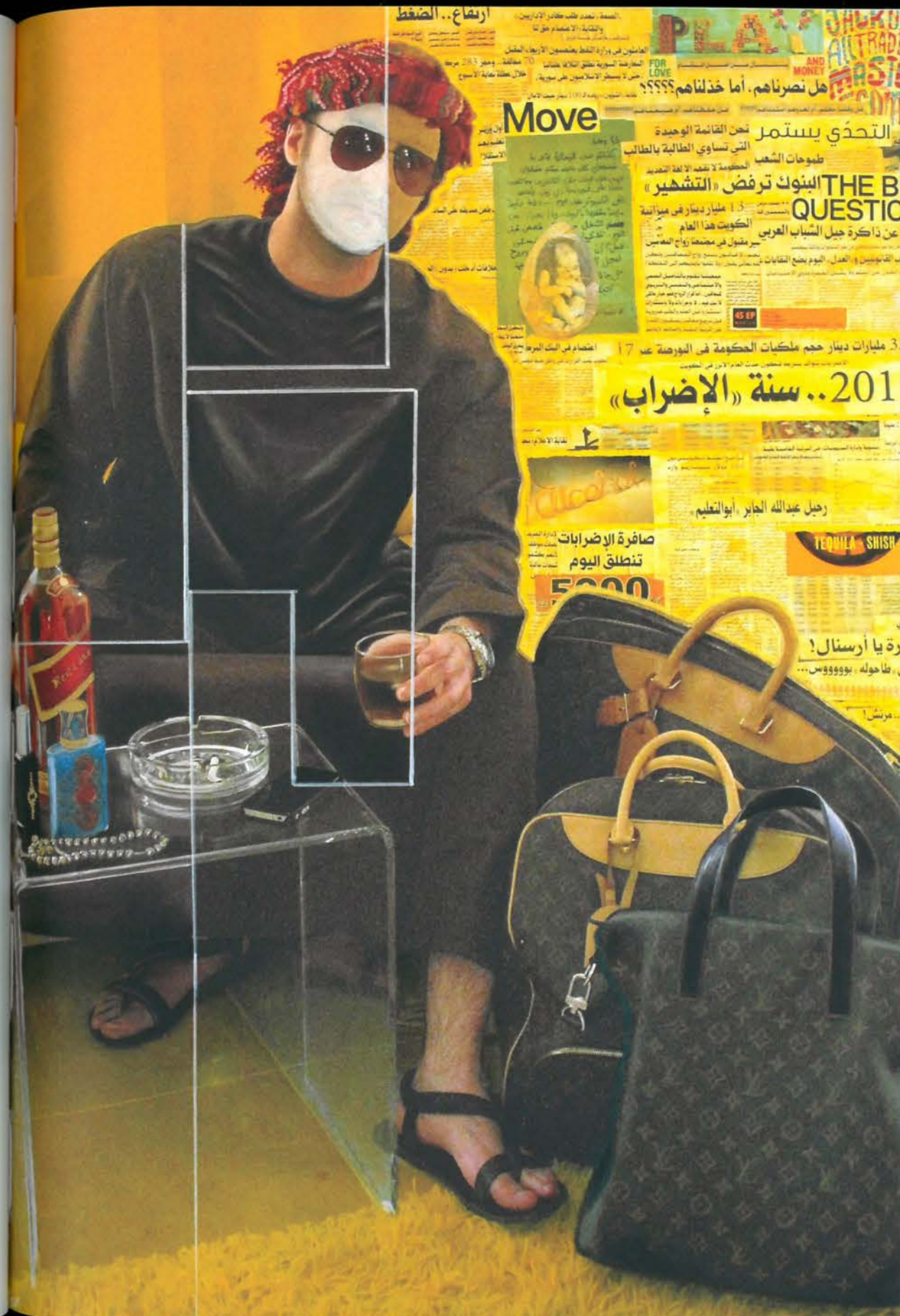
"In pain did his mother bear him, and in pain did she give him birth, and her bearing and his suckling period took 30 months."

In the Arabian Peninsula, the idea of one's own body, of sexual development, is actively repressed. Children are brought up in the household with a mother or midwife. According to religious teachings, they can be breast-fed for up to two years. In the next four years of development, they are not separated from mother or midwife. Children are always watched. Only at the age of six are they segregated according to gender. The "horror", as Kristeva defines it, of this segregation, marks the beginning of the repression of desire. In both the household and in school, children are ordered not to befriend people of the opposite gender. Apart from with family members, contact with the opposite gender is always risky.

It is in the practices of Bedouin social structures and sexual politics, which from its very beginning Islam attempted to repress, that we can understand the causes behind the enflamed rupture we have in modern times. Islamic teaching attempts to enhance the understanding of the body with different approaches towards health and sexual safety, advocating sobriety, chastity and privacy. In both traditional and modern scenarios, a person's body is in almost complete submission to religious and social guidance, making it shameful not to adhere to the scriptures, especially in public.

Kristeva argues that the detachment of an infant from its mother's womb creates an identity which tries to steer away from inevitable death, symbolised by the corpse. This is revealing of the ways in which the mother is considered the source of life and absolute safety, which in Islam guarantees her a position in paradise. Kristeva's notion can help us understand how vital it is within Islam to prepare oneself for the tomb and what comes after. For Muslims, everything you do after pubescence (marked by a female's menstrual cycle and a male's change of voice and growth of body hair) either adds to the eventual gratitude you receive after death or decreases your time and lowers your position in the hierarchy of paradise.

© Shurooq Amin
The Big Bling (2011)
It's a Man's World Series
Mixed media on wood
150 x 120 cm
Ayyam Gallery, Dubai



"There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire [...] desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects [...]. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemne. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself."⁶

.... Like an inescapable boomerang,
a vortex of summons and
repulsion places the one haunted
by it literally beside himself.

Under strict Islamic teaching, body and mind are the central actors in the play of social assemblies. Body and mind can be "purified" by cleansing before each of the five essential daily prayers. Body and mind can be blessed by directing calming litanies at the place of pain or impurity, or they can be "soiled" by suspicious and prohibited behaviour. Although these strictures are meant to unify people and sustain peaceful living, we, in the Arabian Peninsula seem to be more invested in ascribing shame, which ruins one's public "I" so that one is deemed unworthy for the "we" that is Paradise-bound.

1 Hadith, Narr. the Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, recorded by Iman Ahmad Bin Hanbal.

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6 Julia Kristeva, op cit, 1.

REJECTING AND ACCEPTING ABJECTION IN MAINSTREAM ART

by Natalie Baerselman le Gros

Abject art in mainstream culture may be a contradiction in terms, but it seems to be an inescapable truth. Regularly, and often to the point of exhaustion, contemporary arts are described as "shocking", even on occasion "disgraceful". We have come to the point where this has become a topic of discussion in itself; critics have recognised that "shock for shock's sake" has become one of the artist's motivations. Nevertheless the provocation that has caused these reactions needs to be discussed, alongside the ability of these "shocking artworks" to hog the spotlight rather than being physically and mentally dismissed as "abject". An investigation of this apparent acceptance of the abject into mainstream artistic culture must begin with the mainstream's definition of abject art.

Julia Kristeva determines the abject as a breakdown between the distinction of the self and the other, namely by allusion to elements that remind us of our own materiality. This is achieved through references to bodily functions and its products and links directly to the defining statement of the abject as that which is "cast off". In this first instance cast off from the body and, on a larger application, from mainstream culture and society.¹

The Tate website offers a definition of "Abject art" which reiterates many of Kristeva's theories in its own description of the abject:

"Artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions. The term abjection literally means 'the state of being cast off'. The abject is a complex psychological, philosophical and linguistic concept [...] In practice the abject covers all the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, that are deemed impure or inappropriate for public display or discussion."²

However, prior to Kristeva's examination and designation of the abject, art already had expressed a concern with the body and its less desirable functions as a means of addressing our own materiality and mortality. The representation of blood, for example, has long had its presence in art. The arrival of the Dada movement, perhaps in response to the visceral atrocities of war, mingled these preoccupations with an increasing interest in transgression and taboo.

Antonin Artaud's proposal for a Theatre of Cruelty is a key example of an approach to abjection, drawing attention to its false reality and causing what Nathan Gorelick (a professor in British and French Literature) refers to as an "unrelenting agitation of [...] life".³ Thus the distance between the self and the other, the true body and the represented body, is lessened. Following Artaud, radical theatre groups such as the Orgien-Mysterien-Theater, begun by members of the Viennese Actionists, literalised the body through the performance of bodily functions in their art, often to the point of arrest. For example, Günter Brus was sentenced to six months imprisonment after his 1968 performance of *Kunst und Revolution*, in which Brus urinated into a glass before covering himself in his own excrement. He then sang the Austrian national anthem

while masturbating and ended the piece by drinking his own urine and inevitably vomiting.

1993 saw one of the first institutional surveys of abject art as the students of the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program curated an exhibition entitled *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, including works taken largely from the Whitney's permanent collection. Tate, in its own description of abject art, describes the show as giving "the term [abject] a wider currency in art."⁴ This exhibition served to spotlight numerous mainstream artists as artists of the abject. They included Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Yayoi Kusama and Cindy Sherman, to name but a few. The exhibition catalogue describes abject art, not as a movement, but as a body of work classified as abject through its use of abject materials. It lists examples of these: "dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood, and rotting food".⁵ This suggests that the abject may not be a conceptual theme initiated by the agency of the artist but one of affect in the viewer as a result of the artist's choice of material.

This perhaps explains this show's assembling of a seemingly disparate collection of art objects under the umbrella of the "abject". By recontextualising some of the museum's collections as "the abject", the Whitney show created a disparity between the abject and the mainstream. It thereby drew attention to the very un-abject nature of its place of presentation, namely the white cube spaces of the Whitney's second floor. To further this the exhibition catalogue describes the general art institution as having an atmosphere of purity and prudery, not the place of the abject. Perhaps this functions to posit this exhibition as "groundbreaking" in the abjection or "outing" of its own collections. However, the *New York Times* criticised the exhibition's "instinct for provocation" and presentation of "a big, splashy picture", alluding to the often utilised shock-factor of art, and thus the abject's shock potential.

The Whitney catalogue adds another layer of provocation in the language it uses to describe the fundamental facets of the abject. Even in the catalogue's academic essays, notable authors turn to words such as "shit" or "pissing" instead of middle-of-the-road language or even a biological lexicon. The latter would perhaps be more fitting in those discussions that reference the physicality of such bodily functions. However these authors seem to align themselves with the shock value that the abject can proffer, underlining its cast-off nature by using language that is, for the most part, not socially acceptable. The value of the use of this unexpected language is in its affect, its ability to cause a reaction, thus drawing attention to the ability of the abject to shock.

What the 1993 exhibition chiefly demonstrated was a disparity between what is classified as abject and mainstream within art: how can that which is cast off be part of the institutional canon of art history? How can the truly abject exist within a space and a collection that are largely approved, historically, socially and culturally?

This then confirms that the abject is not only a material component of art but also a vehicle of affect, an immediate reaction occurring before it becomes quantifiable or recognisable as disgust or intrigue. This links it directly to the capacity of shock, a word so often referenced in contemporary art criticism. Interestingly these so-called "abject works of art" are often the work of some of today's most popular, sought-after and highly priced artists. We see this in Tate's re-contextualising of its collections in an attempt to locate the abject in works by Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Gilbert & George, Louise Bourgeois and Jake and Dinos Chapman. Yet one of today's largest and most profitable private commercial art galleries, White Cube, represents the majority of these artists. If the mere success of these mainstream artists, both historically and commercially, proves that abjection pays and draws an audience, then how can abjection not be mainstream?

If this is the case then perhaps the abject no longer exists as it once did, which returns us to my previous questions. Tate's description distinguishes between theory and practice. Perhaps in theory "the abject" remains intact, but in practice (the production and reception of the abject in mainstream art) it is merely a label, little more than a controversial PR tag. A work of art may appear abject, ticking all the boxes, but its failure to elicit the correct reaction from the public, its inability to connect the self and the other, leaves its affect as no more than mock-shock. Are we, as an audience, now unfazed by the materials of the abject yet social custom obliges us to react with shock?

... perhaps the abject no longer exists as it once did...

The *New York Times* suggests that the real problem for the 1993 Whitney exhibition was its museum context: the institutional atmosphere had a nullifying effect. This indicates that the institution has played a role in its audience's willingness to be more accepting. It may be that the distance between the self and the other cannot be bridged in such a context, even through the use of abject materials, because one feels so "other" there. The exhibition space, especially the white cube, provides a vacuum in which art is presented without distraction, removing all that may divert our attention from its status as art. We can follow art critic Brian O'Doherty and suggest that the human body is unwelcome in this space: "your own body [...] seems superfluous, an intrusion. The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not."⁶ O'Doherty makes a clear distinction between the eye and the spectator, designating the former as the art-viewing organ and the spectator as merely the transporting body of the eye. With this in mind, how can we be expected to connect what we view, that which is abject, with our own self, if we have in fact cast off that self at the gallery door?

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

² "Abject Art", Tate. Accessed 24 October 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/abject-art>.

³ Nathan Gorelick, "Life in Excess: Insurrection and Expenditure in Antonin Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty", *Discourse* 33 (2), 263.

⁴ "Abject Art", Tate. Accessed 24 October 2014, <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/a/abject-art>.

⁵ Whitney Museum of American Art, *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art. Selections from the Permanent Collection*, exhibition catalogue, 23 June – 29 August 1993, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City.

⁶ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1976), 15.

A KNEE-JERKING RE-EDUCATION WITH JAKE & DINOS CHAPMAN

interview by Natalie Baerselman le Gros

Many people are quick to describe your work as shocking or horrific, however I am yet to meet anyone who has been physically or emotionally shocked by your work. What do you think causes these reactions and why?

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE WHO ARE QUICK TO DESCRIBE OUR WORK AS SHOCKING OR HORRIFIC – IF YOU CAN'T ACTUALLY FIND THEM DO THEY EXIST? I'VE NEVER MET ONE. BUT IF YOU MANAGE TO FIND ONE, KEEP HOLD OF THEM AND GIVE US A CALL. I WOULD LIKE TO MEET THEM AND SHAKE HANDS WITH THEM, IF INDEED THEY HAVE HANDS. I IMAGINE THEM AS STRANGE CREATURES THAT LIVE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA, FLOATING IN THE DARK, SIGNALLING WITH FILAMENTS OF WEIRD LONELY NEON, ALL STRANGE AND TRANSPARENT, LIKE ANGRY BLOGGERS THAT MASTURBATE AND MOAN IN THE DARK.

What provokes you to continue to create such art that will inevitably be deemed "shocking" and "horrific"? Are you hoping to re-educate people or do you revel in people's knee-jerk abhorrence?

I LIKE THE IMAGE OF KNEE-JERKING RE-EDUCATION. IT SOUNDS LIKE SOME KIND OF YEAR-ZERO CULTURAL REVOLUTION. IF IT WORKS I'M ALL FOR IT.



© Jake & Dinos Chapman
Mannequin (1998), Mixed Media
Wigs and Trainers, 152 x 47 x 57cm
MAXXI Gallery, Rome, Italy

The Tate describes your work as “abject”,
something they define as:

“Artworks which explore themes that transgress
and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety,
particularly referencing the body and bodily
functions [...] In practice the abject covers all
the bodily functions, or aspects of the body, that
are deemed impure or inappropriate for public
display or discussion.”

**Despite the apparent inappropriateness of
“abject” art it has been embraced by the art
world, evinced by its sheer presence in the
Tate collections (and many others). Similarly,
White Cube represents three artists deemed
abject by Tate. Do you think then there is a
place for the term “abject” in art or indeed
any form of culture today?**

I LIKE IT THAT WHITE CUBE HAS THREE ABJECT
ARTISTS AND THAT THE TATE HAS MANY. IF ABJECTION
EXPRESSES A TENDENCY TOWARDS THE UNSAVOURY,
IT SEEMS A NICE COUNTERBALANCE TO THE TATE’S
SUGARY PAST. IF BEAUTY IN ART REPRESENTS
THE APOGEE OF ENLIGHTENED TRAJECTORY, THE
TENDENCY TOWARDS ABJECTION SEEKS TO DRAG
THE SUBLIME BODY BACK INTO THE MIRE. THIS IS A
POLITICAL PROJECT.

**Is the presence of the “abject” rooted in the
reaction of the viewer rather than inherent
in the artwork or the intentions of the artist?**

BOTH/NONE?

Is shock before the “abject” a moral obligation?

IT’S PROBABLY MORE A SOCIAL OBLIGATION,
A PERFORMATIVE RESPONSE.

**Do contemporary media and current affairs have
any effect on the dulling or exaggerating
of people’s expectations and experiences
with art?**

THE INSUFFICIENCY OF ART’S ABILITY TO DO MUCH-
AT-ALL IS THE REASON IT’S WORTH DOING. KILLING
THE DEAD BODY OVER AND OVER WITHOUT EVER
LETTING IT FINISH WITH BEING DEAD.

If the "abject" has become mainstream, where does art go now in order to provoke thought and emotion from the viewer? How do you see your artistic practice evolving in the future?

IT'S A TENDENCY TO EXTINCTION, NOT A HANDBAG.

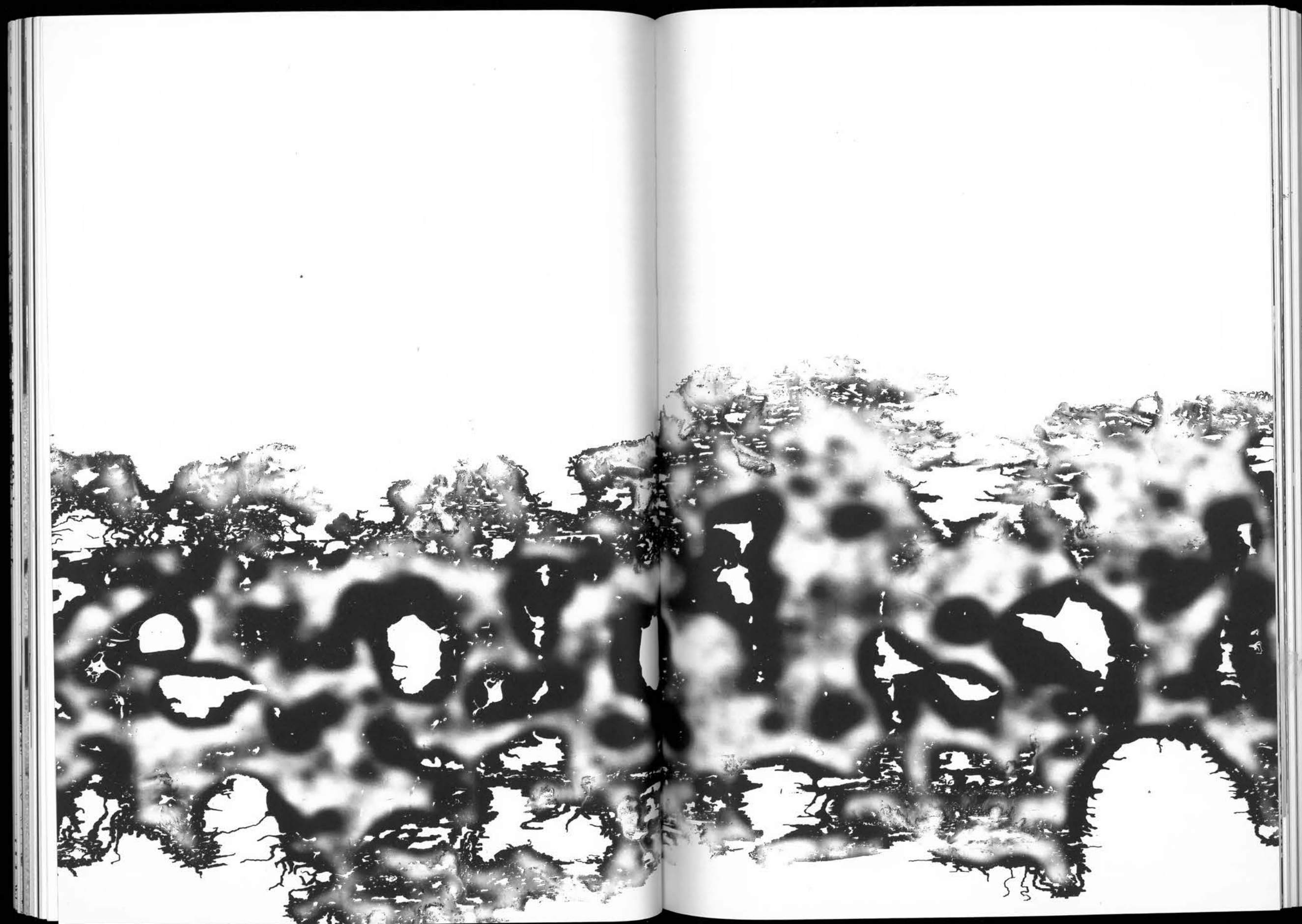
In light of the "spectacularisation" of the gallery and the art space, do you think "the spectacular" has become or could become a legitimate genre within the art world, to become recognised as a chapter of the art historical canon in the future?

COULD BECOME? IT'S ALWAYS BEEN — THE MYSTICAL SIGNIFIER FOR ABSTRACTED CAPITAL — THE AESTHETIC SUBLIME.

... like angry bloggers that masturbate and moan in the dark

In August your sculpture *Piggyback* was removed from MAXXI in Rome by the Italian Observatory of the Rights of the Child to "avoid promoting depictions with a clear paedo-pornographic context behind the art [...] this is not about an attack on the freedom of artistic expression." To me it seems more of an appeasement of the public's inability to deal with imagery responsibly and a refusal to address the social reasons behind such associations. Do you think censorship has a detrimental effect on the art world and the wider social world? Is it demotivating as an artist to see censorship as a reaction to these associations, rather than discussion or engagement?

IT'S UNLIKELY THAT ANY SELF-RESPECTING PAEDOPHILE WOULD GET HIS ROCKS OFF LOOKING AT ANYTHING WE'VE EVER MADE. MORE SO THE PAMPERS ADVERT AND ALL THE OTHER CUTE-CHILD ADVERTS THAT FLIRT WITH SUBCONSCIOUS CHILD SEXUALITY IN ORDER TO SEDUCE BUYERS INTO THE SAFE COMMODIFICATION OF THEIR PRODUCTS. IF THE VALENCE OF THE NEGATIVE REACTION TO OUR SCULPTURE IS TELLING, IT INDICATES THAT IT SIMPLY TRANSGRESSED THE COMMON CODE OF CONDUCT UNDER WHICH SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION REMAINS DISCREET.



REPULSION & DESIRE

The Desire for Immortality and
the Fear of Death by Siyi Chen.
The effects of Anatomy Art and
Gunther von Hagens's *Body Worlds*
exhibition in Chinese society.

The Blessing and the Curse
by Rhianne Sinclair-Phillips.
Mythology and photography
of albinism with photographic
artist, Justin Dingwall.

Rebecca Morgan.
Artist Feature.

THE DESIRE FOR IMMORTALITY AND THE FEAR OF DEATH

by Siyi Chen

"The abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, 'where meaning collapses'; hence its attraction for avant-garde artists and writers who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society." Hal Foster¹

Opened in Tokyo in 1995, Dr Gunther von Hagens's exhibition *Body Worlds* presented to the general public over 200 well-preserved human organs as well as dozens of fully flayed corpses in various poses.² It was even possible for visitors to touch the human organs on display. There was, for example, a man holding his own skin aloft as though it were a precious trophy and the unimaginable bisected cadaver of an eight-month pregnant woman with her womb open to reveal the foetus inside.



© Gunther von Hagens's
Body Worlds. The Skin Man
Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg,
Germany. www.bodyworlds.com

The exhibition has been touring since 1996 and it arrived in Hong Kong in 2002 and later in Taiwan in both 2004 and 2011. As an exhibition of real human bodies after plastination, *Body Worlds* added a literal dimension to the discussion of life and death in Chinese society. Von Hagens, the brains behind the exhibition, claimed that it would democratise anatomy while generating a better understanding of our bodies.³

Von Hagens invented a new method of body preservation, called plastination. This process is complex, but makes it possible for bodies to be preserved indefinitely. This is achieved by replacing the water in the human cells with liquid reactive plastic, making the body malleable, allowing it to be manipulated and posed.⁴

Indeed, what is so fascinating and complex about von Hagens's work is that it links to aesthetic anatomy, the fear of death and immortality. Although I doubt it is an integration of art and science to the extent that he claims, von Hagens considers himself "chiefly a scientist who wants to enlighten people by means of aesthetic shock rather than cruelty shock".⁵

His Tokyo audience criticised the first exhibition as having been too medically orientated. This prompted him to study Renaissance art and reconsider the poses of bodies. This is the main reason that he then began displaying the exhibited bodies in different positions, which his technique allowed him to do. One of von Hagens's most astonishing exhibits is *The Skin Man*. It shows a standing male body, with his muscles and genitals exposed, holding his own skin draped over his arm. This piece is based on Michelangelo's depiction of St Bartholomew in *The Last Judgement* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. It is a nod to von Hagens's regard for the great painter and especially to Michelangelo's work in the area of anatomy.⁶ Von Hagens also draws influence from traditional anatomy paintings, such as Rembrandt's famous *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolas Tulp*, showing a group of surgeons watching a dissection. In a live broadcast in 2002, von Hagens performed the first live dissection in London in front of the general public. He invoked Rembrandt's painting by wearing a similar hat and more obviously by covering the corpse with a copy of the painting itself.⁷

Body Worlds raised ethical questions regarding the display of dead bodies in public. Is it appropriate, legal or right to display the human body in such a way? Or is it merely perverse, horrific or simply spectacle?

Von Hagens opened a factory in Dalian, a northern coastal city in China. Although von Hagens claimed that the bodies were donated by volunteers, ever since then there has been speculation that the former mayor of Dalian allowed von Hagens to use the bodies of criminals sentenced to death and of those who passed away in jail. While donating your body to science is common in the West, it is not in Chinese society and thus it is hard to imagine that a woman would donate her body and child as a medical specimen.

... How can the body be immortal without a soul? The cold dead body is more a reminder of death than of an external existence.

How can the body be immortal without a soul? The cold dead body is more a reminder of death than of an external existence. The fear of death may be immortal in Chinese culture, but von Hagens problematically believes that the preservation of these dead bodies represents the immortality of the individual, thus clashing with traditional Chinese beliefs. In Chinese culture, the question of life and death is associated with the Confucian virtues of filial piety, civility, righteousness and benevolence.⁸ Presenting a dead body is regarded as a serious offence to the individual as well as to their family. There is a tradition that the sins of the deceased should be forgiven as they are a body without consciousness and they deserve a proper burial. During the Qing Ming festival, tombs are cleaned while memorialising the ancestry of the deceased, offerings are made to the dead and Joss paper is burnt, thereby securing a good afterlife for the deceased soul.⁹ Thus, the ultimate act of revenge is to open a tomb, exposing the dead body, therefore disrupting the after life and prohibiting the soul from rest.¹⁰ These embedded traditions make it highly unlikely that a person of Chinese origin would willingly donate their body and demonstrates how great a transgression it may be to exhibit a plastinated body in public in Chinese society.

© Gunther von Hagens
Visitors at *Body Worlds*
[Plastinate: The Woman Bearing Life]
Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg,
Germany, www.bodyworlds.com



However, it is interesting to discuss audiences' reactions to this exhibition, especially in China, where there is a special view on life and death as described above. *Body Worlds* is not just an aesthetic shock for Chinese society, as the greater question is how this aesthetic shock influences the society.

The removal of the skin and the exposure of the internal organs of von Hagens's bodies add another dimension of horror for the viewer. The transgressional nature of the exhibition is similar to what Kristeva describes when she speaks of the abject moving from the private to the public sphere; it is most often a transgression within society: "By way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representative of sex and murder".¹¹

Not only did von Hagens's exhibition cause a backlash by Chinese audiences but it also faced criticism from religious groups. In von Hagens's home country, the German Catholic church argued that the exhibition violates the sanctity of the human body. Yet *Body Worlds* continues to gain enormous success while travelling the world. Due to a high volume of attendance some exhibitions had to be extended for several weeks and even kept open overnight.

On the other hand, during each exhibition people voluntarily donated their bodies to have them plastinated after death, including over 3600 people in London in 2002. This overwhelming response is a reflection of the human desire for immortality. One person claimed that "I know I will feel better this way rather than being eaten up and digested by worms", thus demonstrating the donors' feeling of peace knowing their bodies will, in a way, be immortalised. When von Hagens was asked if he would let himself be plastinated, he said yes and explained that he plastinated his best friend after his death, as a kind of consolation.

But if the fear of death and that of the corpse comes from deep inside the human conscious, this brings forth the question: will this abject fear then disappear over time?

© Gunther von Hagens's
Body Worlds The Basketball Player
Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg,
Germany. www.bodyworlds.com

© Gunther von Hagens and a plastinate
of Blood Vessel, Configuration
of the Head and Brain Institute
for Plastination, Heidelberg, Germany
www.bodyworlds.com



1 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (London: MIT Press, 1996), 153.

2 Alison Goeller, "Interior Landscapes: Anatomy Art and the Work of Gunther von Hagens" in *The Abject of Desire*, eds Konstanze Kuzbach and Monika Mueller (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 271.

3 Stuart Jeffries, "The Naked and the Dead," *The Guardian*, 19 March 2002. Accessed 1 September 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2002/mar/19/arts.highereducation>.

4 Gunther von Hagens and Angelina Whalley, eds, *Körperwelten: Fascination beneath the Surface* (Heidelberg: Institute for Plastination, 2001).

5 Stuart Jeffries, op cit.

6 Alison Goeller, op cit, 277.

7 Alison Goeller, op cit, 280.

8 Silvia Fok, *Life and Death: Art and the Body in Contemporary China* (Bristol: Intellect Ltd, 2012).

9 Traditionally, China upholds the belief that the afterlife is similar to present life. Once a year, during the Qing Ming festival, on the fourth or fifth day of March in the Lunar Calendar, the family prepares food, wine, flowers and joss paper (fake money believed to be used in the afterlife) and visits their ancestors' graves. They clean the gravesite before setting out the food and wine and then burn the joss paper in front of the grave.

10 In my hometown, a village in Southern China, opening the graves of our ancestors is permitted only in order to dehydrate the bones for better preservation. This ritual takes place during the first years after the burial and is only performed during Qing Ming.

11 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans by Leon S Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press), 109.

12 Over two million people attended the first exhibition in Tokyo. In Munich, there were only 4,700 visitors on the first day.

13 Stuart Jeffries, op cit.

14 Stuart Jeffries, op cit.

THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE

by Rhianne Sinclair-Phillips

Despite the prominent success of the American albino model Shaun Ross, albinism rarely attracts serious debate in Western culture. In Africa, by contrast, and particularly in South Africa and Tanzania, albinism is frequently associated with witchcraft. South African photographic artist Justin Dingwall takes a different point of view. His photographic collection *Albus*, a collaboration with legal prosecutor turned model Thando Hopa (herself an albino), challenges the fallacies and consequent invisibility of albinism.

While he was flicking through the pages of a South African newspaper 11 years ago, Dingwall was suddenly confronted with a vivid portrait of an albino child. The portrait made him reconsider the beauty that South Africa so frequently abjects. "I found the newspaper portrait a powerful and striking image that portrayed its sitter as a person with strength and dignity," he recalls. "That beauty in difference has stayed in the back of my mind ever since. South Africa has a lot of misconceptions about albinism and there are many myths surrounding it that cause severe social stigma to be attached to people with albinism." Albinism is a congenital disorder that results in the production of little or no pigmentation in the skin, hair and eyes. The condition occurs in populations around the world but is most prevalent in Africa: according to one report, "one in 4000 people" has the disorder in South Africa.¹



© Justin Dingwall
White Veil (2013), Albus



© Justin Dingwall
White Mary (2013), Albus



© Justin Dingwall
Sheer Veil (2013).
Albus

Dingwall has given considerable thought to what beauty means. Albus (first seen in Western Europe at London's Art4 fair) celebrates difference by uncovering the way in which Thando Hopa's albinism evokes fear and hence becomes associated with sin. By doing this, he offers a new way of reading race while raising awareness about Africa's *zuru zuru* ("ghosts": the Swahili word is often used to describe albinos) who regularly disappear. Many mistaken beliefs surround their existence. In particular, they are thought to possess mythical powers: witch doctors, whose words are taken as ultimate truth, spread the belief that the bones of an albino can cure ills and bring wealth and success. In this context, scientific facts count for nothing.

The vulnerability seen in
the images is created to
portray a quiet beauty

Ordinary African people, typically of the Black working-class, murder or mutilate albinos to harvest their body parts for use in spells promising good fortune. Fishermen place the white skin of their albino victims on their boats and bind their hair to fishing nets because they believe that doing so will enable them to catch large fish with gold in their stomachs. At the time of writing, Tanzania, the country which reportedly has the largest albino population in the world, is preparing for a general election. There have been warnings that, until the winning party is announced, there will be a significant increase in albino murders and fatal amputations. This is as much about economics as it is about superstitions: money is to be made once the body parts of an albino are delivered to a witch doctor. As a result, family members expose their albino relatives in order to receive financial reward, while those without albino relatives often resort to desecrating the graves of

albinos. Superstition decrees that an albino death is a blessing; as Dingwall observes, "There aren't many structures in place to protect the people living with albinism."

Making a conscious decision to dispel the myths, Dingwall addresses the negative perception in his striking portraits of Thando Hopa: "In all of the images, Thando embodies a saintly angelic beauty that I created through lighting, styling and poses. What her publicist was looking for was a body of work that she could use for magazines and interviews. After the first click I knew that I wanted to make something new and different with her." Dingwall certainly achieves this. There is a striking contrast between his work and the haunting qualities of Gustavo Lacerda's portraits of white Brazilian albinos. In an interview with *Wonderland* magazine, Lacerda discusses his desire to explore the albino universe, but instead he places albinos in the position of an alien, a sentiment that comesthrough in the stiff body language of his sitters.² In *Albus*, however, Dingwall's invocation of the chaste persona of the Virgin Mary captures an enchanting and, from a Western perspective, provocative beauty.

Dingwall's photographic series forces the viewer to address the invisible, the trauma and vulnerability of the abjected beauty when it is thrust into the mainstream. However, as Dingwall proclaims, "There was never an intention in making the work to portray trauma. The vulnerability seen in the images is created to portray a quiet beauty that was never intended to be confrontational. It was intended to be celebrated and elevated. I don't view difference in humanity as abject; to me diversity is what makes humanity interesting and beautiful." Yet what is so often cast out of society and considered "abject" requires a quality of interpretation, since it operates indifferent ways depending on social or cultural context.



© Justin Dingwall
Red Blue Mary (2013), Albus



© Justin Dingwall
Purple Mary (2013), Albus

In 2012, fashion designers came under fire for the lack of ethnic diversity on the catwalk. As a result, designers such as Shayne Oliver (of Hood by Air), Patrick Ervell and Riccardo Tisci (of Givenchy), have since embraced albino models as the "new face of fashion". Shaun Ross, the most successful albino model, has challenged the black-and-white perfect expectations of models with his unique looks. In numerous editorials and advertising campaigns, Ross uses his celebrity status to raise awareness of the ways in which negative perceptions of his appearance made him an outsider. His 2012 TED talk further articulated how Western beauty standards fear extreme difference, casting it as ugly, when in fact that difference constitutes a new kind of beauty, one that deserves to be celebrated.³

Ironically, Ross featured as a beauty pageant instructor during Beyoncé's music video for Pretty Hurts, but is the presence of an albino model in such a mainstream context any more than a passing trend? As Justin Dingwall suggests, "The fashion industry always has been and always will be affected by trends. And yes, certain types of models represent these trends but I don't feel that albino models are being exploited; I feel that they are being celebrated for their uniqueness. They add another element to the ever-changing diversity of the fashion industry. What I have found in the industry is that people have become bored with 'perfection' and they are now looking for people who are unique, who they feel they can relate to. It is now imperfections and quirkiness that make beauty interesting."

1 Joan Paul, "Strategies to address vulnerable populations," *Harvard International Review*, 20 December 2012. Accessed 22 July 2014, <http://hir.harvard.edu/archives/3018>.

2 Shaun Ross, "In my skin I win: Shaun Ross at TedxHackney," *Tedx Talks*, April 2014. Accessed July 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqRIB5ZQeho>

3 Gustavo Lacerda, "Albinos," *Wonderland Magazine*, August 2014. Accessed July 2014, <http://www.wonderlandmagazine.com/2012/08/gustavo-lacerda-albinos/>

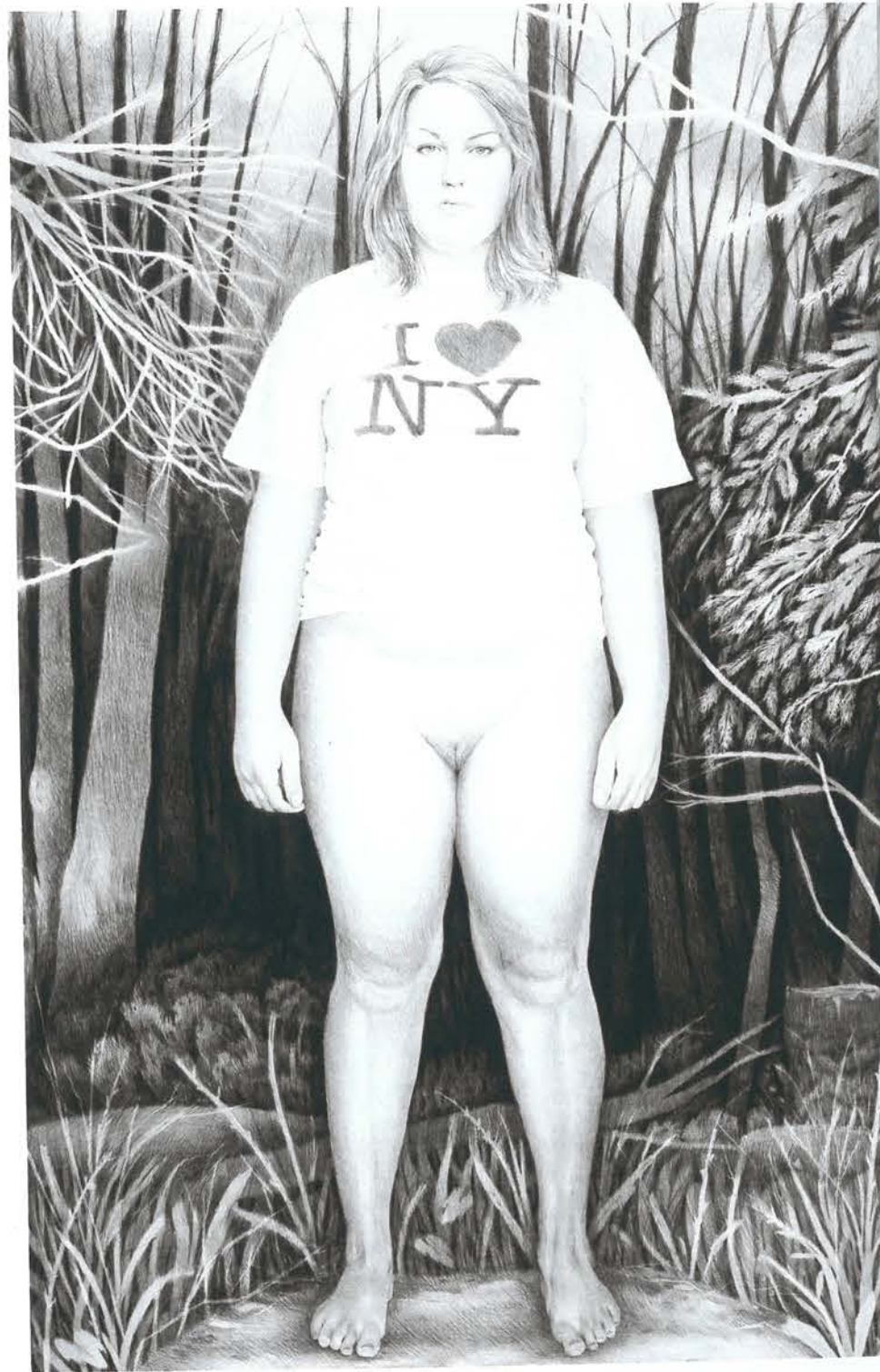
REBECCA MORGAN

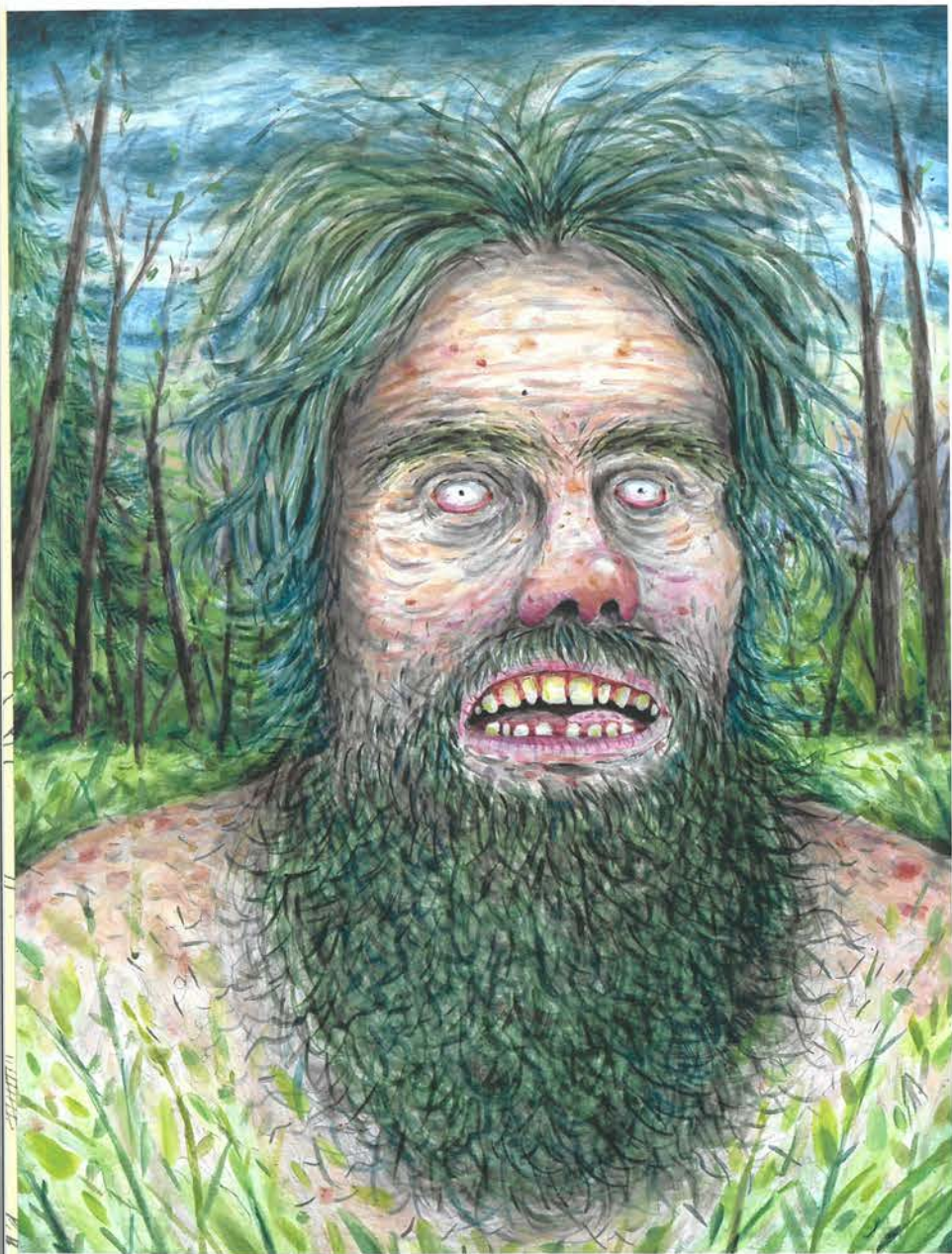
Rebecca Morgan, born 1984, is an artist living and working in Bloomsbury, Pennsylvania. She holds an MFA from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn (2009). Morgan is represented by Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.



© Rebecca Morgan
Found Something I Didn't Want to See on
the Internet (2011), Ink on Paper, 8 x 5 in
Scanned by artist, Asya Geisberg Gallery

© Rebecca Morgan
I Love New York (2009) Graphite on Paper
84 x 60 in, Photo. © Cary Whittier, The
Marielouise Hessel Collection, The Hessel
Museum of Art, Bard College





© Rebecca Morgan
Cartoonish Mountain Man (2013)
Oil and graphite on panel,
20 x 16 in. Photo: © Etienne
Frossard, Asya Geisberg Gallery



© Rebecca Morgan
Homecoming Picnic (2012)
Graphite and oil on panel, 69 x 62 in.
Photo: © Cary Whittier
In artist's possession



© Rebecca Morgan
Picnic on Norman Hill (2010)
Graphite on paper, 58 x 158 in.
Photo: © Cary Whitlier Asya
Gelsberg Gallery



RITUAL & HABIT

Getting Rid of Yourself

by Janice Mitchell.

Navigating identity in a country
that leaves no space for it.

Lingua Trauma a la Mexicana:

visualising drug culture in

Mexico by Marisol Rodriguez.

The collective trauma of

21st-century Mexico in the visual
language of narco-culture.

The Bad Abject-Object

by Kymia Nawabi.

How Kymia Nawabi's personal

experiences relate to the abject and
translate into her artistic practice.

GETTING RID OF YOURSELF

by Janice Mitchell

Racism presents itself in subtle and less subtle ways. It can be a fist in the face or a kick with a steel-toed boot. It can be a gesture, a word, a sentence. But words are acts and as such they can hold more power than a slap in the face. Sentences are structures through which acts unfold, in which they take on a shape, a form, become part of a system. And within this system, they define worth and value. Racism attacks those who are deemed the least valuable, those with the least worth, making them most vulnerable. Within this system it spreads, touching every part of it, every part of you, every part of me. It assigns us places and we look at each other from afar, unable to build bridges because it has taken hold of our most powerful weapon, language itself.

In the end, it is always about a lack within language. It is about our inability to adequately address these issues, to make sense of ourselves, to make sense of who we have become through language and to bridge the gap between representation and reality.

Last weekend more than a thousand neo-Nazis, hooligans and other far-right extremists gathered in Cologne, Germany to protest against what they believe to be a rise of Islamic fundamentalism, mainly Salafism, in Germany. Gathering under the name "Hooligans Against Salafists" (short: HoGeSa), the protest march was just another public display of their ugly and ignorant worldview. Throughout the day chants such as "Deutschland den Deutschen, Ausländer raus!" were heard repeatedly; journalists, photographers and uninvolved passersby were attacked and in the evening there were violent clashes with the police. Three years ago, the far-right terror network National Socialist Underground (NSU), was revealed to be behind a series of murders in Germany that left nine shopkeepers and restaurant owners of Turkish origin for dead. The media called the murders the "Döner Murders" and for years the police only investigated the possibility of organised crime as the background. The entire country was in a state of shock when it was revealed in 2010 that Uwe Böhnhardt, Uwe Mundlos and Beate Zschäpe had been the masterminds behind the murders, fuelled by their nationalist and xenophobic worldviews.

And when your face hits the dirt, when you lie on the green grass and bruises bloom like flowers on your body, then you know you've made it; from invisible to visible and headlines in a week.

That is most often what people of colour are reduced to in Germany; a headline, a statistic, either for causing trouble and crime or for being the victim of a hate crime. I remember being afraid of neo-Nazis as a teenager. I remember walking to the bus stop at night, scared they would all of a sudden appear, hurl insults at me and beat me to the ground. I would sit on the bus or train home, carefully watching who got on at what stop. Sometimes I considered avoiding certain streets or crossing the road, switching train carriages, but mainly I refused to let them have such power over me and my movements. I knew who and what to watch out for, I actually knew

them by name. They were my neighbours, we had gone to school together and been in the same play group in kindergarten. One of them, known for his constant nosebleeds as a child, now wore combat boots with white laces and blasted Störkraft¹ from his car stereo.

But this is not about neo-Nazis, a distinctly German world-wide export, like the Wirtschaftswunder. This is more about the "Alltagsrassismus", the everyday racism and the subtle ways in which German society constantly reminds you that you are not like them, that you are not one of them, regardless of where you were born or what your passport says. But maybe there is a connection between this blatant racism and its more subtle cousin. Perhaps they subconsciously feed on each other, looking to each other for both differentiation and approval, for justification and excuses.

Sometimes I want to shed my skin. To be a bit less visible, more invisible, to blend in just a bit. It has gotten tiring and I am tired. I am tired, of answering questions, of constantly explaining myself. It is as if I, again and again, have to justify myself, for occupying space that some feel I have no right to. I am in between, neither completely here nor there. I know the questions by heart and the answers too.

"Where are you from?"

It is almost always one of the first questions I'm asked when I meet someone new. At parties, at university, by the cashier at the store (because: "You have such a nice complexion"). It is as if where I'm from is more important than who I am. But for the person asking the question, it is tied to who I am. I know the correct answer to this question, but it's not necessarily the one they are looking for. What they want to know is why I sound like them, but don't look like them. And because I don't look like them, because I don't have straight hair and pale skin, I can't be German. Where you were born or what passport you have does not matter. You are German by blood and half is not enough.

Identity is shaped by trauma, trauma is the pieces that we pick up and stitch together. It is the words we choose to describe ourselves, to describe others and to describe us all.

"Do you feel more German or more American?"

Unlike in most other countries in the world, being born in Germany does not automatically give you German citizenship. This is either passed on through blood, whereby at least one parent must be German, or if both parents are not, they are eligible for citizenship under certain circumstances; at least one parent must be able to prove that Germany is their lawful and ordinary residence. This is not the easiest task and it also means that the child will have to give up any other citizenship they have rights to. For many children of immigrants, this means that even though they may have been born in Germany, they do not necessarily have the same status or rights as their German peers.²

What they want to know
is why I sound like them,
but don't look like them.

"Do you feel more German or more American?"

How can I answer that? German society has no concept for being both; you can only be one or the other, other with a capital "O". I and many others are that eternal Other, which is only defined within German society by what it is not. The Other must always justify its worth. It must always justify itself, I must always justify myself: why I am German and look the way I look, why I am here and not somewhere else. "German" is not a malleable concept, it does not share its space with anyone else.

Within German society, so much of who is perceived as German depends on appearance and an ethnically non-German appearance is always very quickly perceived as a threat. The foreigner is always reduced to a stereotype, to a cliché, enforced through media and politics, the foreignness manifesting itself in the person: in the way s/he acts, in the

way s/he speaks and lives. It is a constant "we are like this and they are like that", that makes way for a rather hypocritical demand towards those who are not seen as ethnically German "to integrate themselves". In practice this means assimilation. But the fact that the lines can no longer be so easily drawn is ignored and far too often the focus remains on what differentiates "us" from "them", rather than on what we have in common.

Always one-dimensional, never a fully-fleshed out character, I am always limited, I am a cliché. As if the way I look defines the way I am and what I am not.

"Wow, your German is so good."

Language is part of reality and we, in turn, use language to shape it. As such it can be a tool used to deceive and lie to us; it can turn lies into truths and stereotypes into facts through repetition. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance has criticised Germany in their 2014 report for its failure to properly address and deal with racism within German society. One of the most poignant criticisms that the Commission has made is that racism is often understood and interpreted too restrictively; namely that there is a lack of awareness of the racist and xenophobic character of public debate within Germany and that the country has repeatedly failed to adequately address and deal with this.³ This mainly reveals itself in the media and in the political arena, but also in every day language. Discussions about why words, such as "Mohr"⁴, "Neger"⁵ or "Zigeuner"⁶ should not be used are too often rendered mute and age-old tropes and prejudices based on race and ethnicity have yet to disappear or be recognised for what they are: they are tied to and represent a history of injustice, violence, oppression and persecution is too often downplayed with the argument that these histories are of the past and not of the present. But they haunt the present, precisely because they bring with them a past that should not, and dare not, be ignored. Racism is not merely a violent act, but words themselves can be acts of violence.

History keeps us in the past, it keeps us on a short leash and we are forever looking back while stumbling forward. History is subject to interpretation, it is only as much as what we make of it: we can look at it with both eyes open, one eye closed or both eyes tightly shut, groping around in the dark, bumping into chimneys, tanks and the ruins of cities, while we try to find our way and ourselves. And some histories simply do not exist: they are not written down and they are not spoken of, they don't even make it to the status of secrets whispered in a lover's ear.

A public conversation on the meaning of national identity in connection to race and racism is long overdue in Germany. There has barely been any examination or discussion of the country's colonial past within society. After World War II, the focus was redirected to quickly rebuilding Germany's infrastructure and economy and the denazification process played a more minor role than had been intended. This led to a failure in re-evaluating the definition and meaning of German national identity after many years of Hitler's National Socialism and extreme anti-Semitism.

Germany does not have such a long tradition or history of immigration as other Western and European nations do. However, its colonial past, short and gruesome, was an undertaking carried out for no other reason than to keep up with the colonial superpowers France and England. But today it is merely an anecdote; Germany's quest for "a place in the sun" completely ignores the hurt and trauma it caused.⁷

Germany today is a country of immigrants, it is no longer the ethnically homogenous society it was until the first half of the 20th Century; it has become multicultural. And while the majority of Germans accept and maybe even embrace this development, German identity is still very much rooted in ideas of belonging based on blood and a shared ethnic background. At the same time,

it seems as if society is caught in standstill, refusing to deal with the latent racism that is so often present in every day society, media and politics: there is a way forward, but there is also a way back.

It feels like I am betraying someone. Someone who believes he has been kind and friendly, welcomed me with open arms, unbiased and unprejudiced, masking the fact that he actually isn't. But he is convincing, more than I am. He is many and I am one.

So how do I explain how I got there from here?

1 Störkraft was a German right-wing rock band active from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, popular among neo-Nazis for their xenophobic lyrics, glorification and call to violence against foreigners and the left. They are forbidden in Germany.

2 "Naturalisation is Germany," Bundesausländerbeauftragte (The Federal Commissioner for Foreigners). Accessed 16 September 2014, <http://www.bundesauslaenderbeauftragte.de>

3 An example in the report is that of Thilo Sarrazin, a former member of the Executive Board of the Deutsche Bundesbank and prominent member of the German Social-democratic Party (SPD). In his book *Deutschland Schaff! Sich Ab* (2010), which can be loosely translated into "Germany is doing away with itself", he cites a decrease in births, the growth of the lower class as well as the increased immigration of Muslims as a danger for the development of Germany, for their "failure to integrate", stating that they prefer to live in a society that operates parallel to German society.

4 "Moor" in English; another term used to describe someone with dark skin. Originally, the term only referred to Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, Malta and the Maghreb, but over time this became synonymous with racialised depictions of black or coloured people, the most famous in Germany being the "Sarotti-Mohr", the mascot of German chocolate manufacturer Sarotti. Sarotti have since changed their mascot to a magician with golden skin.

5 "Negro" in English; the word originally had no negative connotations, but was simply descriptive, but through the rise of theories of race connected to colonialism, slavery and National Socialism, it took on a derogatory meaning and is considered politically incorrect today.

6 "Gypsy" in English; dates back to the 15th Century and describes a group of people whose style of life differs from that of the general population, mainly in that they move from place to place. Due to its strong ties with the persecution of said people, it has become a derogatory term; designations such as Roma, Sinti or Jenische are preferred.

7 Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Bernhard von Bülow in a speech on German colonial politics at the Reichstag on 6 December 1897: "In short: we do not want to overshadow anyone, but we also demand our place in the sun." (Original: Mit einem Worte: wir wollen niemand in den Schatten stellen, aber wir verlangen auch unseren Platz an der Sonne.)

LINGUA TRAUMA A LA MEXICANA

by Marisol Rodríguez

"The imperative to acknowledge the disrupted subjectivity that comes of a broken society on the one hand, and the imperative to affirm identity at all costs on the other."
Hal Foster¹

I

In 2007 I wrote an article called "Blood". It was illustrated by a photograph of five human heads lying on a dance floor somewhere in the state of Michoacán, México. I still remember the moment I saw this picture on the front cover of a newspaper, leaving a metro station in México City. I found it upsetting that something so horrible would be there for everyone to see. I remember this moment clearly, and even then, I thought it significant enough to write about it.

Ever since images like this have become part of Mexican media culture, society has become numb to the news: there is at least one mass grave a day, waves of executions here and there. The individual is engulfed in a sea of casualties, whose gloom metamorphoses first into pseudo-information, then into crass entertainment.

According to the American TV channel CNBC, *El Blog del Narco* is "México's go-to website for information on the country's drug war". It has existed since 2008 as an unfiltered, uncensored and supposedly unbiased forum for all narco-related news. The anonymous editors publish "anything" they receive from "anyone" including graphic images of executions that can be found in the section for "strong videos".

A comparison between the site in 2008 and today confirms how our gaze has changed, from alarmed to morbid. Back in 2008, the site was mainly text with very few photographs. The lengthy notes attempted to untangle the increasing narco-web of violence, drug trafficking and government corruption. Six years later, the blog logo was revamped so that it looked like one from a *telenovela*;² the different sections were now ordered with the hierarchies of any other fast-news blog, with sections highlighting the “most viewed” videos and so on. A chat room aims to increase user engagement. Some of its participants use the names of infamous druglords as their own, such as “Chapoguzman”, a user who interacts with others in a rapid exchange of insults.

The individual is engulfed in a sea of casualties, whose gloom metamorphoses first into pseudo-information, then into crass entertainment.

A society's trauma turned into information, turned into attraction and turned into habitus. Hal Foster attributes the fascination with the abject to a “dissatisfaction with the textual model of reality”, with a “disillusionment with the celebration of desire”, an increasing “despair about [...] disease [...] death, systemic poverty and crime, a destroyed welfare state... [and] a broken social contract”.³ In this context, the corpse becomes the evidence of truth, the truth an argument for society to empower itself and act. Nineteen mass graves discovered in a single Mexican state within the past four weeks (October 2014) are more eloquent in their narration of structural reality than any discourse could ever be. But Foster wonders if this abjection (let's think of it in the form of El Blog del Narco) is “a refusal of power or its reinvention in a strange new guise, or is it somehow both these events at once?”⁴

Protest in Zocalo Square, Mexico D.F. 2014



Diego Rivera, Mural. Scene in which indigenous society dyes fabrics in different colors, courtesy of the National Palace of PRL Taller de Exhibiciones Potenciales 2015



II

On 6 June 2014 the exhibition *MADE IN MEXICO: The Rebozo in Art, Culture & Fashion* opened at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London. The hallway leading to the show was adorned with colourful *papel picado* and was flanked by a giant *papier-mâché* statue of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.⁵ Within the gallery space, the perimeter of the exhibition was marked by petrol barrels that contained plastic cactuses; inside, long vinyl stickers covered the gallery's spotless walls, giving them a more "third-world-Mexican" look, one that is defective and rough. A little chapel was also installed in the middle of the exhibition space, showing the *Virgen de Guadalupe* next to representations of Frida Kahlo and an assemblage of joyful kitsch that must have earned the curator some prestige in the scrapbooking communities of the world. It was, overall, like a page in a tourism catalogue, a parody of identity and ritual that claimed in its curatorial statement: "The *rebozo* (a traditional and versatile textile apparently better known for being one of Frida Kahlo's favourite accessories) has [...] become an integral part of daily life and represents the journey from birth to death, being used as both a baby carrier as well as a shroud. Most Mexican women today own at least one *rebozo*."

The *Taller de Exposiciones Potenciales*, or in English, Atelier of Potential Exhibitions, took notice of the exhibition and upon an invitation from Divus, an exhibition space in London, proposed a video, a performance (documented in video) and a mural as counterpoint. The performance took place inside the Fashion and Textile Museum; in the video we see a man, the artist Oscar Holloway, walking through the galleries looking at the exhibition. Sometimes he acts as a mannequin while wearing a black polo shirt that has a green polo shirt stitched on the back. The green polo shirt has become popular on México's counterfeit market after Texan drug lord

La Barbie was photographed wearing one and smiling with scorn after his arrest in August 2010. (He is known for decapitating his enemies and is called "Barbie" due to his white skin and blond hair.) On the streets, vendors were quick to react to what was destined to be the year's biggest fashion trend. They wrote "La Barbie" over the framed and laminated picture of the *capo* that worked as an advertisement: "T-Shirt \$130 POLO FERRARI AMERICA EAGLE" (sic). For just £6, people could associate themselves with their new idol, a bloodthirsty criminal who, nonetheless, represented a social mobility denied to most members of Mexican society. La Barbie was able to escape and overcome his social background, mingling with the country's elite in México City's most expensive restaurants and nightclubs. Police interrogations that were quickly uploaded to YouTube had him describing how he hired famous performers, had model girlfriends and wore designer clothes. Some YouTube users comment on how handsome he is; "I wish I had met you before," one woman says.⁶

Back in London, a counterfeit green polo shirt brought from México found its way into the Fashion and Textile Museum, parasitising on the back of the performer and creating the promised "intercultural exchange" that the original *MADE IN* show had promised but had failed to deliver. It was not an exchange between Mexican and British culture, but rather an intercultural exchange from within the same culture, one that questioned the Mexican rhetoric of traditional anachronisms convenient to diplomatic representations abroad; one that demanded an acknowledgement of the actual, not so joyful contemporary culture in México. The Atelier of Potential Exhibitions framed the piece with the same bombastic institutional validation used in the original exhibition, appropriating the press release for *MADE IN MEXICO* to eloquently claim:

"Still woven using traditional techniques, Polo Ralph Lauren remains an important emblem of contemporary Mexican life and it is celebrated for the Chinese craft skills involved in its production. Polo Ralph Lauren is an integral part of daily life and represents the journey from birth to death, being used as both a baby carrier as well as a shroud. Most Mexican men today own at least one Polo Ralph Lauren."

Requiem

On 26 September 2014, a group of 43 left-wing student teachers who had protested against the Mexican government's funding and hiring policies for teachers, were kidnapped by local authorities. The students were later handed over to the *Guerreros Unidos* (United Warriors), a local cartel composed mainly of people between 16- and 25-years-old. The *Guerreros Unidos* were not only smugglers and drug dealers, but apparently they also functioned as hit-men for the local government of Iguala, a small town on the Pacific coast of México. Over a month later, the whereabouts of the students remained unknown; the search for them revealed a number of mass graves, each one with its own share of unidentified corpses.

A month later in London, a couple of days before *Día de Muertos*, Diego Gómez Pickering, the Ambassador of México to the United Kingdom, opened the exhibition *Contemporary Mexican Art*. There was no shortage of *papel picado*, colourful *Día de Muertos* paraphernalia and margaritas sponsored by Tequila José Cuervo. Instagram pictures were taken, hash-tags were circulated, and "generous sponsors" were thanked "first and foremost" while overly sweetened tequila drowned every trace of social reality.

©RexisteMX (2014)



1 Hal Foster, "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic", *October* 78 (1996), 124.

2 A melodramatic and serialised TV program that typically inundates all public television channels during prime time hours in México and other countries of Latin America. Mexican *telenovelas* are especially popular in Eastern Europe and stories about the extreme popularity of some of its past stars (e.g. Rogelio Guerra) in places like the former URSS are well documented.

3 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), 166.

4 Hal Foster, *op cit*, 23.

5 A traditional folk art in which tissue paper of all colours is punched following intricate designs. In México it is used (and until recently, exclusively) to adorn altars during *Día de Muertos* celebrations but perhaps following its popularity abroad it has become a common ornament in all kinds of parties and ceremonies.

6 "La Barbie confesses," YouTube. Accessed 15 October 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TimMsPOESHl8>. (The complete video of La Barbie's interrogation has been broken down into small clips, look them up at your own risk as videos of his infamous executions can easily pop out).

7 "Made in Mexico: The Rebozo in Art, Culture & Fashion," Fashion and Textile Museum. Accessed 15 October 2014, http://fimlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/MADEinMEXICO_press_release_13Feb.pdf.

THE BAD ABJECT-OBJECT

by Kymia Nawabi

In my teenage years, my body developed social anxiety and panic disorder, as well as numerous phobias. Nervousness and frequent sobbing produced constant lumps in my throat that made swallowing, eating and breathing difficult, resulting in the development of pseudodysphagia, a choking phobia. I also constantly experienced urinary incontinence from the nervousness. As if I was a newborn baby (at the age of 14), my mother would feed me pureed meals and I was eventually taught to eat solid foods again. Training the body to breathe, eat and control urination all defined a stage of my life I call my "second infancy."

Existing as part infant during my teen years opened the world of fantasy to me again and helped me demystify and understand my experiences. Growing up as a minority, an Iranian-American, in Durham, North Carolina, I experienced mistreatment in school, which was the major cause of the development of my severe anxiety disorders. These experiences also led me to realise that my psyche and soul are structured around very conscious fantasies that transform into my internal phantoms and panorama. My inner illusionistic world allows the literal to be transformed into symbols and metaphors, consequently permitting me to organise my disorders and chaos in a meaningful way.

After years of medication and therapy, it was making art that became the true remedy for me. My fear of interacting with society and others was cured by the valour and catharsis of self-portraiture, which allowed me to share my stories with the world. I approached making art from a psychoanalytical point of view, turning myself inside out for the viewer to see my innermost parts and understand how I operated, felt and saw myself. In a very open manner, I described how I perceived myself as a disgusting, horrific and self-destructive being.

Fuelled by my own desire to fully understand my artistic practice and myself, I began to research psychoanalytic theories, mainly Melanie Klein's object-relations analysis and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. According to Kleinian theory, the soul and mind are structured through conscious fantasies, produced and driven by bodily experiences. These fantasies, present from early infancy on, are not states to which the individual can regress, but are rather ever-present positions in which one can become stuck:

"Constructing her model of subjectivity around the infant [...] Klein places at the center of her model not the unconscious, but fantasy — fantasy understood not as a work of the unconscious mind, but as a bodily operation."¹

Klein believes that the infant experiences a part-object logic, where the child understands an object, such as the mother, in a disjointed fashion. An example of this is the mother's breast; it is sucked on and bitten by the infant's mouth and teeth, producing a system of these components through invented mutating, splitting and joining part-object systems within the fantasy of aggression.

The infant has turned its source of stress into the bad object and can experience "splitting", which means it cannot keep two contradictory thoughts or feelings in its mind at the same time. It is my

understanding that the "splitting" in the example given is where the infant loves and hates the objects of its desire and stress. The mother can only be partially understood as "part-object", such as the breast pertaining to being fed, in turn making the infant feel good. When this object and function are not present, this creates the anxiety that sparks the object relations to occur, relating the breast to the teeth, to the mouth and so on.

This also means that it can no longer distinguish between inside and outside, the body and its environment. A de-centering and a collapse of the body has taken place; its atmosphere in turn lets a world materialise that is structured around the bad object.²

In both Kleinian analysis and Kristeva's understanding of the abject, there is an overlap in the disruption of identity and boundaries, where confusion and breakdown in meaning lead to a blurring of the distinction between subject and object. Kelly Oliver, a scholar of inter-subjectivity and feminist philosophy, writes:

"The abject is disgusting. It makes you want to vomit. It is what is on the border, what doesn't respect borders. It is neither one nor the other [...] it is a relationship to a boundary and represents what has been 'jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin'. The abject is what threatens identity; it is neither good nor evil, subject nor object, ego nor unconscious, but something that threatens these very distinctions."³

I perceived myself in fantasy as the bad abject-object. Thinking in terms of Klein's theory, I had been lodged in my disturbed psyche from my second infancy onwards and as a result I had become the part-object. My experience with "splitting" was my simultaneous existence as both an American and an Iranian, as both infant and adult, culminating in the fight between the urge to allow my disorders to take over and kill me and my will to live and more importantly, to survive. I chose to survive.

With each self-portrait, I reinvented myself, using it as a form of catharsis, purging my abject self. In reference to Kristeva, this meant that I had to again wean myself from my mother – my maker – to re-create my own identity.⁴ I took it even further, weaning myself from myself, from whom I had been when I was consumed by my disorders. To mark this process, I changed my name when I began college.

...the soul and mind are
structured through conscious
fantasies, produced and
driven by bodily experiences.

The anxiety disorders that placed me in a state of infancy for most of my teen years, made me a late bloomer. Many experiences that normally mark the epoch of adolescence, I had not experienced as a teenager. In 2009 and 2010, my drawings and paintings were an examination of my earliest yet still belated experiences, acts and reactions connected to love, jealousy, sexuality and sex. I described what the body and mind experience during foreplay, sex and after – all things that people mainly prefer not to discuss, because they are thought taboo, yet I constantly wonder and fuss about them.

Three earlier works in this series are a close examination of what coming of age felt like to me including the portrayal of my perceived self during this time in my life. In *What Is Mine Is Yours and What Is Yours Is Mine*, remnants of hair are incorporated into the portrait, covering the body of the figure, giving her a monstrous, beastly, unfeminine and unintentionally unkempt appearance. In *Everyone Is Expected To Come and Cum*, baby clothes linger among lingerie, and in *And Next, Next... Next...*, there are multiple partners participating in transcendental sexual experiences, but what is most apparent in all of these works and is still present, is the abject.



© Kymia Nawabi
*What Is Mine Is Yours
and What Is Yours Is Mine*
(2009) Acrylic, ink,
watercolour on paper, 18 x 18 in
In possession of Dave Salo

© Kymia Nawabi
And Next, Next... Next... (2009)
Acrylic, ink and watercolour
on paper, 24 x 24 in
In possession of Kymia Nawabi



© Kymia Nawabi
Everyone is Expected to
Come and Cum (2010)
Ink and watercolour
on paper, 17 x 24 in
In possession of Kymia Nawabi

In 2010, due to a loss in my family, I began making work about death, the afterlife, rebirth, spirits and souls. Three drawings, *Dedicated To Azza*, *Atmospheric Shifts* and *Dream Home* are all centered around the image of the corpse, what Kristeva claims to be the primary force behind abjection as an act that leads to a breakdown in the symbolic order and meaning: "The Corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection."⁵

Within my works from 2010 to the present I want to confront and decipher death by creating drawings through continued introspection and borrowing from other cultures burial rites and beliefs concerning the body and the spirit's path to the afterlife. Although I am illustrating the abject cadaver, burials and even accessories such as the coffin, I want to defy Kristeva's understanding of the corpse. Instead I want to visually discuss death as if it is not cast off and does have a place in the symbolic order as defined by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, to find some solace in what may be an uncertainty. In my research, I do not look to God or science, but rather to mythology and alchemy. I found the latter to be more aligned with my ways of thinking and believing, in connection to shared attempts to understand our common phenomena.

From this point, from my own wonderings concerning our world and its inhabitants, my work portrays and wants to personify our abject experiences as humans. Each of my characters and landscapes in their entirety represents the abnormalities of existence. These manifest out of the clash between our ordinary capacity and our daily internal fantasy lives: our mind, soul and body's intangible, yet real and deeply felt phantom world, not sensed by others.

It is not where we are or what we are doing in the physical world that I am interested in, but rather where actual life places us in our minds; who we are and what we are doing. This is what I want to re-create. Thus, through the lens of my own experiences, obsessions and observations, I want the viewer to see and acknowledge the complex make-up of who we are that makes us dwell on what we are: the abject human.

1 Mignon Nixon, "Bad Enough Mother", *October* 71 (1995), 73-79.

2 *ibid.*, 8 & 79-81.

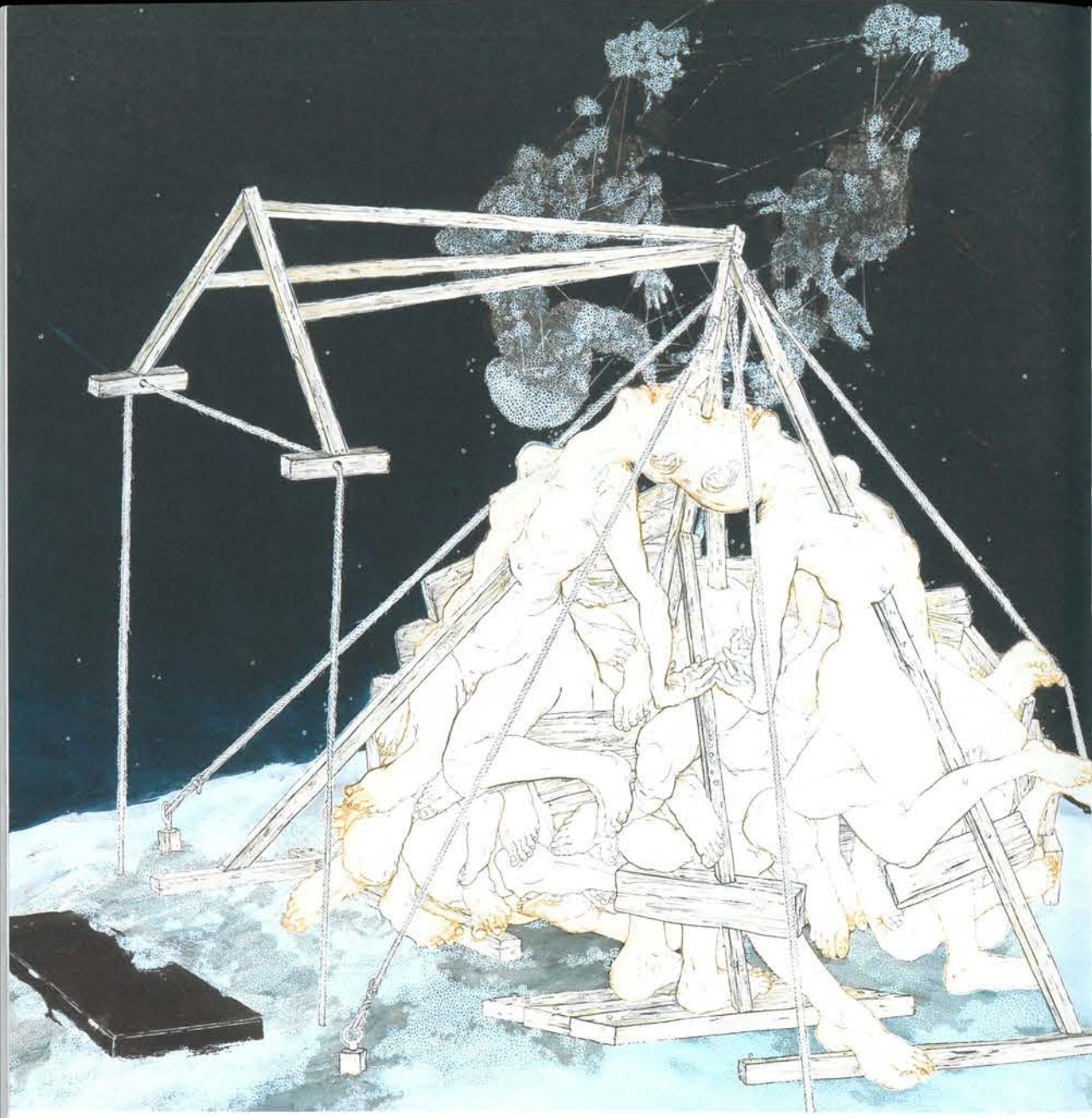
3 Kelly Oliver, "Kristeva's Imaginary Father and the Crisis in the Paternal Function", *Diacritics* 21: 2/3 (1991), 48.

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

5 *ibid.*



© Kymia Nawabi
Atmospheric Shifts (2011)
Acrylic, acrylic ink,
watercolour, watercolour
pen on paper, 24 x 24 in
In possession of Kymia Nawabi



© Kymia Nawabi
Dream Home (2011)
Acrylic, ink and watercolour
on paper, 24 x 24 in
In possession of Kymia Nawabi



© Kymia Nawabi
Dedicated to Azza (2010)
Gouache, ink, watercolour on
paper, 17 x 24 in
In possession of Luke Brian

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