

The Aesthetics of Abject Art

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1 The Visualization of Our 'Internal Nature'

The characters in Cindy Sherman's series of the latter half of the 1970s *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) lost their identities in her color photos of the eighties, and increasingly showed their solitude, confusion, and despair. It became crucial in the series *Disasters* (1986), where we are confronted with the most unpleasant, disgusting things that we cannot physiologically/psychologically bear to look at—a decomposed body swarmed over by flies (*Untitled #173*), rotten and moldy leftovers (*Untitled #145, 175, 236, 239*), spaghetti made of giant worms (*Untitled #172*), etc.

It is not only in the work of Sherman that bodily substances such as blood, urine, and excrement, or vomit and decay intrude into contemporary art. Since the seventies various types of so-called 'body art', such as performances concerning female physiology or sex organs, have appeared on the art scene. These feminist arts are the project to recover the identity as women which resists the repression and alienation of the feminine image idealized by the male gaze, by exposing the naked women's bodies with all their physiology and desire. As Mary Douglas says, spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth from the orifices of the body "have traversed the boundary of the body",¹ which threatens the culture supporting the fetish of the glossy skin of women.

It was Julia Kristeva that indicated the ambivalence of the skin separating the inside and outside of the body with the word 'abjection'. Abjection is an action and reaction of "spasms and vomiting" against "what I permanently thrust aside in order to live"² such as a piece of filth, waste, or dung, body fluids, shit, a wound with blood and pus, the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay. So abjection is one of "the primers of my culture." But on the other hand, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*", because these 'abjects' are what I assimilate and excrete. Then Kristeva directly associates them with the dogmas of Freud and Lacan. The abject 'takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death.'³ In this ambiguousness, the abjects keep fascinating the 'Ego' in its unconscious old stratum, and are caused to exist by enjoyment ("jouissance") at violence and pain, which is related to "perversion".

I will not argue about the dogmas of Freud and Lacan because I am in no position to judge whether they are respectable theories or mere fictions. But it is a fact that contemporary art pays attention to what are named 'abjects' and is trying to visualize them. The matter

¹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Penguin Books, 1970, p. 145.

² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, transl. by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia U. P., 1982, p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 15.

at issue here is a sort of transcendence beyond control by ego, spirit, reason or culture, and the transcendent 'raw nature' within us humans.

It is not only feminist art that tries to visualize this 'nature' as our internal transcendence, violating cultural taboos. In 1987, Andres Serrano exhibited a photo-work which incurred intense blame from the American Family Association (AFA) and conservative Senators. The work—a small wood-plastic crucifix floating in a deep golden, rosy glow—according to Lucy Lippard, "would have raised no hackles had the title not given away the process of its making."⁴ The title *Piss Christ* changes the context in which the work is seen, and "transforms this easily digestible cultural icon into a sign of rebellion or an object of disgust." Now, can these projects which use disgusting 'ugly' materials really be art if the *ars* called art is a field of social practice and a discipline which has mainly concerned itself with appreciation of the aesthetic? In order to answer this question, we must newly consider the meaning of 'ugliness' which has been a blind spot of modern discourse on 'the aesthetic' based on the pleasure gained from the beautiful.

2 'The Aesthetic' and Ugliness

At the opening of 'The Part I, Chapter 1. The Analysis of the Beautiful' of *Critique of Judgment*, Kant says that "if we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not...we use imagination...to refer the presentation (Vorstellung) to the subject and his feeling of pleasure or displeasure."⁵ But in fact, the judgment of taste is exclusively based on 'pleasure (Lust)'. Indeed the sublime is 'unpleasant' for sensation and imagination which cannot be adapted to its dimensions. Yet, it also brings about a sort of pleasure, "negative pleasure" experienced not by sensation but by reason. What relationship displeasure has with the judgment of taste remains unclear. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant mentions little about ugliness. In the posthumous manuscript of Anthropology, he enumerates pleasure (A), displeasure (-A), and indifference (non A) as the setoff of the two ($A-A=0$), which correspond to 'beautiful', 'ugly', and 'ordinary' respectively⁶. The Ugly (-A) refers to something contrary to the beautiful (A), but what 'non A' (as the setoff between the beautiful and the ugly) means stays unclear. In *Logik Philippi* (1772), Kant says more clearly that "ugliness is something positive, not mere absence of beauty, but the existence (Daseyn) of what is contrary to beauty"⁷, which is not lack but deprivation and therefore corresponds to error and illness. In opposition to it, what is not beautiful nor ugly is dry and tasteless, which lies in "artificiality (das Gekünstelte)", i.e., in the fact that "the art is faulty". In *Logik Pöhlitz* (1789), Kant definitely insists that "to discriminate the beautiful from the non beautiful (not

⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter, in: *Art in America*, April 1990, vol. 78, No.4, p. 239.

⁵ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, p. 44.

⁶ Kant, Anthropologischer Nachlaß, in: *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Bd. XV, Dritte Abtheilung, Handschriftlicher Nachlaß, 2. Bd., Erste Hälfte (*Kant's handschriftlicher Nachlaß*, Bd. II, erste Hälfte, Anthropologie, erste Hälfte, Berlin, 1913), S. 296.

from the ugly because what is not beautiful is not always ugly) is taste”⁸. So, for Kant, the pure aesthetic judgment is that of whether an object is beautiful or not, and the basis of the verdict is whether it gives pleasure or not. The ‘non beautiful’ as evidenced in a lack of pleasure is a deformity such as the lack or deficiency of the right order, harmony, and balance in the composition of colors, forms, or tones; our aesthetic response to it might be not displeasure but indifference as ‘non pleasure’. By contrast, to judge an object as ugly because of displeasure is, we should say, not a purely aesthetic verdict, but rather a negative judgment based on physiological sensation. As to the ugly, Kant mentions it just once in *Critique of Judgment*: “Fine art shows its superiority precisely in this, that it describes things beautifully that in nature we would dislike or find ugly. The Furies, diseases, devastations of war, and so on are all harmful; and yet they can be described, or even presented in a painting, very beautifully.”⁹

Karl Rosenkranz’s *Aesthetics of the Ugly* (1853), which is the first systematic theory of the ugly in modern aesthetics, deals mainly with those various ugly things represented in fine arts and literature. Here too, the ugly is “the unaesthetic (das Unaesthetische)” and “the opposite of the beautiful”, but on the other, it is “negative beauty (das Negativschöne)”¹⁰ or “aesthetic ugliness (das ästhetisch Häßliche)”. And then, the beautiful and the ugly are considered as two poles of a scale of aesthetic categories. But in fact, the ugly of Rosenkranz is submitted to the rules of the beautiful and “idealized” for the wholeness of a work, and transformed into the comic whereby “in this reconciliation arises unlimited serenity which causes us to laugh and smile”¹¹. The ugly represented in art can be reabsorbed into the idea of the beautiful so long as it is comic in the sense of one of the aesthetic categories such as the sublime or the grotesque, which do not belong to the beautiful in the strict sense, but to “the beautiful in the sense of aesthetic harmony, the return from contradiction to the unity”¹².

Though Rosenkranz might not be conscious of it, in his argument we can find two other kinds of the ‘ugly’. When he says that “if a form is not there a content should have, we compare the content with its presupposed form and feel this deficiency as ugliness”¹³, it is a relative ugliness violating “the general rule of the beautiful”, which is equivalent to Kant’s ‘non beautiful’. Yet, he also refers to the ugly as literally repulsive: a product of nature (such as sweat, slime, faeces, pus and so on) which “organisms cut off from themselves and leave to putrefaction” is just “disgusting (das Ekelhafte)” – something which “subverts the orderly

⁷ I. Kant, Logik Phillips, in: *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Band. XXIV, Vierte Abtheilung, Vorlesungen, erster Band, erste Hälfte, Berlin, 1966 (*Kant’s Vorlesungen*, hrsg. von der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Bd. I, Vorlesungen über Logik, erste Hälfte, Berlin, 1966), S. 364.

⁸ I. Kant, Logik Pöhlitz, in: *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. XXIV, S. 514.

⁹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 180.

¹⁰ Karl Rosenkranz, *Aesthetik des Häßlichen*, Königsberg, 1853, S. 5.

¹¹ Ibid., S. 7.

¹² Ibid., S. 53.

¹³ Ibid., S. 55.

process of nature and degrades a mouth to an anus”¹⁴ and therefore can never be an aesthetic object.

Umberto Eco, in his *On Ugliness*, asks “whether it is possible to make an aesthetic judgment of ugliness, given that it arouses emotional reactions such as disgust”¹⁵. He fairly distinguishes three different phenomena: “ugliness in itself (excrement, decomposing carrion, or someone covered with sores who gives off a nauseating stench)”; “formal ugliness, understood as a lack of equilibrium in the organic relationship between the parts of a whole”; and “*the artistic portrayal of both*” (as almost all aesthetic theories recognized that “any form of ugliness can be redeemed by a faithful and efficacious artistic portrayal”). Yet, Eco himself suspends decision about the possibility of an aesthetic judgment of ugliness.

3 The Aesthetics of Ugliness

Here we use the word ‘aesthetic’, according to the tradition, in the widest sense of ‘aesthetically pleasing’, so that it means not only the emotional effect of the beautiful but also those effects aroused by aesthetic positivity such as admiration, approbation, and appreciation of the sublime, the tragic, the comic, the picturesque, the grotesque, and the ‘interesting’ or the ‘characteristic’ named by German Romanticism and so on. Now, as we saw, formal ugliness as ‘non beautiful’ or the lack of aesthetic pleasure means an ‘aesthetic’ quality which does not reach the standard of aesthetic positivity set by each particular age and culture, and is in this sense insufficient and deformed.

In his article *Aesthetic Concepts* (1959), Frank Sibley mentioned little about ugliness. But in his posthumous manuscript *Some Notes on Ugliness*, he includes ‘ugly’ among “aesthetic negatives”¹⁶ (garish, gaudy, trite, ungainly, plain, very ordinary, etc.) which deform and denormalize aesthetic positive qualities. He finds the plain or ordinary aesthetically ‘neutral’ which he puts at “a zero degree of aesthetic value”¹⁷ in a scale of aesthetic quality which has the “ideal” of beauty at the one pole and ugliness violating maximally the standard of beauty at the opposite pole. These poles of ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’ are “somewhat analogous to other adjective pairs of ‘opposites’ which increase in degree in opposite directions from a central zero point, as sweet and sour do from tastelessness, loving and hating from indifference, and so on”¹⁸. Other aesthetic negatives than ugliness are put in their respective proper positions on this scale according to the degree of deviation and deformity, while ugliness is put at the negative pole as maximum deviation from the ideal standard of beauty, but ugliness in this sense is still a sort of negative ‘aesthetic’ value. The ugly is generally considered to be what repels or arouses revulsion and disgust, but Sibley thinks that it is not likely to be straight-

¹⁴ Ibid., S. 170.

¹⁵ Umberto Eco, *On Ugliness*, transl. by Alastair McEwen, Rizzoli, 2007, p. 19.

¹⁶ Frank Sibley, *Some Notes on Ugliness*, in: *Approach to Aesthetics*, ed. by J. Benson, B. Redfern, J. R. Cox, Clarendon Press, 2001, p. 197.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 192.

forward. A toad's face might repel us or blotched skin or a bloated body, but if we see them "only as abstract coloring and patterns, far from being repulsive, they might be very pretty, even beautiful and attractive. In most cases we can make quite cool judgments as to this or that being ugly. We do not have to show or feel disgust, distance, or repulsion". In fact, "many instances of ugliness are only rather or somewhat ugly—insufficient strongly to repel us"¹⁹. We might "coolly judge someone ugly and not feel strong aversion unless he or she had to be embraced, had to come too close for comfort and equanimity". Certainly, Sibley also recognizes the existence of 'ugliness itself' different from aesthetic ugliness, "those that have something of "the dirty, squalid, polluted, diseased, spoiled, degraded, coarse, base, subnormal, brutish or subhuman, even foul or evil, either physically or spiritually—as well as threatening, dangerous, or frightening" and are "conditions against which there might be natural responses of distress, aversion, revulsion". But among what Sibley names in his list are 'aesthetic negatives' and 'ugliness itself' mixed, which makes his argument unclear.

What Kant and Rosenkranz indicate in artistic representations, and Eco calls 'artistic ugliness' is already discussed by Aristotle: even something disgusting such as abominable animals or corpses, given in represented images, can be pleasant for us who can look at them coolly and make acquaintance with them, or admire the painter's skillful 'ars=art'²⁰. Indeed, the examples are too many to enumerate in the history of fine arts: the bloody scene of passion and martyrdom in Grünewald's *Crucifixion* for the altar at Isenheim (1515) or Memling's *Christ at the Pillar* (1485-90); the very real representation of brutal execution or disgusting disease in Caravaggio's *Judith Cutting off the Head of Holofernes* (1599), Gérard David's *The Flying of Sisamnes* (1498), or Gaetano Zumbo's waxwork *The Plague* (1691-94); countless depictions of excretion, vomit, and the obscene in the seventeenth century Dutch genre paintings like those of Bosch and Bruegel.

People have usually found in these representations a paradox of the beauty of the grotesque, or the beauty of murder and cruelty, which is similar to the well-known traditional paradox of the pleasure of tragedy. They have often associated the pleasure of that sort with sado-masochism which is supposed to be rooted in human nature. But, as I have already pointed out in my papers²¹, most of these arguments make an error by confounding what the work represents with its emotional effects on audiences. A description that 'this piece is sad' can either mean that 'it depicts a sad scene as a motif', or that 'it makes the audience sad', which refer to two different facts. Similarly, we must distinguish the representation of ugly objects like abominable animals, corpses, or some bloody scene from its 'aesthetically' pleasing effects on an audience. What Rosenkranz calls 'aesthetic ugliness', and Eco 'artistic ugliness', means an aesthetic category as an artistic and aesthetically pleasing depiction of

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 204.

²⁰ Aristoteles, *Ars poetica*, 1448b10-b19.

²¹ Kiyokazu Nishimura, On the Aporia of the Pleasure of Tragedy, in: *JTLA (Journal of the Faculty of Letters. The University of Tokyo. Aesthetics)*, vol. 34, 2010, pp. 23-32.; *Fiction no Bigaku (The Aesthetics of Fiction)*, Keiso-syobo, Tokyo, 1993.

objects which are themselves ugly and disgusting. Accordingly, this must not be called 'ugly' in the original sense in which it arouses revulsion and makes us avert our eyes.

When poets and painters choose those motifs which are in reality ugly and unpleasant, they handle these materials, as Lessing already says, according to the difference of each proper medium and 'ars=techne' in order for readers and audience to be able to accept and perceive some aesthetic qualities such as the comic, "a shiver and a fear"²²—in truth, it should be called 'a thrill and suspense'—, irony and humor without averting their eyes because of revulsion and disgust, which is the task of 'ars=art' of poem or painting as an aesthetic discipline. Yet, it is not always true that any representation can transform ugly and repulsive objects in reality into harmless apparent images ('Schein') which are objects of pure and 'cool' aesthetic judgment cut off from threat and repulsion, not in the way that Sibley suggests. For people at that time, it could be very difficult to look at Zumbo's *The Plague* aesthetically, all the more for its being a realistic waxwork which might have been produced with the aim of providing a document or a specimen, and a lesson of 'memento mori'. If so, it would have been intended to give audiences a feeling of literal repulsion and disgust and to make them reflect on their lives.

Indeed, Kant also refers in *Critique of Judgment* to 'ugliness itself' which can never be an object of aesthetic judgment, and therefore not 'non beautiful' nor 'artistic ugliness', in the sentences following the previous quotation (see note 9): "There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in conformity with nature without obliterating all aesthetic liking and hence artistic beauty: that ugliness which arouses *disgust*. For in that strange sensation, which rests on nothing but imagination, the object is presented as if it insisted, as it were, on our enjoying it even though that is just what we are forcefully resisting; and hence the artistic presentation of the object is no longer distinguished in our sensation from the nature of this object itself, so that it cannot possibly be considered beautiful."²³ Kant here is certainly talking about ugliness which causes disgust as a sensory physiological reaction radically different from the 'non beautiful' or 'aesthetic ugliness'. The reason why it cannot be a motif of artistic representation is that it forces us to accept the repulsive quality it has in its reality even though it is now changed into a mere apparent image by art, against which we cannot help resisting with disgust in order to reject 'tasting' it and to discharge it. Even when it is transformed into an apparent image by artistic representation, it cannot be accepted in aesthetic judgment and transfigured into aesthetic quality. On the contrary, it destroys the aesthetic dimension of the artistic image and exposes utterly the disgusting nature of its sensory physiological reality.

'Taste (Geschmack, goût)' literally means to adopt through the mouth to eat and digest, and 'disgust (Ekel, dégoût)' to reject swallowing, and to excrete out of the mouth. As Derrida says, the mouth is a dominant organ and border dividing and connecting the inside

²² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Laokoon, in: *Werke und Briefe in Zwölf Bänden*, hrsg. von Wilfried Bamer, Bd. 5/2, Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1990, S. 167.

²³ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 180.

and the outside of our being. It is also the place where the word is uttered and the “logo-phonocentric system”²⁴ of the world is established, and at the same time the “place of gustation or consummation” where pleasure is ordered by discriminating between the edible and the inedible. But just what causes disgust, “the disgusting (le dégoûtant)”, uses such violence as to dismantle the system of *Critique of Judgment* in which the mouth as a boundary orders pleasure, as Rosenkranz says that the disgusting ‘subverts the orderly process of nature and degrades a mouth to an anus’. It is eliminated from this system of aesthetic judgment as “the absolute other of the system”, and at the same time as “the boundary (internal and external) which designates its limit and the cadre of its *parergon*”, and is in itself “what never admits to be digested, represented”, “obscene”, and therefore “unspeakable in its singularity”. It is the disgusting itself which we cannot take into the mouth and enjoy, nor assimilate, and have “*an urge to vomit*”. Confronting it, we can just say: “*what is it ?*”, and answer: what “*compels to be vomited*”. Yet Derrida says that every philosophical question already determines a cadre of a system, a parergon, trying to name the unspeakable, which has an effect of “paregoric remedy”: it “lightens by speaking, it consoles, it exhorts with words”. For as soon as philosophy names it “the vomited (le vomi)”, this term recovers “the system of the beautiful” which has been at a crisis of destruction in the way that it puts the disgusting thing at the mouth and “substitutes...the oral for the anal”²⁵, so that the unspeakable absolute other is somehow withdrawn into the system as “*its own* other”. So this term ‘le vomi’, Derrida says, is still “an elixir for philosophy in its bad taste itself”²⁶. If it is true, then the projects of contemporary art to represent and to make us confront somehow our internal nature (i.e., the absolute other which we humans can just name ‘what causes disgust itself’) can also be said to be types of ‘ars=art’ as an aesthetic paregoric remedy, even though it is of such bad taste.

4 The Aestheticization of Ugliness—Anti-Art

Certainly in the works of Sherman and Serrano an ‘anti-art’ dominates which tries to subvert the order of pleasure and of culture articulated on the basis of *fine arts* and *good taste* by touching on the disgusting, ‘ugliness itself’. But essential for Sherman might be, as Norman Bryson says, a *new* relationship between representation and the real in art which has traditionally been an *ars* of mimesis. Bryson compares the bodies in *Fairy Tales* with such tortured and mangled bodies as those of Zunbo’s work, displayed in a house of wax or a chamber of horrors, yet at the same time, he recognizes a crucial difference between the two in regard to “the kind of representational regime within which each operates.” The waxwork museum is “an extreme product of the post-Renaissance aesthetic of representation as the duplicate of a physically stable referent”, and “the body is presumed simply to exist out there in the world.”²⁷ As opposed to it, in modern ages, as Foucault indicates, “the whole project

²⁴ Jaques Derrida, *Economimesis*, in: *Mimesis des articulations*, Flammarion, Paris, 1975, p. 87.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 93.

of making the body disappear that characterizes the Enlightenment” had been advancing, and the postmodern has been reducing it to mere superficial images as simulacra. Yet, there still exists pain felt at the body which is beyond our powers to represent before others and cannot be channeled into signs and words, and the body is never deprived of being ‘the site of the real’. In this sense, Bryson calls Sherman’s images “Gothic Revival in the postmodern”²⁸. Hal Foster also says that in some images of Sherman “we glimpse what it might be like... to touch the obscene object, without a screen for protection.”²⁹ Obscene means ‘Ob-scene’ and “suggests an attack on the scene of representation, on the image-screen.”. The reason why contemporary artists like Sherman are fascinated with trauma of the obscene and abjection without any protection of screen is that they want to possess again “the real, repressed in poststructuralist postmodernism.”³⁰

Bryson finds the “comedy of the macabre”³¹ in Sherman’s *Sex Pictures*. This comedy cannot yet be reduced to traditional aesthetic categories such as the ugly, the grotesque, or the comic. Sherman herself says in her own note: “funny becomes cute and doesn’t work. Funny should move towards terror...The shock (or terror) should come from what the sexual elements are really standing for—death, power, aggression, beauty, sadness, etc.”³² And the aesthetic strategy Sherman took to go in the reverse direction against the traditional grotesque is her method already developed for *Film Stills*, that is to use and cite the grammar of Hollywood horror movies which “offer us a next frame which, however terrifying, can make the image intelligible as part of the story, and hence part of a pretense.”³³ Important for Sherman is to make the disgusting ugly reality of the world funny in order not to make the audience avert their eyes from it but to excite their interest in it by means of the ‘ars’ and discipline of art persistently concerning the aesthetic, which must not relieve them with aesthetic resolution but make them experience the secretion of the unspeakable by suspending them in uneasiness and fear at the edge of representation.

The works of Serrano also make us stand at the edge of representation. Serrano himself said about *Piss Crist*: “my intent was to aestheticize Christ. Beautiful light, I think, aestheticizes the picture. Visually, it doesn’t denigrate Christ in any way”³⁴, and also said: “in my pictures piss is not something repugnant, it’s something very beautiful, it’s a beautiful

²⁷ Norman Bryson, *House of Wax* (1993), in: *Cindy Sherman 1975-1993*, Text by Rosalind Krauss with an essay by Johanna Burton, Rizzoli, 1993, p. 217.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁹ Hal Foster, *Obscene, Abject, Traumatic* (1996), in: *Cindy Sherman*, October Files 6, ed. by Johanna Burton, The MIT Press, 2006, p. 179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

³¹ Bryson, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

³² *Cindy Sherman. Retrospective*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, Thames & Hudson, 1997, p. 164.

³³ Amelia Arenas, *Afraid of the Dark: Cindy Sherman and the Grotesque Imagination*, in: *Cindy Sherman*, ed. by Sachiko Ozaki, The Asahi Shimbun Company, 1996, p. 46.

³⁴ cf. William Niederkorn, *Artist Defends Depiction of Christ*, in: *Boston Sunday Globe*, August 20, 1989, p. 89.

glowing light.”³⁵ But insofar as “blood and urine are hypersemantic, impossible to tame by abstraction or containment”³⁶, as Serrano himself also recognized, the aestheticization of Serrano cannot be that of formalism. Serrano said in an interview that he was “thinking of Mondrian’s simplicity and elegance”³⁷ when making *Milk Blood* (1986), and that his ideas of *Blood* (1987), *Milk* (1987), and *Piss* (1987) owed something to Yves Klein’s monochrome paintings. Though he compared his own works with pure abstractions of Mondrian and Yves Klein, such semantically overcharged materials as blood and urine cannot but crash through the border of pure abstraction. Just in this contradiction and tension between pure abstraction and hypersemantic vital fluids lies Serrano’s aesthetic strategy to go from form to content of real bodily substances by reversing the direction of modernist formalistic aestheticization which neglects real content, which might have something in common with that of Sherman.

5 The Border Transgression of Ugliness–Non-Art

In fact, there exists one more version of contemporary ‘abject art’. It is more radical body art which responds to that of the sixties, already celebrated in museums as avant-garde, “with actions and performances involving conceivable or actual danger and pain”³⁸: Chris Burden’s performance *Deadman* (1972) which made the real possibility of death a part of the work by having himself put in a bag and left on the freeway in California, or *Trans-fixed* (1974) in which Burden was nailed up on the roof of a Volkswagen just as Christ; Orlan’s performance *The Re-incarnation of Saint-Orlan* (since 1990) which transformed her face successively by cosmetic surgery; Marina Abramovich’s performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) in which she permitted spectators to abuse her at their will for six hours, using instruments of pain and pleasure including a razor; the performances of self-mutilation by Rudolf Schwarzkogler and David Nebreda; and Hermann Nitsch’s performance of primitive and magic ritual full of the blood of lambs and bulls *The Orgiastic Mysterious Theater* (*Das Orgien Mysterien Theater*, 1958-), and so on.

Dawn Perlmutter says that “the goal of these artists was personal transformation and attempts to reclaim the spiritual”³⁹ by dismantling “personal and societal boundaries through physical sacrifice as a ritual form of purification”, and that “the result was unconventional forms of the sacred manifested in art that attacked fundamental values of Western culture.” Yet, even if these performances are attempts at personal spiritual ‘transformation’ and a sort of therapy for the performers themselves, they are performed as *art* before an audience, requiring them to participate in and respond to them. So, Perlmutter cannot avoid asking:

³⁵ cf. Derek Guthrie, Taboo Artist: Serrano Speaks, in: *New Art Examiner*, September 1989, p. 45.

³⁶ Wendy Steiner, Introduction: Below Skin-deep, in: *Andres Serrano. Works 1983-1993*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1994, p. 13.

³⁷ Susan Morgan, An Interview with Andres Serrano, in: *Artpaper*, Vol. 1, September 1989, p. 14.

³⁸ Barbara Rose, Is It Art? Orlan and the Transgressive Act, in: *Art in America*, Vol. 81, No. 2, February 1993, p. 86.

³⁹ Dawn Perlmutter, The Sacrificial Aesthetics: Blood Rituals from Art to Murder, in: *Anthropoetics* 5, no. 2, Fall 1999/Winter 2000 (<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0502/blood.htm>), p. 1.

“how does one distinguish this activity as performance art from other acts of sadomasochism?”⁴⁰

In such performances, as Perlmutter points out, the audience are not participants from within a community but just an audience of an artistic event, and therefore it “fails to accomplish religious rituals of blood sacrifice or ritual mortification.”⁴¹ Nitsch’s performance full of the blood of lambs and bulls is indeed a hodgepodge of Greek tragedy, Christian Mass, and Freud’s ‘unconscious’ as well as Wagner’s composite art and Nietzsche’s philosophy of intoxication, as the manifesto proclaims: “The almost perverted ecstasy of sensations releases our soul (psyche) from the tense situation which is maximally uncovered in a mythical excess-situation and sadomasochistic paradoxes.”⁴² Nitsch himself pretends to be a shaman or a savior, saying that “I am an expression of the whole creation. I have assimilated and identified myself in and with ye.” But the audience addressed with ‘ye’ are not members of a communion participating earnestly in the ritual, but mere audience of a literal mysterious ‘theater’ and enjoy this bloody show, so to say, as a anachronistic make-believe of bad taste, as Eugene Gorny reports: “if we look at the faces of the audience, we shall see that no one takes it very seriously. People smoke, drink beer and laugh during the performance.”⁴³ In the case of a performance *Excerpted Rites Transformation* held by Ron Athey, a gay man and former heroin user who is H.I.V. positive, on March 5, 1994 at a cabaret in Minneapolis, an audience of nearly 100 people witnessing it could not have kept calm. For Athey, known through another of his performances which has the title of an essay of Bataille *The Solar Anus* (1998), in this performance pierced his scalp with acupuncture needles, causing it to bleed, and pierced his arm with hypodermic needles. He also inscribed ritual patterns in the back of his assistant Darryl Carlton with a scalpel, and then suspended sheets of paper towel blotted with Carlton’s blood over the heads of the audience, which met with public blame as a performance putting the audience in danger from blood infected with H.I.V., though in fact Carlton was not H.I.V. positive.

Here certainly exists naked real ‘flesh’ which is exposed beyond the border and screen of representation. Orlan therefore distinguishes her performance from so-called body art, and calls it ‘Carnal art’. Rose enumerates “intentionality and transformation” as “the two essential criteria for distinguishing art from nonart”, and calls Orlan’s performance ‘art’ because these two criteria “are present in all her efforts.”⁴⁴ Orlan’s taboo-challenging investigations force us “to reconsider the boundary that separates ‘normality’ from madness, as well as the line that separates art from nonart”, and therefore are “esthetic actions rather than pathological behavior”, and a crucial objective of her confrontational actions is “an examination of the limits of art.” It might be true that Orlan intends to “deconstruct mythological images of women” imposed

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴² Hermann Nitsch, *Blutorgelmanifest*, 1960, in: *Das Sechstagespiel des Orgien Mysterien Theaters 1998*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003, p. XI.

⁴³ Eugene Gorny, *Bloody Man: The Ritual Art of Hermann Nitsch*, in: http://www.netslova.ru/gorny/selected/nitsch_e.htm, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Rose, op. cit., p. 87..

by men, and that she sees “an intentional parallel between religious martyrdom and the contemporary suffering for beauty through plastic surgery.” But when Rose says in addition that Orlan, influenced by Duchamp, considers her own body a “readymade”, and that “the visceral effect and sensory overload of her imagery, however, are sufficiently alienating to afford the detachment required for judgment and interpretation”, I find this open to question. Rose says that Orlan “creates esthetic distance through a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect.” Yet, is the distance here, in fact, not that of repulsion and aversion rather than aesthetic distance or detachment? What reaction indeed do Orlan’s ‘esthetic actions’ evoke from us other than ‘the visceral effect’ of physiological-psychological repulsion and disgust? Rose herself eventually cannot help asking “the disquieting question of whether masochism may be a legitimate component of esthetic intention, or whether we are dealing here not with art but with illustrated psychopathology.”⁴⁵

Even if it is true that ‘intentionality and transformation’ are in a sense found there, it is doubtful whether these performances which directly use abjects can be called art. Considering that a urinal could be transfigured into an artwork by being named *Fountain* by Duchamp and exhibited in a gallery, it seems to be possible that the performances of Burden, Orlan, or Nebreda which present the real possibility of death, facial plastic surgery, mutilation or bloodshed, as they are in reality, can be called art. As Duchamp insists that he “took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object”⁴⁶, Burden, Orlan, or Nebraska would similarly claim that they created a new thought by presenting the ‘real’ as it is. Yet, insofar as conceptual art is not simply the matter of intellectual activity with intentionality, but art as an ‘ars’ aiming at an aesthetic dimension, the new thought created by the art must be experienced at this aesthetic dimension. So *Fountain* acquired, under a new thought, new aesthetic qualities—Danto describes them as “daring, impudent, irreverent, witty, and clever”⁴⁷—different from those of the urinal, which is not mere transformation nor modification but substantial and aesthetic transfiguration of real mere ‘things’ into ‘artworks’, and therefore the intention and concept of Duchamp belong to his *ars* of art. When one spills paints in anger on the bed of a mate, the bed is damaged and spoiled, and so transformed, but it does not transfigure itself into some other thing or quality. But in the case of Rauschenberg’s *Bed* (1955), the bed which was, according to legend, the painter’s own bed, is aesthetically transfigured, by his pouring paints on it and hanging it on the wall like a work of art, into an artwork which “loses its function, but not its associations with sleep, dreams, illness, sex—the most intimate moments in life”⁴⁸, and is therefore “as personal as a self-portrait”, just as the painter himself says that “painting relates to both art and life...(I try to act in that gap

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁶ The Richard Mutt Case, in: *The Blind Man*, No. 2, May 1917, p. 5.

⁴⁷ Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, Harvard U. P., 1981, p. 93f.

⁴⁸ *MoMA Highlights*, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, revised 2004, originally published 1999, p. 207.

between the two).⁴⁹

Helen Molesworth says that it is hard to overlook the way the textures and colors of Rauschenberg's work *Black Painting* (1953) "resonate with fecal matter: the smeared quality of the paint, the varying degrees of viscosity, and the color—shit brown and black."⁵⁰ She also finds in the bloody red of his *Red Paintings* (1954) "the horror of the body exploded, dispersed, and flowing over the surfaces of everything", and recognizes that Rauschenberg's work at that time "catalogued the body through its products—shit, stain, blood."⁵¹ According to Molesworth, the 1950s was the time when "the problem of registering the body" was shared by artists. John Cage's silent piece, for example, was motivated by "the desire to know the body more intimately, to listen to its interior", by hearing the high sound made by our "nervous system in operation" and the low one made by our "blood in circulation"⁵², i.e., the sound within the interior of the body. Rauschenberg also, Molesworth says, "does not want to be in the painting—as in Jackson Pollock's famous pronouncement that he could "literally be *in* the painting—as much as he wants to have the painting be on his body and, conversely, to have his physicality be on the canvas."⁵³ Anyway, with their aesthetic *ars* and through the 'screen' of art such as canvas or bed, the real disgusting physicality within the interior of the body could be gazed at and heard.

Now, Nebreda's self-mutilation is a behavior of hatred and refusal against his alienated body. If it is a sort of therapy and self-ritual for recovering his own identity, the blood bleeding from the injured and stained body, as a medium of 'purification', might bring about personal spiritual 'transformation' to an innocent self which he thinks is proper to him. However, is it really possible that the body as a real 'thing', which is transformed with suffering hurts and bleeding, can be substantially transfigured into an aesthetic 'artwork'? Performers of self-mutilation have probably a knack for injuring but not killing themselves or a ritual order such as "the strict schedules of 'discipline'"⁵⁴ according to which the bodies are tormented with knives or fires, as Nebreda's *Autoportraits* (2000) shows, which could be called *ars* of self-mutilation. Yet, can this *ars* of self-mutilation, similar to the *ars* of a bloody show of professional wrestling, be art as an aesthetic discipline which 'relates to both art and life' and 'act in that gap between the two'?

Danto who is talking about the transfiguration of the commonplace calls these radical performances "the arts of disturbance"⁵⁵, distinguished from "disturbing art" which disturbs us as, say, depictions of a bloody scene of traditional martyrdom do but stays within the limit

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Hellen Molesworth, *Before Bed*, in: *October*, 63, Winter, 1993, p. 71.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 81.

⁵² John Cage, *Silence*, Wesleyan U. P., 1973, p. 8.

⁵³ Molesworth, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁵⁴ David Houston Jones, *The Body Eclectic: Viewing Bodily Modification in David Nebreda*, in: *Reconstruction*, 5.1, Winter 2005, p. 1.

⁵⁵ Arthur Danto, *Art and Disturbance*, in: *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, Columbia U. P., 1986, p. 119.

of traditional art. ‘Disturbation’ is a coined word with an analogy to masturbation, and disturbance art seeks “to produce an existential spasm through the intervention of images into life”. Indeed “reality must in some way then be an actual component of disturbational art, and usually reality of a kind itself disturbing: obscenity, frontal nudity, blood, excrement, mutilation, real danger, actual pain, possible death.”⁵⁶ In this way the art of disturbance “aims at reconnecting art with those dark impulses out of which art might be believed to have originated and which art came more and more to stifle”, which is “a regressive posture”, undertaking to recover a stage of art almost like magic.

Danto himself says: “I do not enjoy disturbatory art, perhaps because I am always outside it and see it as pathetic and futile.” And yet he recognizes that “there is an undeniable power in the concept of the artist as a kind of priest in a primitive ritual” and in the attempt recovering “the power of capturing realities”, and says that “it is difficult to be dismissive of the courage of an artist who takes this frightening mission on.”⁵⁷ I, however, would rather let stand as sufficient Lucian Krukowski’s claim: that performances of self-mutilation “would not include aesthetic pleasure” and that to accept them as art is “a category mistake”⁵⁸ because our sense of horror and compassion towards them, similar to real gruesome scenes of car crashes, precludes, leaves no room for, is antithetical to, an aesthetic response. Today, tattooing and piercing could be seen as belonging to traditional body art, and it depends on the standard of particular ‘aesthetic framing’⁵⁹ whether they can be aesthetically experienced. It would be true that contemporary body art is an attempt to offer a new standard of aesthetic framing motivated by the thirst for ‘the real of life’ with recognition that the existing standard is no longer suitable to the reality. Yet, so long as art is *ars* and a *discipline* with ‘aesthetic interest’ based on the aesthetic framing within an artworld, this behavior of just exposing and hurling at an audience such ‘raw nature’ rudely and masochistically and without such *ars* does not seem to me to be aesthetic, nor allowable according to the ethic of our aesthetic framing. The artworld, however small, which approves it as art really exists, but I at least am reluctant to accept it as art, and will never be a citizen of such an artworld.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 121.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

⁵⁸ Lucian Krukowski, Appreciation, Obligation, and an Artwork’s End, in: *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1983, p. 35.

⁵⁹ Kiyokazu Nishimura, Kaori to Ajiwai no Bigaku (The Aesthetics of Smell and Taste), in: *Bigaku-Geijutsugaku Kenkyuu* (The Bulletin of the Department of Aesthetics, Univ. of Tokyo), vol. 27, 2008.