re:visions, no. 5, Abjection

Deadline: Oct 13, 2024

re:visions journal

What is expelled and excreted as ‘abject’ marks the blurred vestiges of a past inner struggle – cast off in order to uphold the borders of the self. Philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva identifies this visceral reaction as a revolt against a looming breakdown in meaning, triggered by a loss of the distinction between subject and object, or between self and other. As demonstrated in Cindy Sherman’s photographic series Disasters from the late 1980s, the subject has abandoned the site, leaving only traces behind. In Sherman’s photographs, we encounter mucous glistening wetness and gruesome excretions of disintegrated, formless composition. The body is removed, and yet it has never felt more present. As Kristeva’s theory suggests, it is in our repulsion that we become most acutely aware of it.

In the guise of corresponding concepts, ‘abjection’ has re-emerged within contemporary discourse and reared its amorphous head. In publications like Ugliness (2023, Hässlichkeit) by artist, curator and author Mosthari Hilal, the political and social importance of the body is restated. Drawing on Kristeva’s concept, Hilal explores how the categorization of certain bodies as ‘ugly’ is tightly interwoven with a distinct cultural and social genealogy, meeting current critical debates where theories of ‘abjection’ are integrated into an intersectional framework. The upcoming issue of re:visions invites graduate students and other scholars, researchers, writers, and artists to re-examine the genealogies and conceptual histories of a significant cultural category alongside its reflections within the fields of art and visual culture.

Notably developed by Kristeva in her work Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection (1980), the concept of ‘abjection’ is described as “a revolt against that which is in us that is opposed to I.” The author commences that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes ‘abjection,’ but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” Building on the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan while incorporating early writings of Georges Bataille, the Kristevan ‘abject’ began its critical and art-historical ascent during the 1980s and 1990s as part of the multifarious debates of the anglophone anti-aesthetic tradition magnified by critical journals of the time. In terms of an art historical and cultural criticism that is separate from psychoanalytical theory, ‘the abject’ came to denote certain materialities that relate to the body and its apertures, while ‘abjection’ indicated not merely the production of disgust, but the cultural marking of events or objects as disgusting.

With the turn of the 21st century visual representations of ‘abjection’ transitioned from a focus on private suffering and isolation, as articulated by Kristeva, to an exploration of the increased visibility objects and bodies traverse as they are expelled by society as in George Bataille’s concept of

the ‘social abject’. Blurring the lines of the designated ‘body’ and exposing gendered concepts of what Kristeva deems the “clean and proper body,” works such as Carolee Schneemann’s Interior Scroll (1975) or Andres Serrano’s Piss Christ (1987) are exemplary for how ‘the abject’ is engaged. In the early 1990s, exhibitions dealing with the ‘abject’ increased, culminating in the 1993 exhibition Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art at the Whitney Museum in New York. Capturing the ongoing dialogue around the boundaries of disgust, desire, and cultural norms in contemporary art without chronicling any particular art movement, what is categorized as ‘abject art’ is largely defined by these exhibitions. Therefore, the term ‘abject art’ cannot be defined by a universal, non-historical category of physical disgust. It is interpretative, emphasizing the negotiability of social and political disruptions. Herein lies the significance of the conceptual-historical sensibility that re:visions seeks to give prominence to in the coming issue.

Departing from its feminist starting point of discussing cis-female bodily functions as ‘abject’ under patriarchy, the analysis of ‘abjection’ can be broadened to include e.g. postcolonial, queer theory and disability studies. With ‘abjection’ characterizing the complex relationship between estrangement and (dis-)identification, the exploration of its political dimension offers a timely lens for analyzing the critical nuances of the moment at which the political becomes embodied. This includes matters of identity politics, bio- and necropolitics, directly addressing the processes and guises of political dehumanization and alienation.

For our new issue, we welcome submissions which examine different objects of art and visual culture from the last decades and how they have engaged with the theoretical scope of Kristeva’s concept. Elevating ‘the abject’ to meet current debates around contemporary art and visual culture, re:visions is particularly interested in how understandings of the self and the other are modified by our medial, cultural-political environments, dictating what is ‘rendered abject’ in the eyes of the contemporary onlooking subject.

Topics of interest include but are not limited to:

- The L’informe: mode d’emploi (1996) exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou co-curated by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois as a formalistic response to the narrative presented in the Whitney’s Abject Art (1993).
- ‘Racialized Abjection’ as a powerful mythological, psychological, and physical response to the Black body and Black sexuality.
- ‘Abjection’ in the creation of artistic archetypes like the grotesque body, monstrous feminine, or marginalized other, as well as in the valorization and aestheticization of artistic misery and the myth of the ‘suffering artist’.
- The ‘rendering-abject’ of otherwise normative (white male) bodies, such as in Ron Mueck’s Dead Dad (1996-97) or Skip Arnold’s 2002 Grüezi (Hello).
- Modified, composite bodies and their spectacularization: Spanning reality television shows like The Swan (2004) or Botched (2014) and the intersection of the human body with technology, including biohacking, cybernetics, and genetic modification, as seen in ‘abject’ animatronics and machine-organ-hybrids like Mire Lee’s Carriers (2020).
- The incorporation and evocation of ‘abject materials’ such as bodily fluids, sheds, ‘gendered’ blood (Lupon 1993) and excrements in the exploration of feminine and queer identity, their ‘leaky bodies’ (Irigaray 1985) and thresholds in the works of Judy Chicago, Louise Bourgeois or Tracey

Emin.
- The ‘social’ and ‘material abject’ in the artistic reflection of pandemics, such as in the imageries of contagion in AIDS-Art, e.g. Izhar Patkin’s Unveiling of a Modern Chastity (1981), and Andres Serrano’s Milk/Blood series (1986-87).
- Artistic depictions of alienation, unsettling or fragmented realities (real or virtual).
- Strategies and affective landscapes employed to maintain or heighten the experience of ‘abjection’ in museal settings.

Please submit an elaborated abstract of approximately 500 words, written in either English or German. The submitted proposals will be evaluated by our editorial team, and contributors will be invited to write a 3,000 to 5,000 word paper if their proposals are selected. Contributions will appear in the fifth issue of re:visions, which is slated for publication in April 2025.

In addition to texts responding to the issue’s theme, we are looking to publish reviews between 1,500 and 2,500 words long (of exhibitions, books, films, etc.) that need not correspond to the topic.

We particularly encourage members of marginalized communities underrepresented in academic writing (including queer individuals and BIPoC) to hand in contributions. The deadline for submissions is October 13th, 2024. Please email your proposal and a short CV as a Word document to redaktion[at]revisionsjournal.de.

re:visions is run by student volunteers and therefore does not offer author honorariums. For our submission guidelines please refer to our stylesheet. For more information and news regarding the journal follow our Instagram account @revisions.journal.

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