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A Sketch of the Affective Classroom: Abject Art

Patrick Kinsman

Herron School of Art and Design, rkinsman@iupui.edu

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This paper deals with the creation of, and some outcomes from, my Spring 2012 seminar in Abject Art. The course surveyed a mix of art considered “abject” (as in the 1993 Whitney show, “Repulsion and Desire in American Art”) as well as banned, censored and attacked art and the “culture war” debates over NEA funding. We further considered art in light of Bataille’s “informe” (both Krauss and Bois’ exhibit, “Formless: A User’s Guide” as well as art that is about excrement and art which defies or aggressively redefines categories). My own sense of whether or not a work is abject is to what degree it summons simultaneous and irreconcilable emotional responses, such as laughter and disgust.

In teaching this course, I discovered that my own reactions to the art were useful when not separated from those of the students. This applied particularly in terms of art which I find painful to watch, such as Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley’s “Family Tyranny.” There was valuable empathy, mutually between me and the students, when I made my own reaction to the art available in discussion, when I did not establish a distanced mastery of the material (illusory or not). Often when seeing material that was especially provocative (as in the pieces by Barney and Tunga from the DVD “Destricted”), class discussion did not immediately turn academic but relied on the students’ reactions to not just the material but also the seeing of that material in a classroom. We learned that context and site (a gallery, a classroom, one’s own apartment) influence and change how a work is seen. This in short became a focus on the “affective” nature of abject art, what I now call “high affect art.” Affect, in this paper, is taken in part from Deleuze and Guattari’s

understanding of these terms. From the abject seminar, I am now investigating the classroom-student-teacher-material relationship in terms of affects.

Two occasions on which students found art offensive, were foundational to my conception of the Abject class. In 2008 I was teaching the 100-level survey of contemporary art, which at Herron School of Art and Design means art since 1950. There is a lecture on “body art” where students see Vito Acconci’s “Following Piece” (1969) and “Seedbed” (1972), and also a number of works from Chris Burden, including “Through the Night Softly” (1974), “Shoot (1971) and “Transfixed” (1974).

A student contacted me by email after that lecture, insisting that something be done about the lecture, because the work we had seen was “not art.” I asked why the student considered the work not to be art and was told that art should never be illegal (Acconci) or involve self-harm of the artist (Burden). The student and I negotiated an opening statement (which I still make today) about the provocative nature of what we were about to see in that lecture, and I additionally make an effort to contextualize such work against Vietnam and TV culture. However, I also began wondering how the “that is not art” argument worked: what sort of art tended to provoke this reaction, and why?

In early 2011 I was teaching a 300-level course on Video Art and showed the first quarter of Paul McCarthy’s “Painter” (1995). We had read about abjection as defined by Kristeva and I had covered the Bataille “informe,” but some students were very provoked by McCarthy’s video. Specifically, some members of the class were angry at me for showing them the piece. Their exact complaint was that they could not tell whether the piece was savage parody, or whether McCarthy’s acting

persona was not actually the work of a man who was either drunk or disabled or, essentially, a victim. In short, these students felt both compassion for McCarthy and amusement at his ridiculousness, and they felt that in showing the video, I had manipulated their compassion. Other students, however, found the video thoroughly ironic and amusing, and in discussion, we discovered that the class had quite varied feelings about and reactions to McCarthy. In that situation, I learned that provocative, high-affect art can have (and be characterized by) multiple and contradictory emotional responses.

In 2011, Maggie Nelson's book *The Art of Cruelty* appeared, and reading that book helped me put the *Abject* course together. The core question of that book is, what can we gain, if anything, from consuming cruel art? Nelson then undertakes a wide-ranging survey not just of art but also of literature, and many of the artists she discusses wound up in my seminar, rephrasing her essential question. Because Nelson's qualifier for art is "cruel," not "abject" (although she does discuss abjection), she writes on art that can or does hurt us, emotionally, psychically or, broadly speaking, art which summons cruel affects.

I organized the *Abject* seminar broadly on theoretical lines dealing with bodies and social power. Major theoretical texts either cited or read in toto included Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, on the idea of abjection, Bataille's "informe," and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Avoiding the term "shock art" (which would become even more a standard-bearer for this type of art when the *New York Times* took up a discussion of it in 2012), I defined abject or cruel art as consummately communicative, relational and social, and this helped focus the course content on

censorship and politicized art, along with a greater focus on sexual abjection rather than violent abjection (for example, we saw no animal cruelty, not even to goldfish). I very much wanted to avoid shocking students into speechlessness or refusal, and have always found sexually explicit imagery better suited to this, and easier to handle, than violent imagery.

As to the breadth of the seminar, this is a sampling of topics covered:

- Mapplethorpe's X portfolio , which contains only ten photos taken in the 1970s; the overt SM content led to infamous bannings of Mapplethorpe in the late 1980s, and will probably go down as his public legacy.
- Hannah Wilke's "SOS Scarification" series: the artist, often nude, decorated with chewed gum (which looks like plague buboes). Part centerfold, part plague victim.
- William Pope.L's crawl pieces: the artist, who is black, crawls on his belly through public spaces. This summons both slavery and hegemonic oppression as well as Bataille's "horizontalty."
- Hermann Nitsch's ritual sacrifice art; part of Vienna Actionism. Animal sacrifice, nudity, blood, shit, and other abject substances in the name of reinventing human psychology after World War II and genocide and Nazism.
- Serrano's "Immersion," better known as "Piss Christ." A sacramental object, now transgressed horribly: or is it about incarnation and the truth of the body (abjection)? This object was determined by public opinion and Catholic protest as scandalous, which led to its recent attack and defacing
- David Wojnarowicz, Fire in My Belly, the recently banned video from the Seek/Find exhibit in 2010. Much like Serrano, this was banned by Catholic activism and protest because of the ants on the crucifix—another desacralization of a sacred object, despite that the video leads us more likely to believe that AIDS victims are abjected bodies, socially crucified.
- Jenny Saville's large-scale paintings of bodies, sometimes from sexual reassignment surgeries; cold immersive flesh in massive scale. Bataille's base materialism, and Kiki Smith's desacralized bodies come to mind.
- Orlan, who uses her own cosmetic surgeries as sites for poetry readings and art and video transmissions, of the intense surgeries which she undergoes.

- Monica Cook, a multimedia artist whose photorealist paintings beautifully and uncannily combine nude women, dead raw octopi and fruit.

Abject art encompasses every medium and varies widely in terms of the nature of its form and content. Some is political or politicized (as in banned or attacked art, such as that by Mapplethorpe, Finley, Wojnarowicz and Serrano), some is beautiful, some is psychotraumatic, (McCarthy and Kelley), some but not all is about the body, some but not all is about religion, some but not all is feminine and/or feminist, some but not all is queer, some but not all is about bodily products (for example, blood, shit, semen).

Affect is usually translated as “emotion” or “feeling.” Borrowing largely from Gregg and Seigworth’s *Affect Theory Reader* and specifically from the essay by Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie on Felix Guattari, I more specifically define “affect” as pre-emotional and powerfully indeterminate. Affect, in the same way that Deleuze and Guattari define “desire,” is generative. Emotions are a possible “condensation” of affect. Put another way, affect could be understood to be a quantum cloud, from which elements or compounds (emotions, feelings) are crystallized, settling out.

Affect can manifest, particularly with abject art, as simultaneous, irreconcilable and/or contradictory feelings and emotional states. This is what happened with my 2010 screening of “Painter.” Some students were deeply offended; in class discussion, we did not so much ease the offense as discover that no single emotional reaction obtained for the majority, and that this incompatibility and multiplicity was

characteristic for many viewers, some of whom moved from offense to amusement or the other way, or swung between the two.

The abject seminar, as a pedagogical experience set within a classroom, taught me that no space is innocent. That is, a classroom can contain art that is pornographic or disgusting or cruel or traumatic, and the classroom environment, which tends to hygienicize and “purify” content, can be overtaken by the content. The affective power of a classroom is this purifying function, creating a safe space for intellectualizing, conceptualizing and discussion or distanced listening in a traditional lecture format. Abject art, with its high affectivity and consummately social character, works better, and is understood better, when it is allowed to affectively touch students and instructor, and to forge a wavering and somewhat indeterminate relationship between the instructor, students, space and course material. Everything is in play, in high affectivity.

The risk of this dynamic is that the classroom becomes a therapy session or “shock art” session and that shock or “sharing” overtake the educational mission of a space dedicated to pedagogy. I found it much more useful to use the affective relationships in the classroom, my own as much as the students’, to open discussion about the social nature of the abject. Affect is how abject art relates; it is the very dialogic character of such art, and perhaps of all art (but that larger discussion is a separate pedagogical and research project from this one). It became essential in my seminar that we all feel the art, that we enter the realm of high affectivity and not stand back from the art, but also not be overrun by the art, falling into the easy “shock” reaction which is non-discursive beyond the sentence, “that was shocking.”

Affect is consummately communicative and also universal; as Deleuze and Guattari put it, “the work of art is a mass of affects and percepts,” and then in the next sentence, “the human being is also mass of affects and percepts.” But we cheat ourselves of specificity and the ability to talk about direct experience if we simply sum up reality as affective. Following Spinoza, Deleuze once defined the human being as “affected and able to affect.” The affective classroom might aim to make the student—and in my specific case, some of my students are working artists—into an actor, an active and affective subject. Notably, when the discussion turns this way, we move far from “shock” and “cruelty,” but this is again a project which outruns the scope of the current paper.

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