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RECLAIMING THE FEMININE IDENTITY
THROUGH THE ABJECT: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF JUDY CHICAGO, MARY KELLY,
AND CINDY SHERMAN

Yuxin (Vivian) Wen

Introduction

In 1993, students in the Independent Study Program of Whitney Museum of American Art in New York staged “Abject Art” as the theme of their annual exhibition.¹ The abject, usually referring to the improper and unclean, is a term theorized by the French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982). It signifies a power relationship in which the abject is the Other, being cast out to preserve the order of an established system and the intact identities of the members within the system. Titled “Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art,” the show gestured towards the affinity between this sense of the abject and the feminine in the first section of its display titled “The Maternal Body.” The display featured female artists including Mary Kelly (born 1941) and Cindy Sherman (born 1954) and male artists including Marcel Duchamp (1887 – 1968) and Willem de Kooning (1926 – 1997) who relentlessly focused on the female body as their artistic subject matter. The display evoked how the feminine is often seen as the abject and the oppressed in patriarchal culture, and how women artists may appropriate the image of abjection to reclaim their identity in the space of art and society.

There is no movement titled “The Abject Movement.” However, “The Feminist Movement” has been formalized

by historians who have retrospectively traced a lineage among women theorists, writers, and artists working within the gendered disciplines of philosophy, psychoanalysis, literature, art, and history of art. Whilst many women artists still deny the “Feminist” label conferred on them, the concept of the abject provides a conceptual link in mapping the shifts in the practices of these women artists, who assume various degrees of affinity for feminism and who work within or outside the codified gallery space. This dissertation focuses on the artworks of three living American women artists – Judy Chicago (born 1939), Mary Kelly, and Cindy Sherman – who are all prolific and versatile in their own way while collectively demonstrating a range of approaches towards the language of feminism and the use of the abject.

Epitomized by the installation *The Menstruation Room* and the performance piece *Cock Cunt Play*, Judy Chicago’s *Womanhouse* (1972) seized the image of the abject and created an immersive setting that simulated the visceral reality experienced by women. Constructed a decade before Kristeva’s writing, *Womanhouse* did not seek to respond to the theory of abjection, but it drew on the symbolism of the tabooed female body with a consciousness-raising agenda. Preoccupied with a radically diverging aesthetic, Mary Kelly’s early work, *Post-Partum Document* (1973 – 1979) employed the controlled image of her son’s dirty nappies in a series of rather aseptic, conceptual prints which hang on the white walls of the contemporary art gallery; as we shall see, she addressed and nuanced Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of woman as lack, as Kristeva also did, thus revealing an interesting parallel between a woman artist’s conceptual practices and a feminist philosopher’s theories. Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* aestheticized the abject to criticize both the institutionalized gallery space and the male-dominant field of Conceptual art. Finally, Cindy Sherman obsessively

appropriates popular images of feminine roles perpetuated by mass media, relies on an effective shocking method to engage the viewer, and thereby invites him/her to criticize the clichéd depiction of the idealized image of women. Most notably, her *Untitled Film Stills* of the 1990s exhibited a magnified grotesqueness using mannequins, bodily fluids, and the explicitly abject, as a way not only of reclaiming the tabooed, abject body but also of criticizing those art movements – especially Surrealism, as we shall discuss later – which she viewed as misogynistic in their portrayal of woman. A feminist perspective allows us to witness a range of approaches adopted by these women artists from the 1970s to the 1990s who seized and symbolized, aestheticized and contained, or radically accentuated the abject to reclaim the feminine body and identity.

Methodology and Literature Review: Feminism and the Abject

In a 2018 interview with *Frieze*, a London-based magazine on contemporary art, Mary Kelly asserts that “The biggest hurdle we had to overcome was psychological: the belief that there never had been, and never could be, great women artists.”² The interview evokes the seminal essay written by Linda Nochlin in 1971, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”³ Nochlin traced the perennial struggles experienced by women artists in asserting their collective and individual voices. She called for a paradigm shift through critiquing the inherently gendered definition of “greatness,” the singular Romantic conception of “genius,” and the various circumstances – education, familial expectations – that confine women’s practices.⁴ She asserted, “It was *institutionally* made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence.”⁵ Nochlin addressed

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“The Question of the Nude,” which was to be picked up by different generations of women artists. Once denied access to nude models and relegated to the subject matters of male painters, women artists have reclaimed the female body – in various degrees of nudity – in paintings, installations, performances and other media.⁶ Nochlin also underscored the “intellectual distortions” of “the unstated domination of white male subjectivity,” casting the binary divide between the subject and the object into the center of gender struggles and power dynamics.⁷ Later, Julia Kristeva alluded to the “abject” as the threat to the “subject” to be cast out. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey coined the phrase “male gaze” to explain masculine, heterosexual perspectives that objectify the female for the sexual pleasure of the male viewer.⁸ About ten years later, Mary Ann Doane further complicated the “woman’s gaze” by emphasizing how women are constantly negotiating between their own feminine viewpoints and the male viewpoints they are conditioned to adopt from their dominant counterparts.⁹ Kelly’s words thus remind us of the trajectory of feminist theories that have helped establish an intellectual basis that influenced many women artists practicing from the 1970s on. These key thinkers formed the backdrop for the battles that women continue to fight.

In the “Preface” to *Art and Feminism* (2001), Helena Reckitt traces the feminist lineage among women artists across the early 1970s, then the mid-1970s and 1980s, and, finally, the 1990s, which witnessed both revived interests in the 1970s and new ideas and practices.¹⁰ She discusses the contradictions and continuities between the “essentialism” that governed the early 1970s and the unified concern over the “strategies of appropriation” in the 1980s.¹¹ She further clarifies the complex relationships between feminist theories and women artists – exemplified by Julia Kristeva among many – in stating that “feminist theorists have variously

influenced, inspired and infuriated women artists.”¹² As the title of her book announces, Reckitt sets out to explore the tensions and affinities between “art and feminism” rather than to claim the capitalized “Feminist art.”¹³ While Reckitt acknowledges that a number of prominent women artists have explicitly rejected the “Feminist” label in their writings or interviews, she asserts a stance that employs the feminist perspectives and frameworks to interpret the works of women artists throughout the decades, as many are not necessarily “non-feminist” even if not articulated as “feminist.”¹⁴ Her assertion provides a seminal framework for my analysis of women artists who are not overtly “feminist” in this dissertation.

Reckitt also warns the reader to beware of the reasons why certain female artists may distance themselves from “feminism” in words although their works demonstrate strong influences from feminist arguments.¹⁵ This viewpoint is especially critical in analyzing the works of Mary Kelly, who is constantly negotiating her multiple identities as a Conceptual artist and a woman artist, and her identities as an artist and a mother – the notion of feminism in her artwork should not overshadow its many other intricate elements. In contrast, Judy Chicago maintains the urgency to vocalize the feminist manifesto and prioritize the feminist agenda in her art, as we shall see in her memoir, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1982). Mary Kelly and Judy Chicago, who are simultaneously visual artists and prolific writers, provide a multitude of materials that allow us to juxtapose the artists’ intentions and the waves of receptions towards their works, and to re-interpret how the trope of abjection functions in the shifts in women’s art that draw different degrees of affinities to the term “feminism.” It is also important to note that Cindy Sherman, who started practicing art slightly later than Judy Chicago and Mary

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Kelly, usually lets her photography work speak “on her behalf” and writes much less extensively about it.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva explains abjection as anything that disturbs “identity, system, order,” rather than an inherent lack of health or hygiene.¹⁶ Kristeva also acknowledges the ambiguous, porous, paradoxical nature of the abject because it is the Other that allows us to recognize and sustain the self by presenting a visible threat to the self; she states “the abject does not cease challenging its master.”¹⁷ Thus, in an established, patriarchal social order, while the female bodily functions and matters are often abjected, they could be leveraged upon by women artists to dismantle the borders of gender roles and destabilize traditional gender identities. The list of the abject made by Kristeva (defilement, waste, milk, menstrual blood) offers tools and motifs that women artists can employ to mobilize power and challenge patriarchy.¹⁸ In a way, the literally unclean – with its effective power – is used to challenge the construction of the clean. At the same time, given the fact that institutions like public museums and galleries are highly codified and typically dispel anything visually impure or distasteful, abject art presents a way to immediately threaten institutionalized space. Abject art practiced by women artists could thus lead to intensified tensions between what is “art” and what is not, providing ample opportunities to advance feminist agendas. While Judy Chicago’s *Womanhouse* was situated outside museums, Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* proved to be an effective intervention in gallery space and Conceptual art. Kelly’s inclusion of her son’s faecal stains in her prints was muted but nevertheless jarring within the bare walls of “the White Cube,” the modern gallery space that Brian O’Doherty described as “untouched by time and its vicissitudes.”¹⁹ The abject is perhaps too real for the apparently insulated gallery space, shattering

the illusion of grand narratives told by those in positions of power. It brings us face to face with the neglected half of history and reality. This dissertation analyzes the artworks through the lens of writings by these three women artists themselves and re-interprets their roles within feminist art history under the unifying theme of the reclamation of the abject. Each section begins with the contextualization of each artist and extends into a detailed analysis of one or two specific projects demonstrative of the abject.

Judy Chicago, *Womanhouse* (1972) and “Cunt Art”:
Seizing the Abject

“But what we have to do is we have to seize our own cunt.” –
Judy Chicago, 1972²⁰

Judy Chicago, born in Chicago in 1939, is a first-generation feminist artist, writer, and educator who now occupies an iconic status among feminist artists.²¹ Well-versed both in words and art, she started learning drawing at the Art Institute of Chicago at the age of three, as she notes in her memoir, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1982).²² The memoir documents her early admiration for her father, a well-educated man, and her frustration over the inhibitions faced by female art students during her undergraduate years at University of California, Los Angeles. The female sexual organs that she was forbidden to portray in her art then were to become constant motifs in many of her works including *Womanhouse* (1972) and *Through the Flower*, the painting that bears the same title as her memoir, which became part of the series, *Great Ladies* (1973), and, most canonically, *The Dinner Party* (1973-1979). Her fascination with the image of the “cunt” as a symbol for the quintessential female experience evokes the notion of abjection and can be seen as the focal tool for her to exercise agency over the definition of feminine roles.

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Chicago's "cunt" art represents a form of liberation both for the female body and the erotic self. As Alyce Mahon argues, by exposing the obscenity of the "cunt" label constructed by the male-dominant society, the woman artist seeks to remake the feminine identity.²³ While she changed her own name from Judith Sylvia Cohen to Judy Chicago as a tactic to assert control over her own role, she initiated a movement that seizes the image of "cunt" as the symbolic strategy to redefine the collective womanly experience.²⁴

Judy Chicago directed the all-woman art program at Fresno State College at the height of the 1970s Women's Movement. The documentary titled *Judy Chicago & California Girls* (1971, directed by Judith Dancoff) records the interactions between Chicago and her students, with highlights including clips of the performance piece, *Cock Cunt Play*.²⁵ Wearing short hair and a unisex utility vest, Chicago insistently articulates the pressing need for women to "seize" and take control of the image of "cunt" – the abject, the othered – and to redefine it in our own terms:²⁶

"What is cunt? We have definitions of ourselves by men. Cunt is passive. Cunt is receptacle. Cunt is vessel. Cunt is give her, give her all rewards and blessing: mother. Cunt is is is... Cunt is evil, demonic, will swallow you up, blow up. Those are all projections. Fantasy projections. But what we have to do is we have to seize our own cunt. [Chicago demonstrating seizing.] We have to found it in our hand and proceed to announce what it is. Announce that it is real, that it is alive, that it is aggressive, that is our going. That it looks like this, that it needs this, that it has this kind of dimension. And what does that mean? That means really take control of our identity as women. And our cunts are symbolic of our identity as women." (Judy Chicago & California Girls, my transcription)

The equivalence that Chicago draws between the central core imagery of "cunt" and "our identity as women"

is unapologetic and lends itself to heavy criticisms of “essentialism.”²⁷ She decides that the societal definition of women is entirely “inoperable,” and the way out is to shatter it by forcefully writing our own definition.²⁸ Orchestrated by Chicago, and leading a group of women students, the ceremony of rewriting women’s immediate experience in 1972 took place in *Womanhouse* (Fig. 1), an immersive domestic setting which echoed the metaphor that the female vagina is a house, while distancing the experimental art piece from the conventional gallery space.

Womanhouse (1972)

Womanhouse was a collaborative project created by twenty-one students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts. The project was directed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (1923 – 2015) – an established American-Canadian woman painter known for her hard-edged works such as *Big OX* (1967) and *Beauty of Summer* (1973–74).²⁹ Schapiro was much less vocal than Chicago about the project and this dissertation draws on Chicago’s writing for its focus on Chicago’s “cunt art.” Retrospectively, *Womanhouse* – with its domestic theme – may be seen as a precursor to Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*.

Built in a run-down Hollywood home that imitated a functional house, *Womanhouse* consisted of private, domestic rooms that were immediately familiar to the women audiences: *The Dining Room* (Fig. 2), *The Nurturant Kitchen* (Fig. 3), *The Menstruation Bathroom* (Fig. 4), to name a few. The Dining Room might be an example of a visually appealing feast that was sensual, delightful and palatable, with saturated colors decorating the dishes clustered over the round table immersed in the golden light. In comparison, *The Nurturant Kitchen* and *The Menstruation Bathroom* evoked

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the abject with the image of breasts and menstrual blood, as if “seized” by Chicago and her students to be forcefully installed into the space, multiplied, intensified, making the private public. For example, in *The Nurturant Kitchen* (Fig. 3), fried eggs on the walls morphed into pendulous breasts in a disturbing manner, hovering over the ordinary, innocuous domestic objects such as frying pans on the wall, cooking ingredients in the cupboard, and cutlery lined up in a wide up drawer. In *The Menstruation Bathroom*, the commercial products of new sanitary napkins, and boxes of tablets of pain killers were piled up on top of the shelf, while a white bin below the shelf was stuffed with used napkins and tampons stained with blood, further dramatized by a singular, dirty tampon on the floor. What was usually hidden behind the bathroom door became directly in view in its visceral representation.

Performance art, often staged in first wave feminism, was incorporated into *Womanhouse* – particularly in *The Living Room* – to enhance the immersive experience. *Cock and Cunt Play* (written by Judy Chicago with Faith Wilding, Fig.5) was a pertinent example employing the abject, mocking and taking control of the pejorative language of “the cunt.” Two women in nondescript, tight black bodysuits were each attached with external, dildo-like sexual organs to represent their sexes. “You have a cunt. A cunt means you wash dishes.” The short-haired woman with the plastic phallus – the husband – commanded the long-haired woman – the wife – in a pretentious mellow voice. Their conversation parodied the everyday domestic scene where the man always leaves all the household duties to the wife, while verbally spotlighting the centrality of “cunt” imagery. The husband started to clumsily hit the wife with his oversized “penis,” inviting laughter among the female audiences and highlighting the absurdity of women’s subjugated roles

through the abject. Most importantly, both the husband and wife were played by women, underscoring the fact that this caricature of domestic violence aimed to represent the female perspective. Performance art thus contributed to the overarching theme of *Womanhouse*.

Through the Flower documents the initial responses from both women audiences and mixed audiences when *Womanhouse* first opened to the public. While the responses from purely women audiences were overwhelmingly positive, the responses from the mixed group were punctuated by “inappropriate silence, embarrassed laughter or muffled applause.” Echoing Mary Ann Doane’s conception of the dual gaze experienced by women, Chicago recalled in her memoir that the very presence of men started to make the women “see the pieces through the eyes of men and couldn’t respond directly.”³⁰ Retrospectively, Judy Chicago’s use of the abject to represent the essential female experience was a difficult and important step at that time, and was fundamental to the first-wave feminism. “Growth takes place by starting where we really are and moving on,” Judy Chicago claimed in her memoir.³¹ She repeatedly emphasized that the agenda behind *Womanhouse* was to render women’s culture visible, and to eventually turn vulnerability into power by exposing the reality of women’s lives.

Behind the imagery of the grotesque, innumerable images of the fried eggs morphing into pendulous breasts in *The Nurturant Kitchen* (Fig 3) was the emotional sharing among two women students at the time, as one talked about the experience of nourishing the family through cooking, and the other, nursing babies; the group thus decided to combine the imagery to collectively evoke and reveal the unacknowledged service women devote in the household and their frustrations.³² According to Chicago, in *Cock and Cunt Play* (Fig.5), the construction of the plot and script also

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demonstrated a process of collaborative reflection, where the performance art, like “skits,” grew out of experiences rather than artificial creation.³³ Hence, the symbols and techniques employed in Womanhouse attested to the first-hand realities perceived by women and served to make the private public.

As Judy Chicago claimed in her memoir, Womanhouse “provided a context for a work that both in technique and in content revealed the female experience.”³⁴ The action verb, “reveal” speaks of the strong consciousness-raising motive of the art project, both for the women who collaboratively participated in creating the house and for those who, as audiences, were confronted with their own experiences that were represented and mirrored in Womanhouse. Retrospectively, both the installations and performance art pieces that employed the abject demonstrate a sensibility and a vision of feminist art that is relevant today and anticipate the many themes in feminist art such as the tensions between the private and the public, the representation of the body and the abject.

Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document (1973 – 1979) and Conceptual Art: Aestheticizing the Abject

“[...] the difficulty of representing lack, of accepting castration, of not having the phallus, of not being the Phallic Mother” – Mary Kelly, 1983³⁵

Mary Kelly was born in Iowa in 1941, attended Saint Martin’s School of Art in London, and made her debut in The Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London in 1976 with the large-scale installation, *Post-Partum Document*. The transatlantic dimension of her career has divided some critics and yet it offers an interesting insight into the shared and different experiences of women artists on both European

and American shores. For the critic Janet Wolff, Mary Kelly's affinity with London and the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain is crucial to any reading of her work: "Kelly is an American artist, whose formative years were spent in London," as she argues in the Introduction to *Mary Kelly: Projects, 1973-2010*, the catalogue published to coincide with the 2011 exhibition under the same title in The Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester.³⁶ Kelly's internationalism aside, a further aspect of her art that is crucial to our appreciation of *PPD*'s intentions is her engagement with psychoanalytic theory and the abject to probe deeper into the social and cultural formations of gender identity and gender relations. Arguably this aspect of her work is universal.

While Chicago's *Womanhouse* (1972) – located in a physical house – sought to signify the collective female reality of domesticity through a largely collaborative project among a group of women students, *Kelly's Post-Partum Document* (1973 – 1979) functioned mainly as a self-documentation of the mother-child relationship, which systematically employed intimate, domestic objects, and the abject body to conjure up a more conceptual discourse on femininity and female roles in the conventional gallery space. Formalized by Sol LeWitt in his essay, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" (1967), Conceptual art is employed by artists to destabilize the underlying ideological structures behind the creation, distribution and the display of art, where "the idea itself, even if not made visual, is as much a work of art as any finished product."³⁷ In a 1982 conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith, the artist articulated her aim to challenge the institution in the work: "It [PPD] was conceived [...] to parody the whole iconography of the museum 'display'."³⁸ In this way, Mary Kelly positions herself foremost as a Conceptual artist, who focuses on issues relating to femininity. Unlike self-pronounced "feminist"

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artists including Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly prefers the concept of “feminist interventions in art practice” over “feminist art.”³⁹ However, as with Chicago, her use of the object is central to her intervention on both art and its display.

In contrast to Chicago’s *Womanhouse*, which embodied the collective, biological female body in a self-explanatory manner, Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* investigated the psychoanalytic dimension of feminine desire through the maternal body and situated the feminine discourse within the personal experience of raising her infant son. The title of the work immediately evoked a non-gendered, analytical, distancing effect, announcing a strong agency over language and critical theory. The exhibition space, ICA, also sought to speak not only to the female – potentially feminist audience – but to a mixed audience specifically interested in contemporary art. With its earlier sections (*Documentation I, II, III, IV*) first exhibited in ICA 1976, the entire project was completed in 1979 as a six-year exploration of the mother-child relationship marked by six sections (Fig. 6). From “Analyzed faecal stains and feeding charts” (*Documentation I*, 1974, Fig. 7) to “Analyzed markings and diary-perspective” (*Documentation III*, 1976), to “Pre-writing alphabet, exercise and diary” (*Documentation VI*, 1978), the art form was “series-based” and “system-based,” demonstrative of a notable trend of Conceptual art concerning real time.⁴⁰ Punctuated and mediated by the artist’s capitalized questions regarding the maternal role – “WHY DON’T I UNDERSTAND?” “WHY IS HE/SHE [THE CHILD] LIKE THAT?” “WHAT DO YOU WANT?” – the artwork explored the insecurities of the mother, the psychological reasons why the woman accepts her social role as a mother, and becomes dependent on her child, and eventually, questioned the construction of the maternal role.

Viewed from a distance, the installation, enclosed in

the apparently insulated white cube space evoked a clinical, monochrome and asexual atmosphere in its serialized and regular form (Fig. 7), which controlled the representation of the abject, most notably, the faecal stains of Kelly's son in *Documentation I* (Fig. 8). The abject presented in PPD was an abstraction removed from the son's actual excrement through the artistic processing of imprint; it thus presented a more detached form compared with the visceral representation of the blood-stained tampon in *Womanhouse*. Systematizing and sanitizing the abject allowed Kelly not only to mediate the visual representation through analytical language, but also to critique the established definition of the Conceptual art, which often excludes domestic, feminine themes such as motherhood. The indexical trace of the son's body was intricately linked to the maternal body and underpinned the central discussions on maternal desire and anxiety. Evoking the Freudian "penis envy" experienced by women – where young girls feel anxiety upon realization that they do not have a penis – Kelly saw the child as the symbolic, imagined phallus of the mother, and by extension, the loss of the child symbolizes castration.⁴¹ The "Footnotes to the PPD" were preoccupied with the maternal insecurities involved in "weaning": "*Experimentum Mentis I: Weaning from the Breast*" (the physical separation of the child); "*Experimentum Mentis II: Weaning from the Holophrase*" (the child's acquisition of language that alienates the mother); "*Experimentum Mentis III: Weaning from the Dyad*" (the intervention of the father that destabilizes the mother-child dyad in establishing the Oedipal triad).⁴² The mother-artist's almost obsessive documentation of the child's faecal stains thus was in itself an exploration of the source of maternal anxiety. A series of twenty-seven liners of her son's used cloth nappies were boxed, each accompanied by standardized annotations that detailed the amount of feeding intake at

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different times of the day (Fig. 8). The record of the leaking body – the maternal – represented in the abject form, might be seen as a visual juxtaposition against the record of the intake and gain – the paternal – represented in the intellectualized form below. A clean, neat chart summarizing the growth of the child in relation to the food consumption was presented as a preface to the twenty-seven day-to-day records (Fig.9).

The leaking body – embodied by the child excrement here, just like milk and menstrual blood – is usually associated with the feminine body, if not the maternal body. In “Footnotes to the PPD,” Kelly repeatedly drew on Lacanian theory of psychosexual development, where the child’s acquisition of language and toilet training represent the movement into the Symbolic Order of the patriarchal, yet is constantly threatened by the abject and the maternal, with the danger of falling back into the Real, the disordered state.⁴³ Kelly’s Conceptual attempt at including the abject and re-inscribing borders around the abject – both literally and figuratively – might be seen as an empowering move that takes control over both the feminine abject and the masculine intellect. Nevertheless, it also bordered on the danger of succumbing to male-dominant language and rendering the content inaccessible in its highly coded theoretical approach.

When *PPD* first appeared in 1976, it provoked the general audience and the Conceptual art world. The mass media reports were dominated with headlines decrying “dirty nappies”, and the mainstream art goers at the ICA saw Kelly’s motherhood subject matter as unfit for the high culture.⁴⁴ Yet, just like the female audiences who identified with the theme of *Womanhouse* despite certain initial unease, feminist critics, including, Lucy R. Lippard felt “touched” in her initial reaction towards *PPD*, without having to “know” about the specificity of the psychoanalytic theories

behind the conception of the piece.⁴⁵ Retrospectively, Kathy Battista observes in her survey book, *Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s* (2013), that “while the notion of classifying faeces may have seemed absurd to a contemporary and largely male art audience, for a new mother at that time this would have been *familiar territory*.”⁴⁶ In aestheticizing the abject and transposing the domestic theme into the white gallery space, *PPD* evoked the theme of the maternal body while giving voice to women to articulate their own desires.

Kelly explained her incorporation of Lacanian theory and the elimination of any direct portrayal of the female body as a “revisionist staging of the female subject.”⁴⁷ In her conversation with Amelia Jones, she explained that her controlled use of the abject image, mediated by language, “activated the contingency of her ‘femininity’” and offered “alternative ways of understanding the complexities of women’s experience.”⁴⁸ Jones contextualized that Kelly’s practice represented the women artists who actively responded to the “raw and confrontational” celebration of the “central core” nature of women by Chicago and Schapiro.⁴⁹ According to Kelly, the nuanced approach that interwoven images and texts was employed to further strengthen the point of view of women instead of men:⁵⁰

“Even, or especially, when I use something as eccentric as the Lacanian diagrams, they are first of all images, representations of the difficulty of the symbolic order for women; the difficulty of representing lack, of accepting castration, of not having the phallus, of not being the Phallic Mother.”

Hence, compared with Chicago’s act of seizing the abject and the “cunt,” Kelly’s approach of anesthetizing the abject and mediating it with language represents going one step further, probing into the psychoanalytic dimension

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of maternal desire, and the non-biological construction of feminine role and identity. Arguably, by taking control over male-dominant language, Kelly intervenes the space of Conceptual art through a feminist approach and stages the mother as the subject of her own desire, who actively gazes back by first aligning with, then subverting the male gaze. The abject, though muted and controlled, remains a marker for the uncompromising feminine space. *PPD* was displayed in the first section – “The Maternal Body” – in the 1993 “Abject Art” exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Cindy Sherman, Untitled Film Stills (1980s – 1990s) and Popular Media: Affect through the Accentuated Abject

“I’m disgusted with how people get themselves to look beautiful; I’m much more fascinated with the other side.” – Cindy Sherman, 1986⁵¹

Born in 1954 in New Jersey, Cindy Sherman grew up in a suburban Huntington Beach, forty miles from Manhattan, loved dressing up from a young age, and belonged to “the first generation of Americans raised on television”.⁵² She initially studied painting but was soon drawn to photography, which was often used by Surrealists like Man Ray (1890 – 1976) and Hans Bellmer (1902 – 1975). Unlike Chicago and Kelly who might be said to verbalize a strong artistic persona through their interviews and writings, Sherman is more reclusive and usually hides her authorial position behind the masquerade that she employs to investigate the performative nature of gender. Her conception of the feminine is thus more fluid than the essentialism advocated by Chicago, and less concerned with the maternal, psychoanalytic dimension explored by Kelly. Her battlefield lies mainly outside the

gallery space, sponsored by commercial galleries and known brands such as Louis Vuitton.⁵³ Her photographs have been auctioned for as high as \$2.7 million, such as *Untitled #153* (Fig. 10, to be discussed below), sold in 2010.⁵⁴ Beginning her *Untitled Film Stills* series in the 1970s – the series now numbers more than three hundred images – Sherman accumulated a body of work that appropriates the mass pop culture and democratizes art.

Sherman has explored a diverse range of topics since the 1970s, from the appropriation of feminine roles depicted in B-movies and popular magazines to the unseemly panorama of vomit, body parts, and bodily fluids in 1990s, to the depiction of aging women framed in scenes that signify money and status in 2018. For the purpose of this dissertation, my focus is on her works from the late 1980s to 1990s, a period of works that relied on the shocking effect of the abject to challenge idealized imagery of women.

Untitled #153 (1989)

In *Untitled #153* (1989), lying still on the ground, surrounded by rotten mosses, the mudcaked female figure evokes horror, silence, and helplessness; her stiffened facial expression recalls rape victims that are often found in the “Missing Person” newspaper sections (Fig. 10). With her head slightly tilted to the camera, her body diagonally positioned and occupying the dominant proportion of the photograph, the figure overwhelms the audience with both of her familiarity and anonymity – accentuated by the nondescript title, “untitled” – it conjures into mind any female but the artist herself. Yet its very nature of being a posed photograph, an artistic conceit, reminds the audience of the layers of representation in the artwork. Beyond the reality of male rapists committing sexual violence to female victims, behind the camera, it is the female artist staging the

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sexual violence committed by the male to the female. Hence, the shocking affect enabled by the abject seeks to make the audience pause and rethink male dominance – magnified in its most forceful form with rape – that continues to dominate the modern society.

For Cindy Sherman, photography offers a specific site to experiment with the abject as a strategy to undermine misogyny. Cindy Sherman: Retrospective (1997) documents a handwritten note (undated) where Sherman articulated her exasperation about the seemingly “misogynistic” assumptions behind Surrealist art through the “beautification” of women:⁵⁵

“I was thinking how the Surrealists were very much into de Sade + thus misogynistic which rather intrigued me, I guess because the main thing that bothered me with their work was in the beautification of the women used, not how they were used (Not to mention, however, how these men themselves seemed rather piggish the way girlfriends, wives, etc. seem to have been treated, passed around, used as models, while these women were, often, artists themselves + much younger.)

“Anyway, I had wanted to explore a violent, misogynistic direction, à la Sade + the boys; instead everything seems too “loaded” about sex/violence. I guess that the successful Surrealistic play here would be to diffuse the ugly-reality of misogyny by twisting the reality-surreal! – Voilà –”

Although it remains curious which Surrealist works Sherman specifically had in mind here, her personal notes revealed her intention to appropriate the “the ugly-reality of misogyny.” Sherman’s works rely on a mechanism that may be called “uglification” as a revolt against male artists – exemplified by those Surrealists mentioned above, who enjoyed the writings of Surrealist philosophers like Marquis de Sade (1740 – 1814). Sherman’s fascination with the abject and the ugly is unapologetic and central to her aesthetics: “I’m disgusted with how people get themselves to look beautiful; I’m much more

fascinated with the other side.”⁵⁶ In subverting what is usually portrayed as beautiful, Sherman’s use of the abject undermines the ideals of beauty and its underlying misogyny. In another handwritten note dated in the 1990s, Cindy Sherman reflected on her self-distancing stance and proceeded to experiment with mannequins instead of her own performative body:⁵⁷

“Even, or especially, when I use something as eccentric as the Lacanian diagrams, they are first of all images, representations of the difficulty of the symbolic order for women; the difficulty of representing lack, of accepting castration, of not having the phallus, of not being the Phallic Mother.”

Untitled #261 (1992)

In *Untitled #261 (1992)*, a once beautiful and perfect mannequin is dismembered, her waist shortened to emphasize the two female sexual organs: the upright breast and wide-open “cunt” – as Judy Chicago might call it – free of any public hair (Fig. 11). Yet Sherman further intensifies the abject “seized” directly by Judy Chicago. With the legs of the mannequin being cut off, her arms are twisted into an unnatural position, supporting a broken neck and a hollow-looking face. This work recalls the rape victim again, underscoring the violence of dismemberment. Yet, unlike *Untitled #153*, *Untitled #261* involves a further step of defamiliarization, as the fabricated nature of the mannequin removes the female victim from a realistic rape scene; the process of defamiliarization generates the effects of both absurdity and fear. The thick red folds below the mannequin almost evokes flowing menstrual blood, further accentuating the sense of horror. *Untitled #261* was included in the 1993 “Abject Art” exhibition at Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.⁵⁸

In the article titled “The Phobic Object: Abjection

in Contemporary Art” published in the catalogue accompanying the 1993 exhibition, Simon Taylor discusses Sherman’s “monstrous representations of the feminine” in the 1990s as an appropriation of horror films and the sub-genre of pornographic “meat” films, as well as the 1930s doll assemblages by Hans Bellmer; Taylor’s argument echoes Sherman’s own words on her skepticism towards male Surrealists.⁵⁹ “The Phobic Object,” as the title of the article suggests, illustrates the mechanism of the shocking effect that Sherman employs: using the abject to invoke an intensified sensation of fear toward the foreign. An example from Bellmer’s *The Doll* series (1934) may be juxtaposed against *Untitled #261* (1992) to illuminate Sherman’s approach (Fig. 12).

In a black-and-white print, Bellmer’s photograph of the utterly fragmented girl mannequin’s body is disquieting in its own way. The figure is decapitated, her displaced eyeball gazing in wide horror, while a tousled wig sits at the juncture between knee, head, and hip. Her hairless labia, resting next to a splayed thigh, remains inviting; the facial expression of the girl evokes a dreamy mixture of pleasure and pain. The striped background perhaps alludes to a young girl’s bedsheet. Working under the context of the oppressive Nazi regime in Germany, Bellmer employed photography as a specific kind of political defiance.⁶⁰ Yet arguably, his work was not without sadistic and fetishistic implications – incarnating the corruption of innocence that De Sade’s writings portrayed – which might have provoked feminist artists like Sherman. Bellmer’s girl mannequin retained a curvy and sensuous form, especially in the area of the narrowed waist and slightly protruding belly, which might constitute what Sherman referred to as the “beautification.” In comparison, Sherman’s stiffened mannequin lacked prominent feminine features except the breasts and female genital (Fig. 11). While Bellmer dismembered the mannequin body and displaced the limbs, Sherman went one step further by re-instituting the dismembered pieces, using artifices to emphasize

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a sense of violence, the posed nature of photography. Hence, Sherman employs and accentuates the abject in a representational medium that doubles back on its own representational nature – photography – to shatter the illusion of the beautification of the female body and thereby critique misogyny. Through the shocking effect of horror and phobia, Sherman accentuates the abject that Chicago seized in *Womanhouse* and Kelly muted in *Post-Partum Document*.

Conclusion

Judy Chicago seizes the abject; Mary Kelly aestheticizes the abject; Cindy Sherman accentuates the abject. All of these three women artists use the abject as a strategy to reclaim the feminine body and identity that have been relentlessly constructed, fantasized, fetishized and appropriated in male-dominant society, art and culture. Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject provides a framework to interpret the constant motif recurring in the works of women artists since the early 1970s and allows us to see continuity throughout various generations of the feminists. While anthologies published in the late 1990s and early 2000s like *Art and Feminism* (2001) reflected a resurgent interest in the women artists working in the 1970s and gestured toward a less divisive approach to the study of feminism in art, catalogues accompanying later exhibitions such as *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007) further traced the affinity between different groups of practicing women artists with the greater benefit of hindsight: it emphasized "global" feminism, performance art as a prominent feminist medium, and race, which must be taken into account as an intersectional factor in the analysis of the construction of gender roles.⁶¹ Writing the dissertation one decade after the "WACK!" exhibition, I have witnessed further attempts in recent exhibition spaces that acknowledge this long feminist battle while tracing its progress.

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In Spring 2018, a new installment called *Women House* arrived at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. to pay tribute to the 1972 *Womanhouse*. The new *Women House* focuses on showcasing a younger generation of feminist art practice and only features two of the twenty-three original artists from the first *Womanhouse* – Chicago and Schapiro; nonetheless, the title of the contemporary exhibition gestures toward the pioneering status of *Womanhouse* and acknowledges the many feminist art themes that have emerged out of its experimental space, including the abject.⁶² The agenda of the National Museum of Women in the Arts is unequivocal – it is a guaranteed feminist space that celebrates and promotes self-pronounced “Feminist” artists like Judy Chicago. The “About” page of the official website announces: “NMWA is the *only major museum* in the world *solely dedicated* to championing women through the arts.”⁶³ On the other hand, the different sections of Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document have been purchased by art galleries throughout the world with different focuses, continuing to assert a feminine space within the realm of contemporary art. For example, *Documentation I and II* are now collected in Art Gallery of Ontario, Canada, *Documentation III* in Tate Modern, United Kingdom and *Documentation V* in Australian National Gallery.⁶⁴ Cindy Sherman, whose photographs fetched as high as \$3.89 million at Christie’s, will have a major retrospective exhibition opening in June 2019 in the National Portrait Gallery in London, making its grand appearance in a national gallery space.⁶⁵ In this instance, Sherman’s works are primarily promoted as an exploration of the tensions between façade and identity, while the feminist undertone is hushed.⁶⁶ Art markets, institutions and media continue to shape how women artists are represented and received; a retrospective feminist perspective helps illuminate the continuities across the different avenues, even when a “feminist” agenda is not

explicitly advertised.

This dissertation traces the lineage across the works of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Cindy Sherman through the theme of the abject as a strategy to reclaim the feminine body and identity. The aim of this retrospective study is not to minimize these women artists' diversity or versatility, but to delineate the many possibilities of women artists' success in re-asserting women's voice. Their battles ensured that we could eventually flip the question posed by Linda Nochlin in 1971: How could women artists *redefine* their roles, and redefine "great art?" A back glance at the 1970s reminds us not to take any present-day progress for granted, and instead, to keep hold of the legacy and keep moving forward.

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<https://female-arthistory.tumblr.com/post/91778506171/dining-room-installation-at-womanhouse-miriam>

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