

National College of Art & Design
Department of Applied Materials - (Textile Art & Artefact)

Research Essay
The Abject Feminine & Her Disembodiment

Ruth O'Hora

Submitted to the School of Visual Culture in Candidacy for the Degree of BA (HONS) – Applied Arts
2023



National College of Art and Design

School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: 

Programme / department: Department of Applied Materials - (Textile Art & Artefact)

Date: 10/2/2023

I would like to express my deepest gratitude for my supervisor Dr. Silvia Loeffler & for her generosity of mentorship, guidance, and knowledge throughout the completion of this research essay.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: What is Abject Femininity?.....	3
- 1.1 Introducing the Abject.....	3
- 1.2 What is it about the feminine that is abject?.....	5
- 1.3 The Abject in Lacan & Beyond.....	6
Chapter 2: The Abject & Disembodiment.....	9
- 2.1 Disembodying of Her.....	9
- 2.2 Sarah Lucas' <i>Pauline Bunny</i>	10
- 2.3 Anna Uddenberg's figurative works.....	15
Conclusion.....	18
Bibliography.....	20

List of Illustrations

Figure:

1. <i>Bunny Gets Snookered</i> , Sarah Lucas (1997) (Coles HQ, 1997a).....	11
2. <i>Suffolk Bunny</i> , Sarah Lucas (1997) (Coles HQ, 1997b).....	12
3. <i>Suffolk Bunny</i> in Freud's Studio, Sarah Lucas (1997) (Coles HQ, 2013).....	12
4. <i>Pauline Bunny</i> , Sarah Lucas (1997) (Lucas, 1997).....	14
5. <i>Savage #5 (cozy crutch)</i> , Anna Uddenberg (2017) (Uddenberg, 2017a).....	15
6. <i>Savage #5 (cozy crutch)</i> (detail), Anna Uddenberg (2017) (Uddenberg, 2017b).....	15
7. <i>Focus #2 (pussy padding) (a)</i> , Anna Uddenberg (2018) (Uddenberg, 2018a).....	17
8. <i>Focus #2 (pussy padding) (b)</i> , Anna Uddenberg (2018) (Uddenberg, 2018b).....	17

Introduction

“Abjection spirals out - it is the irrational, animalistic, sexualised, pathological constitution of the feminine, theorised from Freud to Lacan & beyond, to be identified against at all costs by the masculine subject, [and] to somehow be negotiated ambivalently by the feminine subject. Abjection is a site of risk and contamination that any feminine subject is at risk of slipping into...” (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

The main concern of this essay, is to address and apply research, language, and illustration to a sensation and condition I had not been equipped to access, to make intelligible, until my introduction to the term ‘abject’. This essay begs the question of what abject femininity is, and aims to detail the feminine’s experience with abjection. Through the context of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, this essay centres around the feminine experience, feminine sexuality, the commodification of femininity, female subjugation, and disembodiment.

Precarious is the path a contemporary woman is to navigate to inhabit a fulfilled, whole existence in the symbolic order. Traces of natural lightness, looseness, and serendipity are effaced in the application of rejection, regulation, remoulding unto her feminine experience, under the voyeuristic and omnipresent male gaze. The completion of this essay will act as a meditative and intuitive process in response to this abstract sensation; it will track a train of thought, tease out possibilities, bridge existing twin notions, and highlight synchronicities in my interests, creative practice, and subconscious to potentially provide a catharsis for the jaded feminine.

Extensive research for this essay was conducted via literature, academic journals, biographies, online articles, video essays, studying artworks, personal reflection, casual interpersonal conversations, and mentorship.

This essay will pose the question of what abject femininity is exactly, a term introduced to me when reading up on Sarah Lucas’ *Pauline Bunny*. Academic concepts will aid in explaining the phenomenon of abjection and its roots in psychology, and introduce the corporeal. The chapter will carry on to address where abjection intersects with the feminine, and tease out the inextricable links

between the female condition and that which is abject. The feminine experience will come to the fore to offer a wide, transversal of what about femininity is abject and abjected, broaching liminality. Introduction of Lacan's theory of the mirror-stage will precede acknowledgment of the Age of Self-Representation will arise to narrate through a self-policing gaze responsible for abjection within the self. Chapter 1 will conclude by meditating upon commodification and victimhood, raising questions and frustrations with the findings of the chapter.

The second chapter of this essay will open by confronting the concept of disembodiment, detailing the sensation of disembodiment, and pointing to the common external forces from which the feminine's disembodiment is manufactured, exemplified by the purifying of bodily performances in tracking-wearables, and the creation of 'dirt' within the symbolic order. Again, frustration with the disenfranchisement and disembodiment of the feminine into a surreal state of inner-chaos is highlighted, moving on to point to contemporary feminist artist Sarah Lucas' *Pauline Bunny* artwork to help illustrate and contextualise the nuanced concepts brought up throughout the essay. Then, concluding the essay with aid from mimetic visual artist Anna Uddenberg's figurative artworks, a serendipitous glimmer of hope and possible remedy for the jaded feminine is uncovered, in a welcomed positive twist.

"The abject is the underside of the symbolic. ... We live in a symbolic world; we've applied language to form structure; we've created semiotics, and we live within that structure. However, it's a construct, it doesn't naturally exist. There's something before that (eg. our experience in utero, our experience being a child without language). The abject always threatens the symbolic... the abject is the underside of the symbolic & it threatens to draw the subject into the underside. It does this by dissembling form." (Lang, 2020).

Chapter 1: What is Abject Femininity?

1.1 Introducing the Abject

Femininity, by definition, is “the fact of being a woman; the qualities that are considered to be typical of women” (Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com, n.d.). Abjection, or “the abject”, is a theory French philosopher Julia Kristeva developed in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1982 (Rogers, 2012). Kristeva’s theory of abjection is rooted in philosophy and psychology; it attempts explanation of what gives rise to horror and disgust in human beings, and why (Smith, 2017). The grotesque, the corpse, the prostitute, the transgender, sweat, menstruation, are some examples of the abject. The female too. Abjection is a phenomenon by which the sight of something corporeal - something that threatens the distinction between the self, and what is outside of it - solicits a physical reaction from human beings (Deschanel, 2021).

The primary example employed by Kristeva for what causes such a reaction is the human cadaver or corpse. The corpse - a human form, with no signs of humanity left within it - is a potent reminder of our own mortality, and facing one traumatically reminds us of our own materiality (Deschanel, 2021). Kristeva explains, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (Felluga, 2011). It discomfits the observer as it makes them recoil, yet it also evokes morbid familiarity and fascination. The corpse straddles a presumably unstraddleable mental borderline of definition. Here’s something that was alive, but now isn’t. It exists on a border of life and death. It’s there, but its no longer what it was (Smith, 2017). Abjection does not respect borders, rules, positions, but disturbs identity, order, system (Lilac, 2022). To Kristeva, the abject is what traverses boundaries. Anything that displays the porosity of borders is abject (Lang, 2020). The abject causes the subject to question their existence, elicits shame and disgust, and a de-stabilising takes place (Rogers, 2012). The abject, as a result, must be cast outside from one's sense of self & identity. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva refers to the primitive effort to separate ourselves from the animal:

"by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder".

This process of revulsing, othering, rejecting characterises the making of the abject.

"If you fall outside the norm of what is beautiful in our culture, you're a pariah"; Lauren Greenfield on *Girl Culture* (Snider, 2021). The female body has been presented as a site of spectacle and commentary for centuries in both art and society; spectators taking great pleasure observing emotion being wrought on the feminine (Deschanel, 2021). Both in art - especially abject art - and in society, women are used as a site of transgression. The female body occupies a given role of ambivalence; an object of simultaneous desire and disgust (Dumas, 2013). This ambivalence leads me to consideration of what it is about the feminine that is abject, and abjection's relationship with the female body. Ageing female bodies are something both "invisible and hyper-visible" in contemporary culture; broadcast as sites of fear and disgust, and "cast as the corporeal signifiers of an inevitable mortal decay that the youth and consumer-orientated culture of late modernity can address only through narratives of punitive physical transformation." on television makeover series' (Tincknell, 2011).

Female comedians often take on a level of vulgarity and grotesqueness that provokes their audience; joking about menstruation, losing control of bodily functions during sex, or having a lot of sex in general and detailing sexual encounters. The reactions expose a taboo. Vulgarity and edgy humour characterise the humour of male comedians, and is something the public are accustomed to seeing in popular media. "The female body, on the other hand, is ornamental.", their comedy is thus perceived as abject. Fatness on the feminine body is itself framed as abject; as an "excessiveness of bodily flesh that seems to transgress borders set by the media" (Deschanel, 2021).

Blackness and P.O.C female bodies have long been regulated through "the racialising and sexualising imperialist gaze ... the 'hottentot Venus' [for example] ... the representation of the black female body and sexuality as excessive and grotesque" (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). A

dynamic of working class shame and abjection was principle throughout Victorian England, where “the impoverished, dirty whore operated as a symbolic site of revile and disgust, a designation working class women have had to navigate across generations.” (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). The feminine exists as a “paradoxical locus of virtue and vice, desirability and disgust” (Dumas, 2013).

1.2 What is it about the feminine that is abject?

Abjection of the feminine experience is exemplified when audiences watch the grotesque feminine on screen (Megan Fox’s performance in *Jennifer’s Body*, for example) ... “they reject it; they abject it. The woman abjecting herself is the greatest horror of them all. The grotesque feminine is an existential threat; a fundamental taboo that needs to be cast off.” (Deschanel, 2021). Taboos function to uphold axiomatic social systems, and to reduce social and intellectual disorder (Søndergaard, 2016).

“We create our identities by expelling the other.” (Smith, 2017). Having summarised the basic understanding of Kristeva’s theory of abjection and highlighted what about femininity is abjected, it is worthwhile to trace closer, in greater detail, why the patriarchal, heterosexual male gaze abjects. In abjection, the process of creating borders between the 'I' and the 'other', what is it that one rejects and excludes from oneself, occurs. This process stems from the “first site” of abjection: the maternal body, from which the child must separate to become a subject (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). As Kristeva puts it, "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva and Roudiez, 1982).

Kristeva notes food loathing as the most elementary form of abjection. Describing her intense and violent reaction to her lips touching the skin-like meniscus formed on the surface of milk her family had given her, Kristeva notices it is the in-between state of the milk that unsettles

her. The milk is meant to nourish, but it is now tainted by a 'skin'. In rejecting the milk - which is intended as a source of nourishment and life - Kristeva separates herself from her parents, who want her to drink it. "It's not the lack of cleanliness, or in this case the lack of freshness of the milk that causes abjection, but rather the way in which her horror & disgust disrupt what the milk means to her. Her mind struggles to place the 'skin' of the milk, because it exists between nourishment & decay."; the abject is a threat to our understanding of reality (Smith, 2017).

A sort of double othering occurs here; the othering of self from the milk, and the othering of self from the maternal. When confronted with the abject, we seek the womb while of the knowledge we cannot go back; we're situated in a state of in-between (Rogers, 2012). Historically, the feminine body is a scientific mystery; an "intractable frontier". Some deem women's genitalia and sexual organs as "innately grotesque by [their] dark, damp invisibility"; they themselves are abject. The female body is distorted into a liminal space, where the discomfort of abjection can take place (Deschanel, 2021).

1.3 The Abject in Lacan & Beyond

For the growing child, anything feminine becomes abject (Smith, 2017). Using Lacan's concept of the 'mirror stage' - the moment a baby witnesses their reflection in a mirror for the first time and comes to realise themselves as a material object, an individual being that must be developed - to underscore her theory of abjection, Kristeva notes this stage as pivotal to the child's "indoctrination into a patriarchal order; one that forces the child to reject the maternal and the feminine, which are potent reminders of their own mortality." (Deschanel, 2021). This patriarchal order, as a result, intends only to tolerate the narrowest ideal of femininity - the sexy, the flirty, the caring - and any other iteration of womanhood will evoke something akin to internal malfunction and an overwhelming response of deny, deny, deny. It is jarring, uncanny, and threatening. Such reaction is reminiscent of the rejection of *Jennifer's Body* by audiences, as they had no idea where

to place it, it was "... not scary enough, not funny enough, not exploitative enough, not feminist enough, not sexy enough..."; a fundamental betrayal of the male fantasy (Deschanel, 2021). As Kristeva puts it, "Abjection ... is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you." (Kristeva and Roudiez, 1982).

"Abjection spirals out - it is the irrational, animalistic, sexualised, pathological constitution of the feminine, theorised from Freud to Lacan & beyond, to be identified against at all costs by the masculine subject, [and] to somehow be negotiated ambivalently by the feminine subject. Abjection is a site of risk and contamination that any feminine subject is at risk of slipping into..." (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Under the perpetual constraint of the abjectifying male gaze - a voyeuristic, oppressive mechanism - the feminine has little choice but to conform. There is power in viewership and voyeurism. With this power dynamic, comes the objectification, disembodiment, degradation and hyper-sexualisation of the feminine.

The state of being abjected, cast off by society, often becomes internalised. Sociologist Imogen Tyler puts it,

"Disgust is not just enacted by subjects & groups in processes of othering, distinction-making, distancing, boundary formation, but it is also experienced & lived by those constituted as disgusting in their experiences of displacement & abandon ... people internalise the social judgements made of their stigmatisation as shame, self-loathing, self-disgust, self-contempt and self-hatred." (Tyler, 2013).

In the Age of Self-Representation, these conditions of self-flagellation culminate in an attempt to commodify, quantify one's worth, in the absence of a healthy self-actualising system and self-esteem. It is becoming increasingly potent the shift from the judgment of an external male gaze to a narcissistic self-policing gaze, whereby women are not only objectified (as before), but they are also to understand their own objectification as self chosen and pleasurable (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). It is as though they are learning how to display and perform the 'right kind' of femininity. 'Doing' feminine becomes a performance of somehow juggling "traditionally feminine qualities like nurturing, passivity and sexual attractiveness as objects of heteronormative gaze, with

traditionally masculine positionalities like assertiveness, rationality, autonomy, economic and emotional independence...”. The feminine has become a locus of limitless potential and endless consumption (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Media like television makeover programmes have aided in reconstructing contemporary femininity into a pathological condition that is abject and fragmented, waiting for renewal and redeeming (Tincknell, 2011). Proliferation of abstract concepts of physical perfectibility and the reflexive project of the self exemplify the heterosexualised Neo-liberal conditions of consuming oneself into being. Considering the axiomatic demand for women to be desirable, presentable, consumable, there is a dichotomy unravelling in the dynamic of women consuming the self into being, having traditionally been the object of consumption (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Anna Uddenberg puts it, “I think the link between feminine expressions and conformist consumer options is the idea that it’s done for someone else’s pleasure and therefore it’s connected to victimhood.” (Greenberger, 2021).

What is the point of this futile perpetuation of the enforced suffering and constraint of the feminine? To fit inside the narrow boundaries of social digestibility in the symbolic order? This order appears faulted, as it

“completely flattens complexity, nuance, difference, and even the entire human condition. All human beings are inherently a bit abject - we’re fleshy, we ooze liquids, we rot when we die, we’re complicated & sometimes awful - and rejecting these fundamental traits, making them taboo, will get us nowhere.” (Deschanel, 2021).

Humanity is abject by nature, thus the impossibility of avoiding abjection seems to be a cyclically torturous psycho-horror for the feminine.

Chapter 2: The Abject & Disembodiment

2.1 Disembodying of Her

By definition, to disembody is to “separate (something) from its material form.” (Oxford Languages, n.d.); to “divest of a body, of corporeal existence, or of reality.” (Webster, n.d.).

Aligning my existential experience as a young, white, able-bodied, privileged woman to the research conducted for Chapter 1 of this essay, the term disembodiment makes intelligible the abstract omnipresence of the abjecting eye; both externally & internally.

Childhoods are spent preoccupied, sitting cross-legged on the carpet while dialogue from television makeover programmes hums in the background, promising

“to transform ‘ordinary’ women into an acceptable version of femininity through the relentless application of transformative powers... Women’s bodies are pulled apart and then cosmetically reconstructed, sealed up & smoothed over, their gaps & apertures sutured to produce a boundary-less object. ... the abject feminine operates as prototype of transformative subject at present.” (Tincknell, 2011).

In order to successfully complete the search of a sense of belonging, a sense of actualisation, a sense of comfort & solace in one’s existence within the symbolic order, it is upon the feminine to conduct a - logically counterintuitive - practice of “‘reflexive selfhood’ ... through the internalisation of the right sorts of expert knowledge to sustain an endlessly adaptive & reinventing self.” (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Once indoctrinated into such a process, it is unto her body & mind that the “drama of possibility & limitation of Neo-liberal reinvention is played out.” (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Nuanced, ungendered experiences cease to exist - her corporeal being becomes a purified, sanitised, and merchandised item - a postfeminist masquerade assumes their place; a feminine gender performance unfolds (Nagypal, 2014).

Similarly, the placement of the body in a wider system of exchange via digital self-tracking technologies & wearables, affirms this. Quantification of bodily performances, as far down to the flow of one’s period that day, becomes biometric data to be harvested & exchanged between

smartphones, databases, and stakeholders (Søndergaard, 2016). Through period cycle tracking on reproductive health apps, “messy blood becomes clean data” within the (religious, cultural, & political) understanding of menstruation as dirt. “As such, menstruation trackers help us manage a (former) site of disgust.”, whereby without, the menstruating woman would fall outside of the feminine ideal in neither equalling sex nor reproduction (Søndergaard, 2016). Mediated separation & disconnection from the volatile chaos of the natural order seems essential in the maintenance of the symbolic order.

Such threats of abjection unto the feminine into “identifying against what we must not be” fuelling “incessant attempts to refashion [our]selves into generalised & normalised bourgeois feminine subjects.” (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008) work to entirely strip her of authorship over her image & self, and through this disconnection, leave her writhing in a surreal, disembodied state. British artist Sarah Lucas’ installation series featuring the work *Pauline Bunny* plus the figurative works of Swedish artist Anna Uddenberg pillar this concept & aid in embodying such an idea of disembodiment. I have chosen these two series’ of works to illustrate the findings of this essay’s research.

2.2 Sarah Lucas’ *Pauline Bunny*

Contemporary feminist artist Sarah Lucas, born 1962 in Holloway, London, examines the influence of class, the tension between minimalism & the excesses of consumerism, and the association of voyeurism with the female body through crude seediness and vulgar humour in her practice (Withers, 2021). Pushing the limits of figurative representations by employing appropriated objects, visual puns, and euphemisms, Lucas contorts the mundane - cigarettes, food, furniture, for example - into “abject, hyper-sexualised genitals and fragmented human bodies.” (Artsy.net, 2014). Lineage of surrealist influence can thus be traced throughout her work, which simultaneously delights & discomfits (Tate, 2019). Her practice spans photography, installation, sculpture, and

mixed media work (Artsy.net, 2014). Lucas' art was my personal introduction to abject art, and to the term 'abject' itself. Since purchasing a postcard of *Pauline Bunny*'s image from the Tate Modern gift shop in 2019, purely from aesthetic attraction, that £1.50 purchase & the subsequent Google search has since shaped my creative identity entirely.

Pauline Bunny is one element of a 1997 Sadie Coles HQ exhibition by Lucas titled *Bunny Gets Snookered* (see Fig. 1), composed of eight misshapen & seated female 'bunny' figures, arranged on and around a snooker table. Each figure represented by no more than a wooden chair, vinyl seat, stuffed tights, stockings, metal wire & clamp, they are only distinguishable by the colour of their stockings, corresponding to the colours in a set of snooker balls (Brown, 1997). The "limply dangling ears and passively lolling legs" (Tate, 2019) have "a sort of authentically seedy, post-fucked, spunked-on look. They [are] ranked like sexual conquests, pocketed, in a horrible polygamy, by the malign presence of the overbearingly male snooker table." (Brown, 1997).



Figure 1: *Bunny Gets Snookered*, Sarah Lucas (1997)

Both the nature of the figures in the phallogentric environment, and the titular term 'snookered' - meaning to be prevented from scoring - join forces to create such a succinct reading

of disempowerment; a “masculine victory in a sexual war.” (Tate, 2019). The work oozes misogyny & female subjugation. The dysphoric sexuality of the scene, the effaced quality of the figures & the common passivity shared by them while literally disembodied, erotic but grotesque; this work is abject femininity in one snapshot. If the girls are pandering to the male gaze with their sexy garments, why is the scene so jarring, so sinister? Why is it all so weird? In *Bunny Gets Snookered*, we are presented with the female body being distorted into a liminal space, where the discomfort of abjection can take place (Deschanel, 2021). Not only are the bunny figures abject in their ugliness & the unpleasantness of their presence, they are the feminine existing as a “paradoxical locus of virtue and vice, desirability and disgust” (Dumas, 2013); they are traversing boundaries, they are abject. Furthermore, the girls exemplify the “feminine gender performance” mentioned earlier (Nagypal, 2014), they are the representation of the disembodiment which occurs to the feminine by the abjecting eye. Quite literally, the girls are fucked.

Suffolk Bunny is one of the eight bunny girls, named after the area in which Lucas’ artist studio is located and where the artist resides. This bunny girl dons a pair of sky blue stockings on her stuffed legs, which are clamped to a metal framed chair in a manner of “secretarial submissiveness” (Tate, 2019). Her dimensions are 96 x 64 x 90 centimetres, proportioning her and her fellow bunnies to just below a likeness of life-size (Artsy.net, 2014).

Figure 2: *Suffolk Bunny*, Sarah Lucas (1997)



Figure 3: *Suffolk Bunny* in Freud’s Studio, Sarah Lucas (1997)

Like her fellow bunny girl forms, *Suffolk Bunny* (see Fig. 2) sits with splayed legs and coloured stocking corresponding to a snooker ball. One could wonder, who is responsible for the naked and abject condition of the figure? Her aloof, sagging nature is like that of docile prey (Bither, 2013). *Suffolk Bunny* was presented in the Freud Museum in London for a period in 2013 as part of an exhibition titled *Mad, Bad and Sad* (Meer, 2013). Inspired by the book *Mad, Bad and Sad: Women and the Mind Doctors from 1800 to the Present* by Lisa Appignanesi, the purpose of the exhibition was to highlight “the experience of women and their relationship to those who confined, cared for and listened to them.”, and traced key moments in the history of ‘female maladies’ (Meer, 2013). A ‘malady’, by definition, is “a disease of ailment; a serious problem.” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). To consider the condition these abjected feminine figures find themselves in as pathological is correct, recalling that

“Abjection spirals out - it is the irrational, animalistic, sexualised, pathological constitution of the feminine, theorised from Freud to Lacan & beyond, to be identified against at all costs by the masculine subject, [and] to somehow be negotiated ambivalently by the feminine subject. Abjection is a site of risk and contamination that any feminine subject is at risk of slipping into...” (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Pauline Bunny, presented wearing black coloured stockings (see Fig. 4), is the most well known of the eight bunny girl figures. Black dually corresponds to the highest valued snooker ball, and is the “most traditionally alluring of the selection of colours” (Tate, 2019). *Pauline Bunny* is the least stuffed form of all of the bunnies, asserting her position as “the most important and seductive of the bunnies” (Tate, 2019), according to the common societal preference of a slim female form, lacking excess and demanding of the least space in any given room.

Of all of Lucas’ bunny figures, *Pauline Bunny* best represents the dichotomy of the feminine’s relationship with abjection. Despite her qualities that deem her the ‘best’ in the room, she remains a pathetic emblem of disempowerment and the cruelty exerted by the abjecting male gaze unto the female. She has learned how to display and perform the ‘right kind’ of femininity

(Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008), 'doing' feminine has become a performance she has mastered.

Aforementioned, Anna Uddenberg's words remain viscerally relevant in *Pauline Bunny*'s case, whereby "... the link between feminine expressions and conformist consumer options [being] the idea that it's done for someone else's pleasure and therefore it's connected to victimhood."

(Greenberger, 2021). To me, Pauline Bunny perfectly represents the disembodiment of the feminine under the subjugating, abjecting symbolic order. She is slim, still, digestible; she has earned her lovely, valued black stockings. Regardless, she is snookered. Disembodied & discarded. She is "trapped by her femininity, only to be knocked against her fellow bunnies in a game of masculine skill." (Tate, 2019). She is Her.



Figure 4: *Pauline Bunny*, Sarah Lucas (1997)

2.3 Anna Uddenberg's figurative works

Stockholm born and Berlin based artist Anna Uddenberg (b.1982) investigates body culture, self-staging, performativity, and womanhood within our contemporary consumerist culture through her practice (Zeidler, 2022). Primarily taking the form of installation and figurative sculpture, her pieces

“embody the tension and hyper-normalized standards of a neoliberal feminine identity, reinforced through commodity culture's commercial imagery, social media celebrity influencers, the rise of reality television at the fin de siècle, and erotic subcultures more easily accessible than ever before due to the ubiquity of the internet.” (Tasman, 2018).

Uddenberg manages to both explore technical limits, and open a space between the poles of the grotesque and figuration. Faceless with hyperreal finishes, her work is exaggerated and commanding; it feels exploitative yet emboldening. The nature of Uddenberg works existing in series', coupled with her use of tongue-in-cheek language in their titles, give way to truly unique and well-rounded exhibitions, which, somewhat ironically, proliferate into virality online (Scarabelli, 2021).



Figure 5: *Savage #5 (cozy crutch)*, Anna Uddenberg (2017)

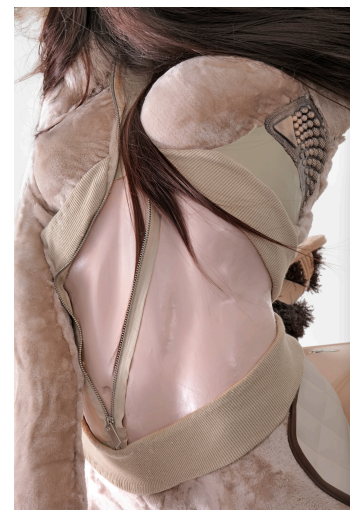


Figure 6: *Savage #5 (cozy crutch)* (detail), Anna Uddenberg (2017)

Savage #5 (cozy crutch) (see Fig. 5) presents us with a pink, highly stylised, contorted female figure posed straddling atop a suitcase. Her body aqua-resin on fiberglass in

composition, the figure's pink skin peeks through on her exposed muscular midriff (see Fig. 6) and manicured hands, the rest of the figure heavily decked in padded, high-tech materials, her outfit "intricate and highly customised, with references to both sophisticated brands and mass-market trends alike." (Tasman, 2018). Chaps-shaped trousers, acrylic nails, synthetic hair, quilted faux leather, a puffed jacket, faux fur, velvet, mesh, crystals, rubber slippers adorn the figure (Lee, 2017). Flexed to the furthest degree physically possible, the female form appears riding her suitcase rodeo-style (Tasman, 2018).

Encountering the female figure, there is something sexual, almost pornographic, by both her attitude and the fragments of clothing she has on. She is in the grips of the norms of performance, 'doing' sexy and fun, her thighs "locked on to [the] suitcase as if riding on a mechanical bull." (Lee, 2017), but inert, she is not in this ecstatic moment. To be a woman is to perform. Her body displays a tension, despite her entry into this 'wild, sexy, spontaneous' moment. Her faceless quality and nightmarish body presence jars. She is halfway. The work offers a sensation of voyeurism, one could wonder if she would elect to be posed like this if we were not watching. The work examines certain social codes within the current quantifying-self culture (Robot Love, 2018). To view her is to watch "a process of emotional and spiritual redemption in which self-esteem is collapsed into sexual self-objectification" (Tincknell, 2011).

Focus #2 (pussy padding) (see Fig. 7 & 8) is composed of a fem-stool hybrid structure, from which a selfie-stick is clutched, her limbs arranged to a degree of impossibility in order to capture a selfie in an explicit pose (Simoniti, 2016). Again faceless, *Focus #2 (pussy padding)* is presented wearing a bike helmet, flip-flops, a puffed jacket, faux fur, and acrylic nails. Her rendering is extremely detailed, and at 200 x 55 x 70 centimetres in dimension, she is approximately life-size (Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, 2018). The perfectness of her rendering seduces (Fluxo, 2019).

Uddenberg is representing femininity as a kind of software or app, because of how it can serve any purpose. She sees it as a sort of self-reflexive form in itself. Upon encountering the



Figure 7: *Focus #2 (pussy padding) (a)*, Anna Uddenberg (2018)

Figure 8: *Focus #2 (pussy padding) (b)*, Anna Uddenberg (2018)

language used to describe women advertised on escort sites - “I am an intelligent and ultra-feminine girl, who is full of life and energy... I have a university background and ... I specialise in a genuine girlfriend experience. ...” - Uddenberg explains “I thought of the girlfriend as a user-friendly, intuitive tool” (Windsor, 2018). The work’s portrayal of femininity becomes so skewed, amplified, over-performed, it unravels to recollect disembodiment as a byproduct of the abjecting eye. Her renegotiation of the symbolic order’s typified feminine, and questioning “as to which thought processes can be triggered when these role specifications are exaggerated in an almost absurd way” (Fluxo, 2019) works to chisel at one’s certainty of the existence of abjection at all. Her ironising and exacerbating of the female form, and “her method of constructing it as a synthesis of ready-mades and handmade objects hold up a mirror to modern society.”, presenting a possible antidote or remedy for abjection of the feminine.

“With greatly overstretched bodies, their seemingly flawless figures – as a revealing expression of a twenty-first century image of women – offer an almost acrobatic still life in space and a dense, strained narrative that questions our exaggerated notions of perfection.” (Fluxo, 2019)

Conclusion

“The abject is a presence that demands to be dealt with; you can’t ignore it. You can abject it, but it returns & destabilises the entire structure.” (Lang, 2020).

To conclude, the completion of this essay was a wholly personable, and moving experience.

I am satisfied with my findings in response to the question of what abject femininity is - a nuanced & difficult condition that is not Her fault nor Her curse, it has unwavering beauty and truth, filled with excess and radical neutrality of being ‘other’ - and detailing of the feminine’s experience with abjection - a state of disembodiment that she is conditioned into, which once acknowledged and made intelligible, can be understood, accepted, harnessed.

Through the context of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, this essay centred around the feminine experience, feminine sexuality, the commodification of femininity, female subjugation, and disembodiment, and its completion became a true catharsis and therapeutic experience. The serendipity I craved in the introduction coming uncovered and exposing a potential remedy at the final moments, thanks to Anna Uddenberg’s *Focus #2 (pussy padding)*, was a wonderful moment.

From my findings, I have landed on a conclusion of this radical neutrality to the abject / being abject is going to be a defining element to both my artistic practice and my personal identity moving forward. I’m proposing to myself - in the active avoidance of returning to jadedness - the key to feminine liberation from domestication, from living uncomfortably in the patriarchal order, is to introduce a more feralistic nature: not necessarily an overgrown under-arm hair cliché (but possibly so) with aggressive nature, but an attitude that leans towards pre-symbolic order meaning.

Limitations I experienced in the essay’s completion included the aforementioned jadedness, leading to time management difficulties and a more fragmented writing process than ideally anticipated. The binary nature of my reliance on the gendered ‘feminine’ term and concept also troubled me throughout the process, finding it somewhat flattening to the multi-dimensional diversity of the wider population’s construct of gendering. Difficulty condensing such a broad,

weighted, nuanced topic into a brief sentence or two when discussing with peers was frustrating and isolating, and aroused doubts in my mind about the validity of the topic, however I am extremely relieved that did not prevent its eventual completion.

To follow on with the unplanned momentum from late revelations, I would have liked to potentially conduct an interview with a female artist who deals with the abject, especially Lucas or Uddenberg. Furthermore, to explore deeper the representation and subtle appearances of the niche qualities of this topic in media, like film and music, would have been an excellent addition to add dimension to the essay.

This said, I have been able to begin harnessing these new perspectives, excitement, and momentum into my studio practice. Temporarily titled *To be a woman is to perform*, my degree project is tracing many of my concluding findings from this essay, employing abject material like hides and dog fur.

Moving forward, I will consider expanding my research and further my knowledge of surrealism, and trace parallels between the experience of dysphoria, disembodiment, and abjection, with the visual language of surrealism. Additionally, I would like to align surrealism with girlhood, influenced by Lauren Greenfield's *Girl Culture* series I researched for this essay, and enjoy the aesthetic and cathartic results. Essentially, I am looking forward to deepening my personal and artistic grasp on areas anthropology, sociology, and psychology to soothe my day-to-day and to inform my creative eye for things that are true and beautiful.

As a final word, I am wildly pleased and relieved to have grabbed the postcard of *Pauline Bunny* in the Tate Modern in 2019, as without it, none of these previously unintelligible thoughts would have been accessed, and made intelligible. I would be snookered.

Bibliography

Artsy.net. (2014). *Sarah Lucas*. [online] Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artist/sarah-lucas>.

Bither, J. (2013). *Unsettled: An investigation of Hans Bellmer's doll photographs - ProQuest*. [online] www.proquest.com. Available at: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/4e8ec43c660fdaca0d24421143fe0714/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750>.

Brown, N. (1997). *Sarah Lucas*. [online] Frieze. Available at: <https://www.frieze.com/article/sarah-lucas-1>.

Coles HQ, S. (1997a). *Bunny Gets Snookered*. Available at: <https://www.sadiecoles.com/exhibitions/8-sarah-lucas-bunny-gets-snookered/works/>

Coles HQ, S. (1997b). *Suffolk Bunny*. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/sarah-lucas-suffolk-bunny>.

Coles HQ, S. (2013). *Suffolk Bunny in Freud's Studio*. Available at: <https://www.meer.com/en/5466-mad-bad-and-sad>.

Deschanel, B. (2021). Abject Women: The Greatest Horror of All. [online] www.youtube.com. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1yfsfQphmo&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=2.

Dumas, R. (2013). Historicizing Japan's Abject Femininity: Reading Women's Bodies in Nihon ryōiki. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, [online] 40(2). doi:10.18874/jjrs.40.2.2013.247-275.

Felluga, D. (2011a). Introduction to Julia Kristeva, Module on Psychosexual Development. [online] [Purdue.edu](https://cla.purdue.edu). Available at: <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevadevelop.html>.

Felluga, D. (2011b). Introduction to Julia Kristeva, Module on the Abject. [online] [Purdue.edu](https://cla.purdue.edu). Available at: <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html>.

Fluxo. (2019). *'Power Play' – Anna Uddenberg at Bundeskunsthalle*. [online] Available at: <https://www.ofluxo.net/power-play-anna-uddenberg-at-bundeskunsthalle/>.

Greenberger, A. (2021). Anna Uddenberg Creates Bizarre Sculptures for Balenciaga Line of Crocs Shoes. [online] [ARTnews.com](https://www.artnews.com). Available at: <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/anna-uddenberg-balenciaga-crocs-sculptures-1234608619/>.

Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. (2018). *Anna Uddenberg, FOCUS #2 (pussy padding), 2018*. [online] Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/works/2123-anna-uddenberg-focus-2-pussy-padding-2018/>.

Kristeva, J. and Roudiez, L.S. (1982). Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. *SubStance*, [online] 13(3/4), p.140. doi:10.2307/3684782.

Lang, S.D. (2020). Kristeva's theory of the Abject. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYtLYUhv2f0&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=4). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYtLYUhv2f0&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=4.

Lee, D. (2017). *Anna Uddenberg, Savage #5 (cozy crutch), 2017*. [online] Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/works/2077-anna-uddenberg-savage-5-cozy-crutch-2017/>.

Lucas, S. (1997). *Pauline Bunny*. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lucas-pauline-bunny-t07437>.

Lilac, J. (2022). Barbara Creed: The Monstrous Feminine Part I Chapter 1 Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChWgr8HpsWA&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=1). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChWgr8HpsWA&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=1.

Meer. (2013). *Mad, Bad and Sad*. [online] Available at: <https://www.meer.com/en/5466-mad-bad-and-sad>.

Nagypal, T. (2014). The Postfeminist Masquerade and the Cynical Male Gaze: The Disavowal of Sexual Difference in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*. *E-rea*, (12.1). doi:<https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.4093>.

Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com. (n.d.). femininity noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com. [online] Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/femininity?q=femininity>.

Ringrose, J. and Walkerdine, V. (2008). Regulating The Abject. *Feminist Media Studies*, [online] 8(3), pp.227–246. doi:10.1080/14680770802217279.

Robot Love. (2018). *Anna Uddenberg • Robot Love*. [online] Available at: <https://robotlove.nl/en/anna-uddenberg/>.

Rogers, D.W. (2012). Watson Rogers. *BMJ*, 344(jun07 1), pp.e3573–e3573. doi:10.1136/bmj.e3573.

Scarabelli, T. (2021). *anna uddenberg - purple MAGAZINE*. [online] Purple. Available at: <https://purple.fr/magazine/the-island-issue-35/anna-uddenberg/>.

Simoniti, V. (2016). *Transfiguration of a Discipline What is the Point of Interdisciplinarity in Contemporary Art?* [online] Available at: https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3165307/1/10.1515_9783839452233-011.pdf.

- Smith, S. (2017). Julia Kristeva's 'Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection'. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rpoqr6TZR3o&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=3). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rpoqr6TZR3o&list=PLUoJ4QFklCjVD544Y5_PM5LOptgSjzc4X&index=3.
- Snider, D. (2021). GIRL CULTURE by Lauren Greenfield. [online] [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v3CYTOq2Mw). Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4v3CYTOq2Mw>
- Søndergaard, M.L.J. (2016). Sharing the Object in Digital Culture. *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About*, 5(1), pp.40–49. doi:10.7146/aprja.v5i1.116039.
- Tasman, D. (2018). *Savage Space - Anna Uddenberg's heterotopic forms*. [online] Available at: https://www.k-t-z.com/usr/documents/press/download_url/5/2018_a_u_flash-art-2.pdf.
- Tate (2019). 'Pauline Bunny', Sarah Lucas, 1997 | Tate. [online] Tate. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lucas-pauline-bunny-t07437>.
- Tincknell, E. (2011). Scourging the Object Body: Ten Years Younger and Fragmented Femininity under Neoliberalism. *New Femininities*, [online] pp.83–95. doi:10.1057/9780230294523_6.
- Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting subjects : social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Uddenberg, A. (2017a). *Savage #5 (cozy crutch)*. Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/works/2077-anna-uddenberg-savage-5-cozy-crutch-2017/>.
- Uddenberg, A. (2017b). *Savage #5 (cozy crutch)*. Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/works/2077-anna-uddenberg-savage-5-cozy-crutch-2017/>.
- Uddenberg, A. (2018a). *Focus #2 (pussy padding)*. Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/works/2123-anna-uddenberg-focus-2-pussy-padding-2018/>.
- Uddenberg, A. (2018b). *Focus #2 (pussy padding)*. Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/works/2123-anna-uddenberg-focus-2-pussy-padding-2018/>.
- Webster, M. (n.d.). Definition of DISEMBODY. [online] www.merriam-webster.com. Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disembody>.
- Windsor, B. (2018). Anna Uddenberg's sculptures re-think female identity in consumer culture. [online] *Dazed*. Available at: <https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/article/40357/1/anna-uddenbergs-sculptures-re-think-female-identity-in-consumer-culture>.
- Withers, S. (2021). *Groom / Consume / Repair*. [online] Available at: https://repository.uel.ac.uk/download/066dd368c37003878c0f121595e502d7dea3c3b3548fccdfa2e2e1a9dccabf1b/31176533/2021_DFA_Withers.pdf.

Zeidler, K.-T. (2022). Anna Uddenberg. [online] Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler. Available at: <https://www.k-t-z.com/artists/39-anna-uddenberg/>.