



"Informe" without Conclusion

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Source: *October*, Vol. 78, (Autumn, 1996), pp. 89-105

Published by: The MIT Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778907>

Accessed: 09/08/2008 22:01

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Informe without Conclusion

ROSALIND KRAUSS

1. During the time the exhibition “Formless: A User’s Guide” was in its planning stage at the Centre Georges Pompidou, a potentially competing project was announced by another Parisian institution under the title “From the *Informe* to the Object,” a title that clearly stated a belief that if the *informe* has a destiny that reaches beyond its conceptualization in the 1920s to find its fulfillment and completion within contemporary artistic production, this is in the domain of what is now understood as “abjection.”¹

Museum protocols being what they are, however, this latecomer was withdrawn, and the project with the seniority was retained in the form of the exhibition for which these texts serve as one section of the catalogue. And yet, that other, unrealized project might nonetheless continue to function in terms of an implicit protest against seniority understood by it in a wider and more injurious sense of the term: that of supporting the old against the new, of scanting current practice in favor of historical precedents, and thereby, of failing to acknowledge what it takes to be the case, namely, that the reason for the currency of present-day interest in the concept of the *informe* is to be found in the insistent spread of “abjection” as an expressive mode.

For indeed, this spread is easy enough to document within the cultural manifestations of the last several years. To name only some very recent ones, two respected spokesmen for contemporary art—David Sylvester and Robert Rosenblum—participated in *Artforum*’s annual survey of the best and worst exhibitions held in 1995 by nominating Gilbert & Georges’s “Naked Shit Pictures” to the top of their lists, comparing this mammoth installation to Renaissance frescoes “in which the settings for the groupings of nude figures were not the usual columns and arches but structures erected from enlargements of turds,” thereby producing in their viewers a supposed rush “from the scatological to the eschatological.”² Or, as another occasion, there was the

1. This project was initiated by Claude Gintz for the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris.
2. See “Exhibitions,” *Artforum*, vol. 34 (December 1995), pp. 62–63.

Centre Pompidou's own *femininmasculin* exhibition, with its heavy complement of artists associated with American and English "abject art"—Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, Sue Williams, Nancy Spero, Gilbert & George, and in matriarchal place of honor, Louise Bourgeois—and its emphasis on contemporary production's fixation not simply on sexual organs but, as well, on all bodily orifices and their secretions—hence a strong showing of urinal-related art and fecal imagery, as in Paul-Armond Gette, Noritoshi Hirakawa, Jean-Michel Othoniel, Helen Chadwick.³

Perhaps, indeed, it is the occurrence of this latter exhibition and the fact that it and "Formless: A User's Guide" shared certain artists—Marcel Duchamp, Jean Fautrier, Cy Twombly, Claes Oldenburg, Mike Kelley, Robert Morris—though not the same genre of work by any of them, and in rare examples even shared the same objects—Giacometti's *Boule suspendu*, Man Ray's *Anatomies*, Eva Hesse's *Accession*, François Rouan's *Coquilles*—that forces us to be explicit on the subject of abjection, and to state why and in what way it must be differentiated in the strongest possible terms from the project of the *informe*.

*The sacralization of the desired object submits
desire to the law of contradictory injunctions
for which the model (the pole of attraction)
that he imitates is at the same time what con-
stitutes the obstacle to his satisfaction (the pole
of repulsion).*

—Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie*⁴

2. This is not to deny, of course, that abjection was a term employed by Bataille himself, particularly in a group of unpublished texts from the mid-to-late 1930s under the title "Abjection et les formes misérables."⁵ Nor is it to overlook the fact that insofar as these texts identify social abjection with a violent exclusionary force operating within modern State systems, one that strips the laboring masses of their human dignity and reproduces them as dehumanized social waste (its dregs, its refuse), they map the activity of abjection onto that of heterogeneity, which Bataille had developed elsewhere as another form of what a system cannot assimilate but must reject as excremental.⁶ And further, it is not to ignore the fact that at around the same time Bataille was devising still another model of social

3. The longstanding concern with "abjection" in the American context begins with a Whitney Museum exhibition in 1992 called "Dirt and Domesticity: Constructions of the Feminine," followed by another one year later, called "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art."

4. Denis Hollier, *Le Collège de Sociologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 122.

5. Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), pp. 217–21 (hereafter cited as *OC*).

6. See Georges Bataille, "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

cohesion under the rubric “Attraction and Repulsion,” for which what is taken to be the most forceful centripetal pull of society is a power not of attraction, but one of repulsion, with the sacred core now a function of those very things that had before been classed as “abject.”⁷

Indeed, it is this Durkheimian project, linking the sacred to horrific powers of impurity, that Julia Kristeva would take over from Bataille in her own development of a theory of abjection some fifty years later.⁸ And interestingly, it is Kristeva’s use of the term, not Bataille’s, that has been influential in the recent theorization of this concept in relation to contemporary artistic practice.

That this should have been the case goes beyond the mere fact that Bataille’s unpublished texts on abjection were relatively unknown, whereas Kristeva’s *The Powers of Horror*, disseminated in translation, was widely available. Kristeva’s theorization of the abject had a very different starting point from Bataille’s, one that was not primarily social—for all its chapters based on the anthropology of *Purity and Danger*⁹—but part philosophical and part psychoanalytic. For the question Kristeva had been posing since *Revolution in Poetic Language* had been how to conceive the connection between subject and object, whether subject be the psyche and object be the soma, or subject be a conscious being and object, its world. If those questions had been mainly pursued within a Lacano-Freudian context, they had also been elaborated within a Hegelian problematic, giving the passage from the subject to its object—understood as the work of *negation*—an overlay of diagrammatic abstraction.

Whether it was for reasons of schematic completeness, or, as has also been suggested, because the avant-garde’s “revolution” could be posed in poetic language not just from the left (Artaud) but from the extreme, fascist right (Céline), itself seeming to demand from Kristeva’s system of semiotic expressiveness a further explanation of how this could be so, *The Powers of Horror* now turned to a model articulated around the arrested passage from subject to object, *negation* functioning here like a kind of bone stuck in the throat. The ab-ject would thus be this intermediary position—neither subject nor object—for which the psychiatric term “borderline” would prove to be extremely useful. And, indeed, “borderline” came increasingly to function as a form of explanation for a condition understood as the inability of a child to separate itself from its mother, so that, caught up within a suffocating, clinging maternal lining, the mucous-membranous surround of bodily odors and substances, the child’s losing battle for autonomy is performed as a kind of mimicry of the impassibility of the body’s own frontier, with freedom

7. Bataille, *OC*, vol. 2, pp. 307–48; and *The College of Sociology: 1937–1939*, ed. Hollier, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp. 103–24.

8. Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

9. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

coming only delusively as the convulsive, retching evacuation of one's own insides, and thus an abjection of oneself.

The abject-as-intermediary is, in this account, thus a matter of both uncrossable boundaries and undifferentiable substances, which is to say a subject position that seems to cancel the very subject it is operating to locate, and an object relation from which the definability of the object (and thus its objecthood) disappears. In this, Kristeva's conception of the abject is curiously congruent with Sartre's characterization of the *visqueux* (slimy), a condition of matter that he analyzes as neither liquid nor solid, but somewhere midway between the two. A slow drag against the fluidity of liquid—"Sliminess is the agony of water," Sartre writes—this flaccid ooze may have some of the qualities of a solid—"a dawning triumph of the solid over the liquid"—but it does not have the resistance of solids; instead, as it clings stickily to the fingers, sucking at them, compromising them, it is "docile."¹⁰ Solids, Sartre reasons, are like tools; they can be taken up and put down again, having served their purpose. But the slimy, in the form of the gagging suction of a leech-like past that will not release its grip, seems to contain its own form of possessiveness. It is, Sartre writes, "the revenge of the In-itself."¹¹

Coming as it does from Sartre's project to ground psychoanalysis in a phenomenology of the object, the concern here to grasp forms of matter as ontological conditions ("Quality as a Revelation of Being") ultimately relates the metaphysical purport of sliminess to the way the autonomous subject is compromised by this substance, which Sartre relentlessly characterizes as feminine—yielding, clinging, sweet, passive, possessive—producing yet one more parallel with the analysis Kristeva would come to produce.¹² For the ontological condition here, analyzed as a function of substances, has as its psychic component a threat to autonomy and self-definition due to the suffocating nearness of the mother.

*Quality is the whole of being unveiling itself
within the limitation of the there is.*

—Sartre¹³

3. The abject, understood as this undifferentiable maternal lining—a kind of feminine sublime, albeit composed of the infinite unspeakableness of bodily disgust: of blood, of excreta, of mucous membranes—is ultimately cast, within the theorization of abject art, as multiple forms of the wound. Because whether or not

10. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), pp. 774, 776.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 777.

12. "Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge which will be symbolized on another level by the quality 'sugary'" (*ibid.*).

13. *Ibid.*, p. 769.

the feminine subject is actually at stake in a given work, it is the character of being wounded, victimized, traumatized, marginalized, that is seen as what is in play within this domain.

Accordingly, abjection is the term that Laura Mulvey uses to account for the point at which she feels Cindy Sherman's work had arrived in the series made in the late 1980s sometimes referred to as the "bulimia" pictures.¹⁴ Tracing Sherman's development over the preceding decade from a form of masquerade, in which women assume a range of stereotypical guises that they wear as so many glittering veils, to this moment where the veil is finally dropped, Mulvey sees Sherman's progression as a steadily growing refusal of the role of fetish object. The cosmetic façades that fit over the heroines of the early work like so many glossy carapaces of perfection were organized, like the fetish itself, as a monument to Lack, as a cover-up for the fact that the castrated woman's body is the site of the "wound."

From the hardened outside—all image—of the film stills, to the idea of the feminine interior as limp, moist, formless, of the erotic reveries of the centerfold pictures, to the parodic fashion-plates that Sherman made in the early 1980s, and then the horrific fairy-tale illustrations from about the same time, Sherman is seen by Mulvey as playing on this inside/outside topography of the woman's being in which nothing can be imagined behind the cosmetic façade but a monstrous otherness, the wounded interior that results from the blow of a phantasmatic castration. Sherman, she says, is exploring this "iconography of misogyny," one that women themselves identify with not only in adopting the cosmetics of the masquerade but in pathologically attempting to expunge the physical marks of their own femininity: "The images of decaying food and vomit raise the specter of the anorexic girl," she writes, "who tragically acts out the fashion fetish of the female as an eviscerated, cosmetic and artificial construction designed to ward off the 'otherness' hidden in the 'interior.'"¹⁵

But it is in the body's final disappearance into the spread of waste and detritus, in the work of the late 1980s, that "the topography of exterior/interior is exhausted," since "these traces represent the end of the road, the secret stuff of bodily fluids that the cosmetic is designed to conceal."¹⁶ With the removal of this final veil and the direct, unblinking confrontation of the wound—"the disgust of sexual detritus, decaying food, vomit, slime, menstrual blood, hair"—the fetish now fails and with it the very possibility of meaning that the mark of the phallic signifier puts into play: "Cindy Sherman traces the abyss or morass that overwhelms the defetishized body, deprived of the fetish's semiotic, reduced to being 'unspeakable' and devoid of significance."¹⁷

14. Laura Mulvey, "A Phantasmagoria of the Female Body: The World of Cindy Sherman," *New Left Review*, no. 188 (July/August 1991).

15. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

17. *Ibid.*



Cindy Sherman. Untitled #175. 1987.

Now it can certainly be claimed that Sherman's work, insofar as it had early on made a compact with the procedures—operational, structural—of the *informe*, had for some time been investigating ways of attacking “the fetish's semiotic,” by dealing a low blow to the processes of *form*. One of these, begun with the elongated format of the centerfold series but continued into later groups organized around a plunging viewpoint, turned on the *horizontalization* of the picture, an operation carried out at the level of the signifiers of the image (format, point-of-view), far more importantly than on its signifieds.¹⁸ For if the woman-as-fetish is to function, it must be not just as a perfect Gestalt, a whole body from the outlines of which nothing is “missing,” but as a vertical one as well: the orientation that the Gestalt always assumes in the imaginary field, mirroring as it does the viewer's own bodily dimension. Indeed, it is this verticality, itself a signifier, that allows the “phallic signifier” to map itself onto the image-form, functioning thereafter in tandem to produce cognitive unity: the Gestalt as a unified whole guaranteeing that the mobility of the signifier will come to rest in a meaning, itself cut out as the unit of the signified. In attacking verticality, Sherman's work thus operates equally against the linked conditions of form, of which the woman-as-fetish is one of a set of homologous terms.

That her work with the horizontal need not configure itself through a literalization of formlessness—pictured as chaotic scatter, or detritus, or substances of disgust—is clear from the series she produced of Old Master Portraits, where the horizontal is played out as the work of gravity, pulling on the prosthetic devices attached to the bodies of the sitters, and thus disaggregating the formal wholes that high art holds together as within so many concentric frames. But here one must also note that the pull from “high” to “low” is not to be read as the revenge of mass-cultural values, since it is clear from Sherman's work that nothing operates to maintain the links between verticality, the Gestalt, the Phallus, and the woman-as-fetish so insistently as all forms of commercial culture, whether film, television, or advertising. So “low” is not low art as opposed to museum culture, since both are part of the system of form. Low is, instead, “lower-than-low,” a principle, as we shall see further on, that was central to Bataille.

Yet another signifier of the /formless/ with which Sherman has worked could be summarized as wild light, or gleams: a kind of luminous dispersal that is not unlike what Jacques Lacan describes as Gaze, which he says “always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel.”¹⁹ This scattered light, which sometimes takes the form of abrupt highlights on bits of flesh or fabric popping out of an opaquely undifferentiated darkness, or at other times a use of backlighting that makes of the figure's hair a burning aureole around the invisible remains of the

18. This discussion of the work on the signifier and the operations against form is elaborated in my *Cindy Sherman: 1975–1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), *passim*.

19. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 96.

face, acts to prevent the coalescence of the Gestalt. In so doing, it also disrupts the operation of the model by which subject and object are put into reciprocity as two poles of unification: the unified ego at one end and its object at the other. Lacan had called this model “geometral,” and had identified its rules of perspective with the assumptions grounding the Cartesian subject. But the Gaze, as an irradiant surround, comes at the subject from all sides, producing the subject now as a *stain* rather than a cogito, a stain that maps itself, like one of Caillois’s mimetic insects, onto the world’s “picture,” spreading into it, getting lost in it, becoming a function of it, like so much camouflage. As luminous but dispersive, this Gaze thus works against the Gestalt, against form. It is in this sense that to be “in the picture” within this alternative model is not to feel interpellated by society’s *meaning*, is not to feel, that is, whole; it is to feel dispersed, subject to a picture organized not by form but by formlessness. The desire awakened by the impossibility of occupying all those multiple points of the luminous projection of the gaze is a desire that founds the subject in the realization of a point of view that is withheld, one(s) that he or she cannot occupy. And it is the very fragmentation of that “point” of view that prevents this invisible, unlocatable gaze from being the site of coherence, meaning, unity, Gestalt, *eidōs*. Desire is thus not mapped here as the desire for form, and thus for sublimation (the vertical, the Gestalt, the law); desire is modeled in terms of a transgression against form. It is the force invested in desublimation.

Throughout the late 1980s Sherman continued to figure this field of the unlocatable gaze by means of gleams and wild light, often married to the /horizontal/ signifier in a combined drive toward the desublimation of the image. Whether this is the gleam of metal grating, or the dull glow of an imageless television set, or the refractive surface of water sparkling upward to meet the downwardly focused view of the spectator, the stabbing beams of the multiple points of light produce not the beautiful of sublimation but the formless pulsation of desire.

Thus these supports for the formless—the /horizontal/ the /gleams and reflections/—had long been operating within Sherman’s work to attack the smooth functioning of what Mulvey names “the fetish’s semiotic”; they had been pitting themselves against meaning in the service of the “unspeakable.” And this is to say that they had also been working against another avatar of /verticality/ and phallic wholeness: namely, the veil, standing as a substitute for or a marker of the place of Truth, the truth which, in the system of the fetish, is that the woman is castrated.

It is for this reason that the interpretive move Mulvey makes when she speaks of the “disgust” pictures as dropping the veil, and to which, citing Kristeva, she gives the label “abjection,” produces the uncanny sense of a return of the repressed. For it is a return, in the place of the “unspeakable,” of a Truth that is spoken again and again, the Truth that is the master signified of a system of meaning for which the wound is feminine and Truth is that the woman is

Cindy Sherman. Untitled #205. 1989.



Cindy Sherman. Untitled #87. 1981.

wounded. Mulvey herself writes that “although both sexes are subject to abjection, it is women who can explore and analyze the phenomenon with greater equanimity, as it is the female body that has come, not exclusively but predominantly, to represent the shudder aroused by liquidity and decay.” Thus when this interpretive structure of “abjection” finally has us lifting the veil to strip away the system of the fetish, what it shows us beneath it is another veil, another signified: the wound as woman.

The wound on which much of “abject art” is founded is thus produced in advance as semantic, as it thematizes the marginalized, the traumatized, the wounded, as an essence that is feminine by nature, and deliquescent by substance. The critique of this procedure was written over two decades ago, of course, in Derrida’s attack on the surreptitious slipping of the “effect of *signification* in general”—the signified—over what had purported to be the purely differential operations of the signifier in Lacan’s own analysis of the circulation of the marker-of-difference in Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter.” For there, too, the operations of unveiling work to produce Truth in an act of finding that always finds itself, since the Truth is the fetish-veil of the castrated woman: “It is, woman, a place unveiled as that of the lack of the penis, as the truth of the phallus, i.e., of castration. The truth of the purloined letter is the truth itself, its meaning is meaning, its law is law, the contract of truth with itself in the *logos*.”²⁰

That the reconsolidation of Sherman’s images around the semantics of the wound acts contrary to their most radical and productive resources, which are themselves running in strong countercurrent to the constellation form/meaning, is to be seen in an operational understanding of her work. Which is to say that “abjection,” in producing a thematics of essences and substances, is in the strongest contradiction with the idea of the *informe*.

*In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory
of life.*

—Marx, as placed in an epigraph for
“The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur*”²¹

4. What would it be, however, to think “abjection” apart from the objects of disgust—the filth, the rot, the vermin, the corpses—that Bataille himself enumerates, after all, in his own treatment of the subject? Well, as Bataille also shows us, it would be a matter of thinking the concept operationally, as a process of “alteration,” in which there are no essentialized or fixed terms, but only energies within a force field, energies that, for example, operate on the very

20. Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 439.

21. *OC*, vol. 2, p. 91.

words that mark the poles of that field in such a way as to make them incapable of holding fast the terms of any opposition. So that just as the word *sacer* already undermines the place of the sacred, by revealing the damned within the very term for the holy, the designation for that part of the social field that has sunk into abjection—the word *misérables*—had started off as a term of pity (“the wretched”) but then, caught up in a rage of revulsion, became a curse (“wretches!”).²²

Bataille is interested in this splitting apart of meaning from within, since as we know all acts of fission produce waste, the sun’s very brightness, for example, piling up an unassimilable, excremental slag. And it is the inevitable waste of the meaning-system, the stuff that is no longer recyclable by the great processes of assimilation, whether these be intellectual—as in science or philosophy—or social—as in the operations of the State—that Bataille wants to explore by means of his own procedure, which he names “theoretical heterology.” The meaning-systems, he argues, are devoted to the rationalization of social or conceptual space, to the process of homogenization, in order to support the orderly fabrication, consumption, and conservation of products. “But the intellectual process automatically limits itself,” he says, “by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process which up until now has been seen as the abortion and the shame of human thought.”²³

In describing the heterogenous product as “excremental,” Bataille leads us to imagine that heterology will concentrate—as one of its related terms, *scatology*, would indicate—on what is untouchably low. And yet Bataille will also point out that if the lowest parts of society have become untouchable (object) through wretchedness, the very summit of that same society is also separated out as untouchable, as kings and popes are precipitated out of the top of the homogeneous structure to form that very exception of which the rule is the product, but from which the sovereign himself is exempt. Sovereignty and the sacred are thus also the unassimilable forms of heterogeneity that the homogeneous forces of lawlike equivalence and representation must create.

It is precisely in the way that these two ends of the spectrum can be brought around to meet each other in a circle that short-circuits the system of rules and regulated oppositions that Bataille sees heterology producing the scandal of thought. At certain times he maps this in the psychosexual domain as a paradoxical notion of castration that is just the opposite of a loss of manliness, since, as the mark of the child’s challenge to the heights of the father’s power, it becomes the very emblem—in all its bloody lowness—of virility. At other times he constructs this as a politics of the *Lumpen*, which is to say a thought about the

22. Bataille, “L’abjection,” in *ibid.*, p. 218.

23. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 97.

consequences of homogeneous society's having forceably excluded a mass of the population from the processes of representation to the point where it can no longer think itself as a class. Indeed the *Lumpenproletariat*, which Marx identifies in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as "the scum, offal, refuse of all classes," is what falls outside the dialectical opposition between the high of the bourgeoisie and low of the proletariat:

Alongside decayed *roués* with dubious means of subsistence and dubious origin, alongside ruined and reckless cast-offs of the *bourgeoisie*, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley-slaves, swindlers, impostors, *lazzaroni*, pickpockets, bamboozlers, gamblers, *maquereaux*, brothel keepers, porters, literary hacks, organ-grinders, rag-pickers, knife-grinders, tinkers, beggars—in short the whole amorphous disintegrated mass of flotsam and jetsam the French call *la bohème*.²⁴

For Marx, the scandal of Louis Bonaparte, surrounded by this trash, was the emergence of something lower-than-low, that represented *nothing*, going to the top. But Bataille saw something powerful emerging from this scandal of the nonrepresentational. As Denis Hollier has written:

The shift of Bataille's writing in the direction of politics is itself a heterological gesture. But it is heterological only on condition that it follow the subversive route (the old mole's route), that is, on condition that it be addressed to a proletariat defined by its total and unopposed exclusion (its "abjection") from the balanced system of social exchange. The proletariat, therefore, would be expelled yet, just the same, still not constitute a general equivalent or represent the society that does the expelling. It is to the *Lumpenproletariat*, the nonrepresentative waste product, that Bataille's political texts refer. The shift toward a political ground is useless as a transgression of the rules of literary activity unless it is backed up with political scatology.²⁵

When, as in the "Abjection" essay, Bataille brings the political and the psychosexual together, it is to demonstrate the scandal of the identification between the two heterological, untouchable elements: the very high and the lower-than-low. It is to describe, that is, the collapse into a single couplet of anality and sadism, as the sovereign assumes his role as sacrificial and thus projects himself into the place of the victim, so that what is at the top (within the structure of the anal-sadistic) is the lower-than-low.

24. *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte* in *Werke*, vol. 8 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1960), p. 161; as cited in Jeffrey Mehlman, *Revolution and Repetition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 13.

25. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 125.

I think [people] see the manufactured object, by virtue of its “untouched” quality, as a perfect object. And as it is the model for the craft object—rather than something that predated it—all craft objects become failures in respect to it. I’m interested in objects that try to play up that schism—between the idealized notion behind the object and the failure of the object to attain that.

—Mike Kelley²⁶

5. If Mike Kelley has been embraced as the key example of “abjection” as a mode of artistic practice, his work has not been placed in relation to Bataille,²⁷ except to locate Kelley as “excremental artist” in tandem with what André Breton had sneeringly labeled Bataille by calling him “excremental philosopher.”²⁸ When it is evoked, the scatological is simply traced in the work’s preoccupation with excrement both as bodily waste and as the traces of infantile use that stain the stuffed toy animals that make up a major part of Kelley’s “production” since 1987. And both of these cast scatology in the familiar terms of “object art,” as gender (the handmade toy a manifestation of woman’s work) and degradation (the body’s substances as filth) are joined in what is seen as an art of failure, an aesthetic of the low.

But Kelley himself has said, “I have a problem with the terms ‘high and low.’” The term “low,” he explains, seems to refer to an absolute, rather than a process; and so he prefers to invoke the concept of repression.²⁹

That Kelley’s notions of repression, and of the challenge to repressive forces through the structural operations of the lower-than-low, not only coincide with Bataille’s but directly invoke them is to be found in various places in his work. Besides the inclusion of Bataille’s portrait in the cycle of *Pay for Your Pleasure*, an obvious index of this is Kelley’s work *Monkey Island* (1982–83)—particularly its poster *Ass Insect*, in which symmetrically linked monkey profiles generate the image of leering eyes from the animals’ paired anuses, in a direct allusion to the role of the monkey in the whole series of “Pineal Eye” texts, as well as “La Jésusve.”³⁰

But as Hollier has insisted, Bataille’s discussion of the monkey’s roseate anus, blooming in the midst of its black backside and displacing interest from the face downward, is not conducted in the service of the obscene *thing*, but in the interests of the “jésuvian” process, in some places described as the castration

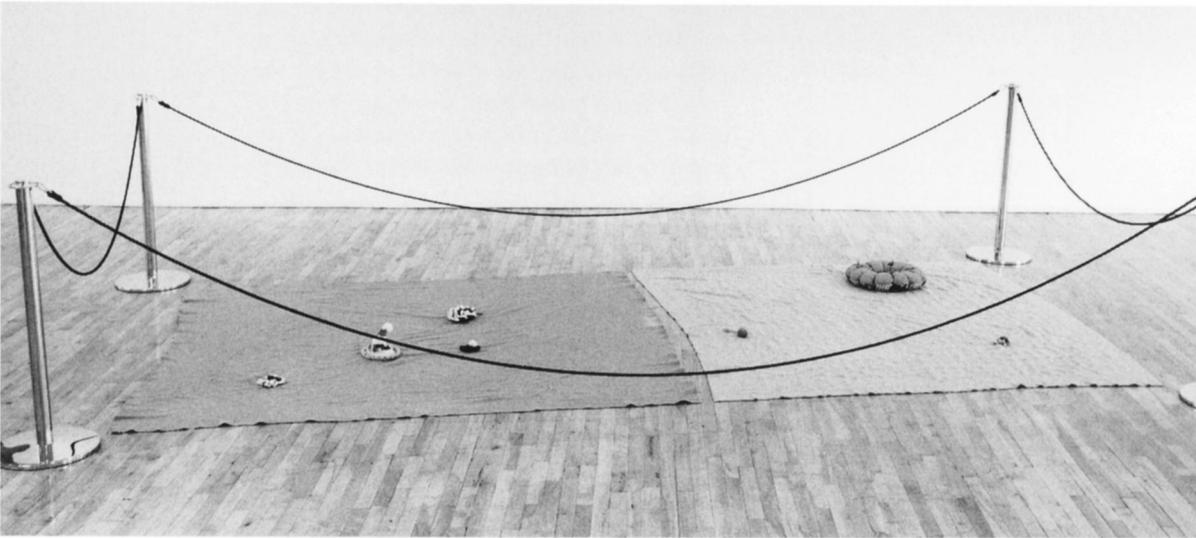
26. Mike Kelley and Julie Sylvester, “Talking Failure,” *Parkett* 31 (1992), p. 100.

27. The exception is Pam Lee’s excellent essay, “Mike Kelley’s Name Dropping,” submitted as a seminar paper to Yve-Alain Bois, Harvard University, 1993.

28. Laurie Palmer, “Review: Mike Kelley,” *Artforum* (September 1988).

29. Kelley and Sylvester, “Talking Failure,” p. 103.

30. Lee, “Mike Kelley’s Name Dropping,” p. 5.



*Mike Kelley. Arena #1 (Blue and Red).
1990.*

complex, in others, that of Icarus's challenge to the sun, a process of a movement upward as a defiance of the top that, in its very ridiculousness, becomes powerfully attractive, attractive *because* repellant, high because lower-than-low.³¹ And in still other places, we remember, Bataille's discussion turns to the forces of exclusion in the field of the social and takes the path of Marx's old mole, which, Bataille says, "begins in the bowels of the earth, as in the materialist bowels of proletarians."³²

So it is not surprising that Kelley should have done a work called *Lumpenprolet* (1991), which with its slightly smaller version, *Riddle of the Sphinx* (1992), stages the jésuvian process, and does so precisely because the "low" occurs here not as a substance (excrement) or as a theme (abjection understood as gender and degradation),³³ but as the functional factor in an operation.³⁴ To secure its condition as function, the "lumps" in these two works are generalized as invasive conditions, erupting within the horizontal field of the work.

31. This structure is discussed in Hollier, *Against Architecture*, in the section on "The Pineal Eye," pp. 115–29; see also Hollier, "Auteur de livres que Bataille n'a pas écrit," *La Part de l'oeil*, no. 10 (1994).

32. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 35.

33. This is the burden of Elizabeth Sussman's introductory essay in *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1993), pp. 27–29.

34. Hal Foster first pointed out to me the consistency of the connection Kelley's work makes between the political and scatological dimensions of the "lump." See his discussion in "Obscene, Abject, Traumatic" (in this issue), where he characterizes Kelley's use of *lumpen* as "a third term between the *informe* (of Bataille) and the abject (of Kristeva)."

Since that field itself is an afghan, spread rug-like on the floor, it seems to begin by fixing the pole of lowness within a stable opposition of high/low, and thus operating as a positional absolute. But beneath it is the lower-than-low, which, though we can imagine these obscure lumps to be anything we want—the stuffed animals of the works called *Arena*, for instance, in which these dirty, handcrafted toys sit on crocheted blankets like so many soiled underbellies of elite culture; or to use the German word for turd, the *lumpf*-like objects that appear in some of Kelley's drawings—owe their capacity for subversion in Bataille's sense, which is to say the operation of transgression from beneath, to their very indeterminacy. It is this indeterminacy that is both *productive* and a *result* of their being *below* the surface, not part of a visible space, but jettisoned into the heterological position of nonlogical difference.

Thus if abjection is to be invoked in relation to Kelley, it must be done (as is the case with Sherman) in a far more operational way than is currently available within the discourse of the art world, with its insistence on themes and substances.³⁵ And no one makes this clearer than Kelley himself, as, for instance, in the work called *Craft Morphology Flow Chart* (1991), in which sixty found, handmade stuffed animals are laid out on thirty-two tables in an arrangement reminiscent of the one evoked by Foucault in the preface to *Les mots et les choses*: some are grouped according to pattern (stripes), some according to texture (loops), some according to size, others according to no perceptible similarity at all, still others—becoming a category of the “unique”—into a grouping of one. And to reinforce the crazed taxonomic drift of this process of organization, each doll is photographed separately lying next to a ruler, thereby producing it as an “individual” within a statistical set that is being established by means of measurement in order—as in some kind of weird riff on physical anthropology—to produce a norm.

All the operations of statistics—from intelligence tests, to police activities such as fingerprinting, to medical record keeping, to political census taking—form the conditions of social control that Foucault would call “discipline” and Bataille would identify with the words “assimilation” and “homogeneity.” But where there would be a divergence between Bataille and Foucault would be in relation to the results of this process, which Foucault links to the very constitution of the “individual” within societies of control. Because for Foucault this individual is wrought, shaped, by the forces of normalization, of which statistics is the procedural tool. Whereas for Bataille things are slightly more complicated, given the fact that assimilation cannot work without producing its own waste, and thus opening up the very category of the “normal” from within.

How this might occur is sketched in the few paragraphs that compose Bataille's essay “The Deviations of Nature,” in which he produces an actual

35. The exception here is Hal Foster, who has mapped so-called abject art (but this of course includes Sherman and Kelley) far more complexly and operationally than any account to date, in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

Mike Kelley. Craft Morphology Flow Chart.
1991.



demonstration of statistical averaging in the field of the visual. Beginning by a reference to freaks, nature's own "inversion" or negation of the processes of homogeneity within species—"deviations," as he says, "for which nature is incontestably responsible"—Bataille turns to the phenomenon of the composite photographs produced in the late nineteenth century by Francis Galton. Here superimpositions of normal examples—twenty ordinary faces, say, or, in another example used by Galton, a series of heads portrayed on Roman coins—can yield a single, perfected shape, an averaging that can end up, as Bataille points out, with the Hermes of Praxiteles: "If one photographs a large number of similarly sized but differently shaped pebbles, it is impossible to obtain anything other than a sphere: in other words, a geometric figure. It is enough to note that a common measure necessarily approaches the regularity of geometric figures." Lowering classicism's Platonic ideal in this way to the "norm," and placing "beauty at the mercy" of the "*mesure commun,*" Bataille makes his next, scatological move. If the making of the average produces the "ideal," it must also generate its own waste, and that over the very field of the formerly homogeneous. For "each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster." The inevitable production of the monstrous, or the heterogeneous, by the very same process that is constructed to exclude the nongeneralizable, this is the force that

creates nonlogical difference out of the categories that are constructed to manage difference logically.³⁶

The other word to which Bataille turned to evoke this process of “deviance” was *informe*, a *déclassement* in all senses of the term: in the separations between space and time (pulse); in the systems of spatial mapping (horizontalization, the production of the lower-than-low); in the qualifications of matter (base materialism); in the structural order of systems (entropy). As this entire project has worked to demonstrate, these processes marked out by the *informe* are not assimilable to what the world of art currently understands as *abjection*. And further, it is our position that the *informe* has its own legacy to fulfill, its own destiny—which is partly that of liberating our thinking from the semantic, the servitude to thematics to which abject art seems so relentlessly indentured. The present project is only one chapter in that continuation.

36. See Georges Didi-Hubermann, *La ressemblance informe ou le savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995), pp. 280–85, 297, for a very different reading of Bataille’s use of the Galton example, one in which Bataille is not understood as seeing the statistical process as dogged by its own negation, as an unconscious but productive countercurrent, but rather needing its negation to come from another practice entirely, here Eisenstein’s procedures of *montage*.