

## Dirty Pretty Trash: Confronting Perceptions through the Aesthetics of the Abject

Natasha Seegert (University of Utah)<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*Both abjection and the return of the abject are crucial feedback. We send away what we don't want, but the forced confrontation of the abject can have a transformative power when we actually perceive what is a part of us and not apart from us. Visual feedback serves as a potential "event" that can let us experience how our behaviors are problematic; in turn, this knowledge can result in potential for change. When the abject appears in the form of art, it becomes enframed for our scopical pleasure and itself becomes an object to observe and reflect upon: abject as object. When it comes to our encounters with the material world of nature and art, both are more than the picturesque or the sublime, but instead embody the cultural connections that we sometimes wish we could ignore and keep safely out of sight or at a distance. This is why confrontations with the aestheticized abject can serve as potential sites for encounter and possibly of transformation. Artist Mark Dion conceives of art as part of this transformation, asserting that one way to encourage care for the more-than-human world is through an "aesthetic sensibility." It is this sensibility that Dion employs in his work to address environmental concerns. Rather than ruminate on the sublime or pastoral, Dion explores the frequently invisible urban ecologies that the vast majority of people encounter but frequently keep at a distance. Dion's work explores what happens to trash and the othered animals that inhabit such trashscapes. By framing the aestheticized abject in the gallery, we grant our bodies the opportunity to perceive and not to simply look away.*

Rot, ruin, decay. The realm of the abject conjures images of death, excrement and decomposition. Where we, much like all other animals, once used our waste to mark space, we now push the abject away from us so that we do not have to deal with the trauma of confrontation. Julia Kristeva writes that these confrontations challenge our very concept of bounded identity (71). Since meaning is established through distinct, Saussurean differences, such confrontation induces a breakdown of meaning, and thus of identity, as those distinct differences are blurred into non-differentiation. In our nuclear age of ecological devastation, abjection allies itself with waste. Michel Serres asserts that it is our very

---

<sup>1</sup> Natasha Seegert ([natashaseegert@gmail.com](mailto:natashaseegert@gmail.com)) Natasha Seegert is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of Utah.

cleanliness that is our pollution. Industrial waste transforms our bodily excretions into indiscernible effluvia that is mixed and pushed away (Serres 34). The toxicity of the landscape, however, does not remain neatly othered and rejected, but surreptitiously infiltrates our bodies through the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we consume.

Confrontation with the abject is both familiar and repulsive. It is this coupling, that of the familiar with the repulsive, that can lead to cognitive dissonance as we recognize parts of ourselves in the abject, something we typically reject and shy away from. It is one thing to flush waste away through the sewer system, but as Slavoj Žižek points out, it is another thing entirely to have this waste reappear in our visual and olfactory fields (Fiennes). Our daily refuse returning to us causes the same anguish and alarm as an overflowing toilet. Such confrontations can be traumatic because meaning comes through differentiation. Kristeva holds that when the lines establishing difference, especially lines relating to death – and thus decay – are breached, we confront the “powers of horror”:

For it is death that most violently represents the strange state in which a non-subject, a stray, having lost its non-objects, imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection. The death that “I” am provokes horror, there is a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely. (25)

This blurred line between inside and outside provokes a panicked physical response, in this case choking, as we sense that something that should remain outside has entered into us.

Such visceral reactions do not only occur with corporeal processes. The term “abject poverty” refers not simply to waste and excrement (though these may come to play in the sensorial experience of abject poverty), but to human beings who subsist in conditions that seem less-than-human and merge into the realm of the non-human animal. If we walk the slums of Bombay, our bodies cannot escape the odors of the slums, or the sounds of beggars, but when it comes to the sights of children with mutilated bodies, we would most likely avert our eyes. We look away so that we are not forced into acknowledging our relationality with an other that is really an extension of the self. As Levinas contends, seeing the face of the other compels one to consider him or her as a subject who demands moral regard (150) It is difficult to see the other when we are confronted by the overwhelming sensorial experience not just of visuals we try not to see, but of odors, sounds, and even touch (e.g. children tugging on your clothing) that we cannot escape. Consider, for example, the experience of watching the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Doing so requires gazing at visual images framed by the director. No odors invade our bodies, making us choke or gag. We do, however, look. For looking is the purpose of film, as well as art. Art is meant to be seen, and in seeing it, the viewer may encounter aspects of the abject that we would not normally permit into our field of consideration. Art thus provides a potential way of exploring the othered abject. When something is framed, it moves from the realm of the mundane, banal or abjected and into the realm of aesthetics. More bluntly put, aestheticizing the abject makes the invisible visible and forces people to see.

Traumas have cultural and historical roots, roots which can threaten the infrastructure of our cultural plumbing – and these roots dig so deep we fear that what was sent down the drain might somehow reemerge. Yet, both abjection and the return of the abject are crucial feedback. We send away what we don’t want, but the forced confrontation of the abject can have a transformative power when we actually perceive what is *a part of us* and not *apart from us*. Feedback lets us experience how our behaviors are problematic; in turn, this knowledge opens up the space for potential change. Marshal McLuhan argued that any pervasive environment “has the power of invisibility and non-perceptibility

("Education in the Electronic Age" 2). For Serres, industrialization and globalization brought with it everyday pollution – fouled air, poisoned waters, plastic tsunamis, vile billboards – that formed an invisible, and thus acceptable, "given." Pollution becomes a new baseline of banality. In contrast, when the abject appears in the form of art, it becomes enframed for our scopical pleasure and itself becomes an object to observe and reflect upon: abject as object. Kristeva frames the object in reference to the self, "The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to the *"I"* (1). This space for reflection creates the potential for transformation, or as Serres more emphatically puts it, "perception will change the world" (73). Perception is always relational. It demands an interrogation of practices that are not limited to a unit of one, but a network of many. When we resist seeing, of confronting the abject, then we risk perpetuating the very behaviors causing us harm. As scopical animals that rely on our sight for knowledge, it is crucial that feedback move from the realm of the real and into the symbolic.

Visual artifacts present one possibility to explore the abject as a confrontation with alterity. The space for alterity, according to W.J.T. Mitchell, opens up possibilities for change and transformation:

Images are active players in the game of establishing and changing values. They are capable of introducing new values into the world and thus threatening old ones. For better and for worse, human beings establish their collective, historical identity by creating around them a second nature composed of images which do not merely reflect the values consciously intended by their makers, but radiate new forms of value formed in the collective, political unconscious of their beholders. (105)

Once disseminated, once art has been brought into view for public consumption, there is the possibility that it will serve as an event and take on a life of its own. It is this potential of transformative power that offers hope for a wounded world.

### **Making the Invisible Visible**

The corporeal act of seeing requires that there be something to see and a space that makes it clear there is something worthy of our gaze. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* is an example of bringing the ordinary, in this case a urinal, into our visual field and realm of consideration. This work not only makes visible the mundane, it also challenges what counts as art and who determines what art is. Thus, the body, particularly bodily excretions, becomes a point of engagement for artists like Hans Bellmer, Kiki Smith, Judy Chicago, Andre Serrano, and Tim Noble and Sue Webster. By making visible bodies and bodily activities that are frequently abjected, the "horror" we attempt to obfuscate is made visible. In a similar move, Trevor Paglen's work takes the invisible, makes it visible, but in the process reveals that visibility does not actually make the objects documented in his photographs more comprehensible. Indeed, in many ways Paglen's photographs reify the realm of the unknown, secret life of the American military and thus maintain the uneasy repression of a world we know exists but don't, or can't, confront (Paglen). The abject and the invisible as works of art serve as a political challenge to ideological structures.

The ecological wounds inflicted on the world also become points for artistic engagement. The imaging of "devastation sites" by photographers like Edward Burtynsky, Richard Misrach or Chris Jordan become aestheticized encounters with both abjected human waste, and the dead animals who are the direct victims of that waste. Burtynsky's images, for example those of the BP oil leak in the Gulf of Mexico, border on sublime wonders that both attract and repel. In contrast, Misrach's *Bravo 20* presents repugnant encounters of the death toll inflicted surreptitiously by humans on the more-than-human

world. Jordan's work specifically demonstrates Serres' distinction between "hard" and "soft" pollution. Hard pollution consists of things like chemical waste and effluvia from industry that marks the earth, while soft pollution comprises the ubiquitous advertising and logos from globalized capitalism that contaminate the human psyche (Serres 54). Chris Jordan's tragic images from the Midway Atoll of dead, decaying albatrosses whose abdomens are exposed and reveal inconceivable amounts of plastic is a demonstration of both "hard" and "soft" pollution. There is the hard pollution of the plastic consumed by dead birds, but there is also the soft pollution of the labels and logos that adhere to the discarded plastic.<sup>1</sup> Animals are "othered" by human waste but art makes that abjection visible.

Similarly, the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) transforms what sites are considered to be worthy of aesthetic consideration in the first place. Exploring CLUI's website, one finds a listing of locations many people would consider to be invisible due to their banality, or even toxicity. These sites suddenly become visible through their listing on the Land Use Database which highlights "unusual and exemplary sites through the United States" (CLUI, "The Center for Land Use Database"). The database brings to the forefront sites like the Aptus Hazardous Waste Incinerator in Aragonite, Utah. Though this site is only sixty-four miles from Salt Lake City, few people in Salt Lake even know it exists, and yet in a very real way it is already part of our everyday lifestyle. According to CLUI, this incineration facility "burns 30,000 tons of solvents, paints, old chemicals, contaminated soils, and PCB's every year" (CLUI, "Hazardous Waste Incinerator"). Not only does this plant eliminate unwanted items which compose the homes and workplaces we inhabit, it emits particulates into the air - air that eventually recirculates within our bodies with each inhalation and exhalation. Each inhalation reveals a boundary between the body, and that which is not the body: "The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnamable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain" (Kristeva 61). In reference to CLUI, Nato Thompson asserts that such encounters between inside and outside can provide a space for self-revelation:

We become what we experience. The same can be said of CLUI which points toward the geologic and urban conditions around us and indicates that these forces produce our sense of self. Tour busses, placards and informational kiosks take us physically to the spaces that comprise the land we live in. It might seem fairly dry to say, "This is a court house." But the overall implication is that we are the courthouse. We are the water-treatment plant. We are the land we live on. (16)

The aestheticization of pollution is a reminder to the human animal of the material waste and self-knowledge we abject and push away. Non-human animals actively leave their marks on the world through urination, defecation, howls, caws, and meows. In contrast the human animal pushes our waste away and in doing so we abject our ways of marking the world that demand a self-knowledge of waste.

Simultaneously, we are the art we see. Art and nature are more than the picturesque or the sublime, but instead embody the cultural connections that we sometimes wish we could ignore and keep safely out of sight or at a distance. Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* made decay an integral part of the work, not apart from it, by stipulating that the piece should be allowed to deteriorate over time (Wallis 31). As a result, *Partially Buried Woodshed* became a potential opportunity for reflection upon our own decay. As we consider the abject in relationship to 1970's land art, it is important to note the process of entropy that pervades many of the early works of the movement. *Partially Buried Woodshed* becomes dilapidated to the point where its concrete foundation is the only thing left remaining. Similarly, Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* not only plays a game of hide and seek with the changing water levels of the Great Salt Lake, but is also "threatened" by oil drilling. Michael Heizer's *Double Negative* no

longer has the same sharp lines originally inscribed on the bluff. As Heizer points out, “The history of sculpture, as we know it, consists mostly of remains and fragments, damaged either by man or by natural phenomena” (Kastner 40). But despite this nod to cultural and natural forces, there are efforts to preserve and maintain these works. It is as if by preserving the works, by resisting the entropic forces of nature, we postpone our own confrontation with mortality, ruin and decay. This is why confrontations with the aestheticized object can serve as potential sites for encounter and possibly of transformation.

Artist Mark Dion conceives of art as part of this transformation: “In order to motivate people to care about the natural world around us, one of our chief tools is an aesthetic sensibility” (Art:21). Critics like Theodor Adorno would scoff at the notion that such aestheticization could serve as anything more than cultural pap to pacify and amuse the masses. Indeed, Adorno asserts that self-reflection *cannot* occur with the aestheticized image (65). By dismissing aestheticization because it “panders” to the masses, it runs the somewhat ironic twist of reducing art to mere utility that only garners merit if it serves to transform and liberate the masses. Rather than follow Adorno’s lead and reduce artistic productions to a form of cost-benefit-analysis that assesses art’s impact through a direct decrease in environmental degradation, I am instead interested in how Dion’s focus on aesthetic sensibility might serve as a potential rupture or an “event.”

An encounter with trash aestheticized on the gallery floor might serve as an “event” for specific individuals. Salvaging the concepts of “truth” and “subject” in the postmodern world, Alain Badiou’s experience of an “event” is a singular, unrepeatable happening. An event – should it be seen as an “event” – creates a fidelity to a singular truth for the subject. The experience of an event which for Badiou can fall into the areas of politics, love, science or art, is relational as it demands something of the subject (41). Indeed, the subject is only created in response to an event and the maintenance of fidelity to the event through praxis. Thus, the event demands an ontological praxis and disrupts relationships with the world.

The aestheticization of trash ruptures not only our view of what “art” is, but also of our relationship with trash. For Derrida, ruptures serve as events, becoming an “absolute spark” which announces the arrival of the unknown (*Echographies* 20). Events are neither predictable nor knowable. When an event is perceived as an event, it results in a filtering and sifting through the rubble, provoking a responsibility to the other. The event provokes dissent and discord. The disruptive force of an event allows the subject to see the world differently and bring forth new discursive possibilities. In art, one of many possibilities is that of transformation in relation to the more-than-human environment.

To address environmental concerns, Dion employs an aesthetic sensibility – sometimes playfully, humorously and with a satirical nod to natural history museums – in his work. In his series *Concrete Jungle*, Dion explores concepts of nature that frequently go ignored. Rather than ruminate on the sublime or pastoral, Dion explores the frequently invisible urban ecologies that the vast majority of people encounter but frequently keep at a distance, “What does Nature mean to us? Where do we find it? Furthermore, the impulse to environmental protection may sometimes be at odds with social justice. Where do we put the waste, the dumps, the incinerators?” (Dion and Rockman 6). In Dion’s work, we explore what happens to trash, the abjected refuse of the privileged, and the othered animals that inhabit such landscapes.<sup>2</sup> Through Dion’s work, we enter into what CLUI refers to as a “trashscape” (CLUI, “A Trip to the Dump”). It is in this “trashscape”, which includes not just human waste but the animals who rely on this waste to survive, that Dion feels we confront our own decay:

For both practical as well as conceptual reasons, pests – what biologists call r-selected species, such as the cockroach, rat and pigeon – are that dangerous class of animals, who are rarely appreciated with the sentimental eye we reserve for pets. Seen as emblems of decay and contamination, as potentially chaotic elements, these animals are symptomatic of our inability to control all the variables in nature. [...] In the same way that advanced urban society refuses to acknowledge shit, distances itself from food production, and denies the process of aging, these animals remind us that we too are animals, and therefore, mortal. (8-9)

Two of Dion's works *The Birds* and *I*, explore these complex relationships between urban dwellers who lie on what superficially appears to be opposite sides of the Lacanian bar of repression. In fact, these dark, dangerous spaces of fear and anxiety may actually be what Kristeva refers to as a threat, or an impurity, that dwells *within* (114).

### Concrete Jungles Where the Repressed Returns

#### *Concrete Jungle (The Birds), 1992*

Stark, white walls form a corner as an expanse of dark, mildly gritty, floor spreads outward. In the corner is a heap of trash. Not the trash that you might imagine overflowing indecorously onto an urban sidewalk, but trash far more maintained and idealized, almost pretty in its appearance. Trash bags, cardboard boxes, rejected plastic toys, decrepit rugs and rolls of linoleum, cascades of paper, splatterings of paint (or is it bird droppings?) mar boxes and cloths, a rusty can of motor oil, disheveled wooden crates and French fries and cigarette butts strewn gracefully in front of it all. Perched on top and about this heap are several different birds. Small English sparrows delicately contemplate the French fries while a pigeon considers a similar meal. On top there is a crow with its wings elegantly spread for flight, and nearby sit a starling (yes, a single starling), two gulls and an additional pigeon surveying the view. This description conveys a scene from any large city were it not for several details: stark white walls, no flaking paint, graffiti or billboards; the floor is only mildly gritty, no spills or signs of sticky, unidentified residues that render the pedestrian cautious; nine birds grace this single heap, five of which are different species, there is no mass collection of monoculture pigeons, sparrows or starlings staking claim to this potentially sweet meal; instead it appears as an aviary of birds considered unremarkable on the "Christmas Day" bird count.

The trash heap itself is carefully balanced with colors. Blue and red bags or suitcases frame each side while additional red and blue bags poke surreptitiously out of the mound at varying layers. Sitting sideways in the middle of the heap is a small box or chest with the image of a smiling turtle saying, "I like to laugh!" (*Ich lache gern!*). This happy turtle sits in a heap, an undifferentiated mass of items that allude to the residue of Theodor Adorno's culture industry (67). A large tire at the base makes a diagonal line with a small tire that sits near the pile's apex. These, combined with the presence of motor oil (*disel motoreno!*) and a child's plastic truck give a nod to the non-present automobile whose multi-ton lumbering presence, din, and fumes are not only part of the urban land- sound- and scentscape, but is also the means by which this trash will eventually be transported *away*. A container of all-purpose cleaner (*allesreiniger*) sits diagonal from a metal wash basin; it is important to maintain cleanliness in one sphere, but that cleanliness inevitably produces rejected, and abjected waste. The need for cleanliness becomes its own form of pollution. Numerous egg cartons are strewn throughout the pile. We consume eggs for meals, but don't necessarily make the connection between the eggs we consume and the birds who festoon the anthropogenic waste and, using their own internal resources, splash

steaks of white upon a mound they literally mark and claim as their own. Within this jumbled heap are microcosms that not only reflect human interactions with the world, but also how those interactions are abjected into a heap of undifferentiated items which are subsequently claimed by non-human animals. In this case, the claim is made by the birds.

Sitting within the bound frame of the gallery, the abjected waste that Dion has carefully created mingles directly with the gallery floor. Rosalind Krauss points out that in the traditional sphere of sculpture, exemplified through monuments, the base serves as a mediator between the work of art and the site-specific location (Krauss 34). These site-specific works are bound by history, cultural connections and ritual containing what Benjamin refers to as “aura.” In Dion’s piece there is a complete severing of the pedestal, as if he has broken down the entire Lacanian bar of repression that the pedestal performed. The trash is not kept away from the pristine gallery, but instead mingles directly with the gallery floor, breaking the “inside/outside” dichotomy we wish to maintain with the abjected other. The viewer is confronted with the waste of everyday life – waste that could belong to anyone and thus makes all viewers at least partially complicit with the production, consumption and subsequent abjection of material goods. The presence of trash made visible on the gallery floor, is a reminder that things do not simply “go away.” Trash reminds the viewer that all things have origins from “elsewhere,” and also enter into a stream of deterioration and decay that also takes place “elsewhere.” By framing waste within gallery walls the viewer is given the opportunity for critical reflection not only about the abject, anthropogenic waste, but also about the non-human animals who are integral to the waste-cycle. In this case the birds who, much like humans, are frequently seen in masses and are so numerous as to be indistinguishable, are displayed in taxidermic wonder as distinct individuals.

The presence of the avian others opens up a potential form of resistance and rupture by the animals themselves. Just as the art may serve as an event for the human audience, we are reminded that “trash day” also becomes an event for the animals who make use of human waste. Waste pushed away by one animal species is eagerly confronted and consumed by other urban animals. Their animal appropriation of the trash heap becomes a moment of possibility where boundaries might be violated and barriers are ruptured. Though their taxidermied frames have been stilled on the gallery floor, their presence reminds us of the “what-might-be,” the future moment when their dexterous beaks will pierce the plastic bags and rupture the vessels of containment. What was bound by human hands might be broken by unruly animal others who do not adhere to the human symbolic order.

The birds, much like the trash we pass in the streets, frequently go unacknowledged and are part of the dark side of urban life, a dark side we do not want to encounter because that encounter forces a confrontation with a part of ourselves that we would rather ignore. Kristeva refers to such confrontations as a threat, “Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: The ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death” (71). To confront the birds who feast on trash is a confrontation with our own severance from our waste cycle. We consume something, put the waste in the trash and it enters the realm of differentiated other that we need not deal with again. When we confront our own waste in the street, and the non-human animals who feast on that waste, we are simultaneously confronted with a part of the self we would rather ignore, as well as sentient beings who become a part of that “othered” realm. There is a tension not only between the human viewers and the trash, but also a tension with the non-human animals that occupy this abjected space. By framing the trash heap within the walls of the gallery, we can confront the severed and repressed dark side of the waste-cycle. This confrontation forces us to look within – an inside that may not be as pure as we fancy, and one which reveals forms of abjection far more culturally constructed than we would like to admit.

*Concrete Jungle (I)*, 1994

A mural looms in front of us. Hazy sky with silhouettes of New York skyscrapers in the distance is foregrounded by a somewhat fuzzy trash-pile. In the painting, seagulls fly overhead and in front of the mass of inarticulate trash are two dogs fighting over a prize (perhaps a tasty, partially rotten morsel of meat?). The trash of the mural cascades forth and becomes real trash upon which perch a seagull and a cat. The cat is turned away; she gazes at the fighting dogs. This orange and white tabby has fur so lustrous you want to touch her slender back. The seagull with its pristine white head is in profile and stares at the mound of trash they are perched on – empty cans of wet dog and cat food, a discarded box of Milk Bone dog biscuits, a box of moth balls and D-Con rat poison, old newspapers, crushed soda cans and paper soda cups, a baby’s pacifier (note the absence of disposable baby diapers, the primary source of non-biodegradable waste in landfills), crumbled cinder blocks (perhaps remnants of the wall out of which peeks a rat), a bird cage holding a crumpled plastic bag with a yellow happy face, and a glistening carp with scales so shiny you might think he had just leapt from the water. A deluge of hard and soft pollution form a river of consumption for animal others.

Unlike *The Birds*, there are no pristine white walls enclosing this scene. The gritty mural itself frames the physical mound of trash and the taxidermic cat, seagull and fish join the painted dogs to form a dystopic “peaceable kingdom.” The painted rat that gazes upon the trash heap is peeking out from a hole in the wall it shares with an impetuous Tree of Heaven, a tree so tenacious it can grow from cracks in a sidewalk and is itself frequently referred to as a “trash tree.” Cockroaches crawl upon the wall and no one seems to pay attention to the large crow who swoops in and bears down on all of them. The birds here are not those of the tropical jungle, they are birds of the urban jungle trash-heap. Not only are they too large to fit in the petite birdcage, their banality does not make them worthy of trapping, imprisoning and showcasing. The tabby cat does not purr contentedly on someone’s lap as the cats do that consume cans of Friskies cat food. Instead it licks out the remnants that cling to the sides of the can and wait for germ-laden rodents to cross its path. In this mural, there is not the passive, clean distance of *The Birds*. Rather, it is as if one is thrown *in medias res* into a scene so close you can’t seem to keep it at a distance.<sup>3</sup> It is this lack of distance that forces a direct confrontation with our abjected trash and the beings who depend upon it to survive. By highlighting the care humans give to some animals (exemplified through the discarded dog and cat food containers), while actively rejecting others (as seen by the boxes of moth balls and rat poison), Dion seems to question our own complicity in this cultural repression that results in valuing some animals as extensions of the self, while other animals are repelled into the category of “abjected other” thrust away from the self where the destruction of the other (by using poison) is preferable to direct confrontation.

Dion puts this type of categorization in terms of relationality: “Our anthropomorphic common taxonomy of animals has been based largely on utility. Thinking about animals has been broadly divided into categories such as destructive/pests, useful/domestic, or useless/wild. Each of these positions have [sic] become unstable” (8). While it is easy to perceive trash as a form of the abject, it is sometimes harder to acknowledge our abjection of sentient beings. When lines are drawn between animals who have moral standing, and those who do not, humans are forced to not only confront their relationships with the non-human world, but also our role in othering certain beings. Kristeva addresses the abjection of the animal:

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, 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 of animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder. (12-13)

Dion highlights this threat from the animal other in his book *Concrete Jungle* which he edited with Alexis Rockman. Within the pages lurk profiles on the very animals depicted, or alluded to, in his pieces: pigeon, starling, tree of heaven, rat, gypsy moth, carp, feral cats and dogs, seagulls. All of these species fall easily into Dion's category of "destructive/pest" and it is this category that we find so threatening, connoting not just fears of disease or germs, but also of invasion and colonization. In *Concrete Jungle*, Shireen Patell explores the etymology of "pest": "The word *pest* derives from the Latin *pestis* meaning "plague, pestilence, contagious disease. [...] Pests cannot merely be regarded as a threat to humans and nature, as they are not conveniently located outside of us or nature" (62). Pests threaten our sense of boundaries because they can invade and make the human body a host to unwanted lifeforms – no longer do we control our bodies, we become hosts for other bodies. For example, a healthy body plays host to face mites, underarm bacteria and tooth amoebas. For other unlucky hosts there are unwanted visitors like bedbugs, human fleas, or crab lice (Zimmerman 149). Pests threaten to come inside: "Other instances give evidence that the emphasis is henceforth placed on the inside/outside boundary, and that the threat comes no longer from outside but from within" (Kristeva 114).

Boundaries and distinctions are established not just between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" animals, but also in the cultural construction of art. Just as we attempt to exterminate certain species labeled "vermin" like pigeons, rats, seagulls, and crows we also attempt to squelch the power of "lesser" images. Graffiti is like a mere street rat that should be quickly poisoned and eliminated, whereas the *Mona Lisa* is like a polar bear that needs to be indefinitely preserved and protected. The presence of Dion's mural in the gallery places it in the category of art. If his paint brush had instead made contact with the side of an urban building, that canvas would have placed his production in the category of "graffiti," an "unacceptable" appropriation of space. Just as the mountains and rivers of trash in the scene have broken free from the confines of plastic bags, the identities of both the animals and of art can also break free of sedimented identities.

Humans may abject waste and marginalize animals, but the aestheticization of such marginalization can open up possibilities and becomings. Derrida's concept of iterability reveals how language is always undergoing transformations that open up new discursive possibilities (*Limited Inc.* 119). Words are capable of assuming new meanings provided those new uses do not stray too far from current understandings. The iterable word wears the mantles of multiple iterations and significations, but will always contain a phantom trace of the past. The iterability of meanings can be applied not just to words, but to images and to animals. Just as artists like Banksy ruptured the public's conception of graffiti and street art, marginalized animals may exert their own ruptures that have limited their visibility. Iterability stresses the unstable nature of such identities and the potential of moving into and out of central and marginal roles. Animals like the swooping crow in the mural encourage iterability in our discourse that results in a wilding, a wilding where we might find we are not completely at ease, but are instead startled by the mischievous *kra kra kra* overhead, behind us, in front of us. Rather than remain in the shadows like the rat, or the urban margins where city dumps are abjected, the animals may start to roam the streets and alleys of the city center. The dogs, rather than growl at each other, might exert a bark which will cause a human with a hotdog to drop his food. The cat may mewl in the alley of the butcher and successfully solicit a savory treat. Humans too frequently forget that while we may not always notice these animal others that Dion has put on display, they have been observing us. The banal act of taking out the trash is an event that literally reeks of opportunity for the marginalized animal who is capable of training human behavior.

Culture, technique, play and innovation influence our perception of the world, weaving themselves together to result in fresh perspectives that resist sedimentation. Actively engaging the presence of other more-than-human animal bodies reminds the human that the world is never ossified and that sedimentation is subject to violent upheavals. The presence of animals in art gives us an opportunity to step back, observe, and consider our relationships with beings who are not human. Our encounter with animals through visual texts has the power to transform how we think about and perceive the very animals who consume our waste. The visual has the potential of being a visceral encounter.

### **Abjected Senses: Material, Sensorial Embodiment of the Object**

Dion's work brings the object to an audience in an approachable manner, one that does not induce shudders of fear. These pieces which are superficially more humorous and prettified than object, still serve as an exploration of the object.<sup>4</sup> Both pieces cross boundaries by stepping out of the museum and into what Miwon Kwon would describe as a discursive site (Kwon 95). In Dion's work a dialogue occurs between the site of intervention (picking up trash from a sidewalk, much as he collected specimens from a rainforest in Venezuela for his work *On Tropical Nature*), the projected site of effect (discourse regarding waste occurs in the museum), with his book *Concrete Jungle* (which provides additional information regarding the inhabitants who dwell in the unmentionable, urban terrains), as well as the garbage dump or landfill (knowledge that this is the "appropriate" site for such items). Thus there is a dialogue occurring between at least four sites which breaks down typically well-maintained boundaries. It should be noted that at least two of these contexts, the gallery and the book, are strictly visual and tightly controlled, whereas with found trash and the landfill, there is a more broadly corporeal experience of how the world gets in our way and trespasses on boundaries. The individual is most likely to engage with Dion's work in the museum or through the book, both spaces being scopic in nature. While it is true that the tires and motor oil portrayed in *The Birds* will still maintain an odor, that odor will not permeate the body in quite the same way that a trip to the city landfill does, or even like that of a walk down an urban sidewalk on trash day. Tires and motor oil, though toxic in their content, do not rot.

The problem of the visual frame is that it contains only visuals and we are not confronted with the smells, the sounds, or the way we gag involuntarily in an effort to prevent the smell of rot and death from invading our system. We are visual animals who not only privilege the eye, but we also make an effort to control what the eye encounters (Crary 40). When exploring the realm of the object in art, the risk is that we are able to keep our other senses at a too-tightly controlled distance. It is important to keep in mind that it is easy to avoid *seeing* things we don't want to – if we are forced to encounter sites we don't want to see, we can avert or close our eyes. When it comes to taste, sound or smell, avoidance is not so easy. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno point out in their essay "Elements of Anti-Semitism," boundaries are broken when smells infiltrate our bodies:

In the ambiguous partialities of the sense of smell the old nostalgia for what is lower lives on, the longing for immediate union with surrounding nature, with earth and slime. Of all the senses the act of smelling, which is attracted without objectifying, reveals most sensuously the urge to lose oneself in identification with the other. That is why smell, as both the perception and the perceived—which are one in the act of olfaction—is more expressive than the other senses. When we see we remain who we are, when we smell we are absorbed entirely. (151)

When the abject is reduced merely to the visual frame, it loses its impact as our bodies are not forced to react to the putrid smell of rotting trash as bird shit coats our shoes. The visual realm of art, whether it occurs in the frame of the gallery or the frame of a photograph, provides a safe distance for the viewer and the viewer's body. There is no risk of the abject Other invading, and infecting, the body – boundaries are maintained. And yet, how often do we go to the dump where the smell of waste meets our nose, where seagulls screech incessantly and where the air touches in a way that immediately leads to fantasies of a hot, cleansing shower? The dump is very much a part of our daily lives, and yet it is invisible. In an interview with Mark Dion, artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles had this to say about trash:

It's weird that we cannot handle the end of the cycle in the same powerful way we do the beginning. A lot of our physical response to decay and waste is an instinctive recognition of putrescence as something harmful. The body contracts, gags, turns away; that is a powerful response which I am certain is an adaptation against a potential threat. [...] We tend to turn away as if the problem did not exist. We have a strong desire for it to just go away. (Dion and Pasternak 170)

Mark Dion's works do not let us turn away. Rather, we go to the gallery, or to the book, in order to look. It is this looking that provides feedback regarding the other, an other that is an extension of the self. The fact that Dion's work is a representation, or a mediation, of the abject and not the abject itself should not be dismissed as somehow less authentic. Marshall McLuhan points out that all forms of mediation both extend and amputate. When one drives a car, the sensation of speed and distance are amplified as the foot presses down on the accelerator, but the foot does not feel the ground crushed by speeding tires. When it comes to confrontation with aestheticized representations of the abject, both the walls of the gallery and the pages of the book extend our ability to see, to look, and hopefully to reflect. They also amputate our ability to smell and to hear and to feel the very real material abject. McLuhan asserts that this is not necessarily a negative thing, "Such amplification is bearable by the nervous system only through numbness or blocking of perception" (McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 64). By framing the aestheticized abject in the gallery, we grant our bodies the opportunity to perceive and not to simply to look away.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> It may even be argued that Jordan's images also enter into the stream of "soft pollution" as the images are appropriated by others and risk becoming what Serres refers to as "pictorial waste" (58).

<sup>2</sup> Dion's use of trash in art is not unique. Other artists who also use trash in their art as a political and cultural statement include HA Schult's *Trash People*, Frederic Delangle's *Pourri*, the *Scrap Skyscraper* by Projeto Coletivo, Vik Muniz's *Pictures of Garbage* and *Pictures of Junk*, as well as the oeuvre of Stefan Gross.

<sup>3</sup> This sense of being thrown into the scene may be a direct consequence of how *Concrete Jungle (I)* was photographed and not how it was experienced directly in the gallery where there could have been more distance between the piece and the observer. It is possible that if *The Birds* had been photographed close up, the viewer would feel as if she were more directly a part of it as opposed to seeing it from a distance and being apart from it.

<sup>4</sup> For a highly material approach to the abject, the works of artist Paul McCarthy should be considered. In addition, Robert Gober's works enter into the realm of the grotesque and render the viewer "helpless before them" (Foster 60).

## Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *The Culture Industry*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Art:21. "Mark Dion | Art21 | PBS." *Science and Aesthetics. Mark Dion: Interview and Videos*. N. p., 2007. Web. 4 Oct. 2012.
- Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: An Understanding on the Ethics of Evil*. 2002: New York, Verso. Print.
- CLUI. "The Center for Land Use Interpretation." *Aragonite Hazardous Waste Incinerator*. N. p., n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2012.
- . "The Center for Land Use Interpretation." *Land Use Database*. N. p., n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2012.
- . "The Center for Land Use Interpretation." *A Trip to the Dump*. N. p., Spring 2009. Web. 4 Oct. 2012.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*. Boston: MIT Press, 1992. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Echographies of Television*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002. Print.
- . *Limited Inc*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988. Print.
- Dion, Mark, and Anne Pasternak. "Interview with Mierle Laderman Ukeles: Artist for the New York Sanitation Department." *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems*. Ed. Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. New York: Juno Books, 1996. 166–171. Print.
- Dion, Mark, and Alexis Rockman, eds. *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death And Survival in Urban Ecosystems*. New York: Juno Books, 1996. Print.
- Fiennes, Sophie. *The Pervert's Guide To Cinema*. P Guide Ltd. Film.
- Foster, Hal. "The Art of the Missing Part." *Robert Gober*. Ed. Paul Schimmel. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997. Print.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002. Print.
- Kastner, Jeffrey. "What Remains." *Public Art Review* 20.2 (2009): 40. Print.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8.Spring (1979): 30–44. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- Kwon, Miwon. "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity." *October* 80.Spring (1997): 85–110. Print.
- Levinas, E. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 1991. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. "Education in the Electronic Age." *Interchange* 1.4 (1970): 1–12. Print.
- . *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press. Print.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *What Do Pictures Want?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.
- Paglen, Trevor. *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*. New York: Dutton, 2009. Print.
- Patell, Shireen R.K. "The Language of Pests." *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems*. Ed. Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. New York: Juno Books, 1996. 62–64. Print.
- Serres, Michel. *Malfeasance: Appropriation through Pollution?* Trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Thompson, Nato. "In Two Directions: Geography as Art, Art as Geography." *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography, and Urbanism*. Ed. Nato Thompson. New York: Random House, 2009. Print.
- Wallis, Brian. "Survey." *Land and Environmental Art*. Ed. Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis. London: Phaidon Press, 1998. Print.
- Zimmerman, Drake. "The Enemy Within." *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems*. Ed. Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman. New York: Juno Books, 1996. 146–151. Print.