




A Materialist Reading of Abject Art: Performance, Social Reproduction and Capitalism

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**WASTE:
DISPOSABILITY,
DECAY AND
DEPLETION**


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ABSTRACT

This materialist reappraisal of ‘abject art’ locates Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection (Kristeva, 1982) within the contradictory spheres of social and biological reproduction that are produced by capitalism. The article argues that abject art is inherently tied to the sphere of social reproduction and consequently it proliferates with economic recessions and downturns, when the sphere of social reproduction is squeezed, controlled or abandoned. Abject art is symptomatic of what Nancy Fraser (2017) describes as capitalism’s ‘crisis tendency,’ and therefore the article utilises Marxist Feminism (Federici, 2012; Fortunati, 1995) and Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017) to draw out the political economic facets of abject art. In defence of abject art’s efficacy to respond to transforming regimes of capitalist accumulation, I develop a new lineage of abject art in three distinct historical periods. I begin with the 1960s Tokyo avant-garde in the work of Hi Red Centre and their abject proofing of Tokyo, and secondly address the 1970s in an Anglo-American context, with maintenance works by Barbara T. Smith and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Finally, I reconsider the trauma and hedonism of the early 1990s in the work of Karen Finley and collaborators Bob Flanagan and Shree Rose. The article focuses on works that employ performance and the body to interrogate regimes of care, waste, the maternal and desire as facets of social reproduction. In doing so it reclaims abject art as an important aesthetic and political response that is capable of representing our ongoing crises of social reproduction under capitalism.

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In *Powers of Horror* (1982) Julia Kristeva asks, ‘why does *corporeal waste*, menstrual blood, and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-parings to decay, represent – like a metaphor that would have become incarnate – the objective frailty of the symbolic order?’ (Kristeva, 1982: 70). This question is an important one and neatly frames the subsequent cultural fascination with the abject that peaked in the 1990s (Menninghaus, 2003). Kristeva (1982) searches for her answer in the psyche and finds it in the maternal separation undergone by the pre-oedipal child. However, in this article I want to use this question to engender a dialogue about our bodies under capitalism, steering the analysis away from the strictly psychological and the universal to the political, economic, and the historical. This is not to deny the psychological affect of the abject, but to locate its genesis and continued maintenance within the contradictory states that capitalism produces in both production and social reproduction. I reframe and refocus a lineage of abject art¹ that focuses on the performing body in relation to socially reproductive labour. Abject art makes the body, its wastes and states the subject and the material of art practice. It can therefore successfully mimic the excessive productive waste of capital, and critique the ever-compromised and unequally exploited state of gendered, sexed and racialised bodies under capitalism.

My assertion is that abject art is inherently tied to the sphere of social reproduction, which engenders a re-reading of abject art through the lens of Marxist Feminism (Federici, 2012; Fortunati, 1995) and Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017). While all of the processes and materials necessary for social reproduction are not abject, blood, semen, vomit, breast milk, faeces, and the maternal body are predominantly coded, confined, and maintained in the sphere of social reproduction. In 1993, the year of the eponymous exhibition *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, both Britain and North America had endured a decade of neoliberal conservatism, a recession, and welfare reform. This directed me to ask if ‘abject art’ is symptomatic of encroaching economic constraints on the social body. Does the proliferation of the abject in art and culture not only correlate with social reproduction but also coincide with economic recession cycles or downturns, when labour and capital are in increased conflict?² And if the abject is situated in a relationship with capital, surely its cultural proliferation must extend well beyond the 1990s? To answer these questions, I identify three historical periods where artworks that draw on the abject or abjection can be found.

Beginning with 1960s post-war Japan, I discuss the collective Hi-Red Centre; despite the period being characterised by economic growth this came at a cost to workers, national sovereignty and the suppression of collective politics. I then address the 1970s and the early 1990s in an Anglo-American context, where we can find similar crises, recessions (IMF, 2002) and struggles between labour and capital. In the 1970s the focus is ‘maintenance art’ or un-maintenance art, explored through the performances of Barbara T. Smith and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. I will then explore the proliferation of the abject in mainstream culture in the early 1990s and look at specific artistic responses and rejections in works by Karen Finley and collaborators Bob Flanagan and Shree Rose. By focusing on the body of the artist as performer and their navigation with the abject I avoid the ‘phobic object’ (Taylor, 1993) that is severed from the social and political. It is the living body of the performer who is able to present abjection, as there is a quotidian horror or everyday abject that is experienced by being in proximity to a real body. As Shannon Jackson explains, performance operates ‘as a hyper-contextual form that is embedded in a network of coordination in space over time’ (Jackson, 2011: 77). The artworks I discuss lament on the drudgery, constancy and abjection of maintaining and performing the body and its productive or reproductive capacities (Butler, 1990, 1993). I argue that the works discussed are specific responses or representations of their spatial-temporal sites and transforming regimes of capitalist accumulation (Floyd, 2009). By locating abject art within

1 What is understood as the ‘canon’ of abject art are works that represent, symbolise and restage the body, and more specifically the maternal or queer body in art (Henry, 2015). These works were critiqued for merely representing the image of abjection, and thus using such images to ‘shock’ viewers, drawing on assumptions of a public morality (Menninghaus 2003; Krauss 1997; Cotter 1993).

2 When, as Marx explains, the laws of capitalist accumulation increase the working day, reduce wages, and transform the technical composition of capital (Marx, 1976). Marx also understood the knock-on effect of the law of capitalist accumulation into the sphere of the home and the family, and it is in the sphere of social reproduction or its failure in non-reproduction that an increase of the abject is found.

Social Reproduction Theory (Bhattacharya, 2017) we can do two things: locate its historical and material conditions for production, and also look to identify it as a form of cultural production that situates desire, gender, sex and the corporeal body as the site of struggle.

ABJECT ART, SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND CAPITALISM

The Whitney's 1993 show *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art* and the accompanying catalogue both cement the term within art history, but also provide a source of contestation and critique (Foster, 1994; Molesworth, 1994; Krauss, 1994). It was labelled too shocking by the media and not shocking enough by critics (Menninghaus, 2003; Cotter, 1993). For Rosalind Krauss it was the wrong kind of abject, and with Yves-Alain Bois she reclaims the concept in line with George Bataille's *l'informe* (1929) (Krauss, 1997; Bass, 2014), in which Bataille summons the 'formless' to level form with the earthworm (Bataille, 1985). This 'base materialism' is employed by Krauss and Bois to curate *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), an exhibition replete of the complicated politics bodies produce. This criticism and reframing fails to identify the importance of *Abject Art* (Henry, 2015) in bringing together a collection of works that sought to critique the increasingly subject-less nature of commodified formalism in the 1980s, a formalism that was unequipped to deal with the material and psychological affect of the era.³ Curators Leslie C. Jones, Craig Houser and Simon Taylor situate a politics and aesthetics of the abject in feminist and queer art (Jones, Houser, Taylor, 1993). The works in the exhibition may offer a 'servitude to thematics' (Krauss, 1996: 252), but they do so in resistance to prescribed and oppressed conditions of living as female and queer under capitalism.⁴ Retreating to formalism (Hugo, 1996) in the face of new regimes of accumulation and oppression masks the already maligned and unseen labours and bodies of those abjected under capitalism. Therefore Kristeva's (and Bataille's) concept of abjection was transformed in this North American context and mobilised at this specific political economic juncture as abject art.

Kristeva (1982) explains that it is the pre-oedipal separation (from the mother) that generates the sensation of abjection. As Rina Arya elucidates: 'the source cannot be objectified and it threatens the subject with engulfment and dissolution...it is not a subject nor is it an object but it displays features of both' (Arya, 2016: 105). This slimy inbetweenness, border, or 'above all ambiguity' (Kristeva, 1982: 9) leads us to deduce that one of the key characteristics of the abject is contradiction. This contradiction appeals to artists, especially those who use their subject position as object in their work. *Powers of Horror* also reads like a textbook for an aesthetics of the abject, giving artists a theoretical basis for their visceral responses. The collection of works in *Abject Art* (1993) draw on a historical lineage of art that utilises the body. The processes and materials of the human body are represented, simulated and contested. Famous 'abject' works that represent the 'canon' are Kiki Smith's *Tale* (1992), where a post-partum body on all fours leaves a trail of umbilical cord behind them, alongside Robert Gober's uncanny severed protruding foot in *Untitled Leg* (1989-1990), and the vomit portraits of Cindy Sherman *Untitled #190* (1989). These works conjure a body politics through their use of severing or severed body parts or substances, which attempt to undo or query the subject/object split. Hal Foster proposed in response that 'abject art tended in two...directions: the first was to identify with the abject - to probe the wound of trauma...the second was to represent the condition of abjection... to make it repellent in its own right' (Foster, 1996: 157). Located somewhere between these two positions is the 'maternal abject', conceptualised through Kristeva's proposition that the reproductive body is abjected through the production of the subject. The maternal abject is then used as 'affirmative abjection' by feminist and female practitioners who use both the maternal body and the sensation of borderlessness in their work.⁵ Imogen Tyler is critical of the maternal abject, or at least the way it has been adopted, as she claims it normalises violence

³ See the 1994 edition of *October* where a debate ensues between Krauss and Molesworth as the formalists, and Foster and Buchloh as the historical materialists, and is centred on how to represent AIDS.

⁴ Imogen Tyler (2013) explains via Spivak that the abject was never able to properly reconcile with post-colonialism, and the subaltern position. Achille Mbembe (2006) has developed abjection to a degree under necropolitics. While this research does not rewrite a global, and racial, history of the abject, by focusing on the Japanese avant-garde and female artists, it is a starting point for important further research into the racial implications of the abject under capitalism. Race is conspicuously missing from many theories of abjection, but, unfortunately, I do not have the scope to address it here.

⁵ The most 'renowned' example of this is Kiki Smith's artworks, but Nancy Spero, Cindy Sherman, Jeanne Dunning, and Hermione Wiltshire all draw on or work against the maternal abject.

and disgust for the maternal body (2009). Winifred Menninghaus also clarifies that the positive negation of 'affirmative abjection' contravenes Kristeva's theory of abjection. This 'necessary matricide' cannot be recuperated for jouissance or even 'subversion' or a renaming as 'identity politics' (Menninghaus, 2003: 392). In order to become subject, one has to reject the abject.

What is important to understand in relation to Menninghaus and Tyler's critiques is that the concept of the maternal abject, or more specifically the social and biological role of women as reproducers of labour power, is socially and historically constructed. Accordingly, when a specific cultural image of the maternal abject is shown it can interrogate such constructs, unsettling its normalisation (Jones, 2007). Images of the biological and socially reproductive body are abjected more by their invisibility, than they are by being brought into a currency of images and art. The maternal abject is never accepted with complicity by artists that employ it; it is conjured to provoke questions about the very nature and history of the maternal as abject. Representations of the maternal abject both trouble the power relationship in the nature/culture dualism and highlight the production of reproduction as abject, which has a specific purpose, as will be expanded on later in the article. Foster importantly locates the cultural fascination with the abject in the historical context of the 1990s with the 'AIDS crisis... systematic poverty and crime, the destroyed welfare state' (Foster, 1996: 166). However, Foster goes on to state that such cultural expressions problematically create a conflict between two states: 'the abjectors and the abjected'. He explains that this 'cult of abjection' cannot be embodied by the worker, the person of colour, or the woman, but is represented by the corpse (Foster, 1996). I assert that, contrary to these critiques, the subject/object of the abject should not be jettisoned in the walking corpse, the maternal body, or even in abject substances, rather it is located in the contradictory socially reproduced labour that is enacted by raced, classed and gendered/sexed persons. Yes, there is the conflict between the abjected and abjectors, but that is the conflict set up *within* capitalism and within social reproduction, to which I now turn.

Because the reproduction of capital does not need the reproduction of all life, but at the same time capital does need living labour, this sets up the capital labour conflict (Marx, 1993). This ongoing push to devalue labour results in the non-or limited reproduction of the worker. Social Reproduction Theory seeks to understand the period prior to labour power arriving at capital's door, asking, how does the commodity labour power on which all value is derived get produced and reproduced, and how does this fit into the capitalist totality? In Tithi Bhattacharya's words, 'who produces the worker?' (Bhattacharya, 2017: 1). These questions have been advanced by decades of Marxist Feminist scholarship that interrogate the role of women's unpaid socially reproductive labour (Dalla Costa, 2004; Federici, 2013; Vogel, 2014). Susan Ferguson and David McNally explain 'that labor-power cannot simply be presumed to exist but is made available to capital only because of its reproduction in and through a particular set of gendered and sexualized social relations that exist beyond the direct labor/capital relation, in the so-called private sphere' (Ferguson, 2015; McNally and Ferguson, 2015). How social reproduction fits into the labour/capital relationship and whether this produces exchange value is still very much an ongoing debate among Marxist feminists. However, for the sake of my argument I adhere to the perspective that both gender and race are part of the 'inner logic of capital' (Manning, 2015), and thus are part of the total reproduction of capital. The particular and unequal relations of gendered and sexualised bodies within capital are central to utilising Social Reproduction Theory to further investigate the concept of abjection. As Bhattacharya explains, 'much more theoretical attention needs to be paid to the relationship between the physical body in all its acts (such as "eating, drinking and procreating") and the social relationships of capital that such a body finds itself in' (Bhattacharya, 2017: 11). So, while it is unhelpful and incorrect to directly conflate social reproduction with abjection, or assert that social reproduction is itself abject, we can say with an element of authority that all that is deemed abject is from or part of social reproduction. Kristeva identifies three main groups of 'abomination' that are ab-jected/abject: '1) food taboos; 2) corporeal alteration and its climax, death; and 3) the feminine body and incest' (Kristeva, 1982: 93). Each category is specifically associated with social reproduction, the family and the female reproductive body, which leads us to ask: why are all of these categories of social reproduction abjected and relegated as pollutants?

The answer can be found in Susan Ferguson's proposal that 'capitalism thus exists only by consistently thwarting the flourishing of human life on which it nonetheless depends' (Ferguson, 2020: 112). This thwarting sets forth a dialectical and ideological relationship between

social reproduction and capitalism. Firstly, the aforementioned categories are devalued and, subsequently, the sphere of social reproduction is constrained, producing abjection of another form: poverty and misery. Capitalism may produce abjection, but it wants little or no part in dealing with the abject. Ongoing cuts to public services and private companies' abatement to employees' sickness, parenting, and care policies are testament to this. This contradiction is also explained by Nancy Fraser as 'crisis tendency', where she explains that 'on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilise the very process of social reproduction on which it relies' (Fraser, 2017: 22). The internal paradox that produces misery on one side and surplus accumulation on the other means that 'the abject' will always constitute part of a capitalist system (Endnotes, 2013). It is for this reason that we can look anew at abject art as an important cultural indicator for constraints put on social reproduction. Because the physical body is an important constant in both theories of abjection and social reproduction, it is this physical body that I will address by examining performance art. What we find in performance art is a simulated sphere where these acts (eating, drinking, procreating) are illuminated, solidified and subsequently estranged from their everyday use. I will now examine three distinct time periods of abjection, conflict and cultural production.

1960S TOKYO: STREET CLEANING AND BOMB SHELTERS BY HI RED CENTRE

The post-war economic 'miracle' of Japan may seem a strange place to correlate economic downturns with abject art. However, accelerated manufacture and accumulation produces heightened conflict between labour and capital (Floyd, 2009). The notion of a seamless post-war transition to High-Tech capitalism in Japan is an illusion only made possible by the domination of labour and the subjugation of bodies. The political economic setting of early 1960s Tokyo is couched by multiple phenomena: the post-war 'Yoshida Doctrine' and its development of favourable industrial policies, and Prime Minister Kishi's re-signing of the Japan-America Security Treaty (ANPO). The Treaty was followed by a year of national strikes and massive protests that were focused on national sovereignty, labour rights and socialist politics (Jesty, 2012). The subsequent Ikeda Administration sought to completely modernise Japan, transforming both the economy and social reproduction by legislating for population size and structure (Takeda, 2005). Part of this agenda of modernisation was also the overhaul of Tokyo for the 1964 Olympics (Whiting, 2014). Japan's 'economic miracle' was bolstered by its production of goods for the Korean War and the imposed alliance with the US during the Cold War (Forsberg, 2000). This miraculous recovery and growth required paradoxical 'collective capitalism' mirroring similar Keynesian economies and the post-war consensus (Hundt and Uttam, 2017). The Japanese model expected long hours and dedication from workers 'for life' (Crawford, 1998). Workers accepted this system to a degree because it meant they became part of a corporate 'family' that supported them with pensions, healthcare and full employment. Under this form of capitalism social reproduction is incorporated into the cost of variable capital (Marx, 1976). However, Hiroko Takeda (2005) explains that this was not the development of systems of welfare to assist workers, but specific government policies set on generating the 'right' kind of workers and familial units to produce them. Takeda explains that the 1962 Population Problem Advisory Council was developed to directly intervene in family planning. It legislated for the size, 'quality' and race of the population: 'the resolution evidently linked biological reproduction closely to economic reproduction, and because of this, biological reproduction appeared to become a matter of concern for the national administrative system' (Takeda, 2005: 111). This period saw the development and implementation of multiple systems of governance, and artists responded to this shaping of both the economy and social body.

It is within the Japanese avant-garde that we see some of the earliest performances that directly address social reproduction in the context of capitalism. The performances are significant for both their social critique and cultural specificity. Tokyo in the early 1960s saw the development of socially conscious and politically aware radical collectives that transformed and openly critiqued the state-supported art of the previous decade (Osaki, 1998).⁶ Their work was

⁶ Here I refer to popular Japanese post-war art such as that created by the Gutai group and performances by Murakami and Takana that are more concerned with formalism rather than subversion and politics.

politically informed by the mass-unrest of ANPO and the imposition of American occupation⁷ and conservative governments (Yoshimoto, 2014). A group whose work was regularly shown at the avant-garde space of the Yomuri Independent Exhibition (Chong, 2012) began to describe themselves as 'Neo Dada.' They initially used found objects, ephemeral sculpture and sculpted body parts to critique over-production and consumption in their modernised Japan (Yoshimoto, 2006). After the closure of the Yomiuri independent in 1963, these 'Neo-Dada' artists reformed into the collective in Hi Red Centre (Chong, 2012; Osaki, 1998). This marked a shift from the production of objects to the event or performance. Hi Red Centre was founded by artists Genpei Akasegawa, Natsuyuki Nakanishi and Jiro Takamatsu and addressed the political climate of 1960s Tokyo (Carter, 2012). Like the Situationist International movement, they 'détourned' the apparatus of the city and emancipated it with bodies (Debord, 1956; Bishop, 2012). Taro Nettleton writes that Hi Red Centre's performances were not only a result of the flowering of radical practice in Japan after the 1950s but were 'part of a closely interconnected constellation of cultural workers whose marginality is located in relation to both the dominant socio-economic and cultural realm' (Nettleton, 2011: 2). The proliferation of artist collectives is testament to this avant-garde impulse to blur art and life, and Nettleton asserts that the use of the street as part of the work connects Hi Red Centre (HRC) with global art movements such as 'Happenings' and the student and worker protests of 1968. No single artist is held up as the epitome of the group with members often having jobs during the day, thus art took place in their socially-reproductive time. The aesthetic and methodology of the work is collaborative, and like contemporaneous Fluxus, modern Dada and constructivist artwork, their oeuvre is made of up posters, instructions and methodical objects that resist reification.

HRC's *Cleaning Event (Movement to Promote the Cleanup of the Metropolitan Area, Be Clean)* (1964) staged a collective cleaning of the streets in the busy central shopping district of Ginza (Hayashi, 2012). The group meticulously clean the streets with mops, buckets, small brushes and toothbrushes, brandishing signs reading 'be clean' in both Kanji and English, wearing masks, gloves and clinical attire. The group, comprised of six adult men, bring the private rituals of care into the public. The clinical nature of their costumes alludes to medical care and intervention – they are performing an operation on the city, exposing its insides. This performance not only takes its form from the then-recent active street 'cultures' of protests and demonstrations but also responds to the specific transformation of Tokyo leading up to the 1964 Olympic games. The humorous parody deals in the abject by cleaning the abject, unsettling the boundaries of public/private and clean/dirty, cleaning up the waste that humans produce, directly pointing to what is 'unclean' and highlighting the particular program of modernisation that the Ikeda Administration was promoting. However, it was not just ideology that was at stake – real-life bodies and people were being forcibly removed in a bid to make a triumphant Tokyo presentable and a model for capitalist development amidst the very public spectacle of the Olympic games.

In Bataille's 1993 essay 'Abjection and Misérable Forms' he explicates that abjection is produced by power relations *within* classed societies. Explaining that 'the majority of workers do not have the capacity to react strongly against the filth and decay which is overtaking them...and it is fitting that the insolent rich evoke the bestiality of the misérables: they have taken away...the possibility of being human' (Bataille, 1993: 11). Here we see that Bataille's 'miserables' are mistaken for the filth they occupy, a 'filth' produced by the imposition of the class relationship that renounces it. This correlation can also be applied to the devalued labour, both paid and unpaid, that is carried out for social reproduction and maintenance that deals in 'filth.' It is those that clean that encounter the wastes of the body, city, home and factory. When Hi Red Centre 'clean up' Tokyo they mine the same contradiction that Bataille identifies between the 'rich' and 'miserables,' and they insert a visual reminder of the power relationship between dirty and clean. The process of cleaning encounters the dirty but occupies a border state, that of neither clean nor dirty, an in-between. Kristeva uses the work of Mary Douglas to explore the relationship between abjection and 'pollution' and 'exclusion' (Kristeva, 1982: 17), explaining that 'dividing lines were built up between society and a certain nature...on the basis of the simple logic of *excluding filth*' and that to exclude filth 'purification rites' set about prohibiting filth and founding the 'self and clean' (65). Kristeva goes on to specify that 'filth is not a quality in itself, but it applies only to what relates to a *boundary*' (69), and its proportional potency is not

⁷ After the US withdrew occupation of the mainland in 1951, it continued to occupy Iwo Jima and Okinawa until 1972 and continues to hold airbases in Japan.

inherent but constituted by the prohibition. Because the act of cleaning sits on this boundary as a purification rite that unsettles the 'self and clean' it always functions as abjection. Cleaning removes the subject from objects, removes dirt, skin, and nails from floors, bringing forth a feeling of embarrassment about our own bodily entropy. It is for these reasons that I assert that the act of cleaning is analogous to both the abject and abjection, and therefore is integral to a discussion on abject art. Consequently, artwork and performances that include cleaning, the maintenance of bodies, or being made intentionally unclean are the focus of this article and *Cleaning Event* is significant as it is one of the first performances that utilises cleaning. The performers make themselves active 'purifiers' of the city, creating a new 'purification rite' that re-draws the lines between 'filthy' and clean.

The 'modern' transformation of Tokyo highlighted its previous form as abject. The city originally had very limited sewers, low-level architecture, poverty, and roaming wild animals – 200,000 wild animals were killed before the Olympics (Whiting, 2014). The pre-modern city then functions as the 'uncivilised' Asian 'other.' The introduction of Western Christian standards of 'filth' (via American occupation) set forth new borders for pollution and its cleansing. *Cleaning Event* recycles these ideological dualisms (clean/unclean; modern/traditional) into the material of their performance. Vida Bajc explains that the processes of both surveillance and security that often accompany the development of a city to make it 'ready' for the Olympics 'share the same ambition; namely, to order and control social life' (Bajc, 2016: 24). This timely renovation strategy channelled funds into the development, control and surveillance of Tokyo, at a time when political unrest was deemed unhelpful and unruly; this was a mass cleaning or cleansing of the physical decay and 'undesirable' political dissidence. *Cleaning Event* not only allies the artists and their labour with the working class/service class labour of the street-sweeper, but it also illuminates the conspicuous 'other' that is Japanese identity under occupation (Nettleton, 2014).

Where Édouard Manet captured the abjected subjects of Haussmann's Parisian modernisation as lurking outcast figures, HRC hyperbolise the process of cleaning that frames subjects and objects as abject. *Cleaning up* takes on a greater degree of abjection and pathos given the recent historical context of World War II. It was bodies that comprised much of the clean up after the United States atomic bombing of civilian cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This barbarism was never openly described by the American Government as 'cleansing' in the way that the Holocaust was, but the fact that such an 'experiment' only happened on non-western soil is testament to racist ideologies of the 'value' of bodies, even in war. This recent historical background sets up a powerful contradiction in the act of street cleaning. Not only does it review the abjection of the other by the colonial occupier, and the case of modernisation, this cleaning also illuminates the internalised resentment of Japanese identity that is promoted by the forced amnesia of the horrors of war. Bearing in mind, that horrors were still being perpetrated through the rape and harassment of Japanese women by North American troops (Tanaka, 2002). While the street is very much connected to the *polis* and not the *oikos*, the labour of cleaning is and has been historically done by women, migrant labour and those of lower classes. The performance, then, is not become about the *polis* as symposia or even protest, rather the streets become domesticated, and it becomes a metaphor for the body or house.

In another of HRC's collaborative performances, *Shelter Plan* (1964), we move inside the interior, where the collaborators rented a room in the Imperial Hotel designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. They invited guests to be measured for personalised and costly bomb shelters. Shelters came in sizes depending on one's financial means. The surviving artefacts from the performance are large life-size photographs of members' bodies, naked, appearing medical or anthropological, alongside small box shaped photographs of group members, taken from all sides. They stand like Lilliputian souvenirs, reducing the body to object or curio, alongside tins with hazard warnings similar to Pier Manzoni's *Merda D'Artista* (1961). The tins could contain either human or toxic waste (it is not clear which), and they draw attention to the containment of the abject. What gives the performance its pathos is the connection to the recent events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; by even summoning the idea of 'bomb' there is an instant social memory of what bombs mean. By reducing the body to a set of measurements it loses its subject and becomes object, and while the fit and healthy body is not abject, it is only understood in this performance by its relationship to a corpse. Jnouchi Motoharu's documentary film captures the performance in action and shows fellow artist Yoko Ono being measured on the bed. Group

member Akasegawa 'notes that the guests were surprisingly docile during the event, perhaps because of the rather formal physical environment of the Imperial Hotel' (Sas, 2012: 152). This formal environment then acts as a kind of 'apparatus' for the performance itself. This biometric and detailed capturing of data mirrors the 'biopower' (Foucault, 1990) being employed in the 1962 Population Problem Advisory Council (Takeda, 2005). Nettleton explains that the work is often read for its humorous and parodist aspects, but by staging it in the American space of a Lloyd Wright designed hotel (Nettleton, 2014) HRC are commenting on American Imperialism and the specificity of the Cold War, where 'bunkers' are becoming an everyday reality. The political context and the fanaticism with which bodies were examined and measured means that the work has much more striking similarities with later feminist practice such as Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics* (1977). In the performance, male doctors measure Rosler, illuminating the patriarchal domination over women's bodies as objects.

In *Shelter Plan* we witness the Japanese artistic elite feigning the act of highly privatised consumption in order to 'get into' the western normative club (the Imperial Hotel), a 'club' that Nettleton explains that was not 'for them' (Nettleton, 2016), during American occupation. Simultaneously, with the act of measuring the participants HRC point to the 'othered' quality of the Japanese body, set into a system of domination via capitalism and American imperialism. This connects the work with later performances like James Luna's *Artifact Piece* (1987) that respond to the western history of 'displaying others' (Fusco, 1994). Here was a multi-layered response to the real bombs that had been dropped on Japan, and to the relationship with non-reproduction, and thus the absolute futility of making any bomb shelters. The performance is about abject proofing, drawing attention to the value of bodies, understood in the global context of war and imperialism but also within the context of growing domestic inequality. The shelters could only be afforded by *some* and thus illuminate the inequality of the apocalypse. HRC were able to understand the way that the body and its surrounding space of the city are constructed as abject via the governance of their own bodies in early 1960s Tokyo. They simultaneously understood that their collective bodies were a source of political and aesthetic power through performances that dramatised and exaggerated the very acts of 'maintenance' that were being imposed. Removed of the toxicity of capitalist development and colonial occupation, the city, its streets and buildings could now function as a site for political *jouissance* or its potentiality. It is these same politics of maintenance and care that I will now turn to in the context of 1970s feminism.

MAINTENANCE ART IN THE 1970S: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION ON DISPLAY

In 'the manifesto for maintenance art' (1969), Mierle Laderman Ukeles exclaims: 'maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight'. Ukeles understood that maintenance is a gendered, raced and classed polemic. In the manifesto she reconciles the need for maintenance and simultaneously the problem of its labour as time consuming, underpaid, boring and underappreciated. Her sentiments resonate with Bataille's 'big toe' as she asks why hierarchies between high art and 'low' jobs exist and continue to structure not only society but culture and cultural production. Kristeva's theory of abjection draws heavily on George Bataille's concept of heterology (Bataille, 1985). For Bataille, the 'high', or 'super', is always reliant on the low, the 'big toe,' even if it resents and discredits it (Bataille, 1985; Noys, 1998). We can use this same analogy to explain the relationship between capitalism and social reproduction. Social reproduction undergirds all production, and functions as the 'base' of the base but cannot simply be dismissed as anterior for the very reason that it is inbuilt into systems of production. This inherent contradiction frames this section and, following on from HRC's maintenances that deal with the abject, there is a thread throughout 1970s performance that is about maintaining the city/home/body. Or, its opposite: the un-maintenance or decomposition of the aforementioned. Post the cathartic, collective and hedonistic artistic happenings of the 1960s, the 1970s brought economic crises, unemployment, the failures of 1968, burgeoning conservatism and economic liberalism. While there is a politics to the performances of the 1960s, performances that centred on the body within social reproduction, maintenances of the body, and the implications and costs for bodies and social reproduction under capitalism, did not fully flourish until the 1970s.

I will examine the works of Barbara T. Smith and Mierle Laderman Ukeles, as both utilise performance to explore ideas around maintenance and care. They insert the ‘big toe’ right into the matrix of bourgeois capitalist culture. Smith’s performances are intimate and concerned with care, as we see in *Feed Me* (1972) where care, sex and pleasure are intentionally reified, and simultaneously subverted in order to become the subject and material of the work. Ukeles’ pioneering work puts the task of maintenance on display as she washes museums in full view of the public and shakes the hands of New York’s sanitation workers. Ukeles’ ‘maintenance art’ and Barbara T. Smith’s care as artwork are contemporaneous with the landmark feminist show *Womanhouse* (1972), in which Chris Rush cleans the floor in *Scrubbing*, while Judy Chicago creates a *Menstruation Bathroom* that ‘exposes the bloody reality of menstruation’ and ‘threatens patriarchy with its fear of the maternal body’ (Jones, 1993). While displaying used tampons may seem like the proverbial second-wave feminist art act, the initial outing by Chicago speaks of the unseen labour and cost of feminine care and it exposes a body that ‘needs’ continual maintenance, contradicting the visible feminised routines that manage and dominate the female body as object of the male gaze (Butler, 1990; Mulvey, 1975).

The concern with maintenance in artwork in the 1970s also corresponds with the emergence of feminist and Black radical traditions⁸ that focused on social reproduction as a new site for contestation and collectivisation. These unseen sites of the home and the undervalued maintenance labour that undergird the functioning of production and culture were foregrounded at a time when they were being threatened by the roll back of state provision due to the failure of capitalist production and new regimes of accumulation (Harvey, 2007; Floyd, 2009). The political economy of the 1970s is important, not because we see capitalism’s total domination, but instead we see a very visual manifestation of the struggles between capitalism and workers. These struggles were often fought in very public protests with strikes that left cities exposed to the ‘filth’ that they created (for example in the 1968/1970 sanitation strikes in the US and UK). What we see in recessions is not only the limited social reproduction of people but also the failed reproduction of capital. Andrew Kliman (2011) attributes the global economic crisis of 2008 to the slow-down in global production and growth since the 1970s (Kliman, 2012). Accompanying this failure of capitalist production are the massive transformations to work seen in the global North, a shift from industrial production to services, finance, insurance and real estate (Golner, 1999). As a drop in real wages ensued, we saw a significant increase in women entering the workforce (Jenkins, 2013; Dimitrakaki, 2013). This precipitated a need for more paid care and maintenance work in the home that was structured by a globalised and racialised workforce.

During economic recessions and workplace transformations, Fraser’s ‘crisis tendency’ (2017) becomes more visible as labour and capital come into increased conflict. Suddenly the overriding principal of capital for more, for ‘encore,’ as Jacques Lacan (2000) emphasises, is even more incongruous with the needs of workers and families. Capital’s ‘more’ or surplus-labour is taken via the trick of the wage and the working day; the workers’ *real* value of their labour is disguised (Marx, 1976). However, in order for labour to take place we need a workforce, which brings us back to Bhattacharya’s question: ‘who produces the worker?’ (Bhattacharya, 2017: 1). In this article, however, I want to ask a subsequent question: why is the production and reproduction of labour power disconnected from surplus value and exchange value?⁹ To answer this question, I want to engage the same sleight of hand that is mobilised by capital in not giving the worker the real value of their labour. I propose that this same deceit is at work on the very source of labour-power: social reproduction. Capital, or more specifically systems within capitalism, disavow the value that social reproduction brings to surplus-value, and the connection is severed through the ideological apparatus of the family (Fortunati, 1995). Capital’s ‘more’ is only produced by labour-power and in the body of the labourer,¹⁰ therefore in social and biological reproduction

8 The Black Panther Party Free Breakfast programs should be considered here, as well as Wages for Housework campaigns, feminist collectives that set up rape crisis centres, collective publishing centres (Spare Rib) and childcare (Hackney Flashers).

9 This much longer debate as to the role of social reproduction in total capital has been ongoing. I don’t have the space to rehearse the conflict here, but as socially reproductive labour is ‘not’ strictly alienated it does ‘not’ produce exchange value. Here I defer to Fortunati (1995) who considers the entire life cycle of value production both in the home and factory.

10 For a longer discussion around the relationship between Marx and Lacan and surplus value and surplus jouissance, see Tomšič (2015), *The Capitalist Unconscious*.

we find a wellspring of this ‘more,’ the only ‘real’ place that the capitalist fantasy for more can be actualised.

Consequently, I propose, it is in Kristeva’s theory of abjection (Kristeva, 1982) that we find an inbuilt renouncement of social and biological reproduction, a devaluation of socially reproductive labour. While this assertion does convert Kristeva’s theory from an unconscious impulse to a socially conditioned ideology, it does so to better understand the relationship between the psyche and capitalism, an aspect missing in Kristeva’s formulation. Inbuilt abjection of reproduction means that under capitalism there is no acknowledgement of this labour, that the blood and bones of those who produce value are summoned from thin air, or conveniently produced in ways that are considered ‘private,’ often abhorrent and invisible. The constant ‘othering’ or abjecting of all of the surplus wastes and labour that the body, and predominantly the female body, does to reproduce the commodity labour power assists in keeping it as such. Ongoing fears, rejections and constructions of the maternal body and its waste products are testament to the necessary drive to abject social reproduction.¹¹ Feminist performance from the 1970s utilises the proposition that the abjection of reproduction is inbuilt into capitalism in three ways: firstly, it makes visible the hidden, the abjected, and secondly, it questions the value of such labour by decontextualising it; thirdly, it inserts acts of social and biological reproduction into new circuits of value and exchange, that of the artworld and domestic paid labour.

Barbara T. Smith’s performance work of the 1970s is not easy to categorise and has an affinity with ceremony, spiritualism and nurture, rather than with what we would perceive as the abject, or abjection. However, I want to focus on two pieces that explore the politics of care, sex, desire and abjection in homelessness. *Feed Me* (1972) took place at the Museum of Conceptual Art and was staged in a public toilet, which is often cited as one of Smith’s most ‘notorious’ works (Klein, 2005). It mirrors work by Stuart Brisley and Judy Chicago, both of whom employ the private/profane space of the bathroom. Smith’s notes for the performance read: ‘artist nude in a room that has mattresses, covered with oriental rugs, pillows, benches around room have wine, cheese, incense...One person at a time enters. A tape loop says over and over “feed me, feed me”. Visitor must respond to situation as he/she will’ (Smith, 1973; quoted in Rigolo, 2016). Smith’s *Feed Me* pre-dates artwork where participants were able to ‘engage’ with the artist’s body, such as Marina Abramovi’s *Rhythm 0* (1973) (Jones, 2012). Smith, however, was more concerned with ‘nurturing’ and ‘care’, for the reason that these actions are as politically important as acts of violence and abuse, and equally structure systems of oppression for women. By asking a stranger to ‘care’ for you, you are asking questions about the nature of care as an act itself: is it for pleasure, for work, for art? This work makes us question the assumption that women ‘care’ for others as a natural state – it questions the acts of social reproduction as natural. It was important to illuminate the labour of care, as Mary Kelly also does in *Post-Partum Document* (1973), at the exact time when women were entering the workforce, as without quantifying it as ‘labour’ it becomes another invisible burden for women to bear (Fortunati, 2013).

What is interesting in *Feed Me* is that the labour of care usually ascribed to the mother is being outsourced to the public. Jennie Klein explains that Smith’s ‘willingness to use and sexualise her older (42), postpartum body long after the others had turned to less corporeally engaging works’ (Klein, 2005: 10) was an act of defiance and reordered structures of the gaze and desire (in a male-dominated show). The work was critiqued as being too similar to the role of woman as courtesan or prostitute (Roth, 2006), because Smith ‘gives up’ her body. This is not the way Smith understood it; she has the power to be pleased and to receive pleasure (which notoriously she did with some of the participants). The ideology of the body as ‘free’ within the realm of commodities is an inverse necessity (Žižek, 1989), which ironically leads to contempt for ‘hiring out’ sexual bodies under capitalism. Herbert Marcuse explains that: ‘for the poor, hiring oneself out to work in a factory became a moral duty, while hiring out one’s own body as a means to pleasure was depravity and ‘prostitution’ (Marcuse, 1932; quoted in Floyd, 2009: 123). Smith maintains herself and others and puts the labour of pleasure on display; not just in the performance, but by proposing the action of ‘feed me’ to viewers she is enacting female desire, a desire for ingestion. This also mimics the demanding infant or battery-operated doll

¹¹ Ongoing reforms and debates on abortion rights, breastfeeding, prostitution and contraception are testament to this. See Rose (2018) for debates around the demonisation of mothers.

that repeats eternally 'feed me'. Maternal separation is played out, not in the rejection of the mother but in the rejection of the role of care prescribed to the mother. Unlike performances that directly address the invisible labour of cleaning that woman traditionally undertake in the home, *Feed Me* has similarities with other important 'sex work' of the 1970s by Cosi Fanny Tutti, and by French artist Orlan. Yet while their work operates through and against the mechanisms of pornography/male gaze, Smith's work is concerned directly with the more-hazy area of care, sex, desire and love in a relationship, in the home, for the family and its iteration within the gallery. To understand care as abject requires an ideological shift, but its reification in a performance and subsequent role reversal allows us to undo the stereotypes of the self-sacrificing mother and ask precisely what it means to 'care' for another.

Imitations of Immortality (1974) saw Smith swap places with two local homeless women. They performed her role as an invigilator in the Grandview Gallery, and she inhabited their parks and benches for the duration of the performance. Charlotte Lindenberg explains that 'Smith lived rather than acted out her idea by changing places for the duration of the month', and thus intentionally identified 'with the position of these déclassé women' (Lindenberg, 2009: 84). She cites the fact that when she became an artist and started living in her studio¹² the prospect of becoming homeless occupied her mind (Klein, 2005). The itinerant nature of the artist as bohemian has been historically accepted, up to a point, but in the 1970s it was men who could embody this role. Smith was interested in the gender imbalance of those on the street (and in art), causing her to seek out female homeless counterparts (Moloney, 2017). The work ended with a party initiated by the volunteers that saw the homeless and artistic worlds collide. Homelessness is a reoccurring theme in art and capitalism. Its prominence is an important political economic indicator which provides visible evidence of immense inequality. The homeless are the abject or abjected of the city. These 'misérables', as Bataille (1993) explains, are the unwanted reminder of the contradiction inherent in capitalism (Thorburn, 2002). However, it is easy to 'call forth' the abject in the vagrant or the prostitute seen in Terry Fox's *Cellar* (1970) or Santiago Sierra's *160cm Line* (2000), or even in works that employ altruism as subject, such as Woceklausur's *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women* (1994). The important difference in Smith's work is that she exchanges places with the volunteers. She does not employ them as spectacles but as workers; they perform her job and she theirs, and there is an equivalence of labour that speculates on notions of value. Smith does not reduce those she works with to objects or novelties in the gallery, as she calls on the proximity of her own fate with the women that she swaps places with. In doing this she un-maintains the gallery through the presence of those who may not readily enter the gallery, or alternatively, makes an equivalence between looking after and over the gallery, and looking after the parks, benches and streets of the city.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles initially submitted photographs of her doing maintenance work to exhibitions but decided that 'she was jealous of photographs that got to go out while she stayed cooped up in the house' (Jackson, 2011: 91). The 'washes' soon followed in *Hartford Wash: Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside/Inside* (1973), where she meticulously washes the Wadsworth Athenium museum in full view of visitors, illuminating this undervalued work as 'the culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives = no pay' (Ukeles, 1969). Ukeles gets dirty to make clean, inserts her body as a form of filtration, carrying her bucket, mop and white rags up and down the steps and scrubbing each step and the entrance by hand. The same is then repeated inside, where she not only cleans the floors and steps but also the artworks. The constant process to tackle entropy is written into the manifesto: 'pay your bills, don't litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets...this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young...But: Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time' (Ukeles, 1969). The manifesto illuminates the invisibility and denial of the work that is done to 'preserve' the objects of high culture in the museum as analogous to the denial of the work that women do to 'produce' future citizens. Ukeles intentionally blurs the lines between reproductive labour and productive labour, and between paid and unpaid, summoning the Lotta Feminista call of 'Wages for Housework'. If, as I have explained, the process of abjection works to disguise the role that social reproduction plays in capitalist production, Ukeles intentionally unsettles this order by inserting her abjected labour

¹² Smith had separated from her husband who mainly looked after her two children, as the studio that she lived in was deemed unsuitable for raising children.

into the circuits of culturally productive space and time. While she is transforming an unseen act into a work of art she is not set on 'sanitising'. She is pointing to the state of cleanliness that has been deemed culturally necessary, and that works in opposition to capitalism's inherent wastefulness.

In the later work *Touch Sanitation* (1979–1980), Ukeles points out that while we acknowledge that things must be clean, we are not willing to confer a high status on those who clean (Ukeles, 2017). Ukeles disrupts this narrative by spending eleven months shaking the hands of all 8,500 sanitation workers in New York City, travelling through every district and taking time chat to and to thank each one individually. Robert C. Morgan writes that she 'believed that most of these negative feelings were the result of irrational fears people had about garbage' (Morgan, 1998: 57) and she wanted to overturn two presumptions. Firstly, she wanted to disrupt the correlation between the task and those who perform it (garbage men = garbage), and secondly to correlate the act of throwing away with the act of collecting – in this she says we are all 'garbage people' (Morgan, 1998). Waste becomes her source material and performance object, but it differs to previous artist's use of rubbish or the readymade. It is not the object but the enduring relationships that we have or don't like to admit that we have with waste that are used in her work. Once an object has encountered our body it becomes abject; this rejection works through the psychic process of abjection but also through the inbuilt need for *more* under capitalism. By illuminating these contact points Ukeles can interrogate both abjection and production/consumption. However, the specific political economic context of late 1970s New York is important. North America had suffered from the 1970s oil crisis and New York City was close to bankruptcy in 1975 (Nussbaum, 2015). The decade was punctuated by strikes and the New York Sanitation department was on strike in 1968, 1975 and 1981 (Yudelovich, 2018). These times of economic hardship are vocalised by each sanitation worker to Ukeles; we see this in photographic documentation of the meetings with intimate conversations hunched over tables and work equipment. Ukeles uses emotional labour to listen to these grievances, and she sees a commonality between her work and theirs: not only in her role as a mother, but as an artist, and by way of this relationality, she avoids appearing as a politician in shaking their hands. Ukeles lived through the 1968 strike and most probably witnessed the tons of garbage on the streets, and large sections of New York on fire or in ruin, which would have impacted on her understanding of the value of both sanitation workers and of maintenance in general. Jillian Steinhauer (2017) contends that while being thanked goes some ways to overcome cultural stereotypes, it did not confront the real-life issues of wage and work conditions.

Ben Davis purports that Ukeles was not summoning the Wages for Housework mantra of bringing the workplace struggle to the domestic sphere, but invoking her own Jewish spiritualism by 'bestowing the sacralizing aura of art on domestic routine' (Davis, 2016). Davis deduces this by pointing to Ukeles' Jewish upbringing and her use of proto Zionist Rabbi Kook's writing in a performance: 'the face of the holy is not turned away from but towards the profane' (Davis, 2016). While is it tempting to reduce her work to ascetism, her writing in the Maintenance Manifesto strongly contests this, and has much more in common with the demands of Wages for Housework than Davis attests. What the use of religious and spiritual ideas around cleaning and cleanliness does confirm is a clear connection to ideas of pollution and exclusion. As Kristeva explains, 'abjection persists as *exclusion* or taboo in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular' and 'the various means of purifying the abject – the various catharses – make up the history of religions' (Kristeva, 1982: 17). As explained previously, I utilise cleaning as a key marker for abjection precisely as it is a border process. Situating cleaning within the religious codes of taboo and then purification both asserts its identity as border, but also brings forth a new dimension against the domestic as entirely perfunctory and economic. Ukeles is wrestling with maintenance's complex role in the household as both important and having value beyond monetary value, or indeed exchange value, because it is intermeshed with the subjective, which troubles the reductive stance that Wages for Housework have been accused of. It is not simple to reduce an act of love to money, so what then is the 'love' that goes into caring and cleaning in the home? While sanitation workers are able to clock-off, the carer often does not.

Though I am not endorsing the use of religion to defend domestic duties, I am wondering if Ukeles employs the quote by Kook to intentionally redeem maintenance: to create a commonality between housework and paid maintenance work through a different register, that of spiritualism, or an ethical register and not only of the economy. We can understand Ukeles' simple acts as connecting the maintenance or indeed 'shit-work' of wives in the home

with men in the public sphere (there were no female sanitation workers until 1986). The wages and working conditions fought for by the Sanitation workers were not a reality for housework and unpaid care work in the 1970s, and are still not today, but nonetheless this technical separation between ‘work’ dissolves via the task itself and in ‘the face of the holy.’ The performance captures a historical meeting point at a time where women were entering the workforce on mass, and reproductive labour would be but another invisible burden to carry, and so Ukeles reaches out to those doing this maintenance work for a wage, a community through cleaning. By bringing forth an ascetic dimension, what Ukeles achieves is to complicate the neat lines that separate work, home, wage work and non-wage work, as social reproduction is not easily definable as one sphere: it is in many.

Ukeles’ and Smith’s institutional performances subvert the cultural hierarchies within the museum/art gallery/home. They subvert with care: in Ukeles’ case it is reframing care as art through the performative act of cleaning. In Smith’s case, it is care understood as both affective labour, and sex-work/pleasure work. While Ukeles does the ‘caring’, Smith is asking to be cared for, but both illuminate the particularities of care work, instigating a reflexivity about the unseen maintenance work that some women do. Both made their work after becoming mothers and their work is a direct response to the limitations and impositions of gendered care work. Marina Vishmidt asserts that we must resist the re-valorisation of reproductive labour as natural through its estrangement: ‘it is the apparatus as reproductive and reparative of the gender relation that is denaturalised when gendered labour is depicted as something monstrous, abject but also prosaic and eccentric’ (Vishmidt, 2017: 63). Alternatively, and in line with Kristeva, we can perceive the very ‘natural’ acts of reproductive care as already replete with horror and estrangement (Kristeva, 1982). Jacqueline Rose (2018) explains that mothers are tasked with the impossible – providing selfless love and protection to their children (keeping them clean), while acting as a buttress for the never-ending horror of the world. The role of the mother, cleansing the world of its detritus, means that she acts as a complex filtration system. But as Rose (2018) clarifies, no mother can take on the crap of the world and remain unscathed. It is this dialogue between the clean, cleaning and the unclean that flows through Smith’s and Ukeles’ performances, working to both expose the unachievable demands of mothering but also the incongruous place of social reproduction under capitalism.

ABJECTION IN THE 90S: SLACKING, SICKING, AND SHOCKING

The early 1990s in North America and the United Kingdom was punctuated by a global economic recession (International Monetary Fund, 2002), the peak of AIDS cases (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001), the highest teenage pregnancy rates in the US (Office of Population Affairs, 2016), the Gulf War, the LA riots and legal reforms in both welfare and squatters’ rights. These political, social, biological and economic events conspired to create a cultural climate that had affinities with the 1970s. This was echoed in artistic practice through the use of the body, performance and real-time. The aesthetic and political austerity and verisimilitude of the 1970s are reborn as a profuse and producing abject body in the 1990s. This body has the task of purging the commercial and ideological excesses of the 1980s, and this purging is evident in the sub-cultures and practices of the period. The works that I discuss are characterised by a performed *jouissance* that replicates the pleasure pain dialectic of neoliberal capitalism (Žižek, 1989). Where artworks from the 1970s engaged bodies, labour and abjection, they did so from a position of some degree of autonomy. These same concepts explored by artists in the 90s have been stripped of the collective bargaining power of the social body and have retreated into the individual. Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower illuminates the management of ‘life’ where persons are reduced to their biological capacities (Foucault, 1990; 2007). So, where Smith and Ukeles invoke and employ the social and the institution, Karen Finley, Bob Flanagan and Shree Rose employ the monologue, the sexual/spectacle and the biological. They exist and are governed as biological/ideological entities with no claim to the social contract.

By the early 1990s neoliberal capitalism was fully embedded and entrenched in the Anglo-American context. A decade of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan had fully transformed the economy (Harvey, 2007), seeping into culture and aggressively quashing resistance. The victims of the fall-out of post-Fordism were desperately trying to understand their identity

as working-class solidarity had been shattered, and subsequently morphed into cultures of poverty, welfare, drug addiction, hedonism, slacker-culture, grievance and racism. It was this mood that was recorded in the Whitney's 1993 show *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, and in the artistic and cultural magnetism to the abject. Mainstream culture in the 1990s drew on the ethos of dropping out, slacking, and taking drugs, with 1997 seeing the highest consumption of recreational drugs on record in the UK (Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2017). A collective self-hatred inspired by lyrics from bands such as Nine Inch Nails and Nirvana reflected a decade of Foucauldian self-discipline imposed by neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008). While these cultures can be read as nihilistic, hedonistic and anti-revolutionary, they were initially anti-capitalist. The very concept of a 'slacker' is someone too 'slack' to maintain themselves and their life enough to work and 'appear' presentable. Watching Richard Linklater's infamous *Slacker* (1990) one is surprised not by how apolitical the characters are, but at their cultures of conversation, collective 'slacking' and community. *Slacker* captures this cultural moment where 'dropping out' is not the bohemian choice of Jack Kerouac and the 1960s hippies, but it has become de rigueur and enforced as the economies of cities and towns have been transformed by deindustrialisation. While the film mainly chronicled students, hipsters and young people, it is peppered with café workers, cab drivers, old scholars, thieves and homeless people. This correlation between a class of 'slackers' or what has now been termed the 'precariat' (Standing, 2011) is then in its infancy and coming to terms with what to do with time and how to survive in it. Katarzyna Matecka (2015), writing on *Slacker*, explains that what makes the film unique is its complete rejection of work; characters live modestly and treat work as something peripheral. Linklater defends the unproductive lifestyles of the characters and compares them to today's public cultures/spaces where people are increasingly disengaged from each other and on their smartphones (Matecka, 2015).

This distinct moment that is before the digital precariat and after the full wage era creates a rift that enables slacking as a collective form of resistance to capital.¹³ The films *Trainspotting* (1996) and *Kids* (1995) capture and interrogate the conflict between a state of social 'ills' through junkie culture and AIDS and their adjoining moral panics. Both films present bodies as potential waste, as valueless, and as characterised by their condition or addiction, and as such can be seen as an important counterpart to the work shown in *Abject Art*. But, neither film completely disenfranchises the characters; instead, their role outside of the norm as non-working subjects makes them the speaking subaltern, too wasted or young to be working. Social reproduction is central to *Trainspotting* and the junkie culture it presents is a powerful representation of non-reproduction. While Reggie emerges clean and free from the early 1990s abject into the entrepreneurial New Labour world of 1997, his advance illuminates the bodies and souls that were laid to waste to make way for such 'progress'.

It is from this social and political milieu that Karen Finley's performance *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989) was produced. The performance consists of Finley reading a scripted poem on stage and at each segment of the poem pouring a different food type onto her body. Central to the poem is a deconstruction and critique of what is expected of women, their bodies and the role of the family as a toxic institution. As Kent Neely writes in his 1990 review, 'stripped to bra and underwear, she said, "My tits were not big enough," just as she took containers of Jell-O and filled her bra cups to fix the problem... *We Keep Our Victims Ready* dealt with rape, incest, and abortion, each made graphically poignant by the use of different food items to manifest a corresponding psychological condition' (Neely, 1990: 495). The artwork is provocative and energetic, moving through different subject positions and utilising different states and voices to interrogate a variety of social issues, but most pertinently the omnipresent state of patriarchy. Her work draws on the maternal abject, not to poke the wound but to illuminate the biopolitical consequences of the female reproductive body.

Finley's performance *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (WKOVR) (1990), and poem published in *Shock Treatment* (1990) can be read through a social reproduction lens to uncover the important critiques of the material basis of female oppression. Abjection and the abject work side by

¹³ We must also not forget that the fragmentation of working-class solidarity and alternative social movements was actively pursued by conservative governments, the 1996 welfare reform bill (The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, or PRWORA) in the US (and the 'new deal' in the UK), and the criminal justice and public order act of 1994 were all enacted to tighten control on the non-working public, and to stamp out 'anti-social' collective behaviour.

side to reclaim a voice for the unspeaking female object body and its 'lack' under patriarchy (Greenwood, 2004; Irigaray, 1985). Finley's possessions by a range of characters act as a harbinger of the multiple sites of oppression suffered by the female body and their simultaneous rejection and female emancipation through enunciation. *WKOVR* was part of a high-profile court case that withdrew Finley's and other artists' National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding under the clause that it was 'indecent' (Bolton, 1992).¹⁴ The case and conflict with right-wing senator Jesse Helms heightened Finley's notoriety and popularity and projected many unwanted associations onto the work. There was a heightened moral panic associated with Finley's 'chocolate smeared body'; as Christine Simonian Bean explains, 'anyone who wished to discount Finley needed only to intone the phrase 'chocolate smeared' in order to deride her message' (Bean, 2016: 97). Finley became an unlikely figurehead for free speech in the American 'culture wars.' While this clouded the very important political, conceptual and artistic contribution that the performance and Finley's wider practice undertakes, it was exactly the hypocritical moral crusades of the Republican party and patriarchal Church during the AIDS crisis that Finley mines in her work. They took the bait: hook, line and sinker. *WKOVR* operates as a critique through its use of hyperbole alongside everyday facts. Finley uses her own enunciation and speech and, like early feminist performance,¹⁵ takes on the role of the woman as 'hysteric' while simultaneously interrogating it. The very act of smearing cake on one's body could be consigned to the insane, to sexual fantasy or to the infantile.¹⁶ When performed, however, it reiterates the corporeal or physical ways that patriarchy is maintained in and through the body. The chocolate, as Finley states, symbolises all those times that she and women in general have been made to 'feel like shit' (Finley, quoted in Neely, 1990). Rebecca Hardie explains that Finley's performances contradict 'Judith Butler's distinction between performance and performativity', as 'while Finley may enact performativity in the sense that no one can escape the performance of gender...The political nature of the work, the shortened proximity of the audience and performer, and the knowledge that Finley authored the script, changes the terms of her performance' (Hardie, 2007: 97). The subversion of gender that Butler explains problematically is 'tolerated on the stage' (Butler, 1990) is not present in Finley's work through her use of Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect (Brecht, 1964). The Brechtian 'fourth wall' is often crossed as Finley comes in and out of character, speaks directly to the audience and moves from the role of aggressor to victim.

WKOVR can be read as a cultural document that responds to the political economy of the time. Finley explains that the 'uneven distribution of wealth – seeing that our government doesn't take care of its poor' (Finley quoted in Mifflin, 1998: 174) is what shocks and compels her to use this same 'shock' in her work. The notion of shock in the work is nevertheless transformed by the repetitive nature of the text; statements and lines rhythmically punctuate the text like a techno track; food is pushed, smeared and attacks Finley's body. These rituals speak to a surplus jouissance, a chasm of 'lack' that is desperate to be filled, and they replicate the system of 'encore' that Lacan speaks of under capitalism's endless thirst for surplus (Žižek, 1989; Tomšič, 2015). However, this lack or condition present under capitalism is also presented in its sober quotidian form, as the object of a system caught in the frenzied state of needing surplus. In *WKOVR*, Finley writes: 'Yes, maybe my daughter could have chances I never had. Maybe she could get another type of job instead of serving, nurturing for pay that most men would never work for. For a waitress there is no pregnancy leave, maternity leave...Waitressing, which is shiftwork, doesn't correspond with day-care hours, and a sitter costs more than half a woman's salary' (Finley, 1990: 105). In this passage we find an unlikely alliance with Ukeles, not in sympathy with the domestic maintainer or the garbage person, but with the service woman. This honest appraisal of what it is/was to be a working-class mother, and the unequal conditions that they suffer, captures the contradictory role of women as both mothers and workers. In response to post-Fordist conditions in 1990s America, Finley writes: 'I want more than a biological opportunity'. Women are no longer fighting for waged housework;

¹⁴ The infamous 'NEA Four' (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes) all had their grants to the NEA rejected on the grounds of indecency and obscenity. This was justified through the recent legislative changes to public law that were made the year before in response to work by Andreas Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe (Bolton, 1992).

¹⁵ For example, see Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975) and Vallie Export's *Genital Panic* (1969).

¹⁶ Finley incorporates chocolate to respond to the story of a 16-year-old girl found in a bag covered with faeces (Potier, 2002).

they are fighting for their lives and their waged service work: 'One day I hope to God, [that] Bush, Cardinal O'Conner and the Right-to-Lifers each return to life as an unwanted pregnant 13-year-old girl working at McDonalds at minimum wage' (Finley, 1990: 114). Where Smith interrogates systems of care in her work that focus on making public the act of nurture, Finley actively subverts the act of love or care that is prescribed to a woman: 'why should I pretend to stop drinking? For the children? Shit, they're the reason I drink!' (Finley, 1990: 108). Much of what punctuates Finley's verse is the everyday, the banal life of living and suffering. Where Ukeles wants us to see the unseen drudgery of maintenance, Finley wants us to understand the violent and pathological ways that this drudgery is enforced: to undo it, by making it dirty, by making women's bodies unavailable for maintenance, even if only for the time they sit and watch the show.

Bob Flanagan and Shree Rose's 'sick' work taps into multiple forms of the abject. The first and most obvious is Flanagan's illness. Living with cystic fibrosis meant that his entire life had been framed by death and dying (Rose, quoted in Johnson, 2015).¹⁷ Kristeva identifies the corpse as the key signifier for the abject in biblical texts: 'a decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between inanimate and the organic...the corpse represents fundamental pollution' (Kristeva, 1982: 109). Flanagan's body is intentionally made both dead and alive, or living dead, through the different contexts and constraints that it is put through. Flanagan and Rose's sexual sadomasochistic relationship and performances are secondarily relevant here: Shree Rose was both his Dom in art and life. Flanagan and Rose began their romantic and artistic relationship in the BDSM communities of California, a decade before they became artists. There is a complexity to their collaboration and relationship that relates to Kristeva's concept of the maternal abject. Rose often calls Flanagan her child, and as her slave he is kept in the mother-son dyad, rejecting his own abjection, which corresponds to the third inference that they are 'sick in the head.' As Robert McRuer (2006) explains, Flanagan is happy to promote and explore even more ways that the term 'sick' can be embodied or mined for meaning.

Flanagan and Rose worked together from the day that they met in 1980 to his death in 1996 (Takemoto, 2009). Their work was a collaboration of life that morphed into art. Rose suggests that Flanagan was her project, but admits that he inspired and challenged her, and the work was often made out of conflict (Rose in Takemoto, 2009). Rose came out of a similar situation to Ukeles and Smith, rejecting the traditional role she had as a housewife and joining feminist activist groups in the 1970s (Rose, quoted in Takemoto, 2009). She wanted to know how to 'sleep with the enemy' (men) and do it transgressively to disrupt patriarchy. It was meeting Flanagan, a self-described masochist, that helped her understand that having him as her consensual slave could go some way to destabilising the power relationships between men and women (Rose, quoted in Takemoto, 2009). Where Finley explores the perimeters of patriarchy on the female body, Flanagan and Rose employ a queer or 'crip' sensibility to interrogate heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity (McRuer, 2006). Flanagan's sick body is often 'slack' in its non-work, where Flanagan either performs the patient, in his hospital bed, or performs his leisure/pleasure activities of BDSM for pain/pleasure with Rose. This sick-work contributes to and interrogates the increasing cultural visibility of slacking in the 90s. Flanagan and Rose utilise the contradictory spheres of illness and pleasure – one is presumed as 'imposed' and the other presumed as 'choice', but both take place in social reproduction or non-reproduction time.

In *You Always Hurt the Ones You Love* (1991), Flanagan sings and enacts his personhood at his head, using humour as a device to further contradict the victim/deviant label (Jones, 1998), while his body is transformed into an object by nailing his penis to a plank of wood. Although the early BDSM performances, which include the use of fishhooks, sewing needles and pegs in various parts of Flanagan's body, are more joyful than abject, they must be read in the context of their production. The very use of blood and intentional injury, at a time when HIV and homophobia had put very strong moral codes on what was accepted, reclaims the abjected. The use of skin as a material is also significant, as Kristeva writes: 'it is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self" but, scraped or transparent, invisible or taut, gave way before the dejection of its contents' (Kristeva, 1982: 53).

¹⁷ See the book *Rated RX: Shree Rose with and after Bob Flanagan* (2020), edited by Yetta Howard, for more details on Shree Rose that gives a fuller picture of her practice.

Skin is what holds in place the border between object and subject, and its perforation, scrapes, and stretching, as we see done again and again to Flanagan's body, employs this fragility as material. Flanagan and Rose both mine abjection in their utilisation of the object, and reject it by returning to the maternal body as child and slave.

Flanagan and Rose's performances often make a parody of self-love within the highly individualised capitalist society that they live in, with Flanagan symbolically castrating himself to make a visual symbol for non-reproduction. There is 'no future' in Flanagan and Rose's sexually reproductive performances; the abjection that is used to disguise the function of reproduction under capitalism is recycled as surplus jouissance, and ironically has more in common with the factory than the family, as Flanagan describes himself as a 'factory of mucus' (O'Brien, 2012). His castrated body rebels against the stereotypical construct of the labouring and reproducing male body. Flanagan differs with other physical endurance artists, such as the Viennese Actionists and Chris Burden, by further pushing the boundaries of what constitutes the male body and masochism. Amelia Jones explains, drawing on the work of Paul Smith, that masochism always holds out the promise of transcendence, and that the fit and healthy male body can undergo a process of trauma or violence in order to return redeemed (Jones, 1998). While Flanagan tries to overcome his sickness with his rallying cry 'FUCK THE SICKNESS', this is only to 'fuck the sickness' with more sickness – there is no reformed male body before or after the feats.

Flanagan and Rose reject and overturn hegemonic masculinity through the utilisation of transgressive femininity in Rose's role as Dom. The question is, then: is this sick body that smiles and laughs even when it inflicts more sickness on itself responding to, or calling forth, Foucault's 'entrepreneurship of the self' (Foucault, 2008; Sholette, 2011)? This dictates that under neoliberalism anything or anyone can become valuable with the right marketing. Or can we read it as a reaction against this impulse, bringing sickness into view at a time when sick bodies were being demonised in response to the AIDS crisis and 'uncared' for under welfare reforms. The answer is both, as McRuer explains: 'Flanagan's work so often functions transgressively partly because he was aware of the perpetual (and disciplining) possibility of co-option' (McRuer, 2006: 194).

In *Visiting Hours* (1992) Flanagan and Rose's major show at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, Flanagan is put 'on display' as a patient. The title 'visiting hours' intentionally draws on the infrastructural nature of care in hospitals and, also ironically, the zoo. Flanagan and Rose performed in the gallery every day. Flanagan the patient sat in his bed and was hoisted up by his feet at points in the day and given his daily medicine and oxygen. What Flanagan found interesting was that people would often use the experience to confess their own personal tragedies around hospitals, death and illness when visiting him (Flanagan, quoted in Rugoff, 1993). The performance became a type of catharsis for both Flanagan and the viewers. What distinguishes this work from much of the work on display in contemporaneous *Abject Art* was that Flanagan's living, humorous, if not decrepit body was there. He was not made object, made external, a representation, a metaphor. What takes place when one encounters abjection as a separate object is that it is neatly abjected, rejected, and not assimilated. In *Visiting Hours* we have to be complicit in some forms of assimilation. We face abjection and cannot reject it as it speaks to us. Confronting viewers with Flanagan's mortality, his 'factory of mucus as thick as pudding', the viewer is brought into consider their mortality, their own abjection (Rose, 2015).

The final piece that Flanagan and Rose conceived was videoing Flanagan's body decomposing in the coffin. This would have been the ultimate in abjection as we watch the subject disintegrate into object (Jones, 1998). Illness plays a key role in social reproduction, especially in the US where medical treatment is private. In exposing the 'performance' of illness, Flanagan and Rose make a statement about this sidelined part of being a body that cannot reproduce life or capital. The body read in the context of illness, mental or physical, is an important marker for the political economy and the welfare state. Under more recent austerity politics it is the bodies of those who are not cared for by the state that become more visible, and it is the bodies of those too ill to work that become abject/ed. Flanagan and Rose's work employs illness or sickness through the subject/object of the artist's real body in the gallery, in similar ways to both Ukeles and, more pointedly, to Smith.

Visiting Hours openly provokes an interrogation about how much the art world or art institution is willing to take/commodify – what will be allowed in the realm of art? We are already aware that the gallery will tolerate bodies such as Vito Acconci and Marina Abramovi being ‘present’, but what if these bodies needed care? What if, like a kinetic sculpture, they needed to be turned on? Fed? Clothed? How much is the gallery or the institution willing to turn into the social reproducer of the artist? The answer, as we know, is that there are limits, as fewer and fewer artists are paid for their efforts. These limits are expressed by Flanagan towards the end of the exhibition in the *Pain Journal* (2001). He does not recall the desire for domination and sexual excitation from Rose as his earlier works do. The journal entries reflect a body going through the mundane processes of being sick and the anxiety that comes with terminal illness. Flanagan correlates the repetition of making art with maintaining his body: ‘I’m dying. It sounds like melodrama, but the damn thing is that it’s true – and everyone has to face it: Sheree, my parents, me. I’m so sick of the art crap. Sick of *Visiting Hours*. Every day is a pile of work and expectations’ (Flanagan, 2001).

The sentiment repeats the same ‘maintenances’ that Ukeles describes in her manifesto, the same necessary procedures that some of us need to follow. This awareness of the limitations of the body and self in art and life illuminate where co-option reaches its limit. A stopping point on the ‘encore,’ an inbuilt human renouncement of more, that slacks, stops and resists further reification. While Finley, Flanagan and Rose’s artwork appears to be engrossed in the subjective, the biographical and the personal, there is a potency to summoning the personal as political during the early 1990s, more so than in the feminist context of the 1970s. This is, as I have explained, due to the disintegration of the social contact and the production of the individual under neoliberalism. The personal is only political in an era of hyper individualism, but this personal is broken, abjected, sick, slack and transgressive.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this article is to purport that abject art erupts from the contradictory imposition of social reproduction under capitalism. To make this assertion, the artworks that I have discussed diverge from the obvious representations of the abject as the transgressive, private or moribund body and its wastes. I have therefore claimed new works of art and movements as abject, increasing its remit. If, as I have explained, abjection and abject art are indicative of the constraints of changing and intensifying modes of capitalist production, then theories of abjection and the role of abject art must be retained as we face new and increased regimes of accumulation. Identifying and understanding the contradiction inherent in capitalism’s need for living labour, yet disregard for life and living, are at the heart of debates around social reproduction. However, we need to dig a little deeper to understand how this contradiction has become embodied in our own social and psychic processes. It is for this reason that I have redeployed Kristeva’s theory of abjection to explain the social and psychological approach to reproductive labour. If we can understand abjection as inbuilt into a system of capitalism that devalues and dismisses social and biological reproduction, we can uncover its real value within capitalist reproduction. Yet beyond and indeed before this theory we have the very intuitive responses of artists to these impositions. It is in art that the abstractions and impulses of capital and its repercussions can be made manifest and material. Therefore, abject art is not only a single response by artists in the 90s, but a century-long project of artistic engagement, with the tensions that capital places on the gendered, sexed, racialised and classed body.

Each of the performances that I discuss respond directly to the social, political and economic constraints of the period in which they were made, periods not unlike our current time. It is hard to untangle the demarcation between subject and object in these performances, all of which draw on the personal (even if that personal is collective suffering). Abjection only exists and operates in the works discussed *between* the performers, the viewers and the location; it is relational, just as it is in Kristeva’s original formulation. But these relations are not abstractions; they refer to specific lives and experiences of being a body in time and space. Each artist begins with an anecdote: the mother cleaning the house, the stories passed on of the horrors of war, unleashed female desire, a newspaper article describing the horrific experiences of a young girl, the state of living through dying. Today the body and its wastes have returned in their telescopic minutiae through new regimes of visibility in an image-saturated culture of social

media. Synchronously they have also dissipated – the bodily contact in face to face, in both conflict and desire, represented in *Kids* and *Slacker*, has been supplanted by a life lived online. The separation of the body from its collective and social potentiality is ever present. But the over determination of the digital apparatus is equally matched by visible corporeal abjection in the form of poverty, homelessness, inequality and growing conservatism that seeks to restrict female reproductive rights. This is why abjection, understood as both social indicator and aesthetic critique, must continue to form part of dialogues around art and culture under capitalism.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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