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# Making my bed : Tracey Emin's hysterical confessions of the abject

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**MAKING MY BED: TRACEY EMIN'S HYSTERICAL CONFESSIONS OF THE  
ABJECT**

By

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A thesis

Presented to Ryerson University and York University

in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Program of

Communication and Culture

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**ABSTRACT**  
**MAKING MY BED: TRACEY EMIN'S HYSTERICAL CONFESSIONS OF THE**  
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Alicia Chantelle VanDeWeghe  
Master of Arts, 2009  
Communication and Culture  
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Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998) presents an alternative representation to normative notions of the body, offending hegemonic propriety so greatly that it caused a tabloid media sensation when it was shortlisted for the 1999 Turner Prize. Emin applies certain feminist notions as she continues the motif of the reclining nude, offering semiotic gestures that indicate evidence of the body rather than the body itself. *My Bed* is the site of trauma and disgust, with all of the abjection left intact, and above all, a self expressionist piece documenting her personal trauma. The expressionist qualities harkens back to cultural discourse of hysteria, reinforcing the legitimacy of the feminist lens. Hysteria is a performance that Emin represents through confessing her traumatic history. Like the archetypal reality television star, she confesses personal emotions and histories, but breaks the status quo by offering an alternative representation with the abjected authenticity of the bed.



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*For Darius, Mom, and Dad*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Tracey Emin – one of four female artists who were the winners of the Turner Prize – installed her bed, *My Bed*, in the Tate Modern. Although the bed was an intimate assemblage, as opposed to a randomly selected object, Emin does claim to have spent several days in the bed after suffering a nervous breakdown. It was during this period of this breakdown that inspired her to make this art piece.



Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998). Mixed Media.

Tate Britain, a Welsh housewife was so outraged and disgusted that she drove 200 kilometers with a bottle of Vanish stain remover to clean the bed. After being reproved by security guards she defended her actions by saying "I had a go, but unfortunately I could not get to wash the sheets, just a pre-wash" (BBC News, 25 Oct. 1999). A similarly conflicted response was provoked by Emin's appliquéd bed, titled *Everyone I have Ever Slept With* (1996), which had similar themes to the bed. When the piece of art



## INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Tracey Emin – one of four finalists shortlisted for the prestigious Turner Prize – installed her used, dirty bed in the Tate Gallery. Although this bed is an artistic assemblage, as opposed to a randomly selected object, Emin does claim to have spent several days in the bed after suffering a nervous breakdown. According to the artist, it is this breakdown that inspired her to make this art piece:

I had a kind of mini nervous breakdown in my very small flat and didn't get out of bed for four days. And when I did finally get out of bed, I was so thirsty I made my way to the kitchen crawling along the floor. My flat was in a real mess--everything everywhere, dirty washing, filthy cabinets, the bathroom really dirty, everything in a really bad state. I crawled across the floor, pulled myself up on the sink to get some water, and made my way back to my bedroom, and as I did I looked at my bedroom and thought, "Oh, my God. What if I'd died and they found me here?"

Moreover, *My Bed* is littered with Emin's personal possessions, such as bloody underwear, urine-stained sheets, used condoms, dirty clothes, a partially used tube of KY Jelly, empty bottles of alcohol, and an overflowing cigarette tray. The work is a personal artifact transformed into an artwork through modification and public display.

Echoing Marcel Duchamp, Emin presents an everyday object in the gallery as high art. Like Duchamp's ready-mades, this regular household object shocked a notable portion of its initial audience. When Emin exhibited *My Bed* for the Turner Prize at the Tate Britain, a Welsh housewife was so outraged and disgusted that she drove 200 kilometers with a bottle of Vanish stain remover to clean the bed. After being removed by security guards she defended her actions by saying "I had a go, but unfortunately I could not get to wash the sheets, just a pre-wash" (BBC News, 25 Oct. 1999). A similarly conflicted response was provoked by Emin's appliquéd tent, titled *Everyone I have Ever Slept With* (1996), which had similar themes to the bed. When the piece of art

was destroyed by fire, British tabloids sarcastically remarked that the ashes of this work should also be short-listed for the Turner Prize (The Mirror, 27 May, 2004). In the journal *Art in America*, however, Cathy Lebowitz states, "What brought Emin to prominence was shock value, but what keeps her work powerful as she continues is the strength and nuance of its form and content" (139). Emin's work has remained popular amongst all but conservative art critics. The way in which she presented her bed scandalized conservative art critics and the media, as the Welsh Housewife and the Mirror comment suggest, and the past ten years have only brought her more fame and recognition as an artist. Her work is now well established within the art world. On first consideration, one might conclude that the key point of contestation around Emin's piece was that *My Bed* consists of objects out of place, things that most viewers would not expect to see in a gallery presented as art. Since Duchamp's ready-mades, such as *Fountain* (1917), addressed this conflict decades earlier and were already well established canons of post-modern art when *My Bed* was presented, it is not because Emin displays an everyday object in a gallery that disturbed viewers. Rather, it is more likely her public display of things such as blood stained underwear, evidence of recent sexual encounters, and abjected bodily fluids that caused such discomfort with the initial audience.

The politics around the public record of the body, its evidence and history will be addressed in chapter one because Emin's representation breaches normative expectations of the public body. To understand how *My Bed* is an alternative representation I must outline concepts of abjection, dirt and impurities that are outlined in Julia Kristeva's *Power of Horror* and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. These texts help illustrate how Emin investigates the liminal borderlines of the body and how disgust is in part,

culturally constructed. I have also chosen to highlight a selection of secondary articles that serve to buttress Kristeva and Douglas' notions of abjection and dirt, most notably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's investigations of shame that arises from disgusting behaviour. Sedgwick views shame as an affect that can be transmitted to the viewer, and as I will argue functions much like how the disgust is transmitted from the bed to the viewer.

*My Bed* is not only about the abject because overall, it serves to document Emin's own nervous breakdown which is why I have chosen to begin chapter one by discussing how it uses affect as a mode of communication and hysteria as a means of performance. I will provide a general overview of affect theory, and how these affects are transmitted from the bed to the viewer. Hysteria can also be seen as a mode of communication, and like the nineteenth century hysteric, Emin's nervous breakdown has been confined to the bed, and the detritus she left in it. The cultural discourse around the hysteric mark conflicts over gender and sexual deviancy that is still relevant today. Like performativity, Emin performs hysteria through confessing her traumatic history in the bed. Moreover, it is feminine bodily functions, although not exclusively, that is often abjected. An in-depth study of Judith Butler's notion of performativity will investigate how gender is constructed and framed culturally, and how these social constructions form a framework that help to define what elements of the body get classified as dirty and disgusting. Such cultural framings are in turn reinforced by Guy Debord's Spectacle, in that general members of society are usually active participants in maintaining the status quo.

Chapter two contextualizes Emin's bed within art history. The most obvious association, and Emin's direct predecessor is the contemporary artists who worked with the abject in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith.



Artists working with the abject often used body fluids to challenge dominant notions of the body, most notably sex and gender; like Emin's work, they exposed taboo, worked outside the borderline of acceptable behaviour, and represented trauma and memory. These gestures are not new to art history, as such investigations of notions of privacy and the public were a common theme in, for example, in feminist art production of the 1970s by artists such as Judy Chicago and Carolee Schneemann. Emin inherits the legacy of these earlier feminist artists, and like them her work transgresses public and private divisions by playing with the liminal borderlines of the body, making the internal elements visible to the public eye, and quite often deliberately pushing boundaries of decorum in order to shock audiences into a re-evaluation of their assumptions. Although the feminist artists who preceded Emin dealt with similar abject subject matter, they usually avoided using abject materials, choosing instead to represent bodily fluids with things such as prints, beads, jewelry, and honey and chocolate; when these works were created, even representations of the abject were avant-garde and disturbing. Unlike these earlier artists who did play a major influence on her, Emin presents us with her discarded bodily fluids without identifying any political aim. She refuses to identify herself as a feminist, but admits to the influence of feminist art production on her work. Her collaboration with the feminist artist Sarah Lucas in the mid-1990s, and the subject matter of her own work, indicate that she is well aware of feminist art practices. Further, the vessel with which Emin chose to present her argument – the bed – is one of the ultimate signs of private space within Western bourgeois culture.

Images of beds and bedrooms proliferate through art history; as I will demonstrate, Emin recognizes this as part of the political context of her claims. Unlike her approach in

much of her other work, she offers *My Bed* with no written context, and in contrast to art historical tradition, Emin presents the bed without an actual body. Most importantly, it is how Emin presents the bed in the gallery, out of its expected context, that serves to make it an original piece of art. Further, she carries on a tradition in Western art of expanding into new realms to represent reality within the aesthetic realm. Although the feminist elements to her work are actively at play, what makes this work a rich piece of art is how she arranges and represents bodily fluids not as abject, but as aesthetically pleasing objects. Expressionist artists such as Edvard Munch, who Emin admits to having an influence on her, have also found new ways to represent emotional reality in their art, and it is her portrayal of her own emotions that mark this work as above all an expressionist piece. Emin garnishes this sort of celebrity attraction by confessing her emotions through her work, and it is this method of communicating emotion that formed the signature motif of expressionist works.

Chapter three examines how Emin continues a tradition of finding new ways to represent the realities of the human emotions in art by the marketing of her own sexuality and abject bodily fluids through art and her use of ecstatic publicity to play with the audience's comfort levels. What is new with Emin's contribution, moreover, is not only the stark, unmediated presentation of the abjected objects in her bed, but the hauteur-celebrity persona she uses to shamelessly present her work to the viewer. The discomfort arising through Emin's *My Bed* echoes that created by her own celebrity persona – the latter being a form of self-representation, like her art. Emin adopts the confessional qualities from the dominant visual culture in which she lives, which is evident just after the emergence of reality television, and uses these to communicate her own hysteric

history to the audience. Unlike reality television that I will argue maintains existing gender categories, Emin's work resists existing hierarchal social frameworks through her use of the abject while delivering the same confessional qualities that has since made reality television so popular.

While researching *My Bed*, I noticed that although the work is original and creative, many of the themes imbedded in it have previously occurred in art history and theoretical discourse. In order to understand the cultural richness of Emin's work one must look at all of the creative ideas and themes that preceded and as I will argue, influenced it such as alternative, abject representations of the body, and the confessing of emotions that is foundational to expressionist art. Given Emin's education and background, she is likely consciously harkening back to the traditions that preceded her. Despite the negative attention *My Bed* received at the Tate Britain, what is interesting is how conservative it is when compared to the radical tactics employed by feminist artists and their portrayal of the abject body in the 1970s. The achievements of these earlier feminist artists have made it possible for Emin to become such a successful artist through her use of personal and bodily history. At the same time *My Bed* is innovative and cutting edge because Emin is able to contribute to a genealogy of art history and theoretical discourse that preceded her, yet solidifies it within the visual culture within which it was produced, mainly the confessional qualities of reality television. *My Bed* breaks away from the cultural status quo of her time by offering an alternative kind of representation that was championed by earlier feminist artists, yet can still be shocking to a mainstream audience.

## **CHAPTER ONE: ABJECTION AND THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDERED TRAUMA**

The purpose of art - in this case, abject art - is to communicate something, be it an emotion, meaning, or a message, to the viewer. Affect and hysteria are both modes of communication that rely on an audience-performer relationship. Affect not only originates from literal performances such as theatre, cinema, a concert, and performance art, but also resonates with any given cultural product such as other forms of visual art like painting, sculpture, and architecture. This section will define affect theory as a mode of visual communication and cultural experience. Similarly, Emin uses abject material to communicate her own hysteria to the audience via the affects that are transmitted from the bed. Therefore, I will give a brief history of hysteria that highlights the cultural meanings and understandings of the gendered body's response and performance of trauma. Emin's choice of communicating the beauty of her own nervous breakdown with her use of abject material is due to the parallels between abjection and hysteria. Both represent a loss of self-control in the rigid codes of conduct by which one is expected to abide by. For example, a hysterical woman can generally be perceived as someone whose emotions are out of control, such as the nineteenth century woman who lost her temper in public and who could have been diagnosed as hysteric (McKay, 234). Accordingly, abjection can also be a loss of self-control, such as an individual who becomes morbidly obese. Likewise, someone who urinates or defecates in public would also be seen as being abject, repulsive, and out of control. Generally speaking, both the hysteric and abject bodily fluids are evidence of individuals who break with normative

codes of behaviour. I will argue that these normative codes of conduct are socially and culturally constructed, through a detailed analysis of how the abject motivates cultural norms, and how performativity maintains them.

The term “affect” refers to a feeling in psychology. Recent theories of affect branched from psychoanalytic theory with the work of Silvan Tomkins in the 1960s, where affects were classified into different categories such as shame, humiliation, joy, disgust and surprise. Although affect theory in the visual arts is indebted to the work of Tomkins, its purpose does not focus on cognitive development and emotional well-being. Rather, affects are understood as something external from innate feelings and emotions. Affects can be transmitted from any given cultural product. They are able to change the atmosphere of the art gallery, cinema, television program, and most other examples of visual culture. For example, when a member of the audience walks into a gallery and interacts with a piece of work, the art causes the person to have certain opinions and feelings about the work, but also changes how the person feels in general. Such an affect is received from an external cause because the viewer experiences it only upon entering the gallery and not before (Brennan, 1). Unlike emotions, which are seen to be innate, affects are changes a person experiences as a result of the influence of the external environment (2). Something that is generally perceived to be shameful and disgusting such as a dirty bed –or abject fluids out of place – will cause people’s feelings to change. Two affects that cause this discomfort are disgust and shame, and like hysteria have often been seen as unacceptable and threatening.

The popularity of hysteria as a diagnosis in the nineteenth century has attracted many feminist scholars to its history. Although both men and women were diagnosed

with hysteria, the majority of those diagnosed were women, and it was seen as an effeminate disease. Rather than being called hysteric, many men were generally diagnosed with melancholy, neurasthenia, or, during WWI, shell shock. Never a single disease or illness, it represented a wide variety of ailments that usually involved the nerves and reproductive organs. It could be psychological, neurological, obstetrical or gynecological, and was of interest to reformers who did not believe that women should partake in the workforce or higher education. Most notably, it was often seen as a sign of sexual deviancy and performance in women. Subsequently, vibrators were often used as a treatment by causing orgasm, and more severe treatments included the removal of the ovaries or a clitorectomy. Rest cure was probably the most common treatment, which involved the subject being confined to bed, away from relatives and friends, forbidden to partake in intellectual activities such as reading, writing, sewing, or drawing.

The most famous fictional documented case of the rest cure is Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story, "The Yellow Wall-Paper", based on her own account of being bed-ridden after being diagnosed with hysteria, although in reality she likely suffered from post-partum depression. In this story the protagonist is told by her doctor-husband that she has lost self control, and that confinement in a rented seaside home will cure her. Forbidden to participate in any sort of intellectual activity, she secretly writes about her hatred of the wall paper that serves as a metaphor for her literal imprisonment in the room. She eventually locks herself in the room on the last day of confinement so that she can tear the wall-paper from the wall, letting on that she has indeed gone crazy (Gilman, 58). Gilman later recalled of the short story that, "it was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked" (Gilman, 349). Written in

1892, at the height of diagnoses of hysteria, Gilman's short story did influence doctors to prescribe other forms of treatment that could have been more effective than rest cure, such as allowing women to engage in intellectual activity.

Evidence does exist that suggests that debate did occur about the methodology of treatment. One woman doctor, Dr. Georgette Déga, believed that a good treatment was higher education in mathematics, because she felt that the cause of hysteria was the takeover of the mind by the lower extremities (Showalter, 313). Sigmund Freud, under the initial guidance of the pioneering doctor in the field of hysteria, Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot, felt that hysteria was the result of surviving a life threatening workplace injury, or could be a traumatic sexual experience that the patient had suppressed. Like Charcot, Freud used hypnosis and developed his own techniques using dream analysis and free association. Freud's early work with hysteria influenced the development of psychoanalysis, and as Juliet Mitchell argues, "hysteria led Freud to what is universal in psychic construction and it led him there in a particular way—by the route of a prolonged and central preoccupation with the difference between the sexes. . . . The question of sexual difference - femininity and masculinity - was built into the very structure of the illness" (Showalter, 314). From his observations, Freud concluded, "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (Breuer and Freud, 7). This was indeed the case for Augustine, a fifteen-year-old girl who was confined at the Salpêtrière Asylum, under the care of Charcot, who photographed her more frequently than any other patient; she later became a pin up girl for the surrealists of the 1930s. She suffered from fits after a sexual assault, and often re-enacted the rape during her fits. Charcot felt that hysteria and trauma were linked, and often used the expression "traumatic hysteria" (Didi-Huberman, 153).

Images of hysteria have a complex relationship with culture, as art historian Georges Didi-Huberman argues, developed by the large scale productions of photographs that were taken in Charcot's asylum (Didi-Huberman, 1).

Hysteria marks a cultural conflict over the meanings of gender, as the contextualization of the diagnosis in history reveals. In the eighteenth century, few people discussed hysteria, as it was largely contained to the upper classes, but by the mid nineteenth century diagnosis became democratized with urbanization and industrialization, colonialism, and the emergence of women in the public sphere. Whether it was the working class women in the factories, or the middle class women participating in suffrage campaigns and higher education - all were subject to hysteria. A general belief amongst feminist scholars is that hysteria was seen to be as the result of unfeminine, degenerate behaviour (Briggs, 247). Under this feminist lens, there are notable differences between why women in the working and middle to upper classes would have suffered from hysteria. The working class woman, like her middle class counterpart, commonly suffered from hysteria, which is supported by reports of outbreaks in workhouses (Porter, 227). Although both working class men and women suffered from unjust working conditions and were always at risk of life threatening injuries in addition to a life of poverty and child labour, women were at a higher risk of sexual exploitation. Although forced by their class to work in factories, women working outside the home would have been viewed as degenerate behaviour, which is why women from higher income families were expected to stay at home.

Middle class women endured rigorous moral training in family, church, neighborhood, and school that gave little opportunity for relieving outlets, making



physical sickness a way to opt out or, in other words, a “mock-escape by self mutilation” in a world of very high pressures (Porter, 228). Women often faced the brunt of this pressure because they were subject to greater moral restrictions placed on their character and sexuality, as well as their forcible confinement to the private sphere. Further, hysteria was seen as the result of unladylike behaviour, as is demonstrated in 1880s England, where suffragette protests were often labeled “hysterical” in the press, and young girls who were diagnosed as “hysterical” were labeled closet feminists.

Although nineteenth century physicians were able to differentiate hysteria from epilepsy, as they were considered two different disorders at the time, some patients likely suffered from a variety of mental disorders that are now identifiable such as post-partum depression and bi-polar disorder. In both working and middle class woman, hysteria can also be seen as a failure of bourgeois respectability, self-control, self-discipline, and outward conformity in the survival of the fittest in the competitive bourgeois capitalist world (Porter, 228). Perhaps due to the belief that hysteria could be an involuntary method of escapism, feminists have rooted it in semiotics because it functions as a means of communicating messages that cannot be verbalized conventionally (Showalter, 286). Although hysteria functioned as a blanket term to describe a variety of illnesses and feelings in early psychology, like semiotics it can be seen as a social performance that defies normative expectations of behavior (Szasz, 19). Hysteria “presents a parody of psychosomatic illnesses...like gender, hysteria comprises what the physician chooses, dislocates, or excludes in order to support the position he seeks to ascribe to this disorder” (Bronfen, 102). Lacanian feminists have adopted the hysterical woman of the nineteenth century as the first proto-feminist, because, as Freud diagnosed, her problem

was the refusal to identify with one sexual identity, playing a bisexual role by not being molded into one constraining sexual identity (Showalter, 287).

Early epistemologies of disgust linked it with hysteria defined as an unacceptable desire. For example, Freud's work saw the libido as the lynchpin between hysteria and the disgusting, where the cause of some hysteric cases could be a "deferred internal disgust" (Luckacher, viii). According to Freud, this deferred internal disgust occurred when the subject was unable to act on his or her desire, and was forced to play a regressive role, such as the ones played out in dreams. In other words, disgust blocks the pleasurable sensations of libido, and produces symptoms of hysteria rather than goals. Freud arrived at these conclusions through investigating his most famous hysteric patient, Ida Bauer, known under the pseudonym Dora. As a young adolescent, Dora rejected sexual propositions from a married family friend for whom she babysat, but Freud mistakenly thought she was repressing her own desires for both the family friend and her father (who was having an affair with the wife of the family friend). Under this premise, Freud thought that the disgust felt by Dora caused her to not be able to fulfill her sexual desires, thereby making her hysteric.

Freud is the first physician to use the subject's voice as a means to treat hysteria. He developed the talking cure as a way to help hysterics with blanks in their narrative histories. The analyst would ask the patient to talk about her own personal narratives, and would in turn reconstruct the patient's verbal history to try to make sense of it. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that Freud's talking cure was incompatible to the patient because while the analyst attempts to cure the patient through the verbal exchange of personal history, the patient actually resists cure by producing new and changing

narratives through the doctor's prodding. The doctor's attempt to cure the hysteric patient is therefore "inadequate, inconsistent, and fallible" (Bronfen, 54). The subject's voice is important because hysteria is a form of communicating codes. According to Lacan, hysteria was one of the discourses at play within psychoanalysis, and is a form of communication from one subject in relation to another. Elisabeth Bronfen argues that the codes it communicates indicate that the body and identity are vulnerable through insecure gender, ethnic, class and sexual experiences in addition to the constant changes and mortal state of the human body (Bronfen, xiii).

Hysteria is a historically illusive malaise that lacks any exact definition, perhaps because it veiled the physicians' own helplessness at the time (Bronfen, xi). It is an important part of medical history, but also works as a cultural metaphor for trauma. For the purpose of this study, the traditional gendered notions of hysteria where it is caused by sexual dissatisfaction will be avoided in favour of Freud's interest of analyzing the illness as a result of trauma related to disgust.

Disgust can be defined as an affect of repulsion toward certain food, bodily fluids, corpses, and characterized by certain digressions in behaviour. People often react to disgust with certain facial expressions such as a scrunched up noses. Gagging and covering up our noses are our defenses against offending odors emitted by some disgusting elements such as excretion and vomit. Although disgust can function in a protective sense against unclean agents that can make us sick, such as feces and rotting meat, it is also in part culturally constructed because it is a common reaction to certain modes of behaviour. Often, the word "abject" is used to describe those objects that disgust. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horrors* (1982) investigates elements of the human

body that are culturally classified within Western society as disgusting, such as vomit, menstruation and excrement. Noting that such fluids form the basic requirements for life, she argues that the “body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond that limit – cadere, cadaver” (231). By “border”, Kristeva is referring to a space that lies beyond the human body. For Kristeva, a borderline is the subjective experience of being human; it is the space where a person lives under the social codes of any given culture. Beyond this borderline lies the materiality of the body and its basic functions. In Kristeva’s view, the material body offers a kind of universal truth beyond cultural inscription and, in particular, the patriarchal social order that categorizes many body fluids as disgusting.

At the beginning of her essay, Kristeva states that the “abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture” (Kristeva, 2). Generally, feminist scholars adopt Kristeva’s notion of the abject because it offers an alternative to Western dualism, which regulated the body as a separate, feminized category, secondary to the masculine mind and in need of its rational control. European history has dictated that the body is deviant, in need of control and therefore part of the feminine realm (Butler, 17). The mind, conversely, is of a higher order because it is rational and therefore masculine. As Rosemary Betterton notes, in accordance with this gendered division, the body and its fluids (and especially the feminine body) have historically been abhorred, sanitized and controlled by a patriarchal culture. The covering up of a woman’s natural, aging body by makeup, plastic surgery, or special effects at the movie studio are deceitful; when these facades are removed the audience may become horrified at the grotesque body that hides

underneath (Betterton, 130). In Kristeva's theorization of the body, however, bodily fluids and the processes in which they are involved are constituted as normal. The body in this model works at one with the mind, rather than being separate from it.

Kristeva sees the anxieties felt upon engaging with the abject as the "violence of mourning for an object that has always already been lost" (241). According to Kristeva, this lost object is the traumatic experience of Lacan's mirror stage. This metaphor encompasses our lifelong desire for wholeness, where representations we see everyday help form an idealized concept of self-identity. Kristeva's conception of the lost object can be compared to visual icons with which we are confronted in Western popular culture, such as the bodies of celebrities and fashion models. Discarded fluids such as dirty underwear, used condoms, and excretion are rarely displayed by mainstream visual icons. Sometimes people do see abject objects by surprise, accidentally, or in the garbage, or when the perpetrator wants to deliberately shock. A notable example is the famous advertisement firm, Saatchi & Saatchi, whose use of controversial subject matter such as a pregnant man with the slogan "Would you be more careful if it was you that got pregnant?" commissioned by the Health Education Council to promote the use of contraceptives or a food safety poster that documented the daily activities of a house fly served to shock the audience in order to spread the intended message of the advertisement. Not a stranger to controversy, Charles Saatchi also owns Emin's bed, as well as a notable portion of her other works of art.

For Kristeva, the abject has only one quality, being opposed to the I. She explains that it is "other" because it "lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rule of the game" (Kristeva, 4). Kristeva finds dirt to be abject because it is not

the lack of hygiene that determines abjection but what disrupts identity, system, order. It does not adhere to borders, regulations and systems of classification. The abject is not essential, but constructed because the fluids are not abject until defined as such by a society. In Western society, the bodies and sexual practices of those who break the status quo are the ones most likely to be classified as abject. In an artistic context, art that is abject blurs the visceral unconscious and bodily ego, and adopts the notion of “base dualism” from Georges Bataille that questions the hegemonic ideas of Western dualism and social taboos through the representation of degraded elements of the body (Ben-Levy, et al, 7). Such representations challenge notions of the mind being of a higher hierarchal order of the body by forcing the viewer to acknowledge abject functions of the body.

In accordance with Kristeva’s psychoanalytic claims, anthropologist Mary Douglas locates the abject through cross-cultural studies. I have chosen to juxtapose Kristeva with Douglas because both scholars offer very similar arguments, while applying different methodologies to support their claims. Kristeva is more interested in cultural theory of the disgust, whereas Douglas uses qualitative research to illustrate the different ways in which dirt and impurities are treated amongst different cultures. Not believing that one methodology is superior to the other, I have felt that the use of similar arguments gained through different disciplines and methodologies serve to strengthen my own claim of the important impact disgust has on shaping cultural values, and how dirt is in part, a social construction that will be used in my own analysis of Emin’s bed.

The fact that various cultures have different cleansing and purifying rituals, Douglas argues in *Purity and Danger* (1966), indicates the cultural and sociological construction of such habits. She notes, for example, that menstruation is classified as

disgusting by some cultures, but not by others. Similarly, she notes that hair is often admired and considered beautiful when it is on someone's head, but when a strand falls off and lands in a person's food at a restaurant, it becomes something that is generally classified as disgusting (33). Douglas believes that the cleansing and purifying rituals we do every day are not solely done as a means to prevent disease, but also serve as a way to re-organize the environment around us so that it adapts to an ideology (2). This argument parallels Kristeva's notion of the abject being both culturally constructed and discomforting because it fails to follow normative social codes. According to Douglas, ideas of impurity are rooted in basic principles of hygiene that avoid unnecessary illness, but also adhere to cultural conventions (7). Images of used condoms and tampons are not intended to be looked at in public; therefore, they would be classified as dirt out of place. Douglas would refer to these items as contradictions of our comfortable classifications (36), disrupting Western culture's notions of patriarchal and bourgeois propriety, order, and cleanliness. Furthermore, Douglas argues that systems of classification that define what is dirty will naturally be confronted by anomalies that disrupt its rules because any code of conduct will automatically have violations.

The discomfort experienced in relation to exposed abject material can cause people to feel shame – the emotion resulting from feeling that shortcomings are being judged with contempt (Cohen, 1075). Shame is part of the public realm, presuming or reacting to what others judge of one's actions. Nevertheless, it can also be experienced internally or privately, thereby blurring the public and private spheres. Shame is even more complex because a person can feel ashamed for a breach of a moral social code. At the same time a person can be considered shameless because he or she deliberately

transgresses a social code of behaviour by not upholding specific social values and not abiding by community norms. The same social norms that classify certain acts and objects as disgusting also cast them as shameful.

Speaking within a legal context, Martha Nussbaum differs from Kristeva and Douglas because she discusses shame in addition to disgust, in relation to the way in which social customs force us to hide our abject bodily functions. Although shame is a secondary affect that I am investigating in this study, I have chosen to include Nussbaum because her ideas have some similarities to Kristeva and Douglas' claims that I have outlined in this chapter. Nussbaum illustrates the association of shame with disgust, and although secondary in my analysis to Emin's bed, shame is still something that is at play with Emin's work. According to Nussbaum, most people strive to be normal and it is the unraveling of this desire that causes shame (174). We conceal abject bodily fluids such as menstruation, urine, and semen because we desire to be non-human and immortal by concealing fundamental corporeal functions, and it is this ambition that is "problematic and irrational" because it is self-deceptive and vain (102). In this claim, however, Nussbaum does not directly address the fact that notions of propriety are taught to people from birth, and then unconsciously these codes are adopted and practiced. She does, however, believe that disgust is a strong emotion for most people, and that it influences our perception of ourselves, our relations to other people, and the structures of everyday life. Like both Kristeva and Douglas, Nussbaum also argues that disgust influences our cleansing rituals, and privacy for sexual act and expulsion of bodily fluid (72). Dominant cultural values are therefore engrained in most people. When an individual



transgresses these social codes, by perhaps subverting them in a work of art or advertisement, such alternative adaptations are able to shock.

Social relations and interactions are influenced and manufactured by the disgusting due to our efforts to distance ourselves from these fluids and stench. Nussbaum states that “most societies teach the avoidance of certain groups of people as physically disgusting, bearers of contamination that the healthy element of society must keep at bay”(72). Individuals who are marginalized in society, in particular those who are marginalized as being sexually deviant, are often the bodies that society at large does not want to confront in public because they threaten social codes of propriety. This argument parallels Kristeva’s notion in the sense that the sexually deviant body cannot be contained in social codes and classifications.

Nussbaum makes special efforts to investigate the links between both shame and disgust. For example, she views shame as something that exists prior to our constructed social value-systems (174), but she also describes it as in part an affect – something transmitted to us from the external environment, and influenced by social-value systems which prescribes what and who are shamed. Therefore, for Nussbaum, shame works as a negotiation because it is a junction between our experiences as humans and the tensions and demands of the social system and structure in which we live (179). Further, she studies how we are embarrassed because underneath our public facade is uncovered elements that are socially constructed as abnormal, or inappropriate to see in public, like bodily fluids. When this happens we blush, we hide, and we turn our faces (173). Shame is what answers this embarrassment, as Nussbaum says, it “brands the face with unmistakable signs” (173).

Elspeth Probyn's views parallel Nussbaum's in her discussion of the public blush. For Probyn, the act of blushing is the only common that is, non-culturally conditioned element of shame. Like Nussbaum, she argues that shame, although often painful, defines who we know ourselves to be both individually and collectively (8). She goes on to illustrate that shame is innate in our bodies, but it also functions in relation to other bodies. She then borrows a line from Epstein which states that shame is the "affective dimension to the transmission of cultural values" (34). Finally, she discusses the complexities of shame, and how the shamed disadvantaged group can also be the shamer, a site where primal shame is reenacted (86). Primal shame can be defined as occurring when one's honour and pride are defied. When Probyn states that the disadvantaged group can also be the shamer, she is referring to occasions when the marginalized are able to shame the privileged with the reminder of past injustices. This shame could be a confrontation of various forms of injustice, or it could just be a shameful element that has common ground between the two groups. Probyn believes that representation presents a reliving of shame, and in some cases can be even more shameful (86). Again, like Nussbaum, Probyn believes that shame occurs as a result of a painful exchange, an unsafe experience where there is nowhere to hide (39). Most importantly, Probyn believes that this discomfort also reinforces the fact that we are interested in cultural artifacts that transmit shameful affects, despite their painful disjuncture (63).

Relying on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Probyn believes those human bodies and their histories conceptually, "challenge any neat divisions of biological affect and biographical emotion, of the social and physiological. Our bodies and histories are constituted by so much more than we usually allow for" (72). According to Probyn,

cultural transmissions of shame, such as a television program about youth coming out, helps an individual who has firsthand experience with this kind of shame, relive it again as he or she watches this television program. This is because these young people are publically acknowledging their non-normative sexualities. Moreover, repeated exposures to sites of shame further arouse and fuel a person's identity with experiences of a similar kind of shame. For Probyn, these cultural transmissions serve as a "collective history" that will influence how people within the represented disadvantaged group experience shame (85).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses a thought experiment to demonstrate how an audience is receptive to shame as an affect. She begins by asking a group of people in a public setting such as a lecture hall how they would feel if a dirty, mentally ill man casually walked into the classroom and publically urinated in front of everybody. She imagines that most people would feel uncomfortable because they would want to be somewhere else. This act of public urination is a transgression because it occurs in a place when it is not expected or supposed to occur. Although Sedgwick explicitly states that the man would be both dirty and mentally ill, if it were a clean, mentally sane man committing the same act of public urination, the audience would still feel uncomfortable. Regardless of what kind of person publically urinated in front of an audience, the most important point is that the audience would be well aware of what it would be like to be the man shamelessly urinating in public. Sedgwick defines this as a "double movement" of shame, "toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality" (37). It would be difficult for the audience not to imagine, or have a general understanding, of what it would be like if they were the ones committing such a transgressive act. Here,

Sedgwick is working with shame at different levels. This double movement could explain why people have such harsh opinions of a shameless person. It is not just because the person is careless and breaking a social code; rather it is because an individual is able to relate himself or herself as the transgressive person. The double movement demonstrates how the affects shame and disgust can be transmitted from the perpetrator to the audience.

### **The Body and Performativity**

It is not only bodily fluids that are abjected and considered shameful, but in particular, feminine bodily fluids and sexual acts. Western culture is hypersensitive to the feminine body. Public images of the female body are both abundant and more acceptable in mainstream advertising and television. Although it is only a certain type of female body that even has the privilege of being portrayed as sexually attractive (thin, young, and probably white), these images do often depict desire, but at the same time they just as frequently depict disgust (Betterton, 30). This is evident in the fact that it is generally considered more disgusting and shocking to look at female bodily fluids, feminine alcoholism, and feminine promiscuity. A body that is abjected, such as one that publicly urinates, gets fat, or drinks heavily, is often seen as a body that is out of control. Although both men and women publically drink, and both suffer problems with binge drinking and alcoholism, alcoholic women are even less likely to receive treatment than men because of the guilt and shame surrounding a drunken woman as compared to a drunken man (Smith, 5). Alcoholism is more of a social stigma for women because it can represent the fallen woman. Recent evidence indicates that women who binge drink

are also more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases, a condition carrying greater shame and social stigmas than alcoholism and binge drinking (Women's Health Weekly, 28). Western cultures enact a perceived double standard between female promiscuity and male promiscuity. Although recent research suggests that there is little empirical data to support this claim, there may be a strong confirmation bias that results in people remembering certain information that suggests women are derogated for their sexual behaviour (Marks and Fraley, 19). For example, the word "slut" is often remembered as being assigned to some sexually active women in a derogatory standard, despite a sexually active man also being condemned for similar acts. Although empirical evidence may not prove much difference in opinion between sexually active men and women, cultural products such as television and the internet do reinforce the idea of a sexual double standard, making people more apt to remember any sort of association with a woman's sexual behaviour and negative opinions. This explains why many feminists have reclaimed this word "slut", they feel that a promiscuous woman should chose to do what she wishes with her body, without the perceived condemnation of those around her. The sexy, promiscuous woman has even been an issue of contention between feminists. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the "porn wars", or robust debates about the character of pornography and feminism, erupted between academic feminists. Some second wave feminists felt that highly sexualized images of women such as those displayed in pornography objectified the female body for male pleasure. They felt that this objectification through the male gaze was oppressive. They felt justified in arguing against this sort of body because there were very few options for women to choose from in terms of careers and accessibility to post secondary education, and these limiting roles

would have influenced what kinds of images of the female body were presented to women.<sup>1</sup> The roles that women played in the sex industry such as playboy bunnies and participating in pornography were generally not intended to be feminist. Also, expected sexual roles for women were largely confined to monogamous, heterosexual marriages. Most importantly, second wave feminism belonged to white, middle class, heterosexual women. Their own sense of bourgeois propriety would have made discourse around female sexuality very limiting. Indeed, women who chose to work in the sex industry, regardless of what they looked like, were cast aside as other. Some third wave feminists felt that the sexualized, promiscuous woman could be a site of liberation from the sexual restrictions of the time. The word “promiscuous” itself has negative connotations because it implies that people who have sex outside of monogamous relationships are transgressing a border by doing something that they should not be doing. The promiscuous body is often one that is classified as dirty.

Judith Butler’s notion of performativity is used for this analysis because an identity such as gender is fabricated, “manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (*Gender Trouble*, 185). Performativity is the repetition of a cultural act or idea that ends up stabilizing the meaning of that idea by forming the normative. Butler asks: through what regulation of normalcy is sex materialized? She argues that sexual practices become normalized through the repetition and reiteration of these norms, causing the repetition of these things to become a kind of truth.

Performativity is repetitive because gender is culturally conditioned, and not just something that we grab and wear from the closet every morning. We support and

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<sup>1</sup> That is not to say that what kinds of mainstream images of the female body that people are generally exposed to offer much more variety now than they did 30 years ago.

reinforce these categories by performing our expected gender roles on a daily basis. We can also subvert these roles as well, such as when a person deliberately displays bodily fluids in public that are deemed disgusting and abject. It retains its shock value because it is not a site that is repeated over and over again, making it something that a general audience is not accustomed to publicly look at. Gender is influenced by both cultural and historical relations (*Bodies that Matter*, 14). Despite numerous criticisms on her theory, Butler does address the materiality of the body by arguing that bodily experiences such as pain, drives, fluids, and the like are not just constructions, but are affirmed discursively (*Bodies that Matter*, xi). In other words, the body exists through language, one that has strong gender regularities. According to Butler, constructions as a constitutive constraining also produce the realm of normal bodies and the abjected inappropriate body (Butler, xi). She feels that these two bodies are not binary because they do not work in opposition to one another; in order to be opposed to something, that thing must be made intelligible. The abject body is indecipherable, ignored, left out, and haunting. Butler says that this abject body “haunts the former domain as the spectre of its own impossibility, the very limit to intelligibility, its constitutive outside” (Butler, xi). She believes that the materiality of sex is “demarcated through discourse”, and that these limits automatically sire excluded and other types of sex (Butler, 16). Like Kristeva’s borderline, abjected bodies are not segregated from material discourse because they are bodies that fail to matter, are not normative, publicly ignored, and entrusted to the private realm.

Some critics have claimed that Butler disputes the materiality of the body in her groundbreaking book *Gender Trouble*. Nussbaum responded to *Gender Trouble* by

criticizing it for leaving the material body aside in favour of verbal and symbolic discourse (Nussbaum, 38). She argues that Butler's "symbolic gestures" do little to help real women living in the real world (Nussbaum, 38). What Nussbaum sees as most damaging with Butler's argument is that it promotes individualism by avoiding public commitment for change (Nussbaum, 44). Indeed, the most common critique of Butler is that her writing is inaccessible to most people; even well educated people have a difficult time understanding her writing style. Butler does address these concerns in her follow up book, *Bodies That Matter*, which is much more digestible than *Gender Trouble*. She defends herself against the claim that she disregards the material body when she argues that both the material body and the discursive body serve to constitute normative conditions by which the physical body is both framed and formed through differing gender categories (Butler, 17). The bodies that transgress the reiterated norm also threaten the hegemony of the intelligible, normative body. These bodies can be compared to impurities and dirt, which are threatening because they disrupt their categorical order. Butler also states that she does not want to presume, or negate materiality; rather she seeks to free the body from metaphysical grounding by learning about the political framework that frames that metaphysical body (Butler, 30). She acknowledges that the body does exist before the sign, but that this pre-existence in itself is always marked as a signification, as prior (Butler, 30). Butler says that this does not mean that the materiality of the body is simply a network of signifiers. She says "to posit by way of language a materiality outside of language is still to posit that materiality, and the materiality so posited will retain that positing as its constitutive condition" (Butler, 30). Butler defends her use of semiotics to describe the materiality of the body because it is this sexed



materiality that embodies a history of sexual hierarchy and erasures, the signs of the body and its “redoubling”, where contradictions serve as the theatre of sexual difference (Butler, 49).

Furthermore, Butler’s concept of performativity is not intended to be binary, and she states this when she describes the materiality of the body under signification.

Adopting a semiotic framework with regards to how an audience views images of the body cannot explain everything. Rather, it serves to provide an analytical framework that describes how meaning can generally be derived from images as they are interpreted.

The use of semiotics, most particularly for art history, not only helps to describe meaning, it also serves as a site where the meanings that transgress hegemonic social and symbolic order are produced (Pollock, 9). Such dominant orders of meaning are not universal, but can said to be general in the sense that images are open to alternative interpretations and meanings. The interpretations of codes are definitely influenced by the dominant social order (Gardiner, 150). As Stuart Hall argued, such dominant readings do not go unchallenged (Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*, 1980). Such confrontations to the normative were indeed on the agenda for many practicing feminist artists, beginning since the 1960s.

Images are signs because people interpret them, and they are able to signify meaning. Art Historian Keith Mosley states that:

Semiotics makes us aware that the cultural values with which we make sense of the world are a tissue of conventions that have been handed down from generation to generation by the members of the culture of which we are a part. It reminds us that there is nothing ‘natural’ about our values; they are social constructs that not only vary enormously in the course of time but differ radically from culture to culture (Schroeder, 225).

Butler’s notion of performativity, where gender categories serve as social constructions that we have inherited from our cultural histories, is maintained by the semiotic system

described by Mosley because it makes us feel that such dominant codes of behaviour are normative and natural. Dominant social orders such as patriarchy and capitalism do play a role in how meaning is interpreted by individuals. Hegemonic displays of images can help determine what kinds of bodies are appropriate for sexual display, and what kinds are not. Guy Debord offers one good insight that illustrates this. He states that “the language of the spectacle is composed of signs of the dominant organization of production; signs which are at the same time the ultimate end-products of that organization” (13). Notions of the abject, the disgusting, and shame are at least in part coded under dominant social orders, and these codings do influence how an image depicting abject bodily fluids will be interpreted and received by a viewer. This constitutes a complex system because disadvantaged people, such as women, are not simply the innocent other of oppression. They too maintain such structures, and this spectacle, by being an active participant in the production of such images by their social relations within society at large.

Via Butler’s use of semiotics, resistance toward the normative seems more possible because one can determine how meaning can be influenced by dominant social orders. A multitude of things cause performativity to exist, such as hegemonic social powers that determine what is normative and what is not, as well as each individual’s own complex bodily history that can play a role in how performativity functions, and how these individual histories relate to the norm. Butler does not cater to an individualistic middle class, as Nussbaum suggests. Rather, she finds that it is absolutely necessary to fight against social relations of power that oppress disadvantaged people. She feels that it is impossible for any one writer to fight against all modes of oppression due to the risks

of either taking the voice from a marginalized person, or instilling one form of resistance as hegemonic over others. In short, each individual has his or her own experiences, and no one can speak entirely on behalf of another. Butler is not trying to overlook the many gains for which effective anti-oppressive organizations have fought; rather she is pointing out that even under such forms of resistance, hegemonic social relations and privilege still exist. Butler does find room for the activist academic when she argues that it is important to think of how complex hegemonic structures of power are in their interarticulation (Butler, 19). A piece of art that is seen as resisting any form of oppression is also open for others to interpret as they wish. Such is the function of releasing any sort of visual object to the scrutiny of the public. Like affects, opinions of a visual work can be influenced by larger social structures, and how each person experiences them will vary from individual to individual. Furthermore, each individual has his or her own voice that is both singular in experience and able to interpret independently, as well as to share common elements with others. Although a person's own individual experience living under these systems is singular, these systems in themselves are not. People can also find common ground with their own individual experiences, demonstrated by social justice movements such as feminism, the civil rights and gay liberation movements.

Butler's reliance on semiotics most importantly looks at the meanings encoded when a viewer is invited to look at abject material placed in a public space. Furthermore, Butler does not necessarily distance herself from the corporeal body politic (Wilson, 109). Natalie Wilson goes on to say that Butler's analysis of the abject body functions as a subversion that supports the material body "as potentially disruptive to the symbolic

domain of viable bodies” (109). Although Butler relies on the body as a matter of signification that is understood through language, Wilson believes that this stance leaves room for the reverse (Wilson, 111). If the body is constructed by language, does not the body also in part frame language? The body is both material and discursive because we have to have a body to be able to even think about the concept of language. The discursive body and material body are always interplayed with one another and work together simultaneously.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE GENEALOGY OF TRACEY EMIN: THE ART HISTORICAL PREDECESSOR OF *MY BED*

The aim of this chapter is to contextualize Emin's bed within art history, giving the reader an understanding of how *My Bed* fits in with other works that have preceded it. To begin, I am going to discuss other artists who have worked with abject art, using bodily fluids in order to renegotiate hegemonic notions of gender and sexuality. Although abject art is not one unified movement, I have chosen Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman whose works serve as Emin's predecessors within abject art. Although Emin does not exclusively explore the abject in *My Bed*, it is one of the forces at play in her bed piece, working at visceral level by playing with objects that are intimately familiar to the viewer. Like Emin, Smith's work also functions viscerally in her portrayals of the internal functions of the body. Hysteria can also function with the abject, as I will explore in Sherman's representations of trauma and the masquerade, evident in colour photographs that she did after her famous black and white film stills. Both Smith and Sherman work with Kristeva's other, functions of the body that cross the borderline of cultural construction, which is what makes their works of art abject. Abject art practices immediately harkens back to another obvious association with Emin: the work of feminist artists of the 1970s. Emin has repeatedly disassociated herself from feminism, but does admit to being influenced by pioneering feminist art work of the 1970s. I have included a general history of notable feminist artists of the 1970s and 1980s in an effort to introduce the goals and objectives of feminist artists such as Judy Chicago, Mirium Schapiro, and Carolee Schneemann, who used conscious-raising techniques to share their experiences of being oppressed as women, and to bring to attention parts of the body that are internal,

designated to the private sphere, and therefore abjected - such as the vagina. I have also chosen to include a selection of works by Lynda Benglis, Hannah Wilke and Karen Finley to demonstrate how feminist artistic practices evolved from the second wave ideals championed in the early 1970s, to third wave discourse that often focused on sexually explicit subject-matter that could disturb the viewer. This is seen in Benglis' and Finley's work, or feminine experiences that were not overtly political like Wilke's. I hope to counteract Emin's own denials of feminism by illustrating how these examples are similar to her use of personal narrative and representations of bodily fluids in the bed. These similarities are not coincidental, given Emin's own admissions, and her background as an art graduate student where she would have been familiar with such works. Most interesting about Emin's bed is how it continues a long history of the representation of beds in the gallery, beginning with the reclining nude of the Italian Renaissance up until Manet's *Olympia* and the various appropriations that followed. I have provided a general history of notable works within the reclining nude genre, and how each piece of art work broke new ground by representing parts of the private realm that were not appropriate to exhibit in public, and then how Emin carries on this tradition by representing a bed that has evidence of a body that is absent from the work. I have concluded this chapter with a brief discussion on expressionism because, above all, Emin's work is expressionist; like Edvard Munch, Emin carries on the tradition of representing intimate emotion in her art work. The hysteric qualities of Emin's bed match earlier expressionist art work, most notably Robert Rauschenberg's bed that also has no body, but rather than fit into the sensual reclining nude genre, is a response to the canonization of the abstract expressionist genius.

Abject art does not represent a concrete art movement; rather it is used to describe the work of any artist who uses dirt, hair, menstrual blood, excrement, semen, and other bodily fluids in his or her art in order to challenge dominant notions of the body, most notably gender and sexuality (Ben-Levi, et al, 7). Much of the time, such investigations are deemed inappropriate by the more conservative, hegemonic culture. Two prominent artists who worked with the abject are Kiki Smith and Cindy Sherman, both of whom use bodily fluids to champion alternative representations of the body.

Linda Nochlin describes an encounter with Smith's work as a "visceral shock" (Nochlin, 31). Smith's work on the human body borrows heavily from some of the techniques of the Northern Renaissance, where the torture and persecution of Christian martyrs were commonly depicted as the pain and abjection of the human body. Many figures are in crawling poses, which Smith later adopts. This is reminiscent of depictions of the second coming of Christ where sinners are condemned to hell, and their bodies are represented as degraded (Nochlin, 32). Smith grew up practicing the Catholic faith, and was probably influenced by the Catholic iconography of the Northern Renaissance period, but her work is not religious because her subjects and their abject bodies are both isolated and secular. Nochlin focuses on the posture of the subject because the postures also beget emotion and meaning. She states that it is not just the representation of shit or bowels, but the crawling figure that represents abjection within Western art history. The body is abject because it is not idealized and proud as it is in the classical contraposto pose, and it not indicative of a mind over body dualism that is achieved with the contraposto pose (Nochlin, 33). One of Smith's most well - known works embodying the crawling body as abject is *Tale* (1992). This sculpture depicts a woman crawling

across the gallery floor with a long train of feces or intestine protruding from her anus. Indeed, the crawling pose also serves to make the abject material more visible, the focal point of the work, and Nochlin is right to address this as a way in which meaning is derived from the artwork.

What is clear with Smith's work is the fact that she is breaking taboos of the human body by placing representations of defecation and the interior bowels into a public place. Her artwork, in particular *Tale*, promotes a visceral shock in the audience, because she exposes functions of the human body that are socially constructed as obscene. She states of her work, "So much of the violence in our culture stems from our phobia of bodily functions. My work accepts the reality of those functions. They define our being here on this planet" (Howard, 31). It is Smith's intent to confront the audience with elements of the body deemed shameful and disgusting. Although she identifies as a feminist, and much of her portfolio deals with her own body, she believes that it is the general human condition that she is trying to investigate, the fear of both male and female bodily fluids. *Tale* can also symbolize the psychological terror of losing control or inability to evade one's emotional baggage from a traumatic experience (Heartney, 14). The exposed position of the defecating figure makes it vulnerable, exposing the viewer to publicly confront a recognizable body function. Such functions reveal that Smith has crossed a socially constructed space, and has gone beyond the public record of the body; it is Kristeva's borderline.

Another example of how Smith represents bodily fluids is *Untitled (Book of Hours)* (1986 – 1993). This work consists of a handmade book with the printed names of various bodily fluids on each page in lieu of prayers that are commonly found in such



books. Although Smith often represents bodily fluids, this is one of many pieces where she does not work with bodily fluids directly, like Emin does. Rather, she represents them as printed words, or in other works uses decorative objects like glass beads to stand in for them. Smith frequently represents female reproductive organs, and other lower regions of the body such as the digestive tract, urinary tracts, and all bodily fluids, some of the culprits of hysteria. Rejecting dualism she states that the “mind/body dichotomy...had had enormously devastating ramifications in the society...to justify great quantities of oppression...we have this split where we say the intellect is more important than the physical. And we have this hatred of the physical” (Jones, 65). Working with the masquerade and theatrical, Smith applies hysteria as a critical methodology which is frequently used in her investigations of how some parts of the body and its biological functions have been socially constructed as abject (Taylor, 62).

Smith's works with abjection parallels other artists of the 1980s, most notably Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1989) and Robert Mapplethorpe's series *X-Portfolio* in her bold representations and public display of abject bodies and bodily fluids. The abject art made by these artists was made as a reaction or development of the culture wars of the 1980s, or more explicitly, the number of lawsuits brought forward by the right toward the visual arts, and the revoking of National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding to controversial artists. Abject art can be seen as a response to conservative condemnation of abject art because this genre seeks to re-evaluate the aspects of the existing social order that are maintained by the conservative status quo. It is in this regard that the right has often used the umbrella term “obscene” to classify abject art (Mey, 36).

Like Smith, Cindy Sherman investigates abject material, offering an alternative to the Kantian ideal of perfection in art, noting that perfection cannot exist without the ugly and non-idealistic. Roland Barthes also commented on the matter, stating that “Perfection, which annuls it, lies outside of anthropological limits, in supernature, where it joins the other, inferior, transgression: *more* and *less* can be generically placed in the same class, that of excess, what is *beyond* no longer differs from what is *short* of a limit; the essence of the code (perfection) has in the end the same status as what is outside the code (the monster)” (Barthes, 71). Sherman admits that her work is not intended to be self-portraits, at least not in the conventional sense. Rather, Sherman dresses up as her imaginary characters in a masquerade performance which was influenced by her own life experiences that had offered the precise cultural context that allowed this performativity to have been constructed in this way (Bronfen, 415). The characters she represents in her photographic portraits are therefore created performativity as she explores notions of the animal, human, and gender hybrid abject bodies through the use of her fabricated mannequins. She evokes horror through her representations, a horror that may be derived from a lived experience, a nightmare, or a trauma that is probably repressed (Bronfen, 417).

Sherman’s work reveals someone who is vulnerable because the human body is both mutable and mortal, its changing being beyond the grasps of control. When Sherman first became popular with her black and white film stills of the late 1970s, she was the darling example for pornography theorists and Butler’s performativity before it was written because of how these photographs portrayed anti-aesthetic philosophies. In *Untitled #175* (1987) Sherman represents bulimia nervosa by exploring the horrors of the

fashion industry and the pressures to conform to rigid, impossible standards of beauty. The photograph is a mix of food and vomit on carpet, with a pair of sunglasses in the upper right hand corner. A screaming blonde woman is reflected into the sunglasses, making it evident that this woman is intended to be the viewer's reflection. The food and vomit, obvious indicators of bulimia nervosa are displayed over a towel. With bulimia, food is purged from the body because the victim sees both food and her body as disgusting and repulsive. Kristeva notes "food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection" (Kristeva, 230). The terror in the sunglasses is a reflection of the bulimic's trauma because her body is more repulsive than the food and the vomit. Probyn sees Sherman's work as stripping all elements of pride and exhibiting just the disgust and shame (Probyn, 127). By hiding the disgusting we are becoming part of the system that forces us to feel shame and disgust toward our bodies, as Debord would say, we play a role in the production of this spectacle. Cultural codes and norms dictate what kinds of bodies are sexually attractive, and like Douglas' argument that dirt is culturally constructed, the reproductive functions of the human body are also controlled by cultural regulations.

Sherman works with memory because she performs in film stills and constructs grotesque mannequins that are both reminiscent of her own interpretation of cultural images found in glossy magazines, films, and advertisements, as well as fantasy and horror movies. She is one of the first generation of children to have grown up under the influence of television, making popular images part of domestic culture. At the same time her images provoke memories of the popular culture with which she grew up, effectively transforming her own body into a representation that blurs the distinctions

between the body and the artist who makes the images (Bronfen, 415). Sherman wants us to find ourselves in her work; she states that “People are going to look under the make-up and wigs for the common denominator, the recognizable. I’m trying to make other people recognize something of themselves rather than me” (Bronfen, 416). Both the nineteenth century hysteric and Sherman, “use the body to repeat by representation an earlier traumatic impression and, in the course of this mimetic self-representation, to oscillate between memory and figuration, between masculine and feminine self-definition...” (Bronfen, 422).

Like abject artists, the body was often a central focus in the subject matter of early feminist artists. It is not just the female body, but in particular female sexual organs and sexuality that had been classified as abject and taboo, entrusted to the private realm and forbidden for public discourse. In the 1960s and 1970s when women artists decided to use their sexuality as artistic subject matter, such public displays were initially discomfiting to an audience that was accustomed to the genius of the male canon in a male-dominated establishment (Lippard, 77). Women who made such art were seen as, and intended to be threatening the male establishment, menacing, and disgusting. The pioneering feminist artists working in the 1970s such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and Carolee Schneemann, sought to reclaim sexual equality by discrediting notions of the female, sexual body as being unclean.

Tracey Emin claims that the pioneering feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s played a major influence on her work. The feminist art movement mirrored the second wave feminist movement of that time because the artists adopted the theory that their own personal narratives were crucial for addressing their shared experiences of oppression as

women. They used this as a tool to improve the status of women in society, adopting the slogan “the personal is political.” The goal of this storytelling was to initiate consciousness-raising regarding the systematic oppression of women. This consciousness-raising allowed women to share their own experiences living under patriarchy, to empathize with other women’s stories, and to form a collective identity to challenge hegemonic patriarchal structures of the time (Edwards, 42). Feminist artists fought to challenge how women were only represented as subject matter from a male perspective in Western art. They wanted to offer alternative modes of representation that were able to show their own experiences as women, as both worthy and important, whether these be domestic experiences in the home, taboo bodily functions, or sexual experiences.

Although Chicago and Schapiro focused on female anatomy in their work, they cautioned against their work being interpreted as simply vaginal, or womb art. Rather, they wanted their work to build a framework that demonstrated how the female body and its anatomy had been devalued by a patriarchal culture. According to them, the female experience was not shaped biologically, but rather socially and culturally (Chadwick, 358). Like Schneemann, both Chicago and Schapiro adopted a “cunt-positive” attitude, and they knew that by representing the vagina literally, they were taking a radical leap from art history’s past of eliminating female genitalia from the nude (Buszek, 281). Although initially a successful abstract expressionist painter, Schapiro overlapped a technique called “femmage”: a concept that used traditional forms of women’s art like collage and textile. Her femmage demonstrated that traditional women’s art forms could be regulated as a high art form of the female genius, like the male-dominated and often

misogynist abstract expressionism. Both Chicago and Shapiro helped to establish an early feminist studio arts program at Fresno State University in 1971, which offered women students the opportunity to be influenced by each other's conscious-raising in a female centred environment, provided positive female role models in the visual arts, and encouraged art to be made based on their own personal experiences as women (Edwards, 43). The foundational piece of work that embodies these themes is *Project Womanhouse* (1972), which came out of the fruits of feminist art education. Chicago and Schapiro organized *Project Womanhouse* with other artistic students and friends, and they rented a 17-room mansion in Hollywood, where each artist was assigned a room to make a piece of conscious-raising art. This house represented the collective experience of all women, and each room symbolized a different kind of experience, or body part.

Chicago's contribution was *Menstruation Bathroom* where she depicts a wastebasket overflowing with blood-soiled pads, tampons and napkins. Her intention was to display the taboo subject of menstruation, and offer an alternative interpretation where menstruation could be viewed as a normal function of the female body that should be celebrated because it makes human life possible. By not hiding the soiled napkins, Chicago is criticizing how menstruation is sanitized in Western culture through the names of products we buy in the store, and how most people would be embarrassed if a houseguest were to see a wastebasket overflowing with soiled menstrual products. Like *Menstruation Bathroom*, Chicago also made a print of pulling a soiled tampon from her body in 1972, titled *Red Flag*. This lithograph explores the taboo subject of menstruation at a time when menstruation was even less of a public subject than it is today. An example of this can be seen in the commercials for pads and tampons in the early 1970s

which were more discreet about the subject matter than they are today, although the genre still holds high degree of propriety. Chicago's political aim in this work was to demonstrate that women should not feel ashamed or disgusted toward their menstruating bodies even though menstrual blood is a body fluid that is both abjected and deemed impure by Western culture. She is also dealing with Kristeva's borderline by using nature to confront culture, disturbing categories of social taboo (Jones, 36). Her use of menstrual blood as an abject fluid is threatening to patriarchy because menstruation is often seen as something that is fearful and disgusting – it is a digression of the normative. Certainly influenced by the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1970, Chicago advocates that menstruation is not a pathological disease or something to be ashamed of and disgusted by, but is a natural part of being a woman. The fight for women to have control over their own bodies and sexuality came to fruition a year after *Red Flag* with the passing of *Roe. Vs. Wade*, providing legal therapeutic abortions to women in the United States.

Rather than focusing on the physical functions of the female body, Schapiro, with fellow artist Sherry Brody, constructed a dollhouse. Schapiro said that this dollhouse represented “magical belief”, or the idea that a house is a safe refuge from the realities of abuse that these feminists were trying to demonstrate happen in the home, from spousal abuse to sexual assault (Edwards, 44). This also coincided with broader social movements to bring awareness to violence toward women. *Womanhouse* was more than just the self-expression of a group of feminist artists in the early 1970s; like many women artists practicing today, these women intended to bring attention to how common these

women's experiences were, and to support both a reclamation and transformation of their collective identities as women (Edwards, 44).

Some early feminist work was based more squarely in performance. Feminist artists saw performance art as a means to offer alternative notions of the female body, which explains why so many early feminist artists became attracted to it. Performance art and Butler's notion of performativity have many similarities because a performance always requires an audience-performer relationship. Such performative practices are sites of reciprocity, where cultural constructs are made, reinforced, and criticized. This is why studies of performance art and the application of Butler's performativity form a crucial relationship in cultural critical analysis that explores "the dynamic two-way street, the 'space between' self and others, subjects and objects, masters and slaves, or any system of social signification" (Schneider, 22). The social classifications that influence performativity also influence the use of performance art to criticize such sanctions. Although there are similarities between performance art and performativity, they are not exactly the same. Performance art in particular often holds a confrontational political agenda, and the way that it disintegrates the separation of the audience and performer that is integral in traditional types of theatre limits the space between signifier and signified, thereby transgressing the comfort levels of the audience (Hardie, 95). This lack of separation differentiates performance art from the theatre - the traditional theatre marks a clear distinction between the audience and the play. Western knowledge and means of understanding encompass visibility, and much performance work seeks to rework ways of seeing in an art space (Schneider, 22). Feminist performance art of the 1960s and 1970s endured charges of narcissism; how feminist artists used their own bodies was generally



labeled vulgar, dirty, and messy. The problem with women using their own bodies in performance art was not nudity or sexuality on display; rather, it was “the agency of the body displayed, the author-ity of the agent” (Schneider, 35). Women used their nude bodies as more than just objects; it was a place where the borders between the artist and the nude subject were crossed because the artist and the nude object were both the same.

The central performance artist of second wave feminism is Carolee Schneemann. Although Schneemann’s art is not primarily concerned with the abject in itself, her focus on female genitalia as a sacred site of beauty offers an alternative perspective toward body parts that can be abjected and considered dirty in Western culture. Furthermore, she chose the female body because of its history as an idealized Western art form in genres such as the reclining nude; and as a woman, she understood that her body was not simply a site of idealization. By displaying the inside of her vagina in her performance pieces, she broke taboos by revealing a form of reality that was not acceptable to show in visual art or Western cultural in general. The only places in Western culture where the insides of the female genitals could be seen would have been medical text books and pornography, in the context of greater sexual liberties and the removal of censorship alongside growing presence and acceptance of pornography in the 1970s. Her performances reveal her desire and ambition to break away from such taboos and the normative, patriarchal ideals indicated by how the female body could be represented. Of her own body, she remarks that, “I was myself both an idealization and a centre of an intense taboo. I didn’t want to feel that taboo projected onto me” (Schneemann, 133). Her work also transgresses how sexuality and genitalia are entrusted to the private realms. In addition to sexual acts being deemed private, the nude

female body has a tradition within Western art of only depicting the external parts, despite the fact that the majority of female genitalia lie hidden inside the body, and is also in itself, its own private space. She states that she sought to “bridge the conventionality of public/private areas of experience...for a painter, no part of the body should have been considered taboo, relegated to a sub physical actuality” (Schneemann, 137). Her most well known piece of work, the performance piece titled *Interior Scroll* (1975) is a performance where she painted the feminine curves of her body, stood up on a table, and slowly pulled a coiled snake-like piece of paper from her vagina while reading from it. The main objective for this piece demonstrated how the vagina is a site of beauty, a sacred source of life, and a place of interior knowledge. She chose to pull a scroll from her vagina because of its snake-like shape, and although snakes are often associated with phallic symbols and temptation in Western culture, her interests lied in the disappearance of the snake as symbolic for the cosmic energy of the womb in ancient cultures (Schneemann, 153). She assumes that the serpent would have been an attribute to ancient Goddesses and like the *Venus of Willendorf* fertility figures, and would have been carved and made by women artists. For *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann considered the vagina as “a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers” (Schneemann, 157). One line that was read from the scroll was “They will deny your sexuality or your work”, referencing her experiences as a working feminist artist prior to the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s.

*Red Flag* and *Interior Scroll* were both about making the invisible parts of the body visible. Both challenge how women's sexuality in Western culture was silenced and not acceptable for public discourse (Betterton, 137). Although initially met with a degree of favourable praise, both Schneemann and Chicago's work also had negative critiques from both the non-feminist and feminist fronts. Schneemann was originally labeled a dancer and a model as opposed to an artist or image-maker because she was considered a "body beautiful" due to her good looks (Lippard, 128). These two artists started critiquing how the feminine body was represented under patriarchal restrictions in visual arts and culture, and feminist critics such as Linda Nead and Janet Wolff have criticized these artist's attempts. They warn that it is dangerous to take a completely literal reclamation of such territory because this is often punished (Betterton, 137). Such literal attempts at reclamation are impossible because the gender categories of Western Dualism are still in place. Nead feels that the art of Chicago and Schneemann inverted, rather than deconstructed the condition of the female physical body, and that this has limited success for feminist discourse about the body. Although it is true that what these artists of the 1970s were critiquing is still largely intact today, they were an integral influence on many artists working in the 1980s and onward. At the very least they managed to bring public attention to their political aims in their attempts to reclaim how notions of the female body are socially constructed under patriarchal hegemony. The ideals of Chicago and Schneemann gave the shameful, secret, hidden vagina a place in public discourse. They wanted to eradicate the secrecy of menstruation and female sexuality. Feminist artists practicing a generation later depicted more complex subject matter such as sexual assault, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and the

complexities of feminine sexual desire. The goal of many of these later artists was to explore a variety of issues within the body that digress against normative expectations (Betterton, 138). Furthermore, at the core of feminist abject artistic production is an examination and re-evaluation of social and cultural conditions of the feminine body. Although these social and cultural conditions still exist, feminist art that deals either directly or indirectly with the abject offered a site where misogynist framings of the feminine body could be discussed and analyzed. Although Schneemann and Chicago's work was met with controversy by the mainstream art world, by the mid-1970s, feminist art became a voice to be reckoned with.

Some of this art became contentious within feminist discourse, in particular if it responded to the mainstreaming of pornography in the 1970s. Art that intended to be covertly feminist that used pornographic imagery caused an abject reaction by some feminists who felt that pornography only served to degrade the female body. At this time, using pornographic imagery in art worked as a shock-value technique because pornographic images were only just becoming mainstream images. It is important to notice which artists were able to get away with using pornographic imagery because male artists, or art stars such as Vito Acconci were allowed to use such shock-value tactics to promote their work, however when women used similar tactics, they were accused of being vain and narcissistic. Culturally, in the West, feminine vanity has been condemned as a distancing device, because it is this vanity which conceals the disgusting elements of the female body (Betterton, 130). Feminist art practices have benefitted women because artists like Tracey Emin do not suffer the same degree of narcissist and vanity charges that women working a generation earlier suffered. Although Emin does not investigate

pornography in the bed, her bed is still sexually explicit because it is stained with abject bodily fluids indicating that she has the freedom to explore sexual explicitness and even use shock tactics while doing so. Lynda Benglis' advertisement in the November 1974 issue of the elite art journal, *ArtForum* is the most famous example of what a woman artist could not get away with in the 1970s. Already a well-known sculptor, Benglis decided to promote an exhibition of her work by producing a centerfold of her naked body clenching a large dildo between her legs. The journal initially refused, so Benglis' gallery paid to have the image printed as a gallery ad, which the journal's editor printed. In the following issue, the associate editors wrote a letter to the editor, dissociating themselves from Benglis' advertisement. They objected because they saw it as vulgar, and they stated "although we realize that it is by no means the first instance of vulgarity to appear in the magazine, it represents a qualitative leap in that genre, brutalizing ourselves, and, we think, our readers" (*ArtForum*, 2). Although the associate editors all supported the women's liberation movement of the early 1970s, and almost half of them were women, they found the ad to be counterproductive to the feminist agenda because it was "doubly shocking...reads a shabby mockery of the aims of that movement" and was at its most "debased" form or artist advertisement (2). Critics of the work did not just see it as debased, as subscribers also wrote into the journal, threatening to withdrawal their support over Benglis "disgusting" image (2). The disgust they felt over Benglis' image abjects her body as a sexual other, one that the viewer is not accustomed to seeing in a public place.

The ad was also not free from the condemnation of notable feminist art historians of the time who would have viewed Benglis as a sexual deviant in the context of their

critiques. The affects produced by such a sexually explicit image shocked and offended some middle class, bourgeois feminists whose outright condemnation of *all* pornographic imagery as misogynist fail to see such images as sites where traditional gender roles can be critiqued and re-evaluated. The frenzy in this feminist discourse toward the sexuality performed in Benglis' image could be indicative of a hysteric reaction to such overt, explicit sexuality. In *The Feminist Art Journal* critic Cindy Nemser accused Benglis of desperately trying to attract male attention. She states "it is sad to think that Benglis has so little confidence in her art that she has to resort to kinky cheesecake to push herself over the top" (Buszek, 290). Critics even compared her to Acconci in a negative fashion. "Benglis' sexual photographs are not to be confused with Vito Acconci's performances on erotic themes...Superficially, Benglis' work reveals the tasteful, the glossy, and the narcissistic, while Acconci's secret sexual systems are more populist, and tend toward the squalid, the exorcistic, and the puritanical" (Pincus-Witten, 312).

However, some feminists understood what Benglis was trying to accomplish with this piece, and how the artist transgressed new territory in what was considered appropriate for women to do. The art historian Lucy Lippard defended Benglis' work, stating that it demonstrated there are "still things women may not do" and that "no such clamor arose in 1970 when Vito Acconci burned hair from his chest," tucked his penis between his legs, and sculpted fake breasts with his own flesh and documented this performance, ending it with a woman crouching down beneath him with his penis in her mouth (Lippard, 127). What critics failed to see is that Benglis was deliberately playing with the cheesiness and kitsch of pornography and the pin-up. She states that she wanted to play with both genders when she says that "Therefore, I used the dildo. For me it

wasn't a dildo, it was a symbol of male power, and alluded to the male myth" (Buszek, 289). Benglis was not the first artist to transform her gender in her art. Apart from Acconci's piece, the artist Scott Burton walked down the street in drag in 1969, and flaunted a large black penis for a performance in 1973 (Lippard, 127). No one condemned either Acconci or Burton for their tactics. Benglis sought to subvert the double standard of what was expected of male artists and female artists at the time.

Charges of vanity and narcissism did not apply exclusively to artists working with imagery as sexually explicit as Benglis'. Hannah Wilke frequently stirred debate amongst feminist circles because she often used her nude, sexually attractive body in her performance pieces, yet unlike most of her contemporary feminist artists, employed the same tactic as Emin by remaining deliberately vague in what the feminist aims of her work were. In *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1974), Wilke uses her body to mimic a fashion model from magazine advertisements. She sticks pieces of chewed gum that are molded to look like vaginas all over her face and body. She knew she was good looking, and she used her looks to reclaim how women were often depicted in advertisements and the media. The title of this piece alone is a beacon call for help. Wilke often photographed herself either topless or nude, and she used her naked body to flirt with the camera and the audience, warning against "feminist fascism" (Heartney, 11). Her nude body is displayed positively, as a source of feminine liberation that is not simply a site of objectification through the male gaze. Wilke's work was shocking to the art world because her portrayal of her own nudity differs from others who preceded her. Although she appropriates poses of the sex symbol, and deliberately used her own good looks to convey sexy poses, her work is not akin to how male artists generally depicted feminine

beauty. She exposes the hidden vagina, onto the most publicly exhibited part of the human body, her own face. The vaginas are made of chewing gum to look like scars, and she scars her own face and upper torso for the pose (Jones, 51). The chewed gum is itself an abject material because it is considered disgusting and not polite, and by using it over traditional forms of art media it is in itself a transgressive act. She mocks poses from popular advertisements; she wears high heels and does a photo shoot outside naked, in provocative poses while carrying a watering gun. It is clear by her gestures that these photographs are not depictions of a passive, female subject. As Schneemann used her own nude body, Wilke is both the subject and the artist. Wilke differs from feminist artists such as Schneemann and Chicago because she does not clearly identify the content of her work, remaining deliberately vague. In one interview, she states that “my consciousness came from being a Jew in WWII” (Princenthal, 93). It is this refusal to publicly identify a political agenda that explains why Wilke’s work does not fit neatly into second wave feminism. She broke new bounds within feminism by objectifying her own body for the gaze of the viewer, and gaining pleasure by doing so. Some feminists likely felt threatened by Wilke’s poses because she fit the mould of a natural beauty at the time, and perhaps her earlier work reflects some of the misunderstandings that a good looking woman like Wilke faced.

Like Benglis, Wilke’s work met with mixed reviews from feminist art critics. Lucy Lippard called Wilke a “glamour girl” whose “confusion of her roles as beautiful woman and artist, as flirt and feminist a little too good to be true when she flaunts her body in parody of the role she actually plays in real life” (Lippard, 103). Although Lippard defends Wilke against charges of narcissism, she does find that Wilke’s parody



of being a flirtatious glamour girl and an artist has resulted in her art work and personality being criticized, that Wilke's art runs the risk of being "politically ambiguous manifestations" (Lippard, 126). But Wilke is not just a glamour girl, most evident in a later series with her mother where she contrasts her own beautiful body with that of her dying mother in *So Help Me Hannah* (1978). When Wilke exhibited her last series, *Intra-Venus* (1993), a documentation of her life as she herself was dying of cancer, art critics felt that this was her best work because the vain and narcissistic characteristics of her earlier work had now vanished: the artist's body was no longer beautiful. It can be argued that this is what Wilke's performances have always been about because she only gets accused of narcissism when she is beautiful, not as a middle aged woman dying of cancer. However, some have felt that throughout Wilke's career, her work has always resisted such rigid definitions because both her final piece and her earlier works are equally as meaningful to the artist (Burton, 353). This is evident in how she portrayed her body in her earlier work was often mirrored in the last series where the same physical gestures were adopted.

Male artists also explored cultural notions of the body, questioning normative ideas through blurring its public and private conditions. The best comparison that can be made to Tracey Emin's work would be Vito Acconci, because like Emin, he worked with abject bodily fluids, personal narration, and sex. Acconci's work dealt with how the body functioned in space by investigating borders of the public and private in his performance pieces from the early 1970s. The negotiation of public and private spaces has remained a common theme throughout all of his work. Examples of how these divisions are blurred involve the telling of personal secrets to strangers, moving his

personal belongings to a gallery, and having all of his personal mail sent to the Museum of Modern Art. His most famous piece is *Seed Bed* (1971) where he built a ramp in the gallery, hid in it, and masturbated while the audience walked over the ramp, maintaining verbal communication the entire time. Acconci breaks taboos around masturbation in public with this wooden platform that he hid under for three days out of the week, in eight-hour sessions. He set up a microphone that captured the voices of the audience in the gallery, where he would mumble things such as “you’re on my left...you’re moving away but I’m pushing my body against you, into the corner...you’re bending your head down, over me...I’m pressing my eyes into your hair”, saying of the piece, “if I’m doing this all day, there are times when I’m looking for a sound of a person, of a viewer, so that I can react against it. There were days when I was probably listening for the secretary or someone because there was no one else there” (Ward et al, 40). Here Acconci transgressed normative notions of public and private behaviour because masturbating is a topic that is embarrassing for people to even discuss in public, let alone actually perform.

One must also look at how Acconci represents his own body in *Seed Bed*, because there is no hard evidence that proves whether he was really masturbating or not.

Regardless of this, the artist presents a work where the audience is led to believe that he is masturbating, and his themes of negotiating the public and the private are still apparent whether he really is masturbating or just pretending to. The most important element of Acconci’s work is his demonstration of how the self exists in both the public and private realms. Accordingly, the self is developed in the private realm through the confines of the family; this self then goes outside and interacts with people publicly. It is this public place where the self is performed and legitimated through the eyes of others (26).

According to Acconci, the self is a product of the social organization of public and private distinctions. Acconci thereby questions the boundaries of the public and private, and the normative practices occurring within, through his performances. It is important to note that Acconci is not a feminist, as one of his art pieces at the time consisted of giving the affections of one of two girls as a prize in an athletic contest. However, his investigation of how the self is socially constructed within the public and private realms is similar to some of the things that feminist artists were questioning, especially with regards to the second wave feminist motto "the personal is political". Though Acconci did not cause as much controversy as a feminist artist like Benglis, he did garnish a reputation for his bad boy antics, similar to the bad girl image that Tracey Emin has achieved.

Influenced by Vito Acconci's provocative breakdown of public and private space from a young age, Karen Finley made similar claims in her performances that often investigated female sexuality. What differs with Finley's work is how it touches the audience at the visceral level because her main attention is given to raw, human emotion in her performances. Her performances are often very sexual, playing the roles of the artist and the model as she talked to the audience while displaying her body sexually. Such performances indicate her role as both a performer, and a person in control of her own body. Her earlier performances addressed sexual abuse, sex work, drug addictions, sex for enjoyment, and sexually aggressive women. Like Emin, Finley attempts to depict the gritty realism of everyday life and sex, and indeed her work tells the most awful of truths (Carr, 142). For example, she covers herself in chocolate because she states that as a woman, she usually gets treated like shit (Finley, 84). She also uses bean sprouts

because they smell and look like semen, and finishes the performance by using tinsel because after all, women still dress up and look good. Perhaps even more shocking is how she takes on the role of both the victim and the rapist in her monologue *I'm an Ass Man* (1980). Here she describes a man on the subway who attempts to rape a woman, only to discover that she is on her period. While in character, Finley describes that assault.

“When I take my hand out I see my arm, my hand, and I see that THE WOMAN HAS HER PERIOD. How could you do this to me, woman? How could you do this to ME! BE THE BEST FUCK IN YOUR LIFE! BE THE BEST PIECE OF COCK IN YOUR LIFE, GIRL! BE THE BEST RAPE IN YOUR LIFE!

And I was running. I'm running, I'm trying to get those purple hearts off of my hands, out of my cuticles, but the blood won't come out of my lifeline, out my heartline, the blood won't wash off of my hands. Be a long time before I use that hand to shake my dick after I piss! (Finley, 20).

Here Finley is making the personal political because she is crossing binary categories by playing both the male attacker and the female victim (Hardie, 98). She used a can of kidney beans to stand in for the menstrual fluid. Here the hearts represent the Purple Heart awarded to brave soldiers and menstruation where women must continue to fight in the wars conflicted on them (Hardie, 99). The power in Finley presenting such stark realities is that she challenges dominant modes of social and political power (Hardie, 97).

Judith Butler believes that onstage performance is an illusion when compared to the performativity of every day because in the theatre, there is clear distinction between the audience and the performers because the audience knows that the play they are watching is just a play. What differs with Finley's performance, which complicates Butler's distinctions between performativity and performance, is that they are social and cultural critiques that confront the audience directly because her work is not just a play (Hardie, 96). Finley seeks to deliberately shock the audience, and this did not come without controversy. In 1990 she was one of four artists whose National Endowment for

the Arts funding was revoked on request by Senator Jesse Helms for being indecent and obscene. Not only was the funding of these artists revoked, but any other artist working in the United States and wanting to apply for public funding had to undergo a decency test where they could prove that their work would not offend the general public. Such forms of testing are vague, as the people who make up the general public do not always think alike, and the arts, whether everyone likes them or not, need public funding to nurture society to the fullest extent. This decency test is a way for the religious right to prohibit the ideas of liberals and libertines. Right wing politicians in congress, who instituted the decency test, sought to prohibit art that was “obscene, sadomasochistic, homoerotic, or that depicts the sexual exploitation of children” (Pally, 58).

In 1986 Finley was invited to perform in London at the Institute of Contemporary Art gallery in Thatcher’s England, which offered a different climate for artists then it did when Emin gained prominence in the late 1990s. The British tabloids attacked Finley before she came by taking her publicity shots out of context, and superimposing her head on the naked bodies of other women, and accusing her of bestiality. When she arrived at the gallery, she was met by Scotland Yard, who informed her that she would be arrested if she took her clothes off, under some ancient law that forbade people to publicly take their clothes off while in close proximity to the Queen (the gallery was near Buckingham Palace). She did not do the show, instead playing an audio recording of her monologue *I’m an Ass Man*, leaving the stage vacant. Another performance artist, John Sex, performed oral sex on an audience member, took a four foot cardboard penis and danced with it while singing disco songs from pornography videos to protest Finley not being able to perform, and he went unpunished. Finley was able to come back to England and

perform after the Thatcher regime, where her performances went without prosecution. These attacks only drove Finley to create more shocking and political performances. She says that she did “react to the attacks in one way – they pissed me off so much that I became even more determined to continue doing outrageous work using my body” (Finley, 29).

Feminist performance artists like Finley carry on a long tradition of how the private body could be displayed as public art that can be traced to the ultimate sign of privacy, the bed, which has been represented in earlier productions of art history. Given Emin’s knowledge of artistic practice, her choice of using her bed continues from themes originating in the reclining nude genre of the Italian Renaissance. Though initially invested in scenes of erotica, such representations proliferated into the nineteenth century with Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), and the various appropriations that have since followed. Starting from the old masters Giorgione and Titian, the reclining nude became a site where the gaze, and whose body had the privilege of the gaze, slowly became reassessed and reclaimed. These ideas of perfection and beauty are often transmitted through sight, such as those obtained with the reclining nude genre. Eyes do not only gaze upon beautiful things, but is also the primary sense in which we recognize disgust. The gaze is linked with the abject because repulsion is established foremost through the site of a disgusting object or stain, as opposed to its smell, taste, or audible qualities (May, 37). Although none of the painters went so far as to represent the internal parts of the female body, exposing the myth of the *vagina dentata* like Schneemann did, they did break social codes on what was acceptable at the time to display in public, given the erotic nature of the reclining nude.

Titian's painting is one of the most celebrated and well known contributions to the genre, titled *The Venus of Urbino* (1538). Titian borrowed the pose of the reclining nude from the Venetian painter Giorgione, who made a similar painting titled *Sleeping Venus* (1510) which depicts a nude woman in a very similar pose lying on a blanket outside. Both reclining nudes do not make direct eye contact with the viewer, and lay back with their hands covering, almost playing with their genitals. Titian's model however, holds a small bouquet of flowers and lies on a bed with a small dog curled up at her foot. Two maids sort through a wedding chest in the background, and the viewer catches a glimpse of the interior bed chamber. The models for both paintings would have been courtesans or prostitutes. Both paintings were commissioned as pornography and would have hung inside the homes of the nobility, often inside the bedroom, or behind a curtain. As pornography, they were meant to be enjoyed in private, and demonstrated the standards of beauty of the time. The original owner of the *Venus of Urbino* is unknown, as he would have not wanted people to know that he owned such a painting (Freund, 29). When Guidobaldo, Duke of Urbino later purchased the painting, he simply referred to it as the "naked woman", and the work was later named after his aristocratic title (Freund, 29). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when these paintings became iconic canons in Western art, art historians misread them as allegorical images of Latin poetry, rather than high class pornography. The only reasons that these paintings did not cause controversy is because they were kept in private, and what we know of them exists through private correspondence between potential buyers and the artist that were recovered in the twentieth century.

Although Giorgione and Titian's Venuses were exchanged privately and eventually misread as allegorical, later artists began to contribute to the genre, depicting both the standards of beauty of the time in the bedroom. Artists such as Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velazquez, and Francois Boucher were able to get away with their depictions because they were labeled allegorical depictions of classical stories such as Angelica and the Hermit, or most frequently, nymphs or a vain Venus admiring herself in the mirror. Francesco Goya broke with tradition, causing controversy with *The Nude Maja* (1800), a full frontal nude woman with a coy look on her face. If Goya had given this painting a mythological name, or an allegorical context his work would not have shocked or offended viewers. Although he refused to paint clothes onto this figure, he somewhat recanted his liberal ideas by completing a replica of the same figure fully clothed, called *The Clothed Maja* (1803). Both paintings were later recalled by the Inquisition in Spain due to their explicit sexuality, but were eventually returned.

Inspired by Goya's erotic representation of an everyday woman, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres shocked the French Salon by exhibiting the *Grand Odalisque* in 1819. After winning a prestigious prize scholarship, he studied in French-occupied Rome and attracted the attention of Napoleon's sister, Caroline Murat, Queen of Naples to paint two nude women. This trip enabled the young artist to become acquainted with the art of the Spanish masters like Goya. Although he was unknown in France at the time, *Grand Odalisque* offended its initial audience, creating hostility toward the artist. By preceding a general European interest in orientalism, *Grand Odalisque* reflects Ingres' own personal interest in the subject matter by representing a Turkish harem woman. The French title is derived from the Turkish word *odalik*, meaning someone who is a



concubine of the Turkish sultan. This choice of a non-European woman appalled some viewers because she represents the other of normative, white representation.

Coincidentally Emin is half Turkish, and the racism she endured at a young age is reflected in much of her other work.

Like Titian and Giorgione, the reclining nude in this painting is meant to be nothing more than a naked woman on display. As demonstrated by the popularity of the reclining nude genre, the idea that nudity was acceptable to show in public if the painting had allegorical and mythological content, such exposures would have been familiar to most people. What is most innovative with the *Odalisque* is that the reclining nude is offered outside of a narrative context, shocking some viewers because Ingres deliberately submitted it to the most public venue for an artist to exhibit art in Paris, as opposed to having it commissioned by a private buyer. Ingres broke proper protocol and social convention by exposing this high class pornography to the general public at large at such a high scale event. The figure's spine is elongated with extra vertebrae, and her joints are eliminated to achieve smooth texture, all of which angered critics because the French classicism of perfect form and proportion were in vogue at the time. Rather than portraying reality through accurate proportion, Ingres represents the sensuality of the courtesan by distorting her body in order to achieve such appearance, stating that "drawing does not simply consist of reproducing the contours, drawing does not simply consist of the line: drawing is, above all, expression, interior form, concept, modeling" (Chu, 214).

Ingres' travels outside of France enabled him to come under the influence of Spanish masters such as Velazquez. As a student, there were only a handful of Spanish

paintings in French public collections, but in 1838, King Louis-Philippe allowed four hundred Spanish paintings from his personal collection to be publicly displayed at the Louvre (Tinterow and Lacambre, 3). This allowed Édouard Manet the opportunity to rigorously study the works of Goya and Velazquez without having to leave France. The most provocative depiction of the reclining nude since *Odalisque* is Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863). In this painting, Manet mocks the pose of the Italian reclining nude. He rebels against acceptable notions of art at the time with both the style and the content of this work. The figures in the painting are painted very flat because the artist refused to apply three-dimensional perspectives, copying the style of Japanese drawings that were found in shipping crates in goods transported to Europe. These Japanese drawings later influenced the Impressionist movement that rejected three-dimensional principals, as a canon of Western art. The biggest controversy with this work, however, was not so much the style that would also allow artists like Claude Monet and Edvard Munch to draw criticism, but the content. According to George Bataille, Manet became the first modern painter because his subjects rebelled against the traditional contexts from which he borrowed (Schneider, 25). Although Titian's reclining nude was iconic in the nineteenth century, what offended people with Manet's version was how the model stared directly back at the viewer. With this defiant look, the model returns the gaze, marking herself an active participant in any potential sexual exchange. She is in control of her body rather than an object of desire because her gaze implies that she may or may not say yes. Already a recognizable artist's model, her gaze indicates that she can choose to pose like a prostitute, and enjoy it (Tinterow and Lacambre, 220). The model who sat for this portrait, Victorine Meurent, was a favourite model of Manet's, and in eight of the nine

paintings in which she modeled for him, she has a similar, unflinching gaze (Lipton, 3). Meurent was a working-class artist and student of Manet who did not have the financial means to be a painter on her own. She took up modeling to substitute a meager income, and her knowledge of what it was like to be working as the artist could explain why her gaze as the model was so defiant. By posing as a prostitute, Meurent becomes the favourite subject matter of the modernist artist. Rebecca Schneider states that “the prostitute appeared to embody a paradox: as both commodity and seller she embodied a bizarre and potentially terroristic collapse of active and passive, subject and object, into a single entity” (Schneider, 24). Though Titian and Giorgione both depicted prostitutes, their paintings were also considered poetic and symbolic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as opposed to the defiant prostitute depicted in Manet’s piece. What also marks *Olympia* as modern and cutting edge is that her confident stare represents what a real sexual exchange with a prostitute could have been like. This angered some of the bourgeoisie who had a full understanding of such an exchange, and perhaps did not feel comfortable confronting this in public.

Manet’s *Olympia* offers some feminist liberation in painting because the reclining nude participates in the gaze rather than just being an object. Later, feminist art historians and practicing artists still reclaimed the female artist in this work even further. The art historian Eunice Lipton sought to find out more about the model and artist, Victorine Meurent, whose work as an artist had been erased from history. She was the first art historian to write about the artist and model from a positive perspective in her groundbreaking book *Alias Olympia*.

An example from the visual arts is the performance artists Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris' gallery performance *Site* (1964). In this piece, Schneemann dresses like Olympia and lies down on blocks in the art gallery. She transgresses the object and the artist with this performance by bringing the object to life in the gallery (Schneider, 29). The male artist, Morris built the blocks around Schneemann's body, which framed and reframed the piece of art. Schneemann participated in this work as a feminist reclamation of the prostitute's body in the gallery. However, after the performance, she did admit to feeling immobilized by the project (Schneider, 31). The body of the black maid, though discussed in depth in *Alias Olympia* is absent in *Site* because race was not really an issue with the white middle class feminism of the 1960s.

How Manet accomplished what a sexual exchange with a prostitute may be like represents a private reality. Similarly, the Norwegian expressionist painter, Edvard Munch investigated broader ideas of reality, most often in the private bedchamber, choosing to represent the visceral emotions of death, sickness, inner torment, and puberty. Emin began her career as an expressionist painter, and though she has not garnished fame as a painter, she still considers herself to be an expressionist artist. She states repeatedly in interviews that one of her favourite artists and most significant influence is Munch. Although Emin investigates similar inner torment and depression like that seen in Munch's work, I will also demonstrate that the hysteric elements found in her bed are reminiscent of the expressionists artist Robert Rauschenberg. Rauschenberg catapulted to fame with his combine assemblages of found objects, at one point sabotaging a bed with paint that resembles an amazing array of abject bodily fluids.

A common motif in Munch's work is the private bedroom as a place of sickness, death, sexual experience, and the feeling and emotions aroused from such intimate experiences. He frequently worked with sickness and death as subject matter because as a young child, he was often sick and spent much of his time recovering in bed. However, it was not his frequent bouts with illness that influenced Munch's interest with the sickroom; rather, the premature deaths of his mother and two sisters proved to be the most devastating effect. As a prepubescent teenager he watched his family members die from tuberculosis, explaining why he became very attached to the private space of the home and family (Boulton-Smith, 36). This is why he often chose dying mothers and children as dominant motifs in much of his work. One work, *The Dead Mother and the Child* (1894) depicts the terror of death, and the bed as a place of sickness, death, and grief. Sickrooms were a popular theme with artists working in the late nineteenth century, perhaps due to the higher mortality rates of loved ones from devastating illnesses such as tuberculosis. What marks Munch's work as innovative and distinctive is his honest depiction of emotional turmoil in the private realm. It touches so many people because this is a shared experience that most people are able to understand by looking at his work (Boulton-Smith, 36). Munch did not just reserve these experiences for the sickroom; one painting that is particularly successful with this theme is *Puberty* (1893). This portrait depicts a young girl, about 12 or 13 years of age, sitting on her bed naked. Her body is beginning to change from puberty, which is evident in how her breasts are beginning to swell. She crosses her arms to hide her genitals, and we see a very dominant shadow lurking across the bed. The girl looks ashamed of her changing body because she not only hides it, but avoids the direct gaze of the viewer. She looks vulnerable, worried and

scared. The figure sits full and frontal, and is minimalist so the viewer experiences the full feeling of the work. Munch states that:

My art had its roots in the search for an explanation of life's inconsistencies. Why was I not like other people? Why was I born when I never asked to be? It was my rage at this injustice and my continual thinking about it that influenced all of my art: those thoughts lay behind all of my work, and without them my art would have been completely different (Stang, 5).

The artist's own personal feelings of anxiety and self doubt are portrayed in this painting, such contemplations and feelings that could be experienced by a young adolescent undergoing the physical and emotional changes of puberty.

Munch briefly rebelled against the bourgeois class and the strict Protestant upbringing of his youth. His painting, *The Day After* (1894) shows a drunk woman passed out in her bed. Empty liquor bottles are visible in the bottom left corner of the portrait, and her arms are spread apart. The woman depicted in this portrait would have engaged in a concept of free love in order to rebel against the rigid doctrines of the Protestant work ethic and Christian moral values. It is important to note that the Bohemians with whom Munch associated with were male dominated, and promiscuity was encouraged to reject Christian and Bourgeois customs of marriage. Like free love, the Bohemians of Oslo also believed in the will for a person to do whatever he or she wants, often culminating in substance abuse and rejecting the Church. Munch had difficulties finding a buyer for the *The Day After*. Despite this, there was little hullabaloo over this work, unlike Munch's contemporary, the novelist/painter Christian Krohg who created a more stark representation of the life of a prostitute in both literature and a painting.

Many modern artists had some degree of interest in expressionism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I do not need to go into a detailed history of this to demonstrate that Tracey Emin is an expressionist artist because some of the parallels in the depictions of

emotion and inner torment between her art work, and Munch's provide an adequate illustration of this. As much as Emin's bed presents her own hysteric nervous breakdown, it also portrays the physical condition of her body experiencing this trauma. Robert Rauschenberg created a bed almost 50 years prior to Emin's as a response to the idealization of the mind and upper faculties that have been canonized in Jackson Pollock's work. Feminist theories of the abject often call for the renegotiation of Cartesian dualism where the mind and body are viewed as functioning as equal entities of the human condition. Emin's choice to represent a record of the hysteric body's detritus reckons back to dualistic notions of the body being feminine and irrational in need of masculine control.

Jackson Pollock is the most well known American abstract expressionists. Although European painters such as Miro and Kandinsky already achieved pure abstract shapes in the 1910s and 1920s, what made Pollock's work innovative in the 1940s was how his expressionist painting style broke down the barriers between the artist and the painting. Pollock abandoned the easel, moving his paintings to the floor so that both artist and painting could become one. He states that "On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting" (Pollock, 2). Under this philosophy, the act of making the painting becomes just as important as the finished product, which allowed for many of Pollock's work to be labeled action or drip paintings. The art critic Clement Greenberg embraced abstract expressionism, arguing that it was art at its purist "because it is almost nothing else except sensuous" (Greenberg, 18). Critics considered the abstract expressionist artist to be a creative genius because he achieved the purity of abstract form

while allowing the process of art production to become an integral part of the work. Until this time, most avant-garde artistic movements came from Europe, but abstract expressionism brought prominence to American artists because and is still considered a sacred genre of American modern art.

An early response to abstract expressionism's glorification of the artistic genius is Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1950). This piece is a real bed that is hanged vertically on the wall, and has different colours of paint splattered all over it, much of it concentrated on the pillow where the head would normally lie. Rauschenberg was heavily inspired by Duchamp's anti-aesthetic impulses best seen in the famous ready-mades that were intended to move art away from just the eye<sup>2</sup>. Like Duchamp's infamous urinal, Rauschenberg took a similar approach of using common everyday household artifacts as art, naming them "combines". These combines are artistic assemblages of mixed media, ranging from everyday items, found objects, and traditional media such as paint and glue. *Bed*, the most iconic of Rauschenberg's combines, hangs from the wall like the traditional painting in the gallery, thereby removing it from our normal assumptions of it being a place to sleep (Hopkins, 44). Rauschenberg also would have been familiar with Duchamp's *Wayward Landscape* (1946), which is one of the earliest examples of body art that explores the interiors because it consisted of a piece of funeral black satin stained with splashes of the artist's semen. This piece of artwork probably influenced Rauschenberg's bed because the splatters of paint on the bed are reminiscent of bodily fluids. Even the dominant colours of the splattered paint are red, brown and black, resembling blood and excrement. Critics initially thought the bed looked like the person

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<sup>2</sup> Duchamp disdainfully labeled works of art that only sought to work with the eyes as retinal art.



who occupied it was butchered to death with an axe. Like Emin's bed, Rauschenberg's bed resembles a crime scene where someone could have been fucked to death, making it transgress our notions of order and cleanliness because the body fluids are transgressions that are both out of place and order. Rauschenberg's use of paint immediately questions the hierarchal idea of the artistic genius because the splattered paint somewhat resembles Pollock's canonical drip paintings and puts them within the context of bodily fluids. Splattered paint in the 1950s would have been associated as the media of abstract expressionist male genius. This is how Rauschenberg's bed pushes new boundaries on what a piece of visual art can be because he uses the painting style of the abstract expressionist as a substitute for menstrual blood, semen, and feces (Hopkins, 44). This cataloguing of the lower extremities and their fluids is what made Rauschenberg's art so innovative and radical. It can be seen as a masterwork of both the abject and hysteria because simulated bodily fluids splatter across the bed signifies that some sort of trauma has been committed to the body in a violent manner.

This chapter has summarized the art historical precedence of *My Bed*. It has demonstrated how Emin has drawn from abject art practices with her use of bodily fluids and representation of a possible violent sexual encounter. It has provided a general synopsis of feminist art historical practices and performance art that Emin acknowledged as playing an influence on her. It illustrates how Emin has managed to carry on the tradition of the reclining nude by offering a bed that reveals evidence of a sexual encounter, alcoholic binge, and hysteric breakdown yet lacks the actual body. Emin's exclusion of her own body from this piece is indicative of the breadth, depth, and originality of this piece because she is able to represent abjection, her own feminine,

personal experience, communicate her emotions to the viewer, and continue on the historical tradition of the reclining nude with her use of semiotic stains and personal mementos that stand in for the body.

### **CHAPTER THREE: TRACEY EMIN'S PUBLIC CONFESSION AND AUTHENTICITY**

Tracey Emin has been making art all of her life, often stating her active years of art practice are the year of her birth, 1963, to the present day. Although she does not exclusively work with abjection, hysteria, and her own sexuality, a common theme in her work is the use of details from her own private life. Much of her art deals with her own autobiography, and at times she does take artistic liberty in the portrayal of her past. She studied fashion at Medway College of Design, printmaking at Maidstone College, and completed a Master of Arts degree in visual arts from the Royal College of Art in London, where she trained as an expressionist painter. Following her graduation, she suffered a nervous breakdown and destroyed all of her paintings. She had some bad breakups, underwent two abortions, and in 1993 teamed up with fellow artist Sarah Lucas where the two artists ran a shop, selling their art. Some of these artworks included t-shirts, ashtrays, photographs of her paintings prior to the burnings, personal letters, and other homemade objects. One object that Emin featured in the gallery was a package of cigarettes that her favourite childhood uncle carried on him when he was decapitated in a car accident. During this time, Emin began mailing letters to art dealers and patrons, offering to send them a piece of her work for 20 pounds. It is at this time that Emin began turning her own life - childhood poverty, sexual assault at age thirteen, teenaged promiscuity, abortion, alcoholism, and bad relationships - into her art. Although people are often drawn to her traumatic history, and indeed that is what is at play with the bed, some of her other works do feature more positive aspects of her past, such as her relationships

with loved ones. She says that “I realized I was much better than anything I ever made...I was my work” (Betterton, 36). Emin gained prominence with the exhibition of her tent, titled *Everyone I have Ever Slept With* (1996), a store bought tent, with the names of everyone she had literally slept with sewn on the inside, including ex lovers, her grandmother, twin brother, friends, and two aborted fetuses. This piece caused outrage because people misread it as a confession of all of her sexual partners, as opposed to a piece about intimacy. Emin became somewhat famous from her tent and caused controversy by appearing drunk and on heavy painkillers on a live television show, subsequently swearing to other guests, and storming off of the set. Emin was already a celebrity when she added to her confessional repertoire with the making of *My Bed* (1998). By the time she submitted the work for the Turner Prize, she was living a more sober lifestyle and in a monogamous relationship, facts most of the initial audience did not know.

Emin became a rare pop culture celebrity through her art in the mode of Warhol. She models Vivienne Westwood gowns, donates art to the Beckhams for charity auction, and appears on the celebrity A-list in Britain. Young girls line up at Emin’s shows in Britain, screaming, “I love you Tracey!” unlike any other contemporary visual artist. Although Emin is good looking – many people have compared her looks to Frida Kahlo – it is the type of art she makes that has catapulted her to this sort of celebrity status.

*My Bed* is one of the most famous examples of Emin *being* her work. Emin installed the bed in Japan, New York City, and later submitted it for the Turner Prize at the Tate in 1999. Emin littered the bed with an assortment of abject materials such as dirty underwear, used condoms in which some were bloody, used tampons, a home

pregnancy testing kit, urine stained sheets, dirty nylons, slippers, an overflowing cigarette tray, empty vodka bottles, and a series of Polaroid close ups of her face that were left scattered on a small night table that sat beside the bed, all of these being Emin's personal belongings. Accounts of the exact objects left in the bed differ, as some were lost while the exhibition moved from city to city, so that Emin occasionally added more of her possessions to the bed.

The first installation in Japan also included a noose hanging near the bed that was not featured in the two other shows. The changing of objects, in particular the removal of the noose after the initial exhibition in Japan best demonstrates that *My Bed* is not just an installation, but also functions as performance art. A noose signifies suicide and death and is a finale that is obvious and overt, a closed signifier. In Japan the noose is Western kitsch, over-the-top rock star, and ultimately, not Japanese. The noose that symbolizes Emin's own contemplation of suicide during her hysteric breakdown in the bed, works in Japan. She could have edited the noose out of the New York and London shows because her point gets across with elements of hysteria and abjection already prominently displayed. Here she does not have to mark the work as Western, but the prominence of her own feminine personal belongings, some of which emit shame and disgust, does make the work feminist. The bed on its own already has the impact of celebrity, ambiguity and outrageousness that Emin seeks to communicate to the audience, and the removal of the noose demonstrates that an installation is never finished.

Perhaps this constant editing is what drew Emin into conceptual, installation, and performance art as opposed to more traditional art forms like painting. Emin uses her own life in her installation and performance art, as opposed to traditional painting,

referring to work of ex boyfriend and painter Billy Childish as being stuck. This term was later adapted to the Stuckist movement in Britain that consisted of a group of painters who were against non-traditional art practices. An installation-performance such as *My Bed* is expected to be edited and re-made, as this is part and parcel to concept pieces. Further, the bed is a portrayal of Emin's past in which she is free to use some artistic liberty in how to best represent the emotions she is trying to convey to the audience with the art although the experiences that inspired the bed are known to be true.

This section argues that Emin's *My Bed*; an installation-performance adopts the gains of the feminist movement, investigates public and private boundaries of the body, even going so far as adopting the crucial theory, "the personal is political" through its confessional representation of trauma in all of its familiar grittiness. First, I offer a discussion in how Emin's use of abject stains in the bed carry on a discourse of how the abject crosses socially constructed borderlines of the body and dirt. Secondly, Emin's use of confession is also a staple element of reality television, a cultural product that often uses hysteric episodes in the lives of people perceived to represent the norm. Reality television was popular in Britain when Emin made the bed, several years earlier than the craze hit North America. Finally, by adopting Debord's notion of the spectacle, where cultural images are not just maintained by social and political powers, but are also reinforced by the masses when watched with an uncritical eye, it will be argued that Emin breaks the status quo by representing the abject realism of her own trauma and hysteria, unapologetically.

Emin is engaged in a form of sexual politics, albeit an individualized form, because the media and techniques she uses have historically been feminine, and her use

of these would be impossible without the feminist discourse that preceded her work (Betterton, 26). Emin borrows many techniques and ideas from feminist art of the 1970s such as her extensive use of the traditional feminine art forms embroidery and textiles that is evident in her tent, the appliqué blankets, and the bed itself. She also applies her own visual autobiography that borrows heavily from second wave feminist artists and their mantra, “the personal is political.” The negotiation of public and private space is the reason why personal experiences played a key component in second wave feminism, and has always been an issue of contention within feminism’s fight for equality. This is rooted in the nineteenth century, where western bourgeois society’s biggest gender divide was represented with a complete segregation of the public and private (Pollock, 6). This polarization influenced bourgeois women to enter the public sphere through the suffrage campaigns; working-class women of course, already transgressed this social category by having to work in the industrial sphere (Pollock, 7). The twentieth century feminist slogan “the personal is political” deconstructs the bourgeois public and private spheres by arguing that the private is not a site of refuge, but a place where violence can harm the most intimate parts of the body (Pollock, 7). Emin’s bed plays with public and private spaces, much like earlier feminist discourse and practices. Like Schapiro’s dollhouse, Emin’s bed also investigates the private space as a site where trauma such as loss of virginity, risk of sexual assault, a ruined reputation, and the replacement of desire by disgust can occur (Merck, 128). Perhaps most of all, Emin’s own hysterical breakdown that was likely caused by some of these earlier traumas that best resonates through the bed. No doubt some of these things were going through Emin’s mind when she left a home pregnancy testing kit beside the bed amongst other materials of sexual abjection.

Her trauma of being raped at the age of 13, her ensuing teenage promiscuity and ostracization, and two abortions play major influences in much of Emin's work, as she describes the bed as looking like a "crime scene", where someone had been "fucked to death" (Brown, 100). Although Emin has conjured up events in some of her art, it is important to note that these facts are known to be true, and although she is a celebrity, they do contribute to the authenticity of her work.

Emin's work shares a common approach to art making with early feminist art production from the 1970s, as well as to Pollock and Rauschenberg. When Mirium Schapiro worked as an instructor for the first feminist art programs, she encouraged people who were not well versed in feminist theory to work in new and fresh ways, with everything "coming from their own experience with the techniques and practices they are used to. Feminist theory is part and parcel of such instruction" (Shapiro 4). Like Shapiro's philosophy, Emin's subject matter is generally her own lived experiences. By abiding by this, Emin does not have to identify any sort of political aim, and it can be argued that it is because of patriarchy that she is deliberately ambiguous to any relationship with earlier feminist production. Creating art, like many occupations in other sectors, often takes the gains of the feminist movement for granted. Part of this gap is the fact that feminism is not much of an issue to many women artists working today because most of them do have rights and privileges that women working a generation or two earlier did not have. Emin can get away with showing what looks like the aftermath of her own sexual and drunken rampages, at least in the world of art critics and historians. Not all women artists working with the abject conditions of the body could have gained the immediate success that Emin has, especially in the 1960s and 1970s when there were



strong gender divides between what men and women artists could do. The transgressions of artists such as Vito Acconci were seen as being bold and daring, whereas women were restricted to a terrain that reinforced patriarchal notions of femininity, such as the work of Linda Benglis (Jones, 34). In the 1970s feminist artists were often met with horror, but by the 1990s women artists like Emin had the privilege of knowing how to play the artistic system. The difference is that feminist art practices were very well established within the art world after the 1970s. While Benglis shocked and offended the art world, Emin does not shock the mainstream art world, except for a few very conservative critics. This is because she is working with and expanding on ideas that have already been well engrained within the artistic community, such as abject art practices. The feminist artists of the 1970s who experienced difficulties exhibiting art work about their own embodied experiences as being women, and the art critics who supported them have all noticed the marked differences in how and what a woman could show as art between the 1970s and 1990s. Schneemann discusses Emin when she states, "the explicit nude body work I did in the 70s was received with pure outrage. Now these women get nominated for the Turner Prize, to get a prize is unbelievable! After my naked actions at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1968, I received death-threat letters" (Falkenstein, 161). Nochlin says that the rebellious nature of artists such as Tracey Emin is "charming; it indicates feistiness, and it's a sign of energy and unconventionality. In a postmodern world like ours, badness is acceptable in women. But in the 1970s, it was deeply unacceptable" (Falkenstein, 160). Judy Chicago feels that "it's great that these women internalized the freedom that the women in my generation had to fight for" (Falkenstein, 163). Finally, in response to younger artists such as Emin working with textiles,

Schapiro states, "I am absolutely flabbergasted to find that women much younger than I am are taken by the sensuality of fabric and its varied material manifestations. After having painted and femmaged the *Anatomy of a Kimono* in the mid-70s, I am again struck by how interested younger women are in using costume as tent, home, amour, theatrical display, seduction, and as personal metaphor for hidden feelings" (Shapiro, 4). Robert Storr, a curator at MoMA argues that though some elements of earlier feminist art are adopted by women artists working in the 1990s, for the most part the art produced in the 1970s was much more aggressive. He states "what is happening is that there is a strong tendency to make the art of the 1960s and 1970s respectable and historical" (Falkenstein, 161). The shock of Emin's art is small in comparison to Benglis; art editors did not quit in protest over Emin's work. However, successful women artists like Emin may disassociate themselves from feminism because of the mainstream negative connotations now associated with it. As a working artist, Emin has the advantage of using the artistic space as a site where she can exhibit her work with relatively little censorship from mainstream society that tends to have more conservative values.

Contemporary feminist criticism constantly turns to Emin's work, but she always publicly resists the title in interviews, often refusing to talk about it although she always admits to being influenced by 1970s feminist artists. Whether Emin admits to being a feminist or not, she does present her own lived feminine experience with sex, which is often the most dominant motif in her work, like *My Bed*. By being labeled a "bad girl of art", Emin is fetishized because she earns these titles through the confessional sexual history portrayed in her work and interviews. The sexual abjection, which runs through much of her work, also has a history within feminist discourse, something that Emin

would be very familiar with, considering that she did complete a master's degree in visual arts. Emin does admit to being influenced by the 1970s feminist art movements when she says that "I'm not flag waving. It doesn't have to be feminist driven, because lots of really good women have fought on my behalf and have already done that. That battle has already been won. But it's quite funny, because I do have big arguments about an artist's work and I do find myself saying 'Yeah, but from a woman's point of view...'" (Emin, 166). Emin's perspective is different from that of the middle class feminist because it can be regarded as a working class response to the feminist propriety of the 1980s (Roberts, 38). In this way it can be argued that she breaks more boundaries than what Benglis' advertisements did because the bed belongs to a woman who uses the most vulgar language, binge drinks, chain smokes, and has promiscuous sex, all performative acts that have culturally been constructed as disgusting as stereotypically unfeminine behaviour, thereby providing the perfect site for a marginalized, working-class femininity. Second wave feminism existed predominantly in the academy and to women who had access to post-secondary education. Although Emin is highly educated, her art reckons back to her working class upbringing in Margate, and represents her own personal experiences of being a woman from that social standing. Emin always makes work from her personal perspective, and draws on life experiences rather than theory. "The personal is political", although intended to help everybody, would have been most accessible to those well read, although working-class women had many of the same battles to fight such as sexual abuse, spousal abuse, and unequal division of labour. Feminists, although drawn to Emin's work, are not afraid to point out her use of non-feminist language such as "bitch" and "broken into", but do acknowledge the artist's portrayal of her own oppression.

Emin reclaims her own oppressed history through her innate working class jargon, unapologetically, giving voice to women who initially lacked privilege within feminist movements.

It is not just Emin's representation of her own marginalized working-class experiences that make the bed feminist. It is evident by the items left, and the scenes from her life portrayed in the bed blur a number of categories. To begin, the messy, used, disgusting state of the bed and how it is shown in public could signify lower class, white trash, and homelessness on one side, especially in how Emin marks it feminine. At the same time, the general messiness and evidence of substance abuse could also signify the messy bedroom of a teenage boy, or trendy, young London rock star such as Pete Doherty. Emin also adopts a traditionally male role; all of the acts signified in the bed from the alcohol to the promiscuous sex are stereotypical behaviours of the bohemian artist. A contemporary dandy in her outrageousness, Emin's innovation and originality is how she flaunts and exposes her own bohemianism as hysteria, and this is how she is being avant-garde. To compliment this, a messy bedroom yet again has other signified contexts, and could have belonged to the Victorian upper class woman who has had a hysteric fit. To this day the messy bedroom is at least somewhat of a transgression if it belongs to a woman, because it is more expected that if someone is going to keep a dirty bedroom, the occupier is usually assumed to be male. Despite more opportunities in the public sphere thanks to the gains of feminism, Western women are still generally expected to take on the labour in the home as well. As the Welsh woman who drove to clean up Emin's bed once remarked how Emin would not get a nice boyfriend by leaving her dirty underwear out for all to see. It is Emin's adoption of not only the role of the hysteric female owner

of a dirty bed, but how she also blurs the stereotypically male categories of the hip rock star and the bohemian like Baudelaire, that mark *My Bed* as an innovative and feminist work of art.

Her method of communicating her own sexual experiences is not traditionally feminine or feminist, rather it articulates a feminine experience that is individual, complex, and at times contradictory (Betterton, 38). The lack of covert political objective that is portrayed in Emin's work could be indicative of a more honest and realistic feminine experience. Her sexual representations relate to a social context of gender that carries on the tradition of the feminist autobiographies of the 1970s. Even her bad girl image is carefully constructed and is at times non-confrontational like Wilke's performances. What she decides to share with the audience is deliberate and crafted carefully, such as the few people who knew that Emin was actually living a sober lifestyle and in a long term monogamous relationship at the time the bed was exhibited at the Tate Britain. Emin brings her own personal stories that can be read as highly political because they are untheorized. She does not take on any political affiliations, which allows her work to not be categorized to any sort of categorical politics. Her generation is privileged because she can make artwork about feminine experiences such as menstruation and abortion without it being labeled as just a woman's issue (Healy, 171). Her refusal to embed her work with any sort of overt political meaning allows the audience to interpret it in relation to their own sexual and emotional experiences because it works at a visceral level. The high realism depicted in the bed is easily recognizable to the audience, because it exhibits an imperfect and genuine human experience; it is not a replica but the real thing, an authentic human experience. The bed, like Emin's other

works that include spelling errors and scribbles, is a site of authentic emotion that like Finley's monologues has not been edited and censored because she refuses to omit the familiar, gritty details of everyday life.

Emin's refusal to physically clean the familiar impurities of the bed supports the argument that her use of stained underwear, menstrual blood, urine, and semen make the bed abject. She knew that any piece submitted for the prestigious Turner Prize would attract considerable attention. Like Finley, Sherman, and Smith before her, Emin's investigations with her bed were deemed inappropriate only by a more conservative culture at large. It is an example of an artist who plays with degraded elements of the body by inviting the mass public to look at the disgusting urine stained sheets, blood stained underwear, and used condoms and be horrified.

Emin's bed can also be placed within a historical context of the abject. When Duchamp presented *Fountain* in 1917, the urinal was initially removed from the gallery because it was seen as indecent. Although Duchamp's main intent was to challenge dominant notions of what art could be by placing a common every day household object in the gallery as art, he did use an item that functions as a place to urinate. The way Duchamp turned the urinal upside down also makes it appear vaginal. Both the urinal and the bed are objects that are used in at least relatively private spaces. Although feminist and queer artists of the 1970s used abject art as a tactic, it lost popularity in the 1980s. It resurfaced again in the early 1990s due to the backlash of the neo-conservative regimes such as Reagan, Bush and Thatcher where abortion rights were attacked, and the AIDS epidemic was blamed on the behavior of gay men. In 1993, the Whitney Museum of Art in New York hosted an exhibition from their permanent collection, called *Abject*

*Art* in response to the marginalization of most artists who dealt with abject subject matter, and the neo-conservative censorship of abject art that artists such as Karen Finely and Robert Mapplethorpe were subject. Emin began to gain prominence in Britain by the early 1990s, under a different climate offered by the new Labour majority in Britain where more funding was given to the arts, and Scotland Yard did not invade the gallery space in the event of an artist performing in the nude. Emin first exhibited the bed in New York where it was successful with both critics and gallery goers. Even at the Tate Britain it was only the most conservative critics, the tabloid media, and some members of the general public who viewed Emin's art with disdain and disapproval. Through the use of abjected bodily fluids, Emin is representing her experiences surviving the traumas inflicted on her own body.

Most artists who work with abject materials, such as Judy Chicago, Karen Finley, and Kiki Smith, do so for the political purpose of challenging normative gender, sexual, and hegemonic notions of propriety. Emin, like Hannah Wilke, remains deliberately illusive in discussing any sort of political aims in her work. By presenting these elements in public, Emin does not necessarily have to admit to having a political purpose, rather her representation of bodily fluids automatically challenges western dualism and social taboos by being displayed in the public realm. Emin's work may have disturbed a notable portion of the initial audience at the Tate Britain because the piece, as Kristeva would say, collapsed the dominant meanings and social codes of the body in Western culture. Like the feminist artists of the 1970s, Emin did shock and disgust some members of her audience because the abjected bed blurred notions of propriety and social taboos of the body. Emin's use of sexual abjection causes a semiotic disjuncture by exposing the

viewer to confront the disgusting 'other' in a public space. The bed also functions as a site where Sedgwick's double movement occurs. By looking at the abject bed, the viewer may experience a sense of shame and embarrassment because he or she has a full understanding of what it would be like if his or her own personal articles were exposed in a public place. This double movement indicates that Emin is enabling the audience to confront things that they fully understand, but may not want to publicly look at. The audience therefore has a vested interest in the used bed, because they can all relate to it. The familiarity of the objects, and Emin's unrepentant exposure of them, may explain why some people were angered, disgusted, and may even felt contempt toward Emin's lack of shame for displaying the used bed in public. People are embarrassed, and do not admit to abjected bodily functions, which are digressions from normative social orders and classifications. Emin works with disgust as an affect that is experienced by everyone, despite being segregated into the private realm, beyond the borderline of appropriate behaviour.

What also makes the bed so familiar with the audience is the autobiographical context that Emin achieves through the confessional qualities of the work. This confessional style has prompted some critics to label her art as narcissistic and pornographic, despite the body being absent in *My Bed*. Although such accusations are not nearly as prevalent as they were in the critical responses to Schneemann, Wilke, and Benglis' work, it can be argued that such charges of narcissism and pornography only go to further legitimize such works of art as being abject (Jones, 53). This is because these artists' form of self-representation offers alternative interpretations of the body by displaying parts of it that are deemed abject. To represent the female body in its private



reality, like what Emin does, is going to be viewed as a transgressive act, whether Emin wishes it to be or not. Although far fewer art critics have labeled Emin's art as narcissistic as compared to earlier women artists, she still lacks the privilege of being able to represent her own body and not having it labeled as transgressive. The shock that some felt at the site of Emin's dirty laundry displayed in her used, stained bed demonstrate how some felt that Emin had digressed common notions of propriety. Perhaps because abject art is not a radical way to promote the interiors of the body, rather it functions as a means that allows us to renegotiate and contest hegemonic social relations (Taylor, 66). Emin's bed offers what Betterton refers to as a "promising monster" because it is able to offer people an understanding of cultural anxieties around sexual abjection (Betterton, 101). Although enemies of Emin's work often draw on the disgusting aspects of her work, most notably her "dirty knickers", these elements can also attract people to her work because it offers the promising monster through the alternative representation of familiar social constructs of cleanliness and order. The audience's recognition of dirt out of place in the bed, and the vested interest of the audience from their own knowledge of such dirt, like Smith's work, is a visceral response toward our own body's abjection.

Although labeled a Young British Artist (YBA), she differentiates herself from the group, saying, "I come from a different place. A lot of my contemporaries are influenced by minimalism and by conceptualism, but when I was a student, I was influenced by expressionism" (Schnabel, 104). Emin's expressionist vernacular is an original, feminist contribution to the art scene because she uses her own emotions as a means to communicate her experiences as being a vulnerable woman who has survived

unspeakable trauma. She talks about how her work communicates emotions to the viewer through the use of her own personal narrative, saying, "I'm incredibly emotional and passionate, and to bring those things together is difficult. It would be very easy for me to make weird, mad, big neo-expressionist paintings. But I don't want to do that" (Emin, 168). Unlike the abstract expressionist, she continues on the tradition from Robert Rauschenberg *Bed* (1955) where the bed is splattered with paint drippings, and globs over messy, unmade sheets in an "excremental tradition" that marked the work of Rauschenberg (Merck, 125). Like Rauschenberg, who left imprints of his hands into the glue that connected the objects in his collages, Emin uses stains from her own body that connects herself as the author of the bed. The expressionist properties of the bed indicate that this is no ordinary bed; rather it is the hysteric aftermath of an alcoholic binge, wild sexual encounter, and a complete nervous breakdown. The way that both Emin and Rauschenberg's beds resemble the hysteric aftermaths of someone being axed or fucked to death cause hysteria to be a dominant expressionist quality of both works. Both artists chose the nineteenth century hysteric's vessel of confinement – the bed – as the site of their expressionist assemblages. In both cases the body is absent from the bed, indicating a liberation from the hysteric confinement.

It can be argued that the nervous breakdown is the contemporary hysteria of our time. Like hysteria, the nervous breakdown is a blanket term that covers a variety of mental and emotional issues, and like the nineteenth century labourer, a person in the twenty-first century could suffer a nervous breakdown after surviving a traumatic experience such as a severe car accident or sexual abuse. Like the rigid gender roles of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie, one can now experience a nervous breakdown as a

result of an unresolved sexual identity crisis by not being able to live up to hegemonic sexual norms. Also the restrictions placed on women who were confined to the home regardless of educational and career desires did result in hysteric fits, like contemporary career disappointments resulting in some people suffering nervous breakdowns. The symptoms of a nervous breakdown are also varied, in that they could be clinical depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, stress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and a number of other mental and emotional disorders that would have been classified as hysteric in the nineteenth century. Like hysteria, the term nervous breakdown is not a literal, scientific term, and is interconnected with culture, one notable example being Pedro Almodovar's 1987 Spanish comedy, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* that featured performances of hysteria on the screen, but classified it with the modern colloquial term, nervous breakdown.

Emin admits that the nervous breakdown she suffered in her bed played a major role in influencing the piece as she invites the viewer to both look at and feel her emotional assemblage:

And then I thought, "What if here wasn't here? What if I took out this bed--with all its detritus, with all the bottles, the shitty sheets, the vomit stains, the used condoms, the dirty underwear, the old newspapers--what if I took all of that out of this bedroom and placed it into a white space? How would it look then?" And at that moment I saw it, and it looked fucking brilliant. And I thought, This wouldn't be the worst place for me to die; this is a beautiful place that's kept me alive. And then I took everything out of my bedroom and made it into an installation. And when I put it into the white space, for some people it became quite shocking. But I just thought it looked like a damsel in distress, like a woman fainting or something, needing to be helped. (Schnabel, 106)

Emin uses her own personal narrative of trauma and memory, borrowing heavily from literary critics who adopt psychoanalysis as an interpretive tool. Like literary psychoanalysis, Emin uses the bed as a means to communicate to the viewer her own interpretation of personal narrative, thereby making sense of her memories. Like the

talking cure, a treatment for hysteria made popular by Freud, Emin discusses her own traumas, reconstructing them in the bed. Emin does not just reconcile her memories by assembling the bed at the gallery, but offers an invitation for the audience to play the role of the voyeur, and like the reality television star, she is able to garnish instant celebrity while doing so.

Parallels can be drawn between hysteria and the contemporary cultural phenomenon of reality television. Like the hysteric, reality television is often a performance because though unscripted, the events are often staged, such as the contestants who deliberately act ridiculous to get more camera time. There is always some level of conflict that leaves at least one character vulnerable, which is what makes programs such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor* so popular. It often represents degenerate, unacceptable, if not disgusting behavior, like the bodies and personalities that are seen in intervention programs and self-improvement shows. Like hysteria, these kinds of reality television programs often feature contestants who fail to live up to the values, self-discipline and conformity of late capitalism. As hysteria was a mode of involuntary escape from the pressures of the nineteenth century bourgeois society, the viewers of reality television are also escaping from work, with the promise that perhaps they too will be the lucky contestants to win one million dollars. The chances of winning are slim, as both contestant and viewer maintain existing hierarchal systems by supporting the social relationships that are portrayed in the programs because quite often, they refuse to be critical to what is being shown to them. Like hysteria, reality television is a form of communication, except that rather than being critical or escaping from, it advocates the values of the status quo.

Reality television functions as a spectacle because it reflects and reinforces hegemonic cultural conditions of gender. This can be seen in shows such as *Bachelor*, *Flavour of Love*, *Joe Millionaire*, and *For Love or Money*, where women's bodies and mortality are judged and scrutinized (Mendible, 337). Reality television is "a manufacture of standardized products", where people are assumed to watch it with peers, gambling on what will happen, and to not pay much thought to the content of the show (Potts, 8). The audience takes for granted that there is nothing wrong with the gender relations that are portrayed in reality television, thereby maintaining gender hierarchies. Further, humiliation and shame function as a central force in these social hierarchies and how they are represented in reality television, something that members of such societies have internalized (Mendible, 337). Although the day-to-day activities of reality television contestants can be mundane, one element that successful reality television programs share is the humiliation of the participants by the production companies. The shame and embarrassment of reality television, from body flaws to intimate betrayals is what make these programs so successful to viewers, offering "the most thrilling evidence of reality" (Mendible, 335). To be humiliated, a person can be disempowered if they do embarrassing things, but the dynamics of humiliation differ with reality television because the contestant is passive and conscious of the humiliating act, where the viewer is always aware of the humiliations and gains satisfaction from it. Reality television makes humiliation a commodity that takes second order because the reality television contestant feels empowered and elevated due to the millions of people who find the embarrassment worth watching. Even the audience is able to imagine themselves as the contestants, desiring their own fifteen minutes of fame (Mendible, 335).

Much like Sedgwick's double movement, the audience is able to relate to the contestants on reality television because of their desire and ability to imagine that they are the stars of the show. Like this audience-performer relationship in reality television, the viewer is also able to picture that Emin's bed and detritus could belong to him or her. Both reality television and *My Bed* deal with abjection, behaviour that can be classified as obscene, and both can function as performances. Despite these common attributes, my interests are not the literal similarities between reality television, rather they are how Emin is able to successfully incorporate confessional qualities to her work, much like reality television.

## CONCLUSION

Emin also plays with the cultural forces of her time, coming of age as an artist in the post-MTV era of reality television and Internet celebrity. When Emin gained prominence in Britain in the latter part of the 1990s, reality television had just become mainstream and extremely popular in Britain, which was much earlier, and actually modeled many American reality television programs that subsequently followed. How Emin is able to garnish so much celebrity attraction is indeed a normal affect and the intended response she seeks to get from her art (Healy, 156). Part of what makes Tracey Emin's work so popular is how it is influenced by affective reactions to popular culture. Her disclosure of autobiography is similar to popular reality television shows at the time in which women are encouraged to confess personal details of their life (Betterton, 25). Even after *My Bed*, Emin is one of the most financially successful living artists in Britain, behind Damien Hirst. The British tabloids obsession with Emin's apparent bad behaviour comes at a time with the recent trend of 'bad girl' behaviour by icons Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Pink and Amy Winehouse. The popularity of raunchy porno culture exemplified in the *Girls Gone Wild* videos that feature drunken, crotch-shoving, sweating, crazy, hysteric women flashing their breasts for the camera also comes to mind. The dominant motifs of sexual abuse, sexual shame and ostracization, abortion, and alcoholism are experiences that many people can relate to, and parallel the confessional quality of reality television programs (Healy, 159). How these confessional qualities mirror reality television programs makes Emin a post-modern hysteric, one of the purposes of the bed is to reveal to the audience how she has survived the trauma of

her own nervous breakdown because as she states, once the bed was moved to the gallery, she had “already cleaned it up.” What makes Emin a post-modern hysteric is how the messages the bed communicates rejects gender and sexual norms of the status quo. The abject qualities fail to live up to bourgeois respectability and values, which is what allows some to label the bed as degenerate and disgusting. Although she can be seductive like the female reality television star, Emin differs in that she is in complete control of her own body, playing the role of artist and model, creator and performer. Emin is her own subject-matter, and her work functions as a “collective catharsis” as she invites the crowds in to participate through viewing her work (Winterson, 6). Unlike the reality television contestant, Emin is not being humiliated, and is empowered through the art making process, making the entire experience cathartic. This cathartic experience would benefit Emin regardless if she had ever become famous through her art making or not. Emin does not “improve” herself in the same way that the protagonist of the reality television self-improvement program does because she does not abide by normative cultural values. There has yet to be a reality television program where a depressed, substance-addicted individual admits to cleaning up his or her act by leaving his or her dirty underwear and used condoms in a gallery. Although she was no longer an alcoholic when she exhibited the bed, the core function of the unmade, used bed enabled Emin to air out her dirty laundry in the gallery without being apologetic. Her bed still breaks dominant social orders of cleanliness and disgust, as opposed to reality television programs that seek to maintain existing social structures. It is those most critical of Emin’s work who seeks to reinforce normative gender and sexual hierarchies, such as the woman who drove 200 km to clean up the bed. Sexual abjection is the catharsis that



serves as a site where she reclaims her voice from shameful, unspeakable trauma. Like the male canon in modern art who relied on the female nude, or the successful reality television program that relies on high standards of beauty and sexual appeal, Emin reclaims her own body, saying “I’ve got a good female nude I can use whenever I like and its mine. I wouldn’t let anybody else use it...I’m my own muse” (Emin, 166). Although she leaves her own body out of *My Bed*, it is the evidence of it, the stains left in the sheets that she displays in the tradition of the reclining nude that make this piece so innovating, a private reality left out in earlier depictions. Many of us know and understand what the evidence of a sexual romp and bedridden breakdown look like, and it is this reality that Emin makes us confront in the white space of the gallery. She acknowledged the work of feminist artists from the 1970s that has given her the privilege to alleviate emotional pain by being in control of her own voice in her work. Emin is making sense of her nervous breakdown because she admits that this art is at least in part, about someone who is asking to be helped, the damsel in distress. She cleans up her emotional mess, resolves the trauma by inviting the audience to look at the messy bed in the gallery, and it is this way that the gallery and audience reception functions as an analyst and healer that have helped her get over her own hysteric nervous breakdown.

Emin’s bed performs her own hysteric trauma and in doing so, she continues a long line of feminist cultural constructs regarding the meaning of gender. The proto-type feminist hysteric of the nineteenth century who would have been labeled degenerate by her peers, feminist reclamations of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the feminist art making practices of the 1970s that investigated public and private spaces, and later questioning of normative gender and sexual hierarchies through her use of abject

materials are all part of this history. Emin further investigates cultural meanings of gender and dirt by her adoption of the confessional and performative gestures that are commonplace in the visual culture that she is immersed in, most notably, reality television. Emin breaks the restrictions that are placed on both the contestants and the viewers of reality television by inviting the viewer to recognize the promising monster of alternative representation in *My Bed*. Although victimized and vulnerable, she reclaims her own voice to make sense of her traumatic history, offering the other, the alternative to our notions of cleanliness and disgust. Furthermore, Emin demonstrates her independence and success as an artist by choosing to remove herself from *My Bed*, as opposed to unlucky reality television contestants who are banished from the show.

Emin is able to become a popular culture celebrity and commercially successful artist of critical acclaim because of the pioneering feminist art practices of the 1970s that has given her this privilege. However, the issues that these older women artists dealt with are still relevant today, as is seen by the outrage that the bed caused in the Tate Britain by some members of the general public that indicate the investigations made by *My Bed* are still taboo. Emin's bed is unable to shatter notions of the abject, feminine sexual body, or even authentic and realistic depictions of sex, in public. Although Emin became immediately successful as an artist at a young age, and the feminist artists who influenced her are now staple reading material in any sort of post-modern art textbook, little has changed with the wider public since Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom*, and even before, as we look back to *Olympia* or even *The Venus of Urbino*. Some people in the general audience still saw Emin's bed as being threatening to dominant notions of social order.

The fact that little has changed in that many people are likely to be uncomfortable disgusted, if not outraged by the public display of abject bodily fluids.

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