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Pretty Gross: Seduction and Disgust in Feminist Video Art, 1996-2009

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the work of three video artists—Pipilotti Rist, Marilyn Minter, and Mika Rottenberg—who all make work that is simultaneously mesmerizing and repulsive. While Immanuel Kant has argued that beauty and disgust are opposed, these works complicate this binary, as does my choice of the more minor terms “pretty” and “gross.” My weaker descriptors encapsulate the desensitization to seductive and disgusting imagery that, in the media-saturated context of the late 90s/early 2000s, is the result of their pervasiveness and thus banality. These artists respond to abject feminist performance art of the 1960s and 70s, which some critics at the time worried attracted the male gaze while setting out to avert it. Theorists of disgust, however, have long understood seduction as always already part of disgust, which the artists in “Pretty Gross” set out to tool strategically. They respond to representations of women as objects of fascination on screen by borrowing resources and formal devices from mass media created to seduce viewers and consumers, but train their lenses instead on traditionally disgusting imagery, from menstrual blood to saliva-coated caviar. Rendering the disgusting palatable, these artists have attracted massive popular audiences and revenue. Yet all have raised a number of ethical quandaries for their critics, who struggle to defend their attempts to reclaim representations of women’s bodies from an abusive history. The widespread visibility and influence of their work makes this critical interrogation especially urgent. Ultimately, I argue that Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg reflect, rather than resolve, tensions between ethics and aesthetics, gender and image, as well as attraction and aversion.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: Pretty Gross

“A vortex of summons and repulsions” is one way that Julia Kristeva describes the abject in her influential theory of the term, titled Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection. More generally, abjection refers to the state of being cast off, and is a descriptor used in a range of contexts from material to social. Hair, for instance, is conventionally seen as beautiful on women’s heads, but repulsive when cast off the head and found anywhere else. Abject is also a term regularly used to describe the marginalized—those whom society has cast off. Ultimately, the abject as Kristeva describes it is “not lack of cleanliness or health . . . but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” The term refers to the disgusting as well, in the sense that it signals toward that which we vomit, or otherwise expel—but ultimately, it is less polluting than disturbing.

That the abject is not only that which is cast off, but also comprises simultaneous “summons and repulsions”—and further, as Bataille put it, that “extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of horror,” is the starting point of this thesis, which takes as its object the work of feminist video art from the late 1990s and early 2000s. The artists surveyed—Pipilotti Rist, Marilyn Minter, and Mika Rottenberg—utilize the simultaneously repulsive and alluring qualities that always underpin the abject to feminist ends, retooling both abject feminist performance art that came several decades before while responding to the long-held position of women as objects of fascination on screen. These artists employ the dialectic of desire and disgust strategically, at once

2 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 4.
attracting and repulsing their viewers, addressing the male gaze, popular audiences, and feminist critics alike. They achieve this through colorful, seductive, and high-production-value videos that appropriate glossy formal devices from advertisements and mass media—intended to seduce viewers-as-consumers—but train their lenses on conventionally disgusting imagery, from menstrual blood to partially ingested substances. They also provoke through excess, namely, excessive prettiness turned disgusting—employing garish color and nauseating sweetness.

I have deliberately chosen the terms pretty and gross over beautiful and disgusting, terms that have received significantly more scholarly consideration and that lack the colloquial tone of my selected adjectives. Immanuel Kant has argued for beauty as disgust’s opposite—but turning to the video works surveyed in this thesis, as well as to the more modest synonyms pretty and gross, complicates this neat opposition. The artworks surveyed are at once mesmerizing and repulsive, fascinating and disturbing. Gross precisely describes the affects often produced by the works I discuss, which tend to solicit discomfort or uneasiness. These works, however, also simultaneously elicit fascination rather than prompting nausea or the desire to have the offending object quickly removed. Indeed, “glaringly noticeable” begins Merriam-Webster’s definition of gross, aptly capturing the elicitation of stares that distinguishes the gross from the disgusting.

The term pretty, rather than beautiful, is particularly operative for its feminized connotation. “Beauty is a proper form of image to admire, whereas prettiness is . . . a lesser, feminine form,” argued Rosalind Galt, whose book, Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image, critiques the gendered language long used to decry ornamented imagery in cinema. Prettiness is also associated with delicacy, whereas beauty is ascribed grandiosity. The artists in this thesis, however, disturb the notion of prettiness as delicate, retooling it instead to provocative ends through exaggeration.

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Further, the pretty has connotations of the cosmetic and contrived—and therefore the deceptive. Art historian Jacqueline Lichtenstein notes that the cosmetic is regularly met with suspicion for assuming to cover up a deficit, while beauty is held up as morally upright.⁶ That the pretty often describes that which is aesthetically pleasing but is also used to signal distastefulness makes the term especially operative for exploring the relationship between seduction and disgust.

**Historical Precedent: Abject Feminist Body Art**

*Abjection* became a key term for artists, critics, and curators in the 1990s to describe recent and contemporaneous art. In particular, the term gained currency among art historians who applied it, retroactively, to a number of feminist body artists working in the 1960s and ’70s. These artists set out to reclaim the tired trope of man as artist and woman as nude muse. They used their own bodies in their work, becoming both subject and object. Rendering their bodies explicitly abject—often by incorporating or referencing bodily secretions such as menstrual blood—they explicitly challenged easy consumption by the male gaze.⁷

They sought to upend women’s long-held cultural position as attractive objects by presenting themselves instead as aversive subjects. One key example of abject feminist body art is the performance *Interior Scroll* (1975) by Carolee Schneemann (b. 1939, United States), in which the artist, naked and with paint on her body, pulled a paper scroll from her vagina.

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⁷ Moreover, these artists—at the height of second-wave feminism—regularly did so by referencing female anatomy before the critical vocabulary distinguishing sex and gender gained significant currency.
while reading it aloud.  

Another is *Vagina Painting* (1965) by Shigeko Kubota (b. 1937, Japan), a performance in which Kubota tied a brush dipped in red paint to her underwear and painted by squatting and moving her hips. Both works were photographed in black-and-white by male artists: Schneemann’s by her then-lover, installation artist Anthony McCall (b. 1946, United Kingdom); and Kubota’s by Fluxus artist George Maciunas (b. 1931, Lithuania).

The efficacy of such work as feminist critique has been both praised and questioned. Art historian Kristine Stiles, for instance, described *Vagina Painting* as a “historically daring rejection of the female as muse.” Critic Lucy Lippard, by contrast, questioned whether works of body art actually *pleased* the male gaze, or, as film theorist Laura Mulvey would have put it, reinforced women’s “to-be-looked-at-ness.” Lippard wondered: if most of these performances are documented, disseminated, and experienced through photographs by men, and performed by conventionally attractive women, are they

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8 The text on the scroll was from her video *Kitch’s Last Meal* (1973–76), which depicted a couple’s lives from the viewpoint of their cat. The work is typically distributed in books and exhibitions as a photograph which does not capture the oral component.

9 My article, “‘Video Is Vengeance for Vagina’: Reassessing Shigeko Kubota’s *Vagina Painting*,” is forthcoming in *Expansive Reflections: A Return to the Feminisms of the 1970s* (ed. Shilyh Warren and Kimberly Lamm). It unpacks the implications of the fact—not discussed by feminist critics who praised the piece—that Kubota was “begged” to do the performance by male artists Nam June Paik and George Maciunas, and also looks toward Kubota’s often ignored video sculptures, which have nothing to do with vaginas.

10 For more on this history, see Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).


actually subverting the male gaze, or pleasing it? Or, to put it in the terms of this project, were these images not actually disgusting, but rather, seductive? And if so, were they still critical and feminist?

**Adrian Piper’s Catalysis (1970–73)**

Around this time, the artist Adrian Piper (b. 1948 United States) began to participate in abject feminist performance art (also known as “body art”) with her *Catalysis* series (1970–73), which critically interrogated the inextricability, rather than neat opposition of, desire and disgust. While Lippard saw disgust’s desirability as abject feminist art’s downfall, Piper instead sought to use this dialectic to her advantage. For *Catalysis*, the artist performed the abject in public places. In *Catalysis I* (1970), for instance, she soaked her clothes in vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod liver oil for one week, then wore them on the bus during rush hour.

Her aim was to emphasize her position, as a black woman, as already abject within society. She achieved this by prompting an exaggerated disgust that strangers might feel toward her by way of putrid smells. Simultaneously, she emphasized her abject position with respect to

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14 Lippard certainly knew of Piper’s *Catalysis* series; she included *Catalysis VIII* in her exhibition *26 Women Artists* at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut, April 18–June 13, 1971.
16 For her later series of performances in public spaces, *The Mythic Being* (1973–75), Piper dressed as her male alter ego. Part of the documentation of this work includes her reflections on how she was treated differently—in particular, feared—as a black man rather than woman.
mainstream museums by performing instead in public spaces. Maurice Berger interprets the series as “her declaration of independence from a fundamentally racist, sexist, and, to a surprising degree, conformist avant-garde,” characterizing her self-abjection as a form of liberation. Indeed, Piper describes this decision to perform in public, rather than the white-male-dominated art world, as an effort to “[keep] the art world at a distance so as to avoid contamination.” Her use of the word “contamination” is ironic: it is unlikely that any individual would have defended their maintenance of the status quo using the language of racial purity. By invoking the language of contamination, Piper likened discomfort with that which disturbs the system to disgust.

Aware that, in the words of critic Sara Ahmed, “disgust is crucial to power relations,” Piper’s Catalysis was an exploration of how the act of expulsion or abjection always works to constitute the self. Sara Ahmed writes that the speech act, “‘That’s disgusting!’, can work as a form of vomiting, as an attempt to expel something whose proximity is felt to be threatening and contaminating.” The act “generates . . . a subject and object,” but Ahmed reminds us that we can only vomit that which has already been “digested, and hence incorporated into the body of one who feels disgust.” Accordingly, art historian Kobena Mercer interpreted the Catalysis interventions as a process of “self-discovery measured by the responses of disgust and aversion elicited from strangers.” They were Piper’s means of emphasizing her position as separate from, but entangled with, those who

witnessed her actions, whom she had the capacity to affect. Mercer applied the term *abjection* to Piper’s work in 1999, which he writes “prefigured many contemporary concerns.” Indeed, to Mercer’s point, Piper wrote of the series that, “Your fear of my otherness is a fear of violation of the boundaries of your self.” Her observation prefigured Kristeva’s argument—published in French in 1980 and English in 1982—that, “The abject . . . [is] opposed to I.”

The notion of the abject as that which opposes the self undergirds Piper’s philosophical writing on discrimination. In her philosophical work—particularly her 1993 article “Two Kinds of Discrimination”—Piper claims that discomfort with the other, or the uneasiness experienced when trying to assimilate something unfamiliar into extant cognitive categories, threatens the coherence of the self. Accordingly, she defines her use of the term *xenophobia* as

a fear of individuals who look or behave differently from those one is accustomed to. It is a fear of what is experientially unfamiliar, of individuals who do not conform to one’s empirical assumptions about what other people are like, how they behave, or how they look. Ultimately it is a fear of individuals who violate one’s empirical conception of persons and so one’s self-conception. So xenophobia is an alarm reaction to a threat to the rational coherence of the self, a threat in the form of an anomalous other who transgresses one’s preconceptions about people.

Or in Kristeva’s terms, attempting to assimilate an anomalous person into a mental schema disrupts cognitive, “borders, positions, rules.” In Piper’s written work, she does not engage the term *abjection*, but uses instead the term *xenophobia*—which, for her, refers to fear of otherness that threatens cognitive categories and thereby self-constitution.

* Catalysis aims to use the strong sensations of disgust produced by encounters with unfamiliar persons to elicit embodied responses and shock people into an awareness of their often-

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subconscious xenophobia. As historian and critic Maurice Berger put it, “By creating visual and sensual experiences that were more or less fresh and unexpected, Piper reasoned that she could create a temporal situation that might jolt the viewer into new levels of consciousness and self-awareness.”

In *Catalysis*, she provoked the disgust others felt toward her, often subconsciously, as an African American woman, by setting out to make the experience of disgust stronger and, therefore, more conscious. “The stronger the work, the stronger its impact and the more total (physiological, psychological, intellectual, etc.) the reaction of the viewer,” she writes, reasoning that strongly affecting viewers could disrupt the status quo and prompt viewers to critically reflect on their own xenophobia, which she believed everyone was socialized into and had to work to unlearn.

While Piper’s aim, like that of many contemporaneous abject feminist performance artists, was to repulse those around her, she found, while sitting malodrously on the bus for *Catalysis I*, that she simultaneously attracted them. She recalls in her text documenting the piece,

> I got this very strange reaction from some businessmen on the subway, which I didn’t understand at the time, but my friend explained it to me later on. I’d been wearing all this putrid-smelling stuff; I’d coated my arms with cod liver oil. I was very passive (just standing there), and they would look at me like they really wanted to fuck me. This friend said that by walking around that way, it seemed that I didn’t have any respect for my body, so why

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29 Though this language is not used by Piper or Berger, consciousness is typically used to distinguish “affect” from “emotion.” In practice, however, the terms are often used interchangeably.
30 Piper, “Talking to Myself,” 32.
should anybody else? . . . That was something I just hadn’t counted on at all, that somehow there could be sexuality in that really revolting make-up.31

Piper was surprised to experience the inextricability of seduction and disgust in this way, but she would go on to strategically employ these interlined phenomena later in the series.

The piece in which Piper most explicitly emphasized the relationship between seduction and disgust is Catalysis VII. In the fall of 1970, she “dress[ed] up very super-femininely”; she teased her hair and wore a tight skirt and high heels to the Before Cortés: Sculpture of Middle America exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum. At the Met, she chewed large wads of bubble gum. She writes in the only text documenting the work,

I got this bubble gum, and I just started making bubbles that got bigger and broke all over my face, all over my clothes, and I kept on putting in more bubble gum and making bigger and bigger bubbles. . . . I could choose whether or not to blow a bubble in someone’s face. They’d duck because the bubble would be coming out, and I got very good at it. I had this hair and earrings and everything and bubble gum all over my face. It looked very strange, and I seemed to be a threat, because if people got entangled in that stuff, then they would be involved, and I’d have to have some kind of interaction with them, and obviously they were very much avoiding that.32

Piper emphasized “pretty” features—feminine dress, pink bubble gum—until they became excessive and therefore disgusting. While, for Lippard, the desire latent in disgust hindered its feminist critical capacities, Piper sought to retool this strategically. For Catalysis I she began with the conventionally abject (putrid smells) and found herself to be, on occasion, surprisingly seductive. Later, in Catalysis VII, she began with conventionally seductive materials, but, through using them to excess, ultimately repulsed museumgoers.

The term pretty is often intended as a compliment (if, at times, a patronizing one) when used to describe a person. Its connotations in both fine art and cinema, however, are often less positive.

Notably, as mentioned above, *pretty* is not included in the grand aesthetic category of *beauty*, but is rather a delicate and minor—as well as feminized—descriptor. Galt argues that her study of the term “is a polemical move because *pretty* so immediately brings to mind a negative, even repugnant, version of aesthetic value for many listeners.”33 Notice that Galt is addressing the term *pretty* but ends up using the adjective *repugnant*, in the same way that Piper began with pretty attributes but eventually repulsed museumgoers. Galt continues to describe how the term is aversive in critical theory, noting that

feminists hear in the term its diminutive implications; a pretty girl is one who accedes to patriarchal standards of behavior and self-presentation. Marxists think of prettiness as a quality of the commodity fetish, a central function of ideology’s ability to veil real relations.34

This cyclical relation, which can begin with the pretty and end with the disgusting, or vice versa, affirms Kristeva’s characterization of the abject’s simultaneous summons and repulsions as a “vortex.”35

Though prettiness is frequently associated with a sort of delicacy, *Catalysis VII* shows how it can also be confrontational. In fact, Galt describes her choice of the term as “polemical.” Likewise, in Piper’s textual recounting of *Catalysis VII*, she describes the action as “aggressive.”36 This shift from delicacy to aggression is achieved through the artist’s use of exaggeration. It is not the bubble gum itself that is disgusting, but the size of the wad she chews and the bubbles she blows, which threaten to stick to those around her. Disgust, as many have noted, is often produced by surfeit, excess, or overindulgence. Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank extended this idea of overindulgence to argue, along the lines of Kristeva’s claim that disgust is related to a sort of suppressed wanting, that

one can only be disgusted by something previously thought to delight or satisfy. Alcohol, for instance, is not itself disgusting to most, but when consumed in excess it can cause vomiting. The same is true of sweetness in excess, which is often nauseating. Piper extends this: pinkness and sweetness characterize bubble gum, but are also tropes of femininity, both of which Piper exaggerates in *Catalysis VII*.

The dialectical relationship between desire and disgust is prominently articulated by Kristeva in 1980, but it can be traced back at least to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, published in 1790. He succinctly captured the paradox when he wrote of the disgusting that “the object is presented as if it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment, while we strive against it with all our might.” Sianne Ngai understands this passage to mean that

> what makes the object abhorrent is precisely its outrageous claim for desirability. The disgusting seems to say, “You want me,” imposing itself on the subject as something to be mingled with and perhaps even enjoyed.

Piper—who remains a prominent Kantian scholar, and was the first African American woman to receive tenure in philosophy in the United States—would, no doubt, have known this passage from Kant. Whether Piper invokes Kant consciously or not, she affirms his claim when she writes that her actions in *Catalysis* “trigger your desire and your anxiety together.” While the understanding of disgust as inherently desirable was not considered in the creation and reception of body art of the 1960s and ‘70s, it has a history in philosophy. Piper, an artist and philosopher, brought this discourse from one discipline to another, setting the path for the artists in this thesis.

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40. Though I cannot claim for certain she would have known it at this time. Her piece *Food for the Spirit*, wherein she documents her experiencing reading *Critique of Pure Reason* while fasting, was completed in 1971. It is actually Kantian rationalism that Piper was critiquing in her 1992 definition of xenophobia. She feared that his insistence on cognitive categories as immutable might work to naturalize inequalities on the basis of race and gender, by disallowing the possibility of the assimilation of the unfamiliar.
The mediums used by the artists in “Pretty Gross,” are color video and video installations, rather than black-and-white photographic documentation of performances. Recall that, for Lippard, it was a problem that the surviving documentation of those performances was framed by men; the artists in this thesis all position themselves behind—and at times, in front of—the camera. While it is not known who took Piper’s photographs, the two works I discussed here (Catalysis I and VII), were not photographed at all, but documented through Piper’s own writing. Witnesses of Piper’s action would not have known that she was performing, or that she was to be interpreted as—in her words—an “art object.” While Berger claimed that this was a declaration of independence from a racist, sexist, and conformist art world, it is important to note that this choice of medium was also a kind of resistance to the notion of a discrete, commodifiable, and collectible art object. Yet while the works I have referenced by Piper, Kubota, and Schneemann were irreverent toward the art world proper, today, they survive and are circulated as photographs in museum collections. The works studied in the following chapters were made for, and thrive in, markets and museums as videos and video installations. With this change of medium came new formal representations of the pretty/gross.

From Performance to Video

The artists in this thesis, working in the late 1990s and 2000s, build on abject feminist performance art in three main ways. First, they specifically interrogate the dialectic of desire and disgust that caused critics like Lippard to be skeptical of body art, and—like Piper—use it strategically. Second, they work with video rather than performance and photography, and make

44 See Piper’s “Talking to Myself.”
work for the exhibition context and art market.\textsuperscript{45} While each of these artists either perform in their own work or hire other women to perform in it, the videos they produce are not simply records of a live event, but are artworks themselves. Accordingly, these artists experiment formally with the medium, (rather than have someone else take a documentary photograph with a straight-on angle and in black-and-white). Third, they use color media to simultaneously amplify the attractive features of their imagery by drawing from mass media, but also to provoke an art world more accustomed to the black-and-white precedents not only from performance documentation, but from pioneering works of video art as well. Though color photography was easily available to the performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s, it was a medium strongly associated with advertisements and mass media—at least, as several historians of photography have argued, until William Eggleston’s landmark solo exhibition of color photographs at the Museum of Modern Art in 1976.\textsuperscript{46} Color photography and moving-image work have since become widely accepted as fine art. Still, Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg deliberately toe the line between fine art and mass media, between art and advertisement. They work simultaneously with the formal language of attraction and seduction of advertising, as well as with techniques of aversion from abject performance art. This thesis will examine how this change in medium affected a group of artists’ representations of female bodies and their tactical deployment of disgust.

With the increased accessibility and use of both moving and color images as artistic mediums came new representations of strong sensations. Relatedly, the increased frequency with which individuals became bombarded by, and desensitized to, abject, horrific, and seductive imagery

\textsuperscript{45} There is certainly a history of video artists who elected to use the medium because it was difficult to sell, though this began to change as the art world rapidly commercialized during the 1980s and as museums began to collect videos intended for an exhibition (rather than screening) context.

through mass media has elicited new forms for new affects. Frederic Jameson infamously claimed that the postmodern era is one of the waning of affect. This heavily criticized claim is often selectively quoted, for Jameson also writes, “This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings . . . are now free-floating and impersonal.”[^47] This is yet another reason that pretty and gross are more apt descriptors than beautiful and disgusting; the relative weakness of my chosen terms is intended to encapsulate the sort of desensitization that is the result of the simultaneous banality of seductive and disgusting imagery in a media-saturated age. Today we can quickly pull up, within seconds, more disgusting images than we might ever care to see. Disgusting and seductive imagery also dominates our visual landscape, as advertisements compete with one another for our attention through sensational imagery. William Ian Miller describes how disgust’s alluring qualities have been capitalized on, writing,

> It is a commonplace that the disgusting can attract as well as repel; the film and entertainment industries, among which we might include news coverage, literally bank on its allure. The disgusting is an insistent feature of the lurid and the sensational, informed as these are by sex, violence, horror, and the violation of norms of modesty and decorum. And even as the disgusting repels, it rarely does so without also capturing our attention. It imposes itself upon us. We find it hard not to sneak a second look or, less voluntarily, we find our eyes doing ‘double-takes’ at the very things that disgust us.^[48]

Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg—all of whom have found commercial success—no doubt “literally bank” on the seductiveness of disgust as well. Yet they simultaneously tool it to critical, feminist ends.^[49]

**Disgust and Seduction in Feminist Video Art, 1996–2009**

[^49]: If Piper’s work is responding in part to Minimalism, these three artists respond to “maximalism” in media, creating works at once disturbing and anaesthetizing. For more on Piper’s relationship to Minimalism, see Berger, “Styles of Radical Will,” 26.
Rather than a survey of video art, this thesis takes as case studies videos by three women artists who employ both disgust and seduction as feminist critique, and, further, looks closely at the critical reception of these works. The first chapter centers on Pipilotti Rist (b. 1962, Switzerland) as a pivotal moment in the widespread shift away from black-and-white still documentation of performances to performative videos made for the museum and market. In particular, it looks at two works from 1996: the first, *Mutaflor*, is a single-channel video in which the artist appears to swallow a small camera and expel it from her anus. The second, *Sip My Ocean*, was Rist’s first work in immersive multichannel projection, and displays seductive shots of bodily insides and underwater worlds. *Sip My Ocean* marks a significant turning point in the artist’s career, turning further away from performance and toward installation while garnering her a vast, popular audience and ensuring her financial security as an artist from then on. Yet as her subversive messages began to reach broader audiences, they were also criticized for becoming more spectacular and less critical or political. In other words, her prettier work has been seen as unquestionably less political than her

![Fig. 1.5, Pipilotti Rist, Sip My Ocean (installation view), 1996](image-url)
gross work. It is assumed that the disgusting tests viewers’ tolerance by presenting difficult imagery, whereas her pretty work has been dismissed as an empty spectacle, a view which assumes that prettiness cannot be deployed critically or strategically, and reflects how the pretty itself can disgust. Nonetheless, Rist has made blockbuster exhibitions out of images of substances—like menstrual blood—often considered disgusting and taboo. She has rendered the gross pretty, and in so doing—as the following chapter will argue—she has radically altered her viewers’ tolerance of that which has been abjected.

Marilyn Minter (b. 1948, United States) is the focus of the third chapter; in particular, her video titled Green Pink Caviar (2009). The piece consist of a series of close-ups of the lipstick-ornamented mouths of a number of models eating, spitting out, and reingesting caviar-shaped candy, as well as various viscous, sticky substances, all shot through a glass pane. The work has not only been displayed in galleries and museums, but also in Times Square, at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, and as the background for the first song of Madonna’s 2009 Sticky & Sweet tour. Here, I consider the word taste: a term that describes personal and social aesthetic conventions, but one that is rooted not in the sense of eyesight; it is, rather, rooted in the mouth and gut. Taste is a social consensus, but is often experienced as a gut reaction. I also unpack the ethics of the ways in which Minter’s long-standing exploration of what she calls “the pathology of glamour” is realized through her collaborations with, and disruptions of, the beauty industry she critiques: Green Pink Caviar was shot during breaks on (and therefore funded by) a MAC Cosmetics commercial shoot she was hired to produce. She both collaborates with and critiques the beauty industry, raising questions about her complacency and, simultaneously, the possibility of representing the female body free from the

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baggage of typical beauty standards.

The third chapter centers on a series by Mika Rottenberg (b. 1976, Argentina) titled *Dough, Cheese, Squeeze and Tropical Breeze* (2003–2010), in particular the video *Cheese* (2008). For this series, and throughout her career, Rottenberg has hired women who “rent” what the artist refers to as their “extraordinary bodies” through online forums. By “extraordinary,” she means bodies which exist in excess of norms—among them, extremely muscular female bodybuilders and obese women whom people pay to “squash” them. For *Cheese*, Rottenberg hired women with exceptionally long hair who make their money as online fantasy workers. I set out to unpack the complicated questions of the feminist ethics that attend to the practice of “renting out” extraordinary bodies, particularly as they intersect with additional questions rooted in fat studies and disability studies that question
whether the fetishization of the unusual can ever be empowering.

![Image of Mika Rottenberg, Cheese (production shot), 2008](image)

I have focused my analysis on the particular artists in order to chart implicit theories of the pretty and the gross as inextricable and ripe for strategic, critical, and feminist use. All three artists have had complicated critical receptions that speak to the simultaneous attractive and aversive qualities of their work, and all are tremendously successful in museums and commercial markets. For Rist and Rottenberg, this success was nearly instantaneous—they both showed in museums while still students. Rist’s undergraduate single-channel video *I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986) (Fig. 2.1) was shown in a festival the year it was made, and is now a canonical work of video art regularly shown in survey textbooks and introductory video art courses. Rottenberg’s MFA project,
Mary’s Cherries (2004), was likewise exhibited (at MoMA PS1) the year it was made. Still, Rist is frequently written about as if she struggled to be accepted in the art world, though this is untrue. Minter’s trajectory is less straightforward: she was actually born the same year as Piper, but it was not until the early 2000s that she received substantial critical or curatorial attention. Accordingly, the chapter on Minter’s work tells the story of the abjection of her work from the art world—work that deliberately attempted to complicate dominant notions of taste—followed by her track into the spotlight; that is, her work’s transition from abject to extremely desired.

To varying degrees, these three artists are more popular than they are critically acclaimed. Each has also reached audiences well beyond the art world. Rist and Minter, for instance, have both shown their video art in Times Square. Yet all have raised an array of ethical quandaries for some of their critics, who struggle, as Lippard did in 1976, to defend the ethics of their flirtation with the male gaze. Other critics assume their use of “pretty” imagery to be necessarily spectacular and uncritical, rather than employed strategically, affirming Galt’s claim that the pretty irks Marxists and feminists alike. This thesis does not set out to defend the ethics of the artists surveyed. In particular, the chapter on Rottenberg will argue for the productive critique provided by the ethical ambiguity of

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51 In January 2017, Rist’s Open my Glade (Flatten) (2000–2017) was shown every night from 11:57 p.m. to midnight. It was organized by the Times Square Advertising Coalition (TSAC) in partnership with her exhibition Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest concurrently on view at the New Museum. Minter’s Green Pink Caviar was screened in 2011 on MTV’s Times Square billboard at the invitation of the nonprofit Creative Time.
her practice—which is distinct from arguing for her practice as itself ethical. Instead, I take on the widespread discomfort with the ambiguity of their ethics as useful for revealing the difficulty of representing women’s bodies in manners universally considered ethical.

This thesis, then, is about the ethics and aesthetics of the pretty/gross. It posits the pretty as potentially polemical because it so often disgusts. My research relies heavily on the theorists of abjection and disgust, as well as on the reception history of the artists involved. Accordingly, I have ordered the works in my study by date made, rather than by generation of artist. The artists are intergenerational—in fact, Rottenberg was Minter’s student—but the works contemporaneous.

Fig. 1.9 Pipilotti Rist, Open My Glade (Flatten), 2000–2017. Installation view: Times Square, 2017
Fig. 1.10 Marilyn Minter, *Green Pink Caviar*, 2009. Installation view: Times Square, 2011.
Aside from Piper’s *Catalysis*, there are a number of works which precede, and set the stage for, the rubric I’ve laid out. The video installation *Corps Étranger* (1994) by Mona Hatoum (b. 1952, Lebanon) serves as an important precedent for Rist’s investigation of bodily innards and her use of tiny medical and surveillance cameras to image the self. Projected in a cylindrical space that encloses the viewer, the video is shot with an endoscopic camera and explores the inside and surface of the artist’s body. Rist likewise uses small cameras and traces bodies inside and out throughout her oeuvre. Hatoum, however, addresses the at once invasive and intimate nature of clinical examination, while Rist searches for gorgeous imagery inside bodies. *IMAGINATION, Dead Imagine* (1991), by Judith Barry (b. 1954, United States), in which an androgynous head rear-projected on the walls of a reflective cube is slowly covered in various viscous substances, is at once repulsive and mesmerizing. “The spectator wants to turn away, but cannot,” the artist writes of her intention
for the piece. As in Minter’s work, the substances move at an altered speed slightly slower than they would in reality, delaying their threat of contamination and rendering their movement hypnotic. Made at the height of the AIDS crisis, the piece speaks to the dialectic of desire and disgust by revealing how desire often renders us vulnerable—to heartbreak or disappointment and, in a physical sense, to infections. It references the trust and vulnerability involved in opening up to let another in. Ann Hamilton’s *Aleph* (1992–93), a close-up video of marbles rolling around and slipping out of her mouth, is a historical stepping stone from black-and-white documented performances to video art. The piece is at once sensuous and tense—some viewers might empathetically gag at the thought of marbles in one’s mouth—and thereby engages the multisensory, much like Piper’s use of smell in *Catalysis*, and Minter’s evocation of taste in *Green Pink Caviar* (the latter which is, likewise, a close-up video of a mouth repeatedly reingesting).

Not only have I excluded specific adjacent works so as to tightly frame my inquiry, but using the terms *pretty* and *gross* themselves necessarily commits acts of exclusion. Both words reinforce norms. *Gross* is a negative descriptor that works to quarantine the distasteful and can even have a school-aged bully’s mocking tone. *Pretty* enforces norms positively, describing that which successfully lives up to socially prescribed standards of presentation. These

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standards are often racist, ableist, and patriarchal. The artists who address prettiness in their work, then, have themselves largely been able-bodied white women.\footnote{Rosalind Galt’s \textit{Pretty and the Decorative Image} productively takes on ornamentation in film from a global perspective. The work is concerned less with women-authored works of feminist critique and considers instead the misogyny of language used to describe and critique aesthetic norms.}

Further, the works surveyed respond to the representation of women as objects of fascination on screen—a topic that is complicated when applied to women historically underrepresented in media, namely, disabled women and women of color, which I will return to in my Rottenberg chapter. Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg are nonetheless indebted to foundational works by women of color: not only Adrian Piper, Shigeko Kubota, and Mona Hatoum, but also Ana Mendieta (b. 1948, Cuba, d. 1985, United States). Around the 1970s, Mendieta regularly performed actions of abjection in remote locations, which she documented—and aestheticized—with color photography. Her work is a key touchstone in the transition from Piper to Rist. Significantly, Rist’s \textit{Open My Glade (Flatten)} (2000–2017), in which the artist presses her face, smeared with makeup, against a pane of glass in front of the camera, recalls Mendieta’s series of still images titled \textit{Glass on Body Imprints—Face} (1972), shot in both black-and-
white and color.\footnote{I discussed this series by Mendieta in Emily Watlington, “Delirious: Art at the Limits of Reason, 1950–1980” at Met Breuer, New York,” \textit{Mousse}, October–November 2017, 178.} This use of glass is also found in Minter’s \textit{Green Pink Caviar}. All these artists use the transparency and compression of the glass to exaggerate in order to critique the flatness of the image, and thereby the confining demands placed on women to exist \textit{as} images.

\textbf{Disgust and Gender, Aesthetics and Morals}

The conceptual frameworks of both disgust and gender require analyzing aesthetics as matters of ethics. William Ian Miller argued that disgust “knows no distinction between the moral and the aesthetic,” that it “makes beauty and ugliness a matter of morals.”\footnote{Miller, \textit{The Anatomy of Disgust}, 21.} He was referring to the fact that we feel disgust both at a morally reprehensible person, as well as at a sticky, unclean substance. Kristeva likewise described abjection as “immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady.”\footnote{Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 4.} Relatedly, because of the long history of representational abuse of women’s bodies in both paintings and porn, each formal decision carries the baggage of centuries of misogyny and, is therefore, an ethical decision. Moreover, gender itself is constituted through outward appearance—both through performative acts and coded styles of dress and representation—meaning one exists as gendered only in image. This is precisely why Sara Ahmed describes disgust as “performative,” drawing on Judith Butler’s definition of the term, which Butler originally used to describe the rehearsal of socially-constructed and encoded norms of behavior and appearance. Ahmed describes the speech act, “That’s disgusting!” not only, as mentioned above, an act of vomiting, but also as performative, because it cites and reinforces norms and conventions. The paradoxes of ethics and aesthetics, gender and image, as well as attraction and aversion, are reflected, rather than resolved, by Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg. Unable to untangle them, these ethical ambiguities have plagued critics, the implications of which I will unpack them in the following chapters.
Chapter 2

Eye Candy: Pipilotti Rist

“Pipilotti Rist is the kind of artist you can get a big crush on,” reads one 2000 review.¹ Rist’s popular reception would suggest this reviewer is not alone in her response: a video the artist made during her first year of art school—*I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much* (1986)—was screened at a film festival the year it was made, and nineteen-year-old Rist was offered an exhibition invitation on the spot. The glitchy, colorful video—wherein the artist manically dances around with her breasts at times flopping out of her dress while singing the line “I’m not the girl who misses much,” a spin on the 1968 Beatles song “Happiness Is a Warm Gun”—has since become a textbook example of video art, and is regularly screened in introductory courses. More recently, Beyoncé’s 2016 music video for the song “Hold Up” drew directly from Rist’s *Ever Is Over All* (1997); also in 2016, Rist’s solo exhibition at the New Museum broke institutional attendance records. Curiously, despite her instant and sustained popularity, Rist’s admiring critics regularly paint pictures of the artist’s struggle for acceptance and recognition. In so doing, they rehearse narratives that historically significant female artists receive their recognition only later in life, and assume discomfort with the abject imagery she often uses in her alluring work. Despite

making work depicting her own menstrual blood (as in *Blutclip*, 1993) and anus (as in *Mutaflo*, 1996), and despite being a female experimental video artist, Rist was an instant crowd-pleaser, and her popularity has only increased since.

The adoration of her work does not mean, however, that it has not also been registered as aversive. Recalling Adrian Piper’s *Catalysis VII*, critic Erdmann Ziegler wrote that Rist’s “style of exaggerated feminine role-playing is pushed to brink of grotesquerie.” Grotesque or otherwise, the attractive feminine qualities of her work—not only her subjects, but, as I will argue, her use of color—have continued to attract wide audiences. In this chapter, I interrogate whether her popularity persists because of or in spite of the abject qualities of her work.

In Rist’s early work, she depicted the abject in a manner more formally similar to the feminist abject artists who preceded her. Working with her own body and small cameras, she recalls the documented and thereby mediated performances of the abject—including Piper’s *Catalysis* series (Fig. 1.3 & 1.4) and Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* (1975) (Fig. 1.1). As Rist’s work moved farther away from documented performance and closer to video art, she retooled these conventions significantly, particularly as she began to work in immersive projection. Art historian Amelia Jones similarly commented on Rist’s response to abject feminist performance art:

1970s to 1990s feminist art projects often functioned within the terms established by [Laura] Mulvey, attempting either to reverse the male gaze by proposing an actively gazing (as well as feeling, thinking, and doing) female subject or to thwart its trajectory through admonishing

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text/image combinations. Rist’s work exemplifies a profound shift in feminist thinking and artmaking.\(^3\)

Fig. 2.3 Pipilotti Rist, *Ever Is Over All* (still), 1997; Beyoncé, *Hold Up* (music video, still), 2016

The shift that Jones describes was due in part to the growing accessibility of the medium of video, which radically impacted the relationship between Rist’s and her camera as both maker and subject. One major shift was the increased availability of color video, in contrast to the black-and-white photographs used by Piper and Schneemann, as I will later detail. To Jones’s point, in *I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much*, Rist’s actions would seem to suggest that she might, in fact, be missing much—that she is merely a thoughtless object with flailing breasts. Yet her words—“I’m not the girl who misses much”—tell viewers otherwise, signaling that she is conscious of her actions. Her actions and words could have been executed as a live performance—indeed, when the piece was first screened, Rist had yet to master the technology, and her audio cut out halfway through, so she improvised a live accompaniment.\(^4\) Yet her message is emphasized by her use of video, and the fact that the work is a performative video rather than a videotaped performance: the analog lines that

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traverse the picture emphasize the flatness and constructed nature of the image, and also refute a clear and consumable view of her body. Meanwhile, the colorful video distortion renders her world pink and rainbow-hued, decorating the image. In other words, the distortion reads as ornament and not as an error—she’s not missing much.

Jones has accurately positioned Rist’s work as a turning point in feminist video art’s response to the gaze, and the works discussed in the following chapters continue her contributions. This major shift largely occurred in 1996, when Rist created her first work in immersive projection. I will focus on two works made that year, *Mutafior* and *Sip My Ocean*, as representing this pivotal movement away from recorded performance and to immersive projection. *Mutafior* is a single-channel work projected onto the floor, and is Rist’s attempt to grapple with moralizing conversations around female pleasure tied to the feminist porn debates of the 1990s. In the short, looped film, the artist, naked, appears to swallow the camera which revolves continually in and around her body and is then expelled from her anus. Between the close-ups of her mouth and anus, the video cuts to black—a classic cinematic trick which suggests the passage of time between the shots before and after, and thereby implying that the camera has been ingested into Rist’s body, where there is no light. Instead of reversing the gaze, as Jones points out, she welcomes it—but she

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*Fig. 2.4 Pipilotti Rist, Mutafior (installation view), 1996*

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5 It has also been titled *Mutafior for Wien*. Pipilotti Rist, "Body Electric: An Interview with Pipilotti Rist," in *Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest*, 50.
also swallows it. *Sip My Ocean* was Rist’s first work in multichannel immersive projection, which would radically alter the history of the moving image in museums. *Mutaflor* has not been as widely-adored by popular audiences, but critics have taken it up—alongside some of her earlier work, namely the related *Pickelporno* (1992)—as more political and less spectacular than her crowd-pleasing *Sip My Ocean*. The close-ups of eyes and bodily innards in *Sip My Ocean* are rendered in fantastic colors and morph fluidly, whereas the Panasonic “lipstick”-style video camera—a small security camera the size and shape of a lipstick tube—captured close-ups of pores in skin by honest and straightforward means. This is in contrast to the glossy and colorful image of *Sip My Ocean*, which was also the first work Rist sold to a museum—the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Denmark. Thereafter, she was able to make a living as an artist.

The installation is taped underwater and is accompanied by a soundtrack of Rist’s own cover of Chris Isaak’s 1989 song “Wicked Game.” The video features footage of underwater life—often illegible—as well as footage of the artist and other women swimming, at times in extreme close-up and always projected larger-than-life. It shows not only hypnotic imagery of an underwater world and a bikini-clad Rist, but also, for instance, extreme close-ups of her eyes, which zoom in so tightly on the veins that the eyes become unidentifiable. The piece is displayed on two projectors pointed on adjacent walls that meet in a corner, and the second projector shows the same image mirrored; viewers sit atop pillows on a carpeted floor. Christine Ross described the tension between the pretty and the gross in *Sip My Ocean* by calling it “a video projection of a mermaid-like woman swimming in paradisiacal waters who transforms herself into a grotesque figure.”

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further popularized by Disney) as that which is opposed to, yet capable of becoming, grotesque reinforces my characterization of relationship between the pretty and gross as dialectical.

Rist’s use of the dialectic of desire and disgust is useful as a feminist strategy because it renders the abject—be it menstrual blood or garish color—tolerable, even popular. I argue against widely held views of her conventionally grosser work as more political by showing how the abject is present in her later, prettier work—but rendered more palatable. I will also show how prettiness itself has become abject.

Lastly, I will unpack the formal formlessness of her work—her use of distorted underwater worlds and oozing substances, her early mastery of projected light, and her infusion of color into imagery that otherwise would recall the work of earlier body artists. Throughout her career, Rist has set out to push past limits in every sense of the word, be they strictures of taste, the confines of the screen, or moralizing dogmas. This refusal to neatly fix her moral stance—in particular, with respect to her feminist ethics—has caused some critical disgust.
Pretty (a)political

Artful and clever are the first words Merriam-Webster uses to define pretty. The pretty is constructed, composed—even manipulative. The pretty in art and cinema alike has been dismissed as superficial and overly concerned with outward appearance. Feminists have at times dismissed the pretty as evidence of having succumbed to patriarchal standards of beauty and self-presentation, while Marxists have dismissed it as an alluring quality of the commodity fetish that works to veil an object’s ugly relations. By these accounts, the pretty is not only superficial, it is also deceptive. Rosalind Galt describes the etymology of pretty in her book Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image (2011): the word is derived from the Old English prœtt, which means a trick, wile, or craft. “The word pretty and its earliest meanings,” she continues, “involve cunning and art,” and in historical context implies a connection to an icon of the female grotesque: the witch. Again, Jacqueline Lichtenstein similarly

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8 Galt, Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image, 7.
describes how cosmetics always imply that they are masking an original defect, veiling ugliness. The pretty, then, is a surface—either covering up a void and thereby signaling shallowness or emptiness; or, worse, covering something gross. William Ian Miller comments on this relationship from another angle, writing that:

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\text{disgust call[s] into question the trustworthiness of the alluring. One type suggests that foulness is an illusion that hides beauty beneath; the other suggests that fairness is a disguise hiding inner foulness.}^{10}
\]

Fear of the superficial illusion, according to Miller, goes both ways: we might wonder whether the foul is fair and whether the fair is foul.

This fear of deception pervades the reception of Rist’s work. Reads one exhibition pamphlet:

*Sip My Ocean* disturbs as much as it seduces, leaving one to wonder if there might be trouble in this aquatic paradise. Desire, after all, always demands an “other,” one who may or may not yield to the embrace.\(^{11}\)

This fear of deception is most prominent in responses to her later works, beginning with *Sip My Ocean*. *Mutaflor*, with its repeated close-ups of Rist’s anus, is direct in its abjectness; it hides nothing.\(^{12}\)

While both are seductive in their own ways, *Sip My Ocean*’s hypnotic music and mesmerizing colors render it pretty on its surface, but simultaneously gross, a fact that left some critics and viewers suspicious. Fear of deception mimics aversion: hypocrisy and betrayal disgust us “because we understand them to mimic the forms of the loathsome in the material world. They slither, insinuate,

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\(^{12}\) There is a “trick” in the editing—a cut to black between the shot of the mouth and anus—but it is not one that is particularly deceptive, and has long been used in cinema.
and exude slime and grease.”\textsuperscript{13} The pretty, then, disgusts because it is thought to be deceptive, and is thus also slithering and greasy.

As Galt points out in her theory of the cinematically pretty, the pretty—a gendered term—bears a direct relationship to the moving image, in that both the term and the medium concern themselves with surface appearance. She also shows how the language used to describe suspicion of the moving image is often gendered. The medium of video—especially projection—is regularly criticized for serving as an empty or deceptive spectacle, just as the pretty itself is.\textsuperscript{14} “The pretty bespeaks a theoretical anxiety about the modern image,” concludes Galt, who also sees the pretty as a potential feminist strategy, writing that “it also names practices of image making that trouble aesthetic dogma.”\textsuperscript{15} Rist often works directly with abject imagery, but her medium is video and she works in a media-saturated age. Like feminist abject artists before her, she often performs with her own body. Rather than using black-and-white documentation to “objectively” record a live event, however, Rist works with video directly and as an artistic medium. She thereby necessarily contends with the pretty, superficial, and deceptive aspects of her medium. As one interviewer commented,

\begin{quote}
\textit{such an approach to fantasy implies a major reassessment of the anti-ocular strategies that have been so important in feminist art and theory since the ’70s and ’80s following Laura Mulvey’s attack on “visual pleasure” so as to dismantle the logic of the spectacle of woman-as-object-of-the-look. Rist’s is an attempt to be critical of the visual through the spectatorial pleasures of popular music and television.}\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

Rendering her images installations, then, Rist engages the full body—not just the gaze. She projects onto her viewers’ bodies in \textit{Mutaflor} by pointing her image at the floor, and exceeds their field of vision while inviting them to lie down in a space she has created in \textit{Sip My Ocean}.

\textsuperscript{13} Miller, \textit{The Anatomy of Disgust}, 186.

\textsuperscript{14} For more on fear of projection as spectacle, see Dominique Païni, “Should We Put an End to Projection?,” trans. Rosalind Krauss, \textit{October}, no. 110 (Fall 2004): 23–48.

\textsuperscript{15} Galt, \textit{Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image}, 11.

\textsuperscript{16} Ross, “Fantasy and Distraction.”
In Rist’s media-heavy era of manipulated images and insidious advertisements, fear of the image as deceptive or superficial is certainly warranted. As Galt notes, responding to debates among feminist film theorists, “Articulating feminist ambivalence toward the image in the language of seduction and suspicion has the counterproductive consequence of underwriting the political analysis of patriarchal culture by means of a patriarchal rhetoric of the image.”¹⁷ In other words, in refusing to trust the image because it is too seductive or too made-up relies on patriarchal logic, equating the image with the woman and the woman with the witch. This suspicion of a seductive empty spectacle is found in one review by Nancy Princenthal, who writes that “Pipilotti Rist intended this installation as . . . [a] gift of visual balm for a wounded city,” and concludes, “Happily, its effect is more complicated than that.”¹⁸ She was happy that it was complicated and not merely a “visual balm.” In Rist’s work, then, we not only find her aestheticizing abject imagery, but also find her using prettiness to disturb viewers who assume prettiness to be covering up something disgusting, or who find it distasteful.¹⁹ To dismiss her later, prettier work as “less political” is not only to reinforce a “patriarchal rhetoric of the image,” but also to assume that Rist is not using, or that one cannot use, prettiness strategically. While the history of disgust as provocation is well documented, Galt notes that excessive prettiness has regularly been

¹⁷ Galt, Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image, 25.
¹⁹ Rist has commented on this, writing, “I want to make cheerful but not superficial works. I’m not afraid of beauty, although it is often associated with corruption, because beauty is also exploited to sell things, like the whole business of advertisement. The human psyche needs its own definition of beauty for the relaxation of minds. There are beauties other than what advertisement enjoys.” Wu Jianru, “Pipilotti Rist,” LEAP, December 2013, n.p.
dismissed as shallow, rather than a strategy of radical excess (unlike, for instance, camp).\textsuperscript{20} Though the pretty is typically considered delicate, the readings of Rist’s work cited above show that it can also be disturbing. Further, Rist, by combining the pretty with the gross, renders the intolerable mesmerizing, thereby potentially altering attitudes towards that which is abject and feminine but also often quotidian for female bodies. The best example of rendering the gross pretty is found in her depictions of menstrual blood, which is presented as nearly fuchsia in color and delicately dripping down her body in \textit{Blutclip} (1993), and which her protagonist collects in a silver chalice in \textit{Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)} (2008). This aestheticization of menstrual blood prompted one reviewer to describe her work as “much more beautiful than it is gynecological,” implying the writer would have normally considered an examination of female physiology as beauty’s antithesis (i.e., disgust, according to Kant).\textsuperscript{21} The description also references the clinical (and thereby affectless) tone of a medical examination, recalling Mona Hatoum’s slightly earlier use of endoscopic cameras, which show less affective and aestheticized images than Rist. Though they show abject imagery—Hatoum’s own innards—they recall the at once intimate and invasive tone of colonoscopy footage.

\textbf{Immersion and Intestines}

One formal device by which Rist complicates the moving image’s flat, seductive surface is through installation and projection, whereby she constructs a spatial configuration out of multiple flat surfaces, immersing her viewers within them. However, this tactic exacerbates the image’s seductive qualities by mitigating a sense of physical distance from the image. Immersion is also a formal property of the disgusting: the disgusting disturbs because it has the capacity to get inside or surround your body against your will. By contrast, the pretty is aversive because it is merely

\textsuperscript{20} Galt, \textit{Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image}, 11.
superficial—on the surface, rather than inside. In *Mutaflor*, the artist implies an immersion of the camera within her own body—the object of the gaze swallows the gazing device. The camera, to be clear, is not actually immersed in her body: It’s a trick, although not an especially deceptive one. In *Sip My Ocean*, Rist immerses her viewers in the image by placing her viewers inside her projections. Her work regularly depicts bodily innards—notably, her work *Pour Your Body Out*, an immersive corner projection that was displayed in MoMA’s Marron Atrium and drew heavily on her earlier *Sip My Ocean*. With a title referencing a command one might receive in yoga class but that also implies pouring out the liquids comprising the inside of one’s body, the artist encourages viewers of *Pour Your Body Out* to:
bend from the hips, stretch the sinews, and look (backward) through your legs as if you could water the floor beneath you with your upper body and head. That’s the perfect perspective to see the installation from.22

“Surrounded, enclosed, enveloped” is how Juliana Engberg described what Rist’s “floating, fluid worlds” do to her—not only by enveloping her viewers in formless light, but also by depicting fluid imagery, whether underwater worlds or bodily insides.23 One review of Pour Your Body Out described the piece as “a video and sound installation that will soak [MoMA’s] second-floor atrium,”24 and Sylvia Lavin famously described the meeting of Rist’s projections with MoMA’s walls as “kissing architecture,” both using language that captures the liquid, formless qualities of her use of projected light.25

Regarding this shift toward installation in 1996, Rist notes that she did not think of herself as an artist per se, but that she wanted to “create rooms where people could find themselves,” continuing that she “was convinced that music and dancing are, in a way, reflections of the inner body. And with dancing and music, we try to show our interior selves outside and melt together.”26 A former member of the band Les Reines Prochaines, Rist regularly incorporates hypnotic music into her alluring visuals, including the aforementioned

Fig. 2.10 Pipilotti Rist, Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters) (installation view), 2008

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appropriation of popular songs by Chris Isaak and the Beatles. Yet curiously, throughout the literature on disgust, a consensus persists that sound is not a carrier of disgust. “Hearing is the sense that plays the smallest role in producing disgust,” writes Miller. “It mainly disgusts because of prior associations with bad visions, nausea, or loathsome touching.” Yet this is precisely how he describes vision to work: empathetically with other senses, by, for instance, triggering nausea at the sight of a food that once made you sick. He also writes, “Only hearing is relatively exempt from disgust, and even it, via its remarkable sensitivity to annoyance and irritation, can lead us by slow degrees to disgust.” For Carolyn Korsemeyer, this is because hearing, like vision, allows for, and even necessitates, distance from its object, whereas taste, smell, and touch necessitate proximity—i.e., are contact senses—and often require ingestion. They make us, therefore, more susceptible to contamination. This hypothesis of distance has been contested, namely by Stamatia Portanova in her 2005 article “Rhythmic Parasites: A Virological Analysis of Sound and Dance.” Portanova’s essay analyzes what she calls “rhythmic infection” and, drawing on virological language by using words such as “parasite,” “infection,” and “viral” throughout, shows how sound is carried through the bodies of its perceiving subjects via vibration. She describes “the disturbing spread of rhythm as a viral propagation infecting all biological, social or cybernetic bodies,” noting that we might find ourselves tapping our feet involuntarily, or that a song might get stuck in our head—stickiness being a defining feature of disgust, one especially operative for Sara Ahmed, who notes that “to get stuck

27 Miller, The Anatomy of Disgust, 32.
to something is also to become sticky.” Kant’s distinction of beauty from disgust is important here—the beautiful is pleasing, and the disgusting is displeasing. It is often pleasant to find yourself dancing involuntarily, and therefore not disgusting. Similarly, we might describe someone’s laughter as *infectious* or *contagious*, but that does not mean we are disgusted by it. Miller is correct when he notes that displeasing sounds, or sounds in excess, are often more annoying than disgusting. Still, there are plenty of disgusting sounds—the biting of nails, cracking knuckles, the sound of vomiting—and sound is not always transmitted to subjects at a distance. In *Sip My Ocean*, Rist covers Chris Isaak’s 1989 “Wicked Game,” she renders it even more lulling than the original, but screams one line vehemently: “I don’t want to fall in love,” aptly capturing a potential experience by viewers attempting to resist her hypnotic work.32

Not only does Rist envelop her viewers in her images by way of projection, then, but she aims to get into their bodies—literally through sound vibrations, and figuratively by affecting them from the inside. “It is a hundred times more laborious and difficult to create interior spaces by visual means than it is with sound,” she notes. “We spend our entire lives in such close proximity to our bodies. . . . To me music often seems like an attempt to understand the inside of our body.”33 By immersing her viewers into her work and into her body through multichannel projection and “sticky” sounds, she works to dissolve the boundaries between artist, viewer, art, and technology. As Kristeva notes, the abject is that which disturbs boundaries.34 This dissolution or encompassing effect of Rist’s work has been experienced as both lulling and disturbing in various combinations by various viewers, as is aptly captured by one critic’s comment, that: “There is a strong sense of an all-

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32 On her 2005 album Soundtrack de las Videoinstalaciones de Pipilotti Rist, she titles the cover “I’m a Victim of This Song.”
33 Rist, “Conversation,” in Pipilotti Rist: Congratulations!, 44.
34 Kristeva, Powers of Horror, 4.
encompassing and limitless female sexuality. I feel absorbed and lost in it, at moments almost dangerously infantilized, my body diffused. Words like *absorbed* and *diffused* again draw on water—an ocean that we experience optically as a surface often without knowing the magnitude of its depths.

While I will more directly address feminist critiques of ocular-centrism in the following chapter, I want to unpack how Rist aimed to tackle ocular-centrism not only through sound, but by looking *inside* rather than *at* the body. This was her explicit aim in her 1992 single-channel video *Pickelporno*, her attempt at feminist porn. She writes:

My theory with *Pickelporno* was that women—and I am not even sure you can really generalize that broadly—may be more interested in knowing what the other is feeling and thinking than in seeing the action as a third person from the outside. When you watch sex from the outside, it is always much less interesting than when you are involved in it. So I wanted to make a porn film from the inside. She does not view or represent bodily insides as gross, then, but as intimate. Accordingly, Mark Sanders reads *Mutaflor* as

a question of close-ups but also our connection to how we perceive the self through closed eyes... When we shut our eyes we have no conception of size. We are free to imagine ourselves as infinite.

Miller comments on the bodily interior, noting that “the inside, while disgusting in its physicality, is somehow honest not by alluring us with false fronts”; he also argues that intimacy always involves a

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suspension of disgust. He means this not only in a sexual sense, but also regarding the sort of care that we provide for our loved ones even in the face of disgust: aiding a vomiting partner, or changing a diaper. Indeed, Baudrillard wrote in his book *Seduction* that, “neither pornography nor sexual transactions exercise any seduction. Like nudity, and like the truth, they are *abject*. They are the body’s *disenchanted* form, just as sex is the suppressed and disenchanted form of seduction.”

Rist continues, “If you kiss someone, you want to know what the other person is feeling. . . . I want to produce images that allow the viewer to be closer and watch the inside of the heart of the other.” The inside of the body is represented in *Mutaflor* as a cut to black, wherein the viewer, who was just metaphorically swallowed by Rist, emerges from her anus. In the gallery, the viewer is analogously placed inside the artist’s body, which is projected onto the floor and invites viewers to stand inside the image as the camera appears to travel into, through, and out of her body. Rist commented that the projection “eats you,” just as she “eats” the camera. This passage inverts the allocation of roles between artwork and audience,” notes curator Klaus Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 58.


Ross, “Fantasy and Distraction.”

Biesenbach, who concludes, “It is not the viewers who consume the work of art, but the other way around—time and time again, the viewers’ gazes seem to be devoured and excreted by the artist.”

The seductive nature of disgust is epitomized by Georges Bataille in the form of fear of the eye. He writes,

It seems impossible, in fact, to judge the eye using any other word than seductive, since nothing is more attractive in the bodies of animals. But extreme seductiveness is probably at the boundary of horror.

This passage aptly captures the experience of the extreme close-up of an eye *Sip My Ocean*, which is striking in both its beauty and horror—a sensation stronger than, but related to, that of the pretty/gross. As in *Mutaflor*, extreme proximity of the eye to the camera is at once intimate and confrontational.

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Rist refutes not only ocular distance, but relatedly, critical distance as well. Regarding her work’s comments on technology, she writes:

I try not to approach machines from a critical distance. On the contrary, I have always thought that if I can get close to them, I can melt together with them. If I treat them like another person, or like the echo of another person, then we can get along better.\textsuperscript{44}

This manifests in her work as a refusal of not only critical, but also physical distance from technological mediums—again, her viewers are immersed in her imagery and her camera is immersed in her body. She describes the guiding aims that led her to this form:

For me it is paramount that the camera and object are both on the same level of power. Where is the camera? What function is assumed by the eye? How can I be modest without becoming depressive?\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Rist, “Body Electric: An Interview with Pipilotti Rist,” in Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest, 66.
In *Mutaflor*, the power dynamic between object and subject is clearly complicated, in that they are both on the same physical level. They take turns being above one another, and take turns consuming one another.

Another reason Rist provides for exploring feminine pleasure from the inside of the body rather than the outside is that she noticed that women have very few clearly definable fetishes. I once went to a Chippendales strip show and it struck me that nearly all the symbolic imagery there stemmed from the gay world. . . . Why are there so few fetishes women have about men? Maybe women work less with such images, or maybe we have no need for this kind of distancing, objectifying gaze.46

It’s important to clarify that she is referring to (absent) trends in the visual culture of female desires, rather than describing what women actually desire. Whether, or to what extent, these two things are related is a separate issue. While many feminist video artists before Rist explored the medium’s capacity to render the artist both subject and object, maker and muse, in *Mutaflor*, the equal power of the camera and the body is further explored: Rist and her lipstick camera consume one another, and are thereby both objects and subjects.47

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47 Artist Friederike Pezold, for instance, commented in the early days of video, “I was greatly delighted to realize . . . that I could at the same time be in front of AND behind the camera. . . . Finally there was a solution to the dilemma: she = the nude model and he = the painter or in other words she as the commodity produced by him. By using video on a new technological level I managed to make possible what had hitherto been impossible: abolishing the distinction between model and painter, subject and object, image and representation.” Johanna Pröll, “Friederike Pezold” in *2D23D: Photography as Sculpture, Sculpture as Photography* (Nürnberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2014), 36.
The use of the close-up in film and photography has determined (and according to Eugenie Brinkema, over-determined) the representational conventions of the disgusting and the fascinating—particularly the fetishized. 48 When we desire something, we want more of it, and we want it to come closer to us. When we are disgusted by something, by contrast, its closeness is an affront. Further, close-ups of body parts disembodied them, rendering them separate from their bodies and at times unfamiliar, as in Ann Hamilton’s mouth in Aleph (1992-3) (Fig. 1.13). Elisabeth Bronfen responds to Rist’s use of close-ups:

One might say that Rist appropriates cinematic fetishism by focusing her camera on body fragments, such as the child’s lips and the breast it caresses, yet she exceeds this scopophilic draw and thereby deconstructs it. 49 Bronfen continues by interpreting Rist’s gaze as one that opens up

a space in which the feminine body becomes the subject of investigation rather than fetishism, curiosity and empathy rather than desire. The body is made an unknown (even grotesque) quantity again and we, as viewers, are invited to re-engage with it rather than avert our gaze. 50

The way she does this, according to Bronfen—who is writing about Pickelporno—is through the close-up, which emphasizes the “tactility” of her camerawork and “draws into focus the skin of these two entwined bodies, underscoring the materiality of what is nothing more than a filmed image.” 51 She continues

Rist, motivated by a desire not to avert the gaze, indeed to foreground all aspects of the viscerality of human embodiment, deliberately produces grotesque visual bodies. She penetrates the very body surface that conventional cinema seeks to use as shield or pans along it so as, by virtue of proximity, to render that surface unfamiliar. . . . One might say she lingers excessively where the conventional camera prefers to avert its gaze. . . . Indeed, precisely by foregrounding those aspects of the body considered to be abject, she intervenes in a cultural imaginary that leaves the feminine body an enigma to be solved and a threat to be averted. 52

50 Bronfen, “Pipilotti’s Body Camera,” 123.
51 Bronfen, “Pipilotti’s Body Camera,” 121.
52 Bronfen, “Pipilotti’s Body Camera,” 121.
This passage succinctly captures one crucial way in which Rist aestheticizes abjection: rather than aiming to thwart the gaze, she invites it, but allows the camera to come even closer to—indeed, inside of—her body. She extends and exaggerates the logic of the gaze by pushing the desire for proximity elicited by the pretty image to the extreme.53

**Lulling and Luring**

Whereas the disgusting prompts viewers to want to have the offending object removed quickly—whether we are spitting out that which tastes foul, or quickly closing our eyes at the sight of something gross—the pretty, of course, invites—indeed, is often intended to attract—the gaze. Rist’s work is both pretty and gross, which has the effect of luring and lulling her viewers, who might feel a faint desire to look away, yet are hypnotized. This experience is repeatedly recounted by critics. Take Juliana Engberg’s account:

> You are lured to this sound not driven from it. It attracts you because you are lulled into a sense of security brought on by the soothing insistence of the hypnotic repetition of humming underscored by little drum-heartbeats and the birdsong that lies so delicately on the surface of the audible. Life is affirmed and active. So when Rist employs humming as a mechanism to mesmerize the audience, she is signaling a threat overcome by the power of instinct.54

Her work has likewise been described as “hypnotic,” even “beyond seductive, almost trance-inducing.”55 This hypnotic effect has been a point of contention among Rist’s critics: it is what makes it pleasurable, but also what makes some viewers uneasy. Note that Engberg describes it as providing not security, but a sense of security, echoing fears cited earlier of the alluring’s false fronts.

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53 “Image capturing procedures like endoscopy are used only when searching for what is medically wrong. I was able to observe a doctor doing a stomach operation, but the only interesting part was the first few seconds where the doctor goes in and just looks around. After that it is just all the business of finding and correcting the problem, with instruments in the picture.” Rist in *Pipilotti Rist: The Tender Room* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2011), 41.


Again, while it can be pleasant to find oneself dancing or tapping a foot unthinkingly, disgust operates on a similarly involuntary level. Miller writes that “the disgusting can possess us, fill us with creepy, almost eerie feelings of not being quite in control,” in the same way that the seductive threatens the will and agency of the seduced.⁵⁶

Chris Bedford described this experience of surrender to Rist’s video as, “pleasurable enslavement,” adding that, “Before you know it, you have been staring transfixed for an hour, wholly unaware of time, yet wholly aware of what is unfolding before you.”⁵⁷ Indeed, as with Rist’s 2016 New Museum exhibition, her 2008 MoMA installation Pour Your Body Out lured large crowds into the galleries. “The place has been packed every day,” notes Logan Hill. While this is often true of the MoMA, he adds that, “Mothers have been making playdates in the atrium, letting kids run around while they gather on the large round couch. Visitors bring computers and work here, or listen to iPods, or chat or doze or read.”⁵⁸ This work drew broad audiences but, by some accounts, at least, rendered them mere passive viewers, or served something like a screensaver backdrop. This disengaged spectatorship was major cause for concern for some: notably, during the run of the show, actress Alexandra Auder began holding yoga classes inside the installation to prevent viewers from being completely lulled into submission.⁵⁹

Yet a more positive interpretation of this hypnosis is provided by critic Howard Halle, who writes, “Pipilotti Rist . . . wants us all to raise the white flag,” and further describes her work as “languidly, swooningly erotic, and ambitious without being threatening.”⁶⁰ Indeed, many of her installations are created to be viewed lying down—asking you to physically surrender, or at least

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⁵⁶ Miller, The Anatomy of Disgust, 27; Baudrillard, Seduction, 22.
⁵⁷ Bedford in Pipilotti Rist: The Tender Room, 41.
relax. Still, her imagery and subject remain disgusting. Randy Kennedy describes *Pour Your Body Out* as

bringing the world right up to your nose, radically, uncomfortably close, in a boldly feminist way that upends conventions of beauty and body image, but doing so while inviting you to relax, stretch out, put your feet up and not feel preached to or even particularly confronted. Using “confrontational” rather than “disgusting,” Kennedy’s comment aptly captures how Rist’s works are at once radical and palatable. The work, then, might feel as easy and comfortable to watch as a mindless sitcom—hence some critics’ fear of her empty spectacle—but the imagery and stories she renders so digestible are harder to swallow than those typically seen in more mainstream media. Again, the video that caused Auder to feel the need to counter passive, mindless viewing, and that also served as the backdrop for toddler’s playdates, is of a woman collecting her menstrual blood in a silver chalice. To make menstrual blood have such popular appeal is an important feminist gesture, refusing representations of women as simply pretty images.

2.15 Pipilotti Rist, *Remake of Weekend*, 1998

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Formless Feminism

Immersion serves yet another purpose for Rist as she sets out to, in her words, “encourage people and myself to ignore unnecessary limitations,” be they taste, form, morals, or even the confines of the rectangle that typifies the moving image.⁶² Terms like anarchist are regularly used to describe Rist’s irreverence towards rules and structures.⁶³ Sip My Ocean gives form to her aspirations of boundlessness by way of its underwater setting; her characters float groundlessly throughout a liquid world. In Open My Glade (Flatten) (2000–2017) (Fig. 1.9 & 1.15), for instance, a video in which the artist presses her face against a glass in front of the camera that was later displayed in Times Square, Rist quite literally exaggerates the flat confines of the surface of the screen. In her installation Remake of the Weekend (1998), she takes on Mary Douglas’s statement that “dirt . . . is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter.”⁶⁴ Continually rebelling against systems as confining in all their forms, she rejects this classification of dirt by projecting pretty, colorful images onto dirt piles—rendering what our “system” would deem worthless an art object, and a pretty one at that.

Throughout her work, Rist has chosen to forgo limiting principles in favor of pleasure, which has clear implications for her depictions of female bodies. Pickelporno, for instance, was a conscious rebuttal of the

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arguments of antiporn feminists of the 1990s: “I didn’t like the idea that people would use so much power and anger to say what they did not like and what other people should not do,” she wrote. She decided instead to make a porn film that she—and hopefully other women—would enjoy. The feminist ethics of her formal decisions—which, as I have argued, flirt dangerously with the fetishist’s gaze—have troubled many critics. Jane Cavalier wrote that Pickelporno gave her “the uneasy sense that its recourse to forests, water, and exotic fruits merely reiterated well-trodden visual metaphors for female sexuality.” Note Cavalier’s choice of the word uneasy, an affect—like disgust—often located in the gut, similar to queasy. William Ian Miller notes that “moral judgment seems almost to demand the idiom of disgust,” citing phrases like “That makes me sick.” “What revolting behavior!” “You give me the creeps.” In other words, it is not so much her abject imagery that makes her viewers uneasy, but it is the difficulty critics have resolving her ethical position. Gloria Sutton likewise noted that

Rist’s long-standing use of overtly abject imagery (menstrual blood and semen, for example), combined with her stated interest in “shak[ing] up taboos which make people tense or afraid,” often obfuscates what makes her work ‘difficult.’ It’s not the imagery but the issue of ambiguity in the work that makes it unsettling within art history.

Indeed, to Sutton’s point that it is not the abject imagery that makes her work difficult, I have shown that she renders such imagery extremely digestible—in fact, to some, disconcertingly so.

Torn by this ambiguity, some critics have gone so far as to describe her work as “postfeminist.” It is actually extremely difficult to find negative reviews of Rist’s work. The quote earlier in this paragraph describing her piece as postfeminist is actually a critic positioning herself against

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67 Miller, The Anatomy of Disgust, xi.
views of her work as postfeminist, but despite having read every review of Rist’s work I could find—and there are hundreds—I have yet to find a published review that declares her work as such. All of the negative reception I have cited is selected from various author’s confessions about their conflicted views of Rist’s work, which, without fail always emerge as positive reviews. Cavalier’s uneasiness, for instance, was described in reference to her experience viewing Pickelporno in graduate school, which sets the stage for her mind to be changed by Rist’s 2016 exhibition at the New Museum. This says perhaps as much about the criticism industry as it does Rist’s work: to publicly critique an exhibition often entails offending a colleague, and, given a pay rate of about $100 per review and rampant job instability that affords few enemies, offending is not often worthwhile.70 Infrastructural issues aside, critics’ difficulties praising Rist’s work wholesale is revealing: its ambiguity breeds apprehension. Further, I do personally know several people who abhor Rist’s work: who find it “too bubblegum” or are, like Cavalier, uncomfortable with her use of the female body. Additionally, Auder was clearly protesting her work by holding yoga classes in Pour Your Body Out, though not in print. Understandably, the difficulty of neatly resolving her feminist ethics has caused some feminists discomfort at a time when sheer intolerance toward anything with potentially misogynist undertones often feels reasonable. This discomfort with her ambiguity affirms Kristeva’s characterization of the abject as that which does not respect borders: if the form of the disgusting is formlessness, then it is no surprise that Rist’s critics are uneasy when her ethical stance cannot be neatly formed to a recognizable moral doctrine.

Rist has repeatedly affirmed that she identifies as “feminist”—though this word means many different things to many people.71 She’s a feminist, “but it’s hardly a big issue for her,” writes a critic

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70 While it was previously believed that bad reviews sell papers, as articles circulate increasingly online, as the art press is increasingly funded by advertisement sales to the very galleries and institutions they criticize, and as protected staff-writer positions continue to disappear, this is waning.

71 Debates have recently raged in popular media over “Beyoncé feminism,” and the singer’s video for “Hold Up,” which is directly derived from Rist’s Ever is Over All. See Kara Brown, “We Don’t Need to
in *Vogue*, who also quotes Rist saying, “‘Women did it once so I don’t have to go back and do what they did.’” This comment is made especially puzzling given the artists’ cultural and historical background: one Swiss canton did not allow women to vote in local elections until 1990, when the artist was twenty-eight. In St. Gallen—where the artist was born—this occurred in 1972, when Rist was ten. Critics also regularly applaud her sex-positive work despite having been raised in a heavily Calvinist country. Nonetheless, her aim to refuse the confines of feminist art, or the moralizing impetus of feminist ethics, is astute: she is a feminist, she asserts, but not *only* a feminist. Indeed, Amelia Jones’s influential theory of parafeminism was derived from her reading of Rist’s work, though the term has since been applied widely. Responding to Rist’s critics, Jones argues that, “her work is para- (expansive of) rather than post- (beyond) feminism.” In other words, in pushing past the dogmas of feminism, she does not mean to abandon it or deconstruct it, but to add to it. Jones continues,

what is offhandedly termed ‘postfeminist’ might much more productively be considered as a radical extension and reworking of strategies, ideas, and political values that are still feminist in the sense that they offer a critical perspective on subjectivity as (still) embodied, gendered, and sexed—more productively considered, thus, as *parafeminist*.

I have shown how Rist’s work, formally, builds on yet pivots from the art by abject feminist artists before her. I want to add to Jones’s point that her work goes beyond feminism not only because it

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73 “The Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist may have been raised in the birthplace of Calvinism, with its reputation for austerity and penitence. But you wouldn’t know it by her work, or almost anything she has touched in an influential career spanning three decades.” Randy Kennedy, “Pipilotti Rist, Provoking with Delight,” *New York Times*, October 21, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2016/10/22/arts/design/pipilotti-rist-provoking-with-delight.html.
76 Jones, *Self/Image*, 201.
comes later than and is indebted to the feminists before her, but because Rist is bent on eschewing feminism as a confine, specifically as yet another way of policing her body.\footnote{Rist writes, for instance, that she is, “moralistic, but sometimes I think it is also important to be moralistic against the excesses of moralism.” “Body Electric: An Interview with Pipilotti Rist,” \textit{Pipilotti Rist: Pixel Forest}, 69.}

Rist sets out not only to reject moral strictures, but also aesthetic ones. I will show more thoroughly how disgust binds aesthetic and moral judgments in the following chapter. Here, I will focus on Rist’s use of formlessness: not only her liquefied imagery in \textit{Sip My Ocean}, but also as a pioneer of early video projection. “Even in her early monitor works you can sense that Rist wants to break free of the frame of the TV or screen,” notes Engberg, citing Rist’s bouncing body in \textit{I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much}.\footnote{Engberg, “A Bee Flew in the Window,” 21.} And in 1996, with \textit{Sip My Ocean}, Rist’s two-channel, floor-to-ceiling immersive projection paved the way for further explorations into light’s formless qualities. Though light itself is formless, it is that which gives form to all in vision. Sylvia Lavin describes the soft, gentle manner in which her projected images lightly caress walls in \textit{Sip My Ocean} as an act of “kissing architecture.” Lavin admires how her moving images would brush up against [Taniguchi’s] still volume, how her shifting colors would apply moist pressure to his white walls, how sound-filled nipples would bud from his flatness, and how this ‘big room,’ 7,354 cubic meters of uselessness devoted to ritualized transcendence, would get filled up by sensuous bodies pouring in and out.\footnote{Lavin, \textit{Kissing Architecture}, 4.}

Lavin’s description of Rist’s colorful imagery softly kissing Taniguchi’s stiff, white walls is obviously a gendered relationship. While Amelia Jones described Rist’s strategies and position as \textit{parafeminist}, Anna Watkins-Fisher offers another, related term that not only positions Rist’s relationship to earlier feminists historically, but shows how it might be used as a strategy. “Parasite feminism,” according to Watkins-Fisher, is the means by which some feminist artists
feed on and destabilize patriarchal forms [in Rist’s case, the institution of MoMA and the white walls architected by a man] by seizing upon the gendered analogy of the ‘correspondence’ between the feminized parasite and her masculinized host.\(^80\)

In other words, the artists Watkins-Fisher refer to—Sophie Calle and Chris Krauss—perform a sort of feminized helplessness in such excess that they become no longer passive but threatening to the host. As with Piper’s *Catalysis VII*, feminized prettiness is brought to the brink of grotesquerie. Rist’s projected light, by “kissing” Taniguchi’s walls, work to dissolve and destabilize them by coating the modernist white cube in color. Her projections, however, would also not be legible as images without walls to catch and support them.

**Color**

![Image of Pipilotti Rist and Pepperminta](2.17 Pipilotti Rist, *Pepperminta* (still), 2009)

Distaste towards color serves as another limiting dogma that Rist aims to provoke. Her work has been described as “garishly colorful,” an attitude the artist intentionally solicits.\(^81\) *Sip My Ocean* and *Pour Your Body Out* are obviously rich in color. Further, the aim of her protagonist in her feature-length narrative film *Pepperminta* (2009) is to bring color and texture into her drab world as a way of following her grandmother’s advice to live without fear. In *Ever Is Over All* (1997), her protagonist’s light-blue dress, ruby red shoes, and the metal poppy that she wields to smash car windows is a clear nod to Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, a young woman who, like Pepperminta, is liberated and empowered when her world becomes colorful.

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\(^81\) Biesenbach, ed., *Into Me/Out of Me*, 72.
Widespread distaste for, and uneasiness toward, color has been aptly described by David Batchelor as chromophobia, who cites gendered as well as racist and orientalist histories of justification that echo Galt’s account of distaste toward the pretty image and ornament in general. He defines the term as, “a fear of contamination and corruption by something that is unknown or appears unknowable.”

His term contamination aptly captures disgust toward color as perceived excess, and as a formless substance. In Walter Crane’s famed textbook for artists titled Line and Form (1900), he describes line as male (structure and reason), and color as female (cosmetic, frivolous). Galt describes this passage as, “The allegory of the formless feminine shaped by masculine line.” In Batchelor’s account, chromophobia is not only fear of, “some ‘foreign body’—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer, or the pathological,” but is also “relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic.” Galt shows how fear of the cosmetic or seductive is already fear of the feminine.

Rist’s use of color is often cosmetic in the sense that it is applied on top of a more drab image in the editing process rather than captured by the camera. However, the artist notes that this

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82 David Batchelor, Chromophobia (London: Reaktion, 2000), 22.
83 Galt, Pretty: Film and the Decorative Image, 41.
84 Batchelor, Chromophobia, 22–23.
is in order to correct to chromophobia (and white supremacy) that is programmed into cameras themselves. She writes,

Because everyone is afraid that skin will look too red or blue or greenish, the machines have these built-in standards to reduce color so people—white people, mainly—look healthy.\textsuperscript{86}

Not only, then, does chromophobia entail fear of the foreign body by associating the other with the ornamented—and thereby frivolous, irrational—but the subdued tones captured by the camera are likewise a result of the privileging of white skin. Bright colors are usually muted slightly to avoid giving white skin strange hues. Rist goes beyond the surface of the skin, then, not only by going past the close-up and into the body, but also by refusing white skin as the primary goal of the color capture.

To be clear, Rist does not represent people of color with any regularity in her work, but rather she rejects one consequence of white supremacy that has been designed into video cameras.\textsuperscript{87}


\textsuperscript{87} The more recent work of Sondra Perry (b. 1986, United States) thoughtfully explores the role of technology in the systemic oppression of black identity—in particular, through color calibration.
Chromophobia as it pertains to video art is to a degree technologically determined not only by the bias against bright colors designed into cameras, but also because many early experimenters who laid the medium’s foundations primarily had black-and-white equipment recording devices easily available. I am referring to works like Bruce Nauman’s early \textit{Stamping in the Studio} (1968), Joan Jonas’s \textit{Vertical Roll} (1972), or Vito Acconci’s \textit{Theme Song} (1973)—all of which were performed for the camera.\textsuperscript{88} However, as artist Dara Birnbaum has noted, early video art was largely split between performance-oriented work, including the works mentioned above by Acconci, Nauman, and Jonas, and less canonical works of television and media critique, such as Birnbaum’s own.\textsuperscript{89} Artists critiquing media were more likely to use color as they regularly appropriated footage from films and television, while performance videos often drew from photographs such as those by body artists. This work of media critique, however, did not begin until about a decade later. Rist makes work at once performative as well as in dialogue with mainstream media. Accordingly, early in Rist’s career, critics frequently likened her work \textit{(especially I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much)} to MTV, and reasonably so: it was of a similar moment, it was a cover of a song and therefore recalled the music video format, and perhaps above all, it was colorful. This has caused many critics and historians to falsely assume that Rist was watching and influenced by MTV,\textsuperscript{88,89}

\textsuperscript{88} Joan Jonas is also a significant part of the historic transition from black-and-white single-channel performance documentation to color video adapted for an installation context through her later work.

though she insists she was not at the time, and instead claims a debt to video pioneers like Ulrike Rosenbach—to whom she claims a debt.90

**Conclusion**

“Eye candy” is the perfect term to describe Rist’s colorful work: it is sticky and fruity and oozing and candy-colored, but some viewers are regularly made uneasy after over-indulging in its prettiness and sweetness. “A little too bubble-gum,” is, for instance, how a colleague of mine once described his distaste for her work. The comment used the language of excessive stickiness, pinkness, and sweetness that Piper’s *Catalysis VII* sought to reproduce. Whether Rist’s work is pretty or gross, empty spectacle or radical feminist commentary, one thing is clear: nobody can look away, they are stuck. Wrote Michael Rush, “she’s tremendously appealing, even as she loudly subverts social constraints.”91 As one *New York Times* headline put it, she “Provok[es] with Delight.”92 Rist’s work is political, but it is palatable, even popular. Her aims—to free representations of women’s bodies both from a history of abuse and from feminist dogmas—are moral but not *moralizing*.

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90 Ross, “Fantasy and Distraction.”
Chapter 3

Palatal: Marilyn Minter

Marilyn Minter’s 2009 Green Pink Caviar is a seven-minute looping video comprising close-ups of the lipsticked mouths of models, shot from below, slowly eating and spitting out and reingesting various viscous, gooey, brightly-colored substances that range from metallic “caviar” to translucent lime-green goo. The work has been shown in galleries, on a Jumbo Tron on the interior façade of the Barclays Center in Brooklyn, on MTV’s Times Square Billboard, and as the background for the first song of Madonna’s 2008-9 Sticky & Sweet tour. I will consider Green Pink Caviar as an object that rather literally gives form to the notion that the simultaneous visceral and social constructions of aesthetic preferences are often described as matters of “taste,” which uses as an analogy a sense other than eyesight. Minter’s video complicates dominant narratives that describe disgust as the “other” of aesthetics, and trouble Kant’s claim that one cannot depict disgust without reproducing it. She achieves this in a video that is at once mesmerizing and repulsive: one passerby in Times Square called it “sick and horny.”

coated caviar and larger-than-life taste buds are cast in slow speeds and bright colors more typical of the *pretty.* The video’s slight slow motion delays the threat of the contaminating and disgusting, rendering the otherwise-repulsive imagery *palatable*—another aesthetic word that draws upon the sense of taste. The cyclical motions of the tongues it depicts give form to Kristeva’s use of “vortex” (defined as “a mass of fluid… with a whirling or circular motion…”) to characterize the form of the abject’s simultaneous summons and repulsions. Green Pink Caviar also addresses the social construction of “taste” by way of caviar: a food that is to many viscerally disgusting, but that the refined (and wealthy) are capable of appreciating. At the same time, the video responds to women’s long-held role as object of fascination on screen, but complicates that gaze by also disturbing its viewers. Analogously, Minter regularly collaborates with (and offends) various entities of the beauty industry, such as Mac Cosmetics and *Playboy.* This chapter grapples with the fraught reception of Minter’s work, and asks if and how embodied sensations such as taste and disgust might be used as feminist strategies.

Disgust in Aesthetic Theory

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First, I will situate disgust within the tradition of aesthetic theory, which harks back at least to philosopher Moses Mendelssohn's 1760 essay “82. Literaturbrief.” Kant expanded upon this essay in his Critique of Judgment, specifically in the following passage:

There is only one kind of ugliness that cannot be presented in accordance with nature without destroying all aesthetical satisfaction, and consequently artificial beauty, viz. that which excites disgust. For in this singular sensation, which rests on mere imagination, the object is presented as if it were obtruding itself for our enjoyment, while we strive against it with all our might. And the artistic representation of the object is no longer distinguished from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and thus it is impossible that it can be regarded as beautiful.  

Sianne Ngai reads Kant as defining disgust as, “the endpoint of mimetic art,” arguing that the bad affect cannot be depicted without being reproduced. And again, Kant claimed that, “nothing is so much set against the beautiful as disgust.” Likewise, Sianne Ngai called disgust, “the ugliest of all ugly feelings.” Winfried Menninghaus built on Kant’s claim in his intellectual history of disgust in eighteenth-century German aesthetics to characterize disgust as the “absolute other” of aesthetics, describing aesthetics as negatively founded on the prohibition of the disgusting. Eugenie Brinkema adds further that, “Disgust… occupies a conceptual non-space, intimately linked to Aesthetics by being continually banished from it.” Derrida agrees, describing disgust as the absolute ‘other’ of the system of taste.

When something tastes disgusting, we spit it out, vomit, or suffer politely in silence, while trying to suppress our facial expression, so as not to offend the chef or host. Psychologist Silvan

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3 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 155. He uses Ekel, which is often translated as “disgust” but also as “loathing” or “distaste.”
6 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 36.
Tomkins describes the facial expression elicited by disgust as one that works to distance the subject from the offending object—we close our eyes, turn our heads away, and recoil, even if the disgusting object is in our mouths rather than before our eyes.\textsuperscript{10} For Darwin, this is a survival strategy—disgust keeps us from repeating that which made us sick before.\textsuperscript{11} The defensive role disgust plays in taste, however, is often a \textit{last defense}—it is not so useful when the offending object has already been ingested.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, many things that might make one sick taste good—recall the nauseating sweetness of Piper’s bubblegum—while many foul-tasting things are healthy.

The imagery found in \textit{Green Pink Caviar} adheres to typical formal properties of the disgusting. The materials seep and ooze; some are sticky. By way of the close-up, the models’ tastebuds are brought to an uncomfortable proximity. Nonetheless, the video is mesmerizing, its movements similar to the slowly spinning spiral of the hypnotist. Rather than prompting the viewer to distance themselves, it often prompts a lingering fascination.

\textbf{Dialectic of Desire and Disgust}

That the relationship between desire and disgust is a dialectical one is somewhat of a truism, though nonetheless, one that remains rather elusive for many theorists, and again was largely absent.


\textsuperscript{11} William Ian Miller, \textit{The Anatomy of Disgust} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 77. He also notes that there is no evidence to suggest that other species experience disgust

\textsuperscript{12} Miller, \textit{The Anatomy of Disgust}, 67.
from the discourse surrounding abject feminist performance art. Recall that Kant succinctly captured the paradox when he argued that it is the disgusting object’s preposterous claims to desirability that we nonetheless must strive against which make it so abhorrent.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, deeming something socially unacceptable often has the effect of increasing its allure. For Minter, looking at glamorous images in beauty magazines inspires in her simultaneous pleasure and shame—she often feels disgusted by their capacity to allure, by the pressures she feels and inabilities to fulfill the unattainable beauty standards they impose, and her repressed desire to do so despite the impossibility of that task.\textsuperscript{14} The artist calls her simultaneous desire for and disgust toward beauty standards “the pathology of glamour.”\textsuperscript{15}

Disgust’s relationship to a sort of suppressed wanting also features in Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. She writes that, “all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.”\textsuperscript{16} Ngai continues that Kristeva does not conceive of the allure solely as a matter of repression, for “fascination with the disgusting is always something we are often quite conscious of even as we turn away.”\textsuperscript{17} Miller notes that the sort of disgust linked to surfeit or overindulgence hardly relates to any unconscious desire—in fact, it is very conscious. Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank articulate disgust’s relationship to desire somewhat differently, arguing that one can only be disgusted by something thought to delight or satisfy.\textsuperscript{18}

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\textsuperscript{13} Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 155.
\textsuperscript{14} Marilyn Minter interviewed by Alex Fialho, “Interviews: Marilyn Minter As Told to Alex Fialho,” \textit{Artforum} online, April 17 2015, https://www.artforum.com/interviews/marylin-minter-talks-about-her-touring-retrospective-51525.
\textsuperscript{15} Holland Cotter first used this phrase with reference to Minter’s work in a review in the \textit{New York Times} (“Art in Review: Marilyn Minter,” May 5, 2000), and the artist herself has used it frequently since.
\textsuperscript{16} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 9.
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The simultaneous summons and repulsion that comprise the abject both pull subjects toward and push them away, in manners that often feel involuntary to the subject.\textsuperscript{19} Elissa Auther characterized experiences of Green Pink Caviar similarly, describing the video’s “dizzying foreshortening to nauseatingly extreme close-ups that repel the gaze as much as they invite it.”\textsuperscript{20} When we desire something, we wish to increase our proximity to it; but when we are repulsed, proximity can feel offensive. Even an object we do not always find disgusting—in this case, a mouth, and especially, a tongue with larger-than-life taste buds—can become disgusting by way of proximity. We would likely not become overly-proximate to something if there were not some initial allure—be it curiosity (a desire to know), or desire for the thing itself.

It is proximity that causes the language of taste to dominate aesthetic discussions of disgust, for eyesight allows—in fact, depends on—distance between the subject and object. It provides space for viewers to close their eyes or look away, while the senses of taste, smell, and touch are contact senses. Brinkema notes that, “Vision is ranked at the top of the hierarchy of the senses because of its requirement of distance between the perceiving body and the object of perception,” but the acknowledgement of the impossibility of critical distance has started to shake up this hierarchy.\textsuperscript{21} Unwanted proximity—that which seeps, contaminates or oozes, that which does not obey boundaries—is what disgusts. Smell and taste are ingested into the body rather than observed at a remove. Smell, touch, and taste cannot—or are not typically—reproduced by visual media.\textsuperscript{22} Disgust has a strong sensory trigger. Nonetheless, most theoretical accounts of disgust are rooted in

\textsuperscript{19} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 1.
\textsuperscript{21} Brinkema, \textit{The Forms of the Affects}, 122.
aesthetic theory (with the notable exception of Charles Darwin, whose psychological work centers on taste). This reveals, however, more about pervasive ocular centrism and extant academic disciplines than it does about disgust. And yet, “other” senses can never be avoided when talking about disgust, even in aesthetic theory, through words like taste or palatable, which make reference not to eyes but to the mouth. Despite this use of language from other senses to describe the visual, however, William Ian Miller laments that, “The Lexicon of smell is very limited and usually must work by making an adjective of the thing that smells.”23 We ask, “What does it taste like? What does it smell like? ‘Excrement smells like excrement, roses like a rose, rotting flesh like rotting flesh.’”24

**Taste**

For Kant, that which distinguishes the tasteful from the distasteful is agreeability. By this logic, sticky, oozing forms are not inherently disgusting but can indeed be enjoyable if presented as such and in the appropriate context—a tactic employed in *Green Pink Caviar*, as well as by some candies such as gushers, which pleasantly ooze when bitten. Kant defines his use of the word “taste” as, “not only… the taste of the tongue, the palate, and the throat, but… whatever is pleasant to anyone’s eyes and ears.”25 Darwin’s etymology of disgust similarly describes the affect as “unpleasant to the taste,” though distaste is of course distinct from disgust.26 Miller accuses Darwin of etymological determinism for invoking the sense of taste with regard to disgust, asking “whether taste would figure so crucially in Darwin’s account if the etymology hadn’t suggested it.”27 Aside from the above passage, the tongue, gut, and palate are not evoked by Kant again in his discussion of taste. The German word he uses, *Ekel* has indeterminate etymological roots, though taste figures

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25 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 47.
prominently in the French dégoût or English disgust. Ekel is, however, nearly an anagram of lecker (tasty), derived from the verb lecken (to lick). Miller argued that the English word disgust emerged contemporaneously with “the expansion of the meaning of the word taste to name a newly recognized general capacity of refinement, a discernment for style,” showing how an affect rooted in the gut came to describe the aesthetic.\(^2\) J.L. Flanterin’s social history of taste, however, sets out to investigate if the concept of “good and bad taste” originated in the culinary or artistic domain, though his evidence is inconclusive.\(^2\) Etymologically speaking, then, the sense of taste is often assumed to be the originator for the concept of taste as aesthetic judgement. Further investigation reveals the relationship to be more like that of the chicken and the egg.

Gastronomical vocabulary persists throughout discussions of taste in the Latinate languages. Brinkema argues that “the opposite of disgust is a craving: a desire for nearness and proximity.”\(^3\) This stakes out a different position from Kant, who argues for beauty as disgust’s opposite, a binary I argue Minter’s video complicates through gorgeous images of saliva-coated candy that looks like caviar. Brinkema also notes the close phonetic proximity between palate—as in, the roof of the tongue—and palette—an artist’s set of colors, again reinforcing the manner in which aesthetic judgments are often experienced as gut reactions. By adopting techniques of seduction from mass media—glossy, high-definition video slightly slowed down—but training her lens instead on an eating mouth, Minter aestheticizes the abject and in so doing, gives form to the manner in which the sense of taste figures into aesthetic judgment.

Gut

The gut—invoked in Green Pink Caviar through candy consumption—plays a unique role in disgust in that it ascribes a certain veracity to our judgments. The common phrase trust your gut

\(^3\) Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 164.
captures this succinctly. Miller notes that disgust’s firm location in the gut gives it a unique
moralizing role, ascribing a sort of indisputability to disgust by the other.  

Our moral discourse suggests we are surer of our judgments when recognizing the bad and
the ugly than the good and the beautiful. And that’s at least partly because disgust (which is
the means by which we commonly feel the bad and the ugly) has the look of veracity about
it. It is low and without pretense. We feel it trustworthy.

The perceived honesty of disgust is yet another reason why the pretty, by contrast, is often perceived
as deceptive, and thereby dishonest and distasteful. Kant likewise notes that “The judgment of taste
is not a cognitive judgment.” It is, instead, visceral, affective, pre-cognitive. Eyesight and language
are often associated with the cognitive, while other senses are associated with with affect and viscera.
Though experienced strongly in the gut, however, taste is still largely based on social consensus. Sara
Ahmed writes that, “if disgust is about gut feelings, then our relation to our guts is not direct, but
mediated by ideas that are already implicated in the very impressions we make of others.” This is
also why disgust appears to be an affect unique to humans, not animals. As psychologists Paul Rozin
et. al. put it, “disgust seems to require enculturation.” We trust our gut—our gut feelings, our gut
instincts—even though our relation to our own guts are heavily socialized. By using formal
techniques of seduction but training her lens on abject imagery, Minter questions the trustworthiness
of the gut and the image. One might expect to be nauseated but find oneself instead fascinated.

Moreover, caviar—the food of Minter’s title—asks you not to trust your gut. It asks
you to transcend what might be reasonable initial disgust toward the fishy smell, the texture, and the
thought of eating fish eggs to instead enjoy something refined, or rely on the cognitive and social to

33 Kant, Critique of Judgment, 44.
University Press, 2004), 93.
Lisa Feldman Barrett, Michael Lewis, and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones (New York: Guildford Press,
2008), 765.
transcend the affective and material. This is true of many delicacies—for instance, stinky cheese, which is often rare and expensive. Of rarity making disgusting things desirable, Miller writes, “More than making the once disgusting now alluring, it makes the now disgusting now alluring.”

Philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer notes that,

> Most cuisine looks different from the disgusting thing that it originates from except some fine cuisine: cake excessively rich, a roasted pig still recognizable as pig, stinky cheese…. Items that disgust at first may be transformed into foods that we savor—for the very qualities that initially repel.

Those who have experienced caviar and are familiar with its taste and smell are probably not the ones who are disgusted by it. Many museum goers will comprise this class, but the video was also shown in public places and as the background for Madonna’s performance. In Minter’s video it is not actually caviar the models are consuming—rather, they are mouthing caviar-shaped candy. The video’s title is deceptive. The sort of disgust associated with candy is typically experienced after overindulgence, after consuming so much sweetness one becomes nauseated. This is in sharp contrast to

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the rarity that helps socialize otherwise-disgusting caviar into something desirable. The classed components of taste—here, in both senses, regarding caviar—reinforce Ahmed’s claim that our relationships to our guts are socially mediated. In other words, the contrasting relationships to disgust present in *Green Pink Caviar* show that excess can make the desirable disgusting, but reciprocally, rarity can make the disgusting desirable.

While abjection was an operative and influential term for artists, critics, curators, and art historians in the 1990s, Bill Arning has claimed that few painters were filed under the term besides Minter (who was then working exclusively in painting, but now works also in video and photography). That painting was largely absent from the discourse of abjection suggests that it is more suited to mediums that engage with the multisensory in manners less attainable for painting. This dissociation of disgust from the visual is not unique to contemporary art theory: in 1760, philosopher Moses Mendelssohn argued that disgust speaks “only to the darkest senses, namely taste, smell, and touch… [senses that] have not the last part in the works of fine art.”

Photography, however, while not multisensory, has often been used to disgust through frank and direct depictions of that which is typically abjected from representation—which is how performance artists like Schneemann used the medium, shocking with female anatomy seldom so frankly presented in nonclinical contexts (Fig. 1.1). When the optical does disgust, it often does so by triggering other senses. Writes Miller,

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40 “The sight of an unflushed toilet in a public facility, of a giant slug, of eels, of maggots slithering and writhing can disgust quite intensely. In these settings we recognize that sight works by suggesting that prospect of unnerving touches, nauseating tastes, and foul odors.” Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 80.
The memory of smells (and tastes and touches) differs from memories involving the so-called higher senses of hearing and sight… If I recall an odor that made me retch five years ago, or the taste of that bad meat that gave me food poisoning, I cannot do so. What I can remember is how I felt; I can recall the disgust, even reproduce it.\textsuperscript{41}

Kant says one cannot depict disgust without reproducing it, and according to Miller, this is precisely how our memories of disgust operate. We don’t necessarily remember offensive smells themselves, but rather the disgust they caused us to experience.

The distance that eyesight privileges is reinforced in *Green Pink Caviar* by the additional layer of glass that emphasizes the flatness of the screen as a barrier between the viewer and the disgusting substances. Like Pipilotti Rist’s *Open My Glade (Flatten)* (2000–2017) (Fig. 1.15), this maneuver recalls Ana Mendieta’s *Glass on Body Imprints – Face* (1972) (Fig. 1.14) in which Mendieta firmly quarantined herself onto one side of the camera, despite being both author and subject. While the materiality of the substances being consumed in *Green Pink Caviar* seep, contaminate, ooze, are sticky and unformed, they nonetheless will never penetrate the barrier of the glass, or by extension come onto the other side of the screen. That which is abject, writes Kristeva, is “not lack of cleanliness or health… but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”\textsuperscript{42} The disgusting

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\textsuperscript{41} Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 77.
\textsuperscript{42} Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
substances Minter employs mutate, but remain firmly on their side of the screen, keeping the out-of-place in place and diminishing their threat to contaminate the viewer.\textsuperscript{43}

Miller argues that representations of disgust in film work, via fiction and facsimile, to allure while simultaneously repulsing in a manner akin to Kant.\textsuperscript{44} For Miller, the boundary between the screen and the viewers works to increase the palatability of that which would otherwise be—or more precisely, simultaneously is—disgusting.\textsuperscript{45} Brinkema again notes that disgust has been primarily depicted—to her, in an overdetermined manner—in film by way of the close-up, through unwanted proximity.\textsuperscript{46} If the screen, and fiction, serve as a sort of protective boundary from the contaminating, the close-up works to partially overcome this by increasing the perceived proximity to the offending object from the camera’s point of view—not, of course, by bringing the actual object into the theater or gallery. Further, close-ups of body parts render them cast off, in a sense, from a body, causing them to appear strange or unfamiliar—an especially unsettling feature found in Ann Hamilton’s earlier and related \textit{Aleph} (1992-3) (Fig. 1.13), which, like \textit{Green Pink Caviar}, comprises a close-up of a mouth slowly moving and salivating over small balls (in this case, marbles).

\textbf{Saliva}

It is not always clear whether Minter’s models are consuming or spitting out the candy in \textit{Green Pink Caviar}, or whether the substances are coated in saliva or simply already wet. This complicates our perception of exactly how disgusting the imagery is. Saliva is not gross when it is your own saliva and it is in your own mouth. Sometimes we even welcome in the saliva of another, and we might salivate when we desire something. But saliva is gross when it leaves your mouth, and even more gross when it re-enters it. We might keep a separate plate for the olives we are about to

\textsuperscript{43}After \textit{Green Pink Caviar}, Minter would continue to use the glass barrier in much of her work.
\textsuperscript{44}Kant, \textit{Critique of Judgment}, 155.
\textsuperscript{45}Miller, \textit{The Anatomy of Disgust}, 113.
\textsuperscript{46}Brinkema, \textit{The Forms of the Affects}, 161.
eat, and the olive pits we have spit out, so as to avoid getting our saliva onto the olives we are about to drench in our saliva. The already shiny and oozing candy in *Green Pink Caviar* is not visibly transformed by saliva, which looks the same as the glossy substances (and moreover, the glossy film covering magazines), but of course is not. Yet while the ambiguity of the candy’s saliva status might be discomforting, even more offensive would be food that has visibly entered and left another’s mouth.

**Hair**

Perhaps the most disgusting parts of *Green Pink Caviar* are when the models’ hair gets caught in the sticky pink goo and, worse, is ingested by the performer. Hair has an interesting relationship to the “pathology of glamour” or the dialectic of desire and disgust—especially on women, it can be, and often is, beautiful and alluring when on one’s head. Once removed and out of place, it becomes abject. In one experiment that aimed to test to what extent disgust was socialized or natural, researchers sought to see where children under the age of two would draw the line as to what they would not put in their mouths. 62 percent ate imitation dog feces realistically crafted from peanut butter and smelly cheese; 58 percent ate a whole, small, dried fish; 31 percent ate a whole sterilized grasshopper; but only 8 percent would tolerate a lock of human hair.\(^47\) This outcome might only suggest that children are familiar enough with hair to know that it is not food rather than that they

are disgusted by it. Disgust toward eating hair has more to do with its texture and tactility than its actual flavor. This is what made Meret Oppenheim’s *Object* (1936) so preposterous: it suggested the consumption of tea in a furry object. Traditionally, of course, we consume food on hard plates, cups, and bowls, which firmly maintain the boundary between that which will be consumed and cutlery. Sara Ahmed writes similarly of stickiness as a common feature of the disgusting, arguing that “Things become sticky as an effect of encountering other sticky things… to get stuck to something is also to become sticky.”48 Recall that Piper and Kristeva both wrote of the abject as that which threatens autonomy, another way in which Minter’s use of glass to reinforce the imagery on one side of the screen works to render the abject palatable.

Minter later explored hair’s capacity for attraction and aversion in another projected titled *PLUSH*, a book of glamorously photographed female nudes that depict close-ups of pubic hair. The project was actually first commissioned (and therefore funded) by *Playboy* in 2014, but the company found the work distasteful and refused to publish it. The etymology of Minter’s title encapsulates at once desire and disgust: *plush* dates back to sixteenth-century French words *pluche* and *peluche*, which describe a smooth or shaggy/hair fabric. In the nineteenth century, *plush* was used as a term to refer to pubic hair, but it now connotes softness, smoothness, and luxury. Minter has long sought to reclaim images of female sexuality from an abusive history—a project that has disgusted both feminists and

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Some feminists have questioned the ethics of her collaboration with a rather dubious company. Her willingness to work with Mac for *Green Pink Caviar* likewise stirred similar debates about her collaboration with the beauty industry (typically painted as slightly less evil than the porn industry). She produced the work during a commercial shoot for Mac cosmetics—a shoot for which she hired the models with the longest tongues. Minter asked the models if she could film them licking the substances between takes, and they were happy to do so.\(^49\) No doubt, her cooperation with such companies is certainly compromised and impure. This exacerbated critique, which pleases neither feminists nor *Playboy* editors, reflects the impossibility of purely representing a woman’s body free from the extensive baggage of representational abuse. Nonetheless, she directly offended the very target of her critique (the beauty industry), and also took their money and resources away from other projects in so doing.

While it is difficult to determine through photographs of pubic hair, it appears that all of the women included in *PLUSH* are white (or at least light-skinned), and cisgendered. The same is likely true of *Green Pink Caviar*. I interpret this as an unconscious reiteration of the norms, as Minter continuing to represent those who are typically included in the glossy magazine images she is

\(^{49}\) Minter only accepts commercial jobs when she can use those resources for her art practice. In a visit to her midtown studio on 4 December 2017, she told me that Mac was not pleased that she used their resources this way; that is, until MoMA purchased the video.
challenging. Recall that the abject is that which we vomit, and thereby necessarily that which has already been ingested. Minter’s work aims to expel deeply-engrained standards of beauty, but they leave a strong aftertaste in her work. This reiteration of exclusion is no doubt unfortunate. It is revealing, however, in that it affirms not only the subconscious abjection and underrepresentation of people of color that Adrian Piper critiqued in *Catalysis* (Fig. 1.3 & 1.4), but also shows the remarkable degree to which media images have affected the way women view their own bodies. Even in an effort to challenge the beauty industry by hacking its medium, Minter ultimately committed similar acts of exclusion.

In reiterating norms, Minter has often gone so far as to capitalize on celebrity appeal, collaborating with figures such as Miley Cyrus and Pamela Anderson, as well as Madonna—one means by which her work becomes popular beyond the art world. These collaborations are in stark contrast to Rottenberg’s work (to be discussed in the following chapter), which represents the underrepresented and aims to push boundaries of what is considered attractive. Minter, instead, reframes the over and often unfairly
represented. Many of the celebrity women she has worked with have been victims of slut-shaming, which consciously frames her depiction of them. Her representations of Cyrus and Anderson are, importantly, not de-sexualized, but rather insist that there should be no shame associated with women expressing their sexuality. Pamela Anderson has long been invoked to typify standards of prettiness in media. She has voluminous blonde hair, large breasts, tan Caucasian skin, and white teeth—with the help of cosmetic surgery, again invoking the pretty’s association with deception and beauty with a moral purity. Anderson is one of Bay Watch’s longest-serving cast members, and was Playboy’s playmate of the month in February of 1990. She has garnered fame and fortune—and thereby a certain kind of power—for her self-objectification. As one who can and does conform to beauty standards and turn them into capital, she has in many ways benefited tremendously from the beauty industry. This is not to say she has not also been the victim of these standards. She has, for instance, been the survivor of a number of instances of domestic abuse—of course, not because her prettiness is in any way at fault, but because such standards of beauty are a result of the same line of thinking that insist women exist to please men. Anderson’s willful participation in a system that both benefits and harms her also raises the question of how anyone could know what they want against what they have been taught to want. This is, why, as Roslind Galt points out, feminists have long been skeptical of the pretty.

Thinking more complexly about Anderson’s subjectivity, it is difficult to determine to what extent she is a victim, and to what extent she is a perpetrator. Accordingly, there is much about Minter’s photographs of her that does little to complicate traditional representations of the model and porn star, nor do they aim to: Minter’s conviction is that Anderson should not be shamed. Some, however, are at once pretty and gross: in Drop (Pamela Anderson) (2007), for instance, a drip

50 She is less well known as an animal rights activist, and has regularly mobilized images of her body for the cause. Anderson posed nude for PETA’s 2003 “I’d Rather Go Naked Than Wear Fur” advertising campaign.
forms at the tip of Anderson’s nose. At first glance, it is reminiscent of water or sweat, but the intense shininess throughout the series suggests it might be a thicker, stickier substance. It reads as neither snot nor semen nor sweat, but as unnatural. Glitter applied to Anderson’s body likewise is at times indistinguishable from her freckles, obfuscating what is natural and what is not, as well as what is pretty and what is gross. This inability to neatly parse the pretty from the gross, Minter’s criticality from her complacency, as well as Anderson’s desires versus what she has been taught to desire, is thus discomfortingly captured by the series.

**Color**

Minter’s “caviar” is candy-colored, bright pink and lime green, and at times metallic—colors often considered tacky or in bad taste. In his book on *Chromophobia*, in which David Batchelor lays out a widespread fear of color, the author suspects that this fear is rooted in the notion that,

> Colour is uncontainable. It effortlessly reveals the limits of language and evades our best attempts to impose a rational order on it… To work with colour is to become acutely aware of the insufficiency of language and theory – which is both disturbing and pleasurable.

His choice of the word *uncontainable* illustrates the ways in which the colorful can disgust, or be in bad taste—it often oozes beyond the strictures of taste. In the previous chapter, I referenced Walter Crane’s *Line and Form* (1900) in which he described line as male (structure and reason), and color as female.

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*Fig. 3.11 Marilyn Minter, Green Pink Caviar (still), 2009*
(cosmetic, frivolous). Philosopher Aurel Kolnai has claimed that only the organic disgusts; certainly Minter’s colors are not organic, which is a chief formal device by which she renders the gross pretty. Food marketing has used this technique to artificially color certain products, primarily to entice customers through attractive colors and by masking food’s capacity to rot. This sensibility, however, has recently begun to change: artificially-colored foods are thought to be aestheticized and therefore deceptive, their colors unnatural and unnecessary. The colored, fake caviar is certainly less gross than actual caviar—not only because they are colorful, but also because actual caviar would smear and leave traces, whereas this candy maintains its form quite well. The pronounced artificality of the candy colors, however, are still disgusting in another sense: through their association with excessive sweetness and artificiality. This tension between natural and artificial that permeates disgust reminds me of an experience I had at summer camp in middle school. Another camper asked me a question that haunts me to this day: Would you rather eat poop flavored chocolate, or chocolate flavored poop? What is more disgusting, the phenomenological experience of the nasty taste, or the knowledge of consuming a disgusting substance? Accordingly, some viewers might be more disgusted by candy than caviar, and vice versa.

**Temporality of Disgust**

A key, and final, formal device employed in *Green Pink Caviar* that reveals the way in which desire almost always underpins disgust, and that complicates the gaze through simultaneous aversion and repulsion, is Minter’s use of very slight slow motion. The effect is applied so subtly that when viewing the work, one cannot determine, by eyesight alone, whether it was an effect or merely slow-moving models. Regarding the temporality of disgust, Eugenie Brinkema has argued that, “disgust

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53 I asked her in a studio visit on 4 December 2017.
advises us that the worst is always yet to come.”

We feel nauseous before we vomit, for instance, or we are disgusted by something contaminating for dread of the awful sensation it might later produce. Sianne Ngai writes that, “Disgust is urgent and specific; desire can be ambivalent and vague.” Miller likewise wrote that, “Disgust merely wants the thing relocated quickly.” That Green Pink Caviar has a consistently, but slightly, slowed-down framerate and has no narrative arc amplifies the impending urgency of disgust: the worst never comes, it always remains yet to come.

The urgent act of repulsion (or proverbial vomiting), never happens, but neither is the nausea amplified nor placated. Its tempo is, further, relaxing and lulling. Not only that, but the video, as displayed in galleries on an infinite loop, has no beginning or end. Writes Kristeva, “The time of abjection is double… of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth,” succinctly capturing the feeling of being

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54 Brinkema, The Forms of the Affects, 132.
55 Ngai, Ugly Feelings, 337.
56 Miller, The Anatomy of Disgust, 35.
nauseated and awaiting relief in the form of vomit. Minter’s use of slow motion simultaneously enhances her video’s mesmerizing effect, and delays the sticky substances threat of contamination.

**Conclusion**

Minter has been active since the 1970s, but received little critical or curatorial attention until the early 2000s. The artist recalls that her work, which sought to reclaim images of porn from their abusive history and champion female pleasure under the rhetoric of sex-positive feminism, were read as collusions with the patriarchy in much the same way Lippard critiqued body art. Further, her sex-positive message sat at a difficult place in the height of the AIDS crisis. Beginning in the early 2000s, her work went from totally abject to extremely desirable. She began to receive attention in the art world as well as among popular audiences. Phoebe Homan, writing in *The Economist* notes that,

> Her apparently sudden stardom was a 360-degree turn from the near oblivion she experienced in 1992, when she became a feminist pariah after showing her *Porn Grid* series—graphic appropriations of hard-core pornography.

Her 2000 breakout exhibition was titled *Food Porn*, and featured close-up paintings from the early 1990s of manicured hands seductively tending to food, which were sexually suggestive but were less burdened by the abusive history of female sexuality—much like *Green Pink Caviar*. Or, one

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might say, food was less explicit and excessive, and therefore more *tasteful* or *palatable*. Moreover, her earlier work, though meant to reference porn, looked much less like seductive mass media images than her more recent work: compare the dripping paint, visible canvas, and matte surfaces from her *Food Porn* series to the seamless, photorealistic, *glossy*, enamel surfaces of the paintings accompanying *Green Pink Caviar*. As she began to use the high production techniques of the commercial world, her provocative and mesmerizing work such as *Green Pink Caviar* started to be widely distributed. She began to borrow formal devices from glossy, misty, high-definition advertisements in her paintings, and later began working with media (photography, and later video) herself. Her paintings themselves are further rendered glossy and shiny by her choice of medium: enamel on metal. Yet the imagery she depicted did not change much at all, clearly illustrating how her formal treatment appropriated from a more media saturated age rendered her work more attractive to a broader audience. Accordingly, her own career shifted from abject to the spotlight, much in the same way her work oscillates between seductive and disgusting.
Chapter 4
Churning: Mika Rottenberg

Throughout Rottenberg’s career, she has—as she puts it—rented the bodies of extraordinary women, meaning she has hired women who, are contortionists, or are paid to sit on fetishists with their large bodies. These women—Rottenberg calls them “talents”—elect to capitalize on the fetishization of their bodies—bodies that exist in excess of normative beauty standards and are considered disgusting to some but as extremely desirable by others. The artist often casts her talents as workers in absurdist production lines. This chapter will focus on her 2008 video and installation Cheese in the context of a larger series that comprises three additional videos: Tropical Breeze (2004), Dough (2005–2006), and Squeeze (2010). For Cheese, the artist hired six women with extraordinarily long hair—well past their toes.

1 Rottenberg was Minter’s student at the School of Visual Arts, and Minter curated an early-career show with Rottenberg’s work—a 2008 duo show with Laurel Nakadate at Family Business. Later, Minter and Rottenberg had a show together at Laurent Godin in 2008 titled Fried Sweat. One review described the pairing as follows: “Pairing the work of Marilyn Minter and Mika Rottenberg is an idea as delicious as toffee, but maybe a toffee that has been spat out and rolled with a generous gob of spittle in the dirt…. Minter’s interest in constructed glamour and the point at which it tips into eccentricity finds a resounding echo in Rottenberg’s video pieces. With less a focus on sex, the younger artist has explored oddballism and physical extremity in tragicomic work.” See: Skye Sherwin, “Slip and Slide: Minter & Rottenberg.” Art Review 22 (May 2008): 28. It is also interesting to note that Rottenberg was a student of Janine Antoni at Columbia University as well.

2 Her 2011 exhibition at De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam was accompanied by a publication titled Dough, Cheese, Squeeze, and Tropical Breeze.
The work references the historic Seven Sutherland Sisters, fin de siècle American women who received significant publicity for at once fascinating and disgusting people with their hair, which reached a collective length of thirty-seven feet. The sisters debuted their hair as freaks in the Barnum & Bailey circus, and later went on to create a fiscally successful “miracle” hair-growth product, primarily targeting balding men. In Rottenberg’s rendition of this history, the long-haired women create not a hair-growth product, but cheese. *Cheese* is set on a goat farm, and the long-haired women wear ankle-length white cotton dresses and are lit with golden sun throughout the work day. Unlike most of the artist’s videos, the colors are predominantly neutral and natural—those of wood, hair, grass, skin, milk, and goats. Yet throughout her oeuvre, which comprises sculptures as well as video, she has regularly used bright, provocative colors, as in her video *NoNoseKnows (50 Kilos Variant)* (2015). Further *Cheese* has a stronger sense of narrative than Rist’s or Minter’s work tends to, though its absurdist, nonsensical tale is not particularly linear and need not be watched from beginning to end.³ The working women’s residence appears to be handmade from scraps of wood—and the video has often been shown on a monitor in a structure that resemble their chicken-coop-like dwelling.

This chapter will critically interrogate the ethical debates that surround Rottenberg’s practice, which occur in short critical reviews of her work and correspond to similar deliberations among the talents she hires regarding whether capitalizing on one’s body is empowering or exploitative. Minter

³ This non-linear form is true to many works of video art, which have adapted for optimal viewing for the gallery context, wherein viewers might walk in and begin watching the work at any point in the plot.
and Rist have likewise capitalized on the alluring quality of women’s bodies and, accordingly, have raised related questions. Rottenberg, by training her lens on non-normative bodies, introduces a new power dynamic. This investigation, then, draws not only on feminist and fetish literature but also from disability studies, queer theory, and anticapitalist critique. Specifically, I will consider how her work gives form to the ways in which certain bodies become abject not only under capitalism because they are deemed unproductive, but also for failing to conform to beauty standards. Relatedly, many fetishes have been deemed abject for often dissociating from reproductive forms of sexuality. Lastly, I will consider Marx’s notion of the commodity fetish as it applies to feminist criticism by considering Rottenberg’s work with women who objectify or commodify parts of their bodies. The talents the artist worked with in Cheese knew each other prior to collaborating on the video from having participated in online forums for long-haired women. That these women are fantasy workers in their real lives, and that Cheese makes reference to a historic set of sisters, grounds my broader argument about the relationship between desire and disgust in a world beyond the fictional ones portrayed by the artists surveyed here.⁴

**On the Ethics of Renting and Exhibiting Extraordinary Bodies**

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⁴ I use fantasy workers rather than sex workers because not all of the talents view their work as sexual.
In interviews with Rottenberg and reviews of her work, critics often bring up the questionable ethics of her depictions of extraordinary bodies, but this facet of her work has not yet been thoroughly interrogated. To date, the artist has regularly received the final word, and while she unsurprisingly justifies her actions, there is some inconsistency in the ways she defends them—an inconsistency productive for understanding the complicated and uncomfortable ethical questions her work productively raises. When an interviewer asked her in 2007 if she could “be accused of exploiting [her] characters,” she replied:

I’m always waiting for that question. In a way, I am using the actors almost as objects, which is supposed to be a bad thing to do. I’m not trying to be a saint, and I don’t think the artist’s part is to be the ‘good guy.’ I often feel uncomfortable in the position in which I put myself, but my connection with the actors runs like an experiment, a behavioral observation, or a motion study. You could argue that we have an equal and satisfying relationship serving each other’s needs as exhibitionist and voyeur. It is certainly true that to compensate and to film an extraordinary body does not necessarily mean to objectify. There are certain formal and narrative decisions that are more ethical or respectful than others. Moreover, whether to objectify is to necessarily rob a subject of agency has recently been brought into question by both feminists and object-oriented ontologists alike. Nevertheless, there is always some sort of power dynamic at play between the exhibitionist and voyeur. While in 2007 the artist’s position embraced the uncertain and ambiguous ethics of her practice, she took a stronger stance in a 2011 interview:

I get offended when people ask me if the actors with whom I work and who I call talents are being exploited . . . they have a total self-awareness and an ideology behind their looks . . . If

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you rent out your body as they do, you do on the one hand objectify yourself, you alienate certain features in order to commodify them; on the other hand, it is a method to regain control over an unruly body . . . if you see someone who is at ease with an extreme body, that is inspirational.\textsuperscript{8}

Some disabled people and disability scholars have taken issue with the frequency with which their stories are held up as “inspirational.” They argue that this reinforces ableist notions that it is somehow a miracle for a fat person to have a positive body image, or for a wheelchair user to have a flourishing career.\textsuperscript{9} Such notions are predicated on the assumption that disabled or nonnormative bodies and minds can not be happy, powerful, or successful ones, and they reinforce normative definitions of happiness, power, and success.\textsuperscript{10} While one could convincingly argue that long-haired, fat, or extremely muscular bodies are not disabled—at least according to the medical model of disability—I will here draw on the social model of disability as a useful framework for thinking about the ways in which nonnormative bodies are socially abject. The medical model portends that disability is a biological problem to be solved—that people become disabled because of physical impairments, which should ideally be cured through treatments such as medicine or physical therapy. The social model, by contrast, posits that it is not the disabled body that should be remedied, but rather that access and accommodation should be expanded.\textsuperscript{11} This is best exemplified by Nora Ellen Grace’s \textit{Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha’s Vineyard}, which argues that, because hereditary deafness in an indigenous population on Martha’s Vineyard affected over half the population, to be disabled in this context was not to be deaf, but to be

\textsuperscript{9} While “fat” has long been used as an impolite word or insult, recent size-positivity activist and fat studies scholars have argued to reclaim the word, and I use it here accordingly.
\textsuperscript{11} Today, most disability scholars agree that both models have some merit and are not neatly opposed.
incapable of speaking sign language. In other words, the quality which rendered one disabled was an inability to communicate with the majority.

Rottenberg herself admits a “personal attraction to long hair or to big bodies,” and considers herself playing voyeur to these consenting exhibitionists. However, on the set of Cheese, the long-haired women all went on strike in response to what they felt was unfair treatment by Rottenberg. The artist, who only had five days to shoot on location in Florida, refused her talents the twelve-hours of hair-washing time they demanded, and the six women united to rebel. As a compromise, the artist allowed them to wash their hair in shifts so that production could continue—rather than giving all of them the same twelve hours to wash. On set, then, she was reluctant to adequately accommodate nonnormative bodies, instead opting to maximize productivity. Ironically, her work is often read to critique the ways in which efforts to maximize productivity often fail to accommodate non-normative bodies. Further, in a recent artist lecture, Rottenberg revealed that many of her “talents” regularly give her a discount because they believe in her work, which is very different than projects they typically participate in. I am inclined to believe, however, that if the artist is arguing for renting bodies as a means of empowering them, then she would indeed pay them full price. One could argue in turn, however, that the discounts reveal that her talents support her projects enough to want to participate for reasons other than money—that perhaps they find her representations of their bodies more empowering than financial compensation.

If, however, one were to disregard these questionable aspects of the work’s production and look solely at her representations, there remains the question of whether Rottenberg’s gaze (as with

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14 Mika Rottenberg, "MFA in Visual Arts Art Talks: Mika Rottenberg" (lecture, Lecture, Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, January 10, 2018).
15 Mika Rottenberg, "MFA in Visual Arts Art Talks: Mika Rottenberg."
any voyeur’s) is, or could be, one of admiration and respect. Interviews with her collaborators suggest that many feel they are her collaborators, and that they enjoy and feel empowered by their participation. Her use of the camera, however, brings another party into this power dynamic: while Rottenberg knows and respects her talents, how can we rest assured that her viewers will, too? Further, her talents are rarely given lines in her videos, which is one way they are, arguably, denied any interiority or agency—in *Cheese*, for example, the women do not speak. This caused one critic to comment that, “It’s not obvious if they are empowered or enslaved. They might be entrepreneurs, or they might be chained to sweatshops.”

While Rottenberg’s talents almost never speak on-screen, in her most recent monograph, she interviewed several of them about her collaboration with them as well as their own independent practices. At times, the interviews read a bit like an effort to absolve the artist of guilt, but they also highlight the fascinating and complex lives of the women with whom she works. While the fat, long-haired, or body-building

![Fig. 4.4 Mika Rottenberg, *Dough* (still), 2005–2006](image)

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women she depicts consent to her imaging of their bodies—and, importantly, to the distribution of her videos—this does not mean that all such bodies consent to being imaged or represented in this way. Further, many of them admit to having initial reservations about their participation. Relatedly, the six long-haired women Rottenberg hired for *Cheese* regularly debate, among themselves, whether it is ethical or empowering to indulge long-hair fetishists—whether it can be empowering to capitalize on the fetishists’ desire as a means of financial capital and, moreover, a form of radical passivity, or whether, in so doing, they perpetuate their own objectification and fetishization. They all work as models, but not all of them consider their work sexual.

At the same time, what if Rottenberg were to only use normative bodies, as most video artists—and, for that matter, most filmmakers—so often do? This is one way in which the artist indirectly addresses Lippard’s critique of feminist body art: that it so often depicted only conventionally attractive women. While the power dynamic of objectifying extraordinary bodies is a complex one, more often such bodies are underrepresented in mass media. When nonnormative bodies are represented, they are often cast as oddities: recall that the Seven Sutherland Sisters originally worked for the Barnum & Bailey circus. One talent, Queen Raqui, specifically agreed to participate in *Dough* because she felt the project was not exploiting plus-sized women as comic relief. In the same way that the aestheticized abjection of the work in previous chapters solicits

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19 Dea H. Boster’s book on slavery and disability shows how a pair of conjoined, African-American twins were able to free themselves from slavery by making money performing in freak shows—in other words, by objectifying their bodies in a different, comparatively more-humane, context. See: Dea H. Boster, *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South, 1800-1860* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

both attraction and aversion, the gaze that nonnormative bodies have tended to receive is either a stare or a turning away so as to avoid being perceived as staring. William Ian Miller describes this as an inherent property of disgust—which, as I have argued in relation to Minter’s work, is socially constructed. Again, the first words of Merriam-Webster’s definition of gross are “glaringly noticeable.”

Miller writes:

> Deformity and ugliness are further unsettling because they are disordering; they undo the complacency that comes with disattendability; they force us to look and notice, or to suffer self-consciousness about not looking or not not looking.

Such bodies, then, elicit a sort of fascination, but an undesirable one: the urge to stare prompts guilt and disgust in the starer. This affirms Kant’s claim that what makes the disgusting object is abhorrent is its claim to desirability. Miller continues that this causes us to “impute to the disgusting a will to offend. The obese are thus fat because they are unwilling not to be.”

Because nonnormative bodies threaten the agency of the starer by soliciting attention the starer does not want to give, this threat is ascribed an intentionality. Seduction is similarly characterized: Baudrillard described the seducer’s mentality as, “it is not you

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23 I argue that this is the merit of works by Catherine Opie, which document queer bodies and invite viewers to stare in hopes that they will satisfy their curiosity and not need to stare at trans bodies in the flesh, thereby making them uncomfortable. Other artists who address staring and nonnormative bodies are Jenny Saville, Diane Arbus, and Laura Aguilar.

who will give me pleasure, it is I who will make you play, and thereby rob of you of your pleasure, ”
capturing the way in which seduction, like disgust, threatens to rob the agency of the seduced.\textsuperscript{25}

Queen Raqui most enthusiastically defends Rottenberg’s work, and herself provides an
interesting case for considering the ethics of the gaze. The protagonist of \textit{Dough}, she is also a size-
positivity activist and a fantasy worker (her specialty is sitting on people). In \textit{Dough}, she has RAQUI
embroidered on her outfit, a detail that references her work and biography beyond \textit{Dough}’s fictional
narrative. At the center of \textit{Dough}’s Rube Goldberg-like system, wherein a complicated machine
performs a simple task, Raqui kneads dough that is an obvious reference to the texture of her body.
In the interview, Raqui says that her squashing practice is not sexual, although it is fetishistic. She
uses the money she makes to support herself as a single mother, and also to fund her activist website
for the plus-sized community: LargeInCharge.com. “Queen Raqui was born out of necessity; Raqui
of LargeInCharge was born out of dedication and determination,” she writes.\textsuperscript{26} Like Minter, she
profits from an industry happy to equate women’s bodies with objects and thereby commodities.
And, like Minter, she uses some of that money for her activist projects.

Raqui’s adamant defense of Rottenberg’s practice is based on the artist’s formal and
narrative techniques for representing nonnormative bodies. When asked by Rottenberg about how
she feels about her involvement in the artist’s videos, Raqui replies:

\begin{quote}
In my eyes, your works are not about conformity, they are celebrations of differences. What
some see as extremes are really everyday people who can be found all over the world. I think
about the many TV ads, commercials, television shows, and other projects that influence the
world. The producers of these shows use people of so-called extremes as comic relief,
monsters, dangerous, or dumb characters. Even worse, they are using them as examples of
unattractive, unwanted, unsexy, unacceptable people. Yet, in vast contrast, your work is not
using people for entertainment by any means necessary. You are not degrading others when
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{26} Queen Raqui in \textit{Mika Rottenberg} ed. Ann Demeester, (New York, NY: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in
association with de Appel Arts Centre and Museum M, Leuven, 2011), 81.
they contribute to your projects. You use them to express an idea or thought. I see that as a pleasant change from the norm.¹⁷

It is certainly true that Rottenberg’s depiction of her talents is not a mocking one, but the works do have a humorous tone. They do not, however, verge on the grotesque, defined by Google dictionary as, “comically ugly or distorted.”²⁸ Most often, the videos’ logics are absurdist and their color palettes playful. As Julia Kristeva has noted, “Laughter is a way of placing or displacing abjection,” which helps to explain (though not excuse) why such bodies are often used as comic relief.²⁹

When interviewed, one of the long-haired women who acted in Cheese, Leona, confessed that she was skeptical about working with Rottenberg because she has regularly been asked to participate in projects that do not actually exist, but are proffered as a lure for a fan or fetishist to meet with her under false pretenses.³⁰ Leona is a long-haired woman who, with her husband, manages and stars in the porn website www.longhairdivas.com.³¹ Her site members have access to her live cam as well as pornographic

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³¹ Visitors to her website must confirm they are 18 to enter. Similarly, websites such as www.longhaircommunity.com state explicitly that fetish videos are not to be discussed on their forums because minors can participate. The notion of minors and purity and disgust will be further explored in the conclusion.
photos of her and other long-haired women. She also creates custom DVDs on request. Queen Raqui was likewise initially reluctant to collaborate with Rottenberg; she is careful not to get involved in projects that are derogatory toward, in her words, “persons of size,” and has refused many such opportunities. From their interviews, it is clear that in the end, both Leona and Queen Raqui trusted and felt respected by Rottenberg, and even saw their chance to participate in Rottenberg’s work as empowering, despite initial hesitations.\footnote{This should not be taken as definitive evidence that Rottenberg is in the clear. Not only does “consent” as the end all and be all require very particular theories about subjectivity, but also, it’s likely Leona and Raqui would feel uncomfortable telling Mika in an interview if they disagreed. Even more likely, other talents were asked to be interviewed and declined, and talents invited to work with the artist declined invitations.} Not everyone Rottenberg worked with, however, was chosen to be interviewed. The voices of the women who declined to work with her are also absent, so we cannot assume that their views apply universally.

I am not interested in neatly resolving the issue of ethics surrounding Rottenberg’s practice, but rather want to underscore the manner in which the works repeat and reflect existing ethical ambiguities inherent in society while making visible otherwise-underrepresented stories. In making them visible, however, the artist is forced to contend with the fetishist’s objectifying gaze, because the history of representing nonnormative bodies—as with the history of representing women’s bodies writ large—is an abusive one. The women she works with elect to self-objectify as a means of economic empowerment. I am not interested in scrutinizing the artist for making work that is perhaps not entirely politically correct. In fact, I argue that the ethical ambiguity her work foregrounds is a productive one, in the lineage of women reclaiming images of their bodies from an abusive history discussed in previous chapters while simultaneously incorporating those often abjected from media. I am not, to be clear, arguing that offensive artwork can be justified by claiming that it sparks a conversation, or that art is an excuse for abuse. Instead, I am arguing that the complicated ethical quandaries regarding subjectivity, empowerment, and representation that her
work takes on remain difficult to neatly resolve, yet Rottenberg does not shy away from them. Indeed, her work reflects (and is even complicit with), rather than resolves, these complex problems. I readily admit that I am not fully convinced by the artist’s justification for the hiring of extraordinary bodies. Such forms of objectification can be empowering in the short term, in that they literally turn abjection into capital, but in the long term, these forms work to reinforce the extraordinary body’s status as both abject and object. (Kristeva wrote that, “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I.”)\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, they are only empowering under capitalist logic (wherein money equals power), though of course, these talents do live in a capitalist world where that is indeed true. Rottenberg employs women who are already renting their bodies elsewhere, but when she participates in this ethically ambiguous system, she gives visibility to and raises questions about these underrepresented women’s lives and stories. Accordingly, the artist has commented that

some critics claim that my work is not truly political because I act like a capitalist, and I agree—I am not outside of the system. I am trying to have a better understanding of the situation by paradoxically being totally embedded into it.\textsuperscript{34} The impossibility of critical distance under capitalism, wherein criticism itself is a commodity, is not unlike the difficult task of shaking the long history of abuse in representations of women’s bodies that Minter and Rist have both tackled. Rottenberg further aimed to address this in the following quote from a 2007 interview, writing:

I’ve always defined myself as a feminist. There is an aspect of misogyny in my work that is a response to the way society in general is. So I have to ask myself what it means to be a “good” feminist. If I use people’s bodies and objectify them, then I’m a bad feminist, or I’m promoting the usual stereotypes. But since these are so common in daily life, it’s a way to negotiate or understand them and make them empowering. I keep questioning my own morality.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 1.
\textsuperscript{35} Mika Rottenberg interviewed by Merrily Kerr. 114.
The impossibility of being a “good” feminist in a misogynist world, and the continual questioning of ethical ambiguities, is what makes Rottenberg’s work perplexing and productive.③⁶ The reception of Rist’s and Minter’s œuvres suggests that they never fully reclaimed images of women’s bodies. While both stake out ethically ambiguous territory—Minter in collaborating with the fashion industry she critiques, and Rist in setting out to dissolve moralizing confines—Rottenberg brings this ambiguity to the forefront of her practice. While all the artists surveyed in this thesis aim to tackle the conundrum of representing women’s bodies despite the long history of representational abuse, Rist works with her own image, and Minter with models from the beauty industry.

Rottenberg, however, trains her camera on ostracized bodies, thereby introducing a new power dynamic. The gaze is female-on-female, but it involves the power dynamic of a normative body on a nonnormative one, and it is voyeuristic.③⁷

**Excess and Unproductive Bodies**

That which disgusts is often that which is excessive—that which does not obey norms or borders or rules, that which is overindulgent, that which cannot be contained, and which has simultaneous aesthetic and moral implications. Disgust toward excess is often based on capitalist logic: we are disgusted by that which

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③⁶ Laura Castigini has aptly applied Amelia Jones’s concept of *parafeminism*—which, as I show in chapter one, she developed in response to Pipilotti Rist—to describe the complicated power dynamics that Rottenberg sets up. Castagnini, Laura. 2015. “Mika Rottenberg’s Video Installation Mary’s Cherries: A Parafeminist “dissection” of the Carnivalesque.” *Philament: An Online Journal Of The Arts & Culture* no. 20: 11.

③⁷ I assume Rottenberg’s body to be “normative” not only because of the way that she appears—for there are myriad invisible disabilities—but also because she readily admits to the work’s power dynamic. Others might prefer the term “temporarily [or currently] able-bodied.”
is not productive. This extends to societal disgust toward fat, disabled, and extraordinary bodies. Fat bodies are often assumed to be fat because they are not working hard enough, when in actuality there are often many other factors involved, including genetic predisposition. Disabled bodies are often assumed to be unable to work—or unable to work hard or efficiently enough. Moreover, the idea of compensation is often used to reclaim some disabled people: e.g., the stereotype of the socially-inept autistic genius aims to reclaim autists through the work they produce, rather than simply because they are a worthy person. Heather Foster, a female bodybuilder with whom Rottenberg worked for Tropical Breeze, commented that

People may not want to look like us, but at least they appreciate the hard work and discipline it takes to achieve this level of fitness and muscularity.  

In other words, her excessive musculature may be aversive to some—especially because she is a woman, and musculature is considered masculine. She is still, however, often respected because her body type serves as evidence that she is disciplined and hard-working.

Rottenberg’s talents have set out to retool disgust by turning their bodily excess into an economically productive forces. The artist likewise turns the abject into something desirable throughout the absurdist narratives of her work: Mary’s Cherries, wherein extremely long manicured

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fingernails are turned into maraschino cherries. In Dough, one talent sniffs flowers, which produce an allergic reaction; tears and snot drip down her body and become an ingredient in the dough she produces (which, it is implied, is in turn ingested into yet another body as food). The social model of disability mentioned above can be extended to argue that, in a capitalist context, bodies unfit for manual labor have been those deemed disabled. The body types required for profitable labor have shifted over the course of the twentieth century, though in unequal ways across racial and geopolitical lines, as Rottenberg demonstrates in her video from the same series titled Squeeze (2010). Among the laboring women in this video, two uniformed white women with teased hair, enormous breasts, and manicured nails enjoy breaks: one eats a white-bread sandwich for lunch, while another similar-looking woman has a cigarette. Elsewhere—though connected through Rottenberg’s absurdist mechanical production line—South American women labor in a field, and as they reach into holes in the ground, the video cuts to Asian women manicuring their disembodied hands through the hole. The types of labor they perform are meant to be typical of their geopolitical region. Similarly, in NoNoseKnows, Chinese women sort pearls in a factory (this footage is documentary) and the film also cuts to their remote, white middle manager. More broadly, bodies that are viewed as not working to maximize societal productivity—

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or, at worst, viewed as holding productivity back by requiring accommodation—are abjected in myriad ways, and bodies are also racially/geopolitically abjected to the realm of manual labor. Such worship of productivity in capitalist culture not only works to marginalized disabled bodies, it also directed toward queerness and the fetishist: nonreproductive sex is considered perverse and, indeed has been at times pathologized.

**Abject Feminine Secretions (or Hair and Dairy)**

*Cheese* provokes an obvious question: why are these long-haired women making cheese? The video itself offers no connection between the two main substances in its narrative, and Rottenberg’s filmic narratives are consistently absurdist. While I will make no claim as to Rottenberg’s intentions, I will point out that milk and long hair are two prominent examples in Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and both issue from the female body. While men can, of course, have long hair, parents have styled their otherwise-androgynous children through hair length and dress to distinguish their assigned gender since around the twentieth century. Kristeva’s infamous passage on the skin of the milk is an especially evocative example, one that, for this reader, succinctly reproduces the experience it describes:
When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail pairing—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it.\textsuperscript{40}

Midway through \textit{Cheese} is a shot of the long-haired women looking into a disturbingly large vat of milk, which they have just squeezed from the goats. Milk, of course, is a productive and life-sustaining substance produced by female bodies. Nearly all of Rottenberg’s videos show women producing substances in factories. Sometimes, documentary footage is edited seamlessly alongside footage shot in fictional, Rube Goldberg-like machines created in Rottenberg’s studio, as in \textit{NoNoseKnows}. Her videos address feminized factory work—from food production to nail salons to pearl sorting. Cheese, of course, is coagulated milk—a food that should be gross but is desirable and delicious. As with the “caviar” in Minter’s work, there are stinky cheeses that are delicacies and are excessive in their grossness—but this is superseded by their rarity as a commodity and the refinement of taste required to enjoy them. Cheap stinky cheese is generally undesirable.

While the women in \textit{Cheese} are hard at work, they tie their extremely long hair up in elaborate buns: such a hairdo, it is implied, is more conducive to productivity because the excess gets out of the way. It is also meant to prevent the unpleasant experience of finding a stranger’s hair in one’s food. Again, one quintessential example Kristeva gives of the abject is hair: it is often beautiful and alluring while on a woman’s head, but the moment it is cut off and detached from the body, it becomes disgusting.\textsuperscript{41} Hair’s status as both attractive and abject is captured in \textit{Cheese} in the two ways in which the women employ their hair to tame the goats: at times, their silky hair is used to lure the donkeys, who work on the farm to power the machinery, into formation, and at other times, as

\textsuperscript{40} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 2-3.
\textsuperscript{41} Kristeva, \textit{Powers of Horror}, 32.
whips to scare them, which works to get the animals in line more quickly, affirming Sianne Ngai’s claim that disgust is urgent but desire is vague.\footnote{Sianne Ngai, \textit{Ugly Feelings} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 337.}

Hair and dairy are both abjected from the female body and do not obey form, but they do this in different ways. Dairy oozes at a viscosity slightly thicker than water, coating one’s mouth with a film when it is warm and rotting and putrid, leaving an unpleasant stickiness behind after being mopped up. In \textit{Cheese}, it is the gross quantity of milk filling the vat that repulses. (Gross, of course, can refer to quantity or size as well as disgustingness, reinforcing the notion that excess often yields disgust.) Hair is disgusting when it is where it does not belong: when it is off of the head—which is never the case in \textit{Cheese}—and especially when it is in one’s mouth or food, not only because it comprises dead skin, but also because of its texture.

The prototypical milkmaid hairdo found in paintings spanning centuries across the United States and Europe—such as Karel Dujardin’s \textit{Italian Landscape with Girl Milking a Goat} (1652) or Winslow Homer’s \textit{The Milk Maid} (1878)—is a braid wrapped around the woman’s head. Long hair is often a means of representing femininity. The milkmaid hairdo makes visible that the milkmaid has long, feminine hair, but she is restraining it—signaling her as a productive woman who
is taming her excess, and providing assurance that abject hair will not find its way into the substance being consumed—but still tying milk to female bodies. In *Cheese*, the milk comes from female goats, but is attended to by women.

While rarity makes some disgusting foods desirable (such as caviar), surfeit makes some desirable foods disgusting (such as candy). Lack and excess likewise play a role in disgust toward and desire for the female body. Literary scholar Mary Russo, for instance, opens her book *The Female Grotesque* by noting the word *grotesque* evokes the cave—literally, “grotto-esque”—which she interprets to reference “as bodily metaphor . . . the cavernous anatomical female body.” She does not claim this interpretation as the original or only use of the word. Her argument on the female grotesque is predicated on a lack, as the Lacanian female void or absence as abject. The abject female bodies in Rottenberg’s work, however, are bodies in excess. Recall the Seven Sutherland Sisters: men flocked to them because of their excessive hair, which represented what they lacked—and they paid them in hopes that the Sisters could remedy their baldness. This fetishization of female excess affirms Freud’s theory of the fetish, which posits that because female bodies remind men of their castration anxiety, they fetishize something other than female genitals as a substitute for the women’s missing penis. In other words, according to Freud, one deals with what Russo terms the “female grotesque” by ignoring the lack and fixating on a replacement—in the case of long-haired women, an *excess*. This configuration flips penis envy on its head: in this case: the women have in excess what the men lack, which renders them simultaneously objects of fascination and disgust.

**From Fetishizing Commodities to Commodifying Fetishes**

Throughout her body of work, Rottenberg’s talents are repeatedly cast as workers in a factory-like setting producing goods. As literary scholar Hsuan L. Hsu notes,

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Rottenberg’s machines do not yield manufactured products so much as they yield agglomerations of excretions: tears, sweat, hair, sneezes, milk, feces—not what bodies produce but what they consist of and secrete.\textsuperscript{44}

In other words, their production does not fetishize commodities, as Marx describes it, but instead works to commodify fetishes.\textsuperscript{45} In all cases, her characters abject bodily parts or substances that are in turn used to produce goods to be ingested—an allergic reaction to flowers produces tears and snot used as an ingredient in \textit{Dough}, and clippings of red-polished nails are rolled into balls to create maraschino cherries in \textit{Mary’s Cherries}.\textsuperscript{46} Abjecting body parts to make new substances to sustain bodies applies a cyclical logic that parallels Marx’s description of capitalism: accruing more and more capital for capital’s sake, and to no apparent end. In rendering this production line in the terms of abjection, Rottenberg reveals how disgusting this mentality is—once we have cast something off as abject, the idea of reingestion is often nauseating.

Hsu interprets this recycling of bodily excess as follows:

Instead of reproducing the bodies of laborers so that they can produce goods in factories, reproductive labor regenerates bodies themselves so that their affects, excretions, organs, and genetic materials may be mined for profit.\textsuperscript{47}

Crucially, the bodies used are at once abject and feminine: reproductive bodies are feminine ones. As Silvia Federici puts it,

The body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers: the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance, as the female body has

\textsuperscript{44} Hsuan L. Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies.” \textit{Camera Obscura} 25, no. 74 (2010): 57.
\textsuperscript{45} The artist tried to do this literally by selling the moist tissues made from talent Heather Foster’s sweat in \textit{Tropical Breeze} to art collectors and her body-builder fans alike, but nobody bought them. Heather thinks bodybuilders would rather buy their own sweat. Heather Foster and Mika Rottenberg in \textit{Mika Rottenberg} ed. Ann Demeester, (New York, NY: Gregory R. Miller & Co. in association with de Appel Arts Centre and Museum M, Leuven, 2011), 39.
\textsuperscript{46} Rottenberg made this piece in 2004 while enrolled in an M.F.A. program at Columbia University, and it is one of her best-known works—now in the collection at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. This is similar to Pipilotti Rist’s success straight out of school. It is also worth mentioning here that tears are largely considered the only bodily substance to not be considered disgusting but rather, cleansing.
\textsuperscript{47} Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 61.
been appropriated by the state and men and forced to function as a means for the reproduction and accumulation of labor.\textsuperscript{48}

Fat bodies are abject for their assumed failure to be appropriately productive. While in \textit{Cheese} the women produce a substance of desirable consumption, the nail-clipping cherries and snot-laced dough are unlikely to ever be consumed—in fact, if they were, they might produce vomiting—rendering their production, in the end, unproductive.\textsuperscript{49} In producing absurdist products, they produce no real products at all.

Marx’s concept of the commodity fetish has been frequently sprinkled onto short critical reviews of Rottenberg’s work, and given her regular use of both factory settings and fantasy workers, it is probably clear why the application of the concept to her work seems appropriate. Here I will unpack this further and consider how Rottenberg’s work reveals this concept as it relates not only to current anticapitalist critique, but also to concerns found in recent feminist and disability studies. For Marx, the fetishization of commodities elicits certain behaviors from capitalist subjects—for example, the kind of crude appetite thus produced causes the commodity fetishist to smash the fetish when it ceases to be of service.\textsuperscript{50} This mentality also means it conceives of the commodity as an object that exists to serve the fetish worshipper, rather than as itself a subject.

“The Fetishism of commodities has its origin,” Marx writes, “in the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them.”\textsuperscript{51} Certainly, \textit{Cheese} highlights the oddness of the labor producing the fictional cheese by drawing on the peculiar social character surrounding certain fetishes, which are

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\textsuperscript{49} Hsuan Hsu has noted that, “Rottenberg’s assembly lines yield products that are in turn used to sustain the health and productivity of workers,” but you never actually see them ingest it. See: Hsu, “Mika Rottenberg’s Productive Bodies,” 60.


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worshipped and therefore ascribed value by some, but deemed gross by others.\textsuperscript{52} Chiefly, for Marx’s critique, commodity fetishism is that which transforms economically and socially constructed value into perceived intrinsic value found in the commodity itself.

The commodity’s perceived intrinsic value affirms what Marx describes as the alienation of workers from the commodities they produce and consume. In the world of Rottenberg’s videos, commodities are abjected (or alienated, objectified) parts of workers’ own bodies. Milk is not only the example of abjection that Kristeva gives in her theory of the term, but it is also the perfect example of a substance cast off—sucked or squeezed—from a body and turned into commodity, which relies on women’s bodies as a productive force (here female goats, not humans). In Cheese, an analogy is revealed between selling one’s milk as a commodity and selling one’s image as the long-haired women do both in and outside of Rottenberg’s film. Instead of fetishizing the commodity-product (milk) (indeed, although in the end cheese is actually produced, in most of the artists’ films, the final products are absurdist or nonexistent), fetishes (long hair) are commodified. Such a correlation encapsulates the intersection between the commodification of everything and the objectification of women’s bodies, as well as the dialectic between desire and disgust: that which was once abject becomes retooled and resold as a commodity. Indeed, while it is the cast-off nature of a substance that renders it abject, this alienation is also precisely what renders it a commodity.

Conclusion

“I’m interested in one of Marx’s main points, that capitalism basically gives shapes to and creates units out of shapeless substances,” Rottenberg has written.\textsuperscript{53} Nowhere does Marx use this

\textsuperscript{52} William Pietz has shown that the term ‘fetish’ was first used in the context of colonial trade in West Africa, meaning it has always had a relationship with both the “Other” and economy. See: William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish," \textit{RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics} 13 (Spring 1987): 23.

\textsuperscript{53} Mika Rottenberg interviewed by Eleanor Heartney, "Mika Rottenberg Putting the Body to Work," \textit{Art-Press 377}, April 2011: 49.
precise language of shapelessness, but certainly his work has addressed the ways in which capitalism creates commodities out of all that it can—which often means rendering excess into a discrete form. Rottenberg’s interpretation is telling, if perhaps not precise: as I have argued, the form of the abject is formlessness—that which seeps, contaminates, or oozes; that which does not obey boundaries. George Bataille defines his concept of the unformed—l’informe—as “a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form.”⁵⁴ The world that demands forms, by Bataille’s account, is not explicitly described as a capitalist one, but is nonetheless one that privileges forms and which the formless, or excessive, can bring down. In both the factual lives of the talents Rottenberg works with, and the fictional worlds she creates, women set out to take that which is bodily and socially abject—often their own bodily formlessness—and form it into something desirable so as to make money and alleviate their abject status.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Market Darlings

While I have so far investigated the critical reception of the art of Pipilotti Rist, Marilyn Minter, and Mika Rottenberg, I want to conclude by looking at their market reception in order to emphasize the broad attraction to their work. In contrast to abject feminist performance artists in the 1960s and '70s who resisted collecting, the collecting market has been an intended audience for the three artists, though at different points in each artist’s career, and in varying ways. All three artists capitalize rather literally on the alluring qualities of the disgusting, as well as on the alluring qualities of the female body. While all three have video works in numerous major museum collections—Minter in MoMA, Rottenberg in SFMoMA, and Rist at the Guggenheim, to name only a small fraction—they also make additional collectible ephemera to accompany their work. While it is easy to scoff at glossy and commodified work, as many have, it is important to consider that the enormous market success of these three artists would have been simply unthinkable for women only a few decades earlier, and still comes nowhere near that of their male counterparts. Minter, born the same year as Adrian Piper, saw little to no commercial success for several decades. While Rist’s success was more instantaneous, the now-canonical work she made at age nineteen was, again, a glitchy low-budget video of herself dancing (Fig. 2.1). In 2018, Rist no longer picks up the camera for commissioned work for less than half a million dollars.¹ The contrast between this and the economic situation for performance artists in the 1970s is stark. More recently, however, both Piper and Schneemann have received retrospectives at major institutions; their aversive work, too, has

¹ Email to the author from one of Rist’s gallerists. 23 February 2018.
begun to attract larger audiences, though certainly not through Times Square billboards or *New York* magazine covers. Schneemann’s first retrospective, *Kinetic Painting*, was mounted in 2015 at the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg and traveled to MoMA PS1 in New York in 2017. In 2018, *Adrian Piper: A Synthesis of Institutions, 1956–2016* marked the very first time the Museum of Modern Art, New York gave over its entire sixth floor to a single living artist. Schneemann’s retrospective included much ephemera from *Interior Scroll* (1975) (Fig. 1.1)—including the scroll itself—and Piper’s included photographs from *Catalysis* (1970–71) (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4).

While the work of both Piper and Schneemann has been displayed to wider audiences, these audiences overlap with, but also differ significantly from, those of Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg. Not only have Minter and Rist shown largely beyond the museum space, but these more contemporary artists have also generated a different type of discourse. Compare the bibliographies of Piper and Rist: Piper is a critic’s artist—note the twenty-eight pages that detail critical reviews of her work. Understandably so: recall Kobena Mercer’s argument that Piper prefigured much of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and has elsewise engaged with critical theory throughout her practice.² Yet while the bibliography of criticism of Rist’s work is likewise extensive, the types of writing on the two artists vary significantly. Unlike Piper, Rist’s bibliography includes no

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monographic books by art historians, but rather a plethora of publications (such as exhibition
catalogues) funded by the presenting institutions, whose role is to defend the work they show, as
well as publications supported by commercial galleries who hire writers with the implicit
understanding that they will discuss the work in a positive light. This is not to say that Rist’s worked
hasn’t sparked a handful of scholarly inquiries, with Amelia Jones’s theory of parafeminism, based
on a reading of Rist’s work, being perhaps the most influential of them. It is important, then, not
only to note the amount of writing produced about an artist’s work, but also the kind of writing: its
intended audience, context, and financial support. While Minter’s and Rottenberg’s work has not
been subject to the same amount of critical attention as Rist’s, their work has been the subject of
articles of a similar category, i.e., primarily gallery and museum publications, as well as reviews in art
magazines. This is in part because Rottenberg and Rist are of a younger generation and their work’s
status as “historical” (and thereby, “art historical,” which typically describes the scholarly discipline
of the study of art) is questionable. However, Rist no doubt features prominently in histories of
video art, and Minter is, again, of Piper and Schneemann’s generation. The type of writing produced
surrounding these three artists is one way in which Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg are revealed to be
market darlings rather than critic’s artists.

Another is, of course, the market value of their work. Each artists’ mass appeal has
translated into capital, but each critically engages their financial success to. While all are fiscally
successful, Rist, Minter, and Rottenberg each incorporate their money and their reach into their
practices in different ways. Rist, whose appeal is no doubt the greatest, does not incorporate her
works’ financial value into her practice in any apparent critical way. Certainly the most popular of
the artists surveyed, she no doubt utilizes the massive appeal of her work to render abject imagery

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Representation, and the Contemporary Subject (New York: Routledge, 2006), 207–238.
popular and thereby disrupt stricures of taste, but her financial gain from this maneuver does not critically reenter her practice.

Rottenberg works directly with the market through her practice of hiring women who rent their bodies. However, these women often give her a discount, and, at least for *Cheese*, she has not always been especially accommodating of their extraordinary bodies. Her own involvement in the economy of renting extraordinary bodies, then, complicates her argument that money empowers the women whose bodies she rents. Further, by participating in the commodification present in her fictional films, she becomes complicit in the very market her work questions—while at the same time giving visibility to underrepresented bodies and confronting normative standards of beauty.

It is not always clear to what extent Rottenberg is aware and critical of her own complacency in the commodification of bodies and excess she both participates in and critiques. There is one instance in which she nods to her complacency within the commercial art world: during her 2010 exhibition of *Squeeze* (Fig. 4.5) at Mary Boone Gallery, New York, the artist included a portrait of the infamous titular art dealer, titled *Mary Boone with Cube* (2010). Those familiar with the figure will recall that Boone is sometimes known as “Scary Mary” in the art world. She was described in 1985 as “the best known of a new breed of young dealers: bright, aggressive and hardheaded in business matters.”

Similarly, but less flatteringly, the *New York Times* described her “monomaniacal drive” in 2009. Boone is known—and criticized—for making her fortune by helping to drive up the prices of art, which of course many dealers do and have done, but Boone has come to represent, and be vilified for, this practice. Many of the collectors she worked with noted her ability to identify

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7 It is not surprising that the dealer most vilified for something practiced by so many also happens to be one of the first majorly successful women dealers in the New York gallery scene.
promising talents at a young age, artists whose work’s market value then increased over time. They began investing in art accordingly, though others resented this, claiming that such a mode of collecting treated art as an investment more like real estate, rather than valuable on its own. This type of collecting grew rapidly during the 1980s—a pivotal moment between the abject feminist performance artists and the artists discussed in this thesis.

Rottenberg’s reason for depicting this charged figure alongside *Squeeze*—in Boone’s own gallery, no less—signals a charged topic, but Rottenberg’s own stance, as in the rest of her work, is unclear. Is her representation of the dealer, holding a sculptural cube of latex rubber, blush makeup, and chopped lettuce, meant to depict Boone as a middle manager between the laborers Rottenberg depicts and art-market commodities? If so, what is Rottenberg saying, if anything, of her role in this mix as an artist clearly collaborating not only with Boone but with the commodification of both her work and the bodies of the women she represents? Once again, Rottenberg reveals herself as both critical and complicit—this time, in the context of the art market.

Minter provides the most interesting case regarding the use of wealth as part of her ethical and artistic practice. The gap between the rigor of her critical and market reception is much larger

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8 Another artist, who has asked to remain anonymous, told me that Boone was instrumental in helping them make money off of their media art, which was important in enabling them to producing non-material work.

9 There is, no doubt, a history of video artists working against commodification, though there were also pioneering video artists who bought commercial slots on television (such as Chris Burden), or who received commissions from entities like MTV (such as Dara Birnbaum).

10 It has also been displayed elsewhere: *Squeeze*, including the photograph of Boone, was acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2011. It was also on view in 2013 at Magasin 3 Stockholm Konsthall as part of Rottenberg’s solo exhibition *Mika Rottenberg — Sneeze to Squeeze*. 
than it is for Rist or Rottenberg, and this gap—between her collectability and her critical acclaim—is very much part of her practice. Though her work might not always read as critical, she is able to make a lot of money from it, and she often uses that money in critical ways. Namely, she regularly donates her work to Planned Parenthood fundraisers. The practice of donation is by no means unique to her—but she has, on a number of occasions, raised millions of dollars for Planned Parenthood, an American nonprofit that provides sexual health care.\footnote{The artist herself got an abortion at Planned Parenthood.} The organization receives at least sixty percent of its funding from the government, and is otherwise funded by donations. Its federal funding is regularly under threat by right-wing anti-abortion activists, despite the fact that abortions are only one of many services Planned Parenthood provides. In May 2015, Minter spearheaded a Choice Works benefit auction for Planned Parenthood, and invited artists Laurie Simmons and Cindy Sherman to cochair. The auction included invited donations by male auction-house stars such as Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, and Matthew Barney.\footnote{Barney no doubt appropriated—and aestheticized—tactics from abject feminist performance art for his \textit{CREMASTER Cycle} (1994-2002), a series of five feature-length films.} All three of these artists have profited from work that likewise uncritically utilizes the alluring qualities of female bodies and male fantasies. Minter states that her goal was to target “the boys that make the most money at auction.”\footnote{Hannah Ghorashi, “Marilyn Minter Reopens Planned Parenthood Fundraising Project, Will Receive Group’s ‘Woman of Valor’ Award,” \textit{ArtNews}, December 22, 2015, http://www.artnews.com/2015/12/22/marilyn-minter-reopens-planned-parenthood-fundraising-project-will-receive-groups-woman-of-valor-award/} She recalled that a couple of women said no, and I know their reason was because their work doesn’t do well at auction, and it hurts their whole market. They totally believe in the cause but they can’t afford to put their work out at auction.\footnote{Hannah Ghorashi, “Marilyn Minter Reopens Planned Parenthood Fundraising Project, Will Receive Group’s ‘Woman of Valor’ Award,” \textit{ArtNews}, December 22, 2015, http://www.artnews.com/2015/12/22/marilyn-minter-reopens-planned-parenthood-fundraising-project-will-receive-groups-woman-of-valor-award/}
While Minter herself does quite well at auction, regularly selling editioned photographs for $15,000–$20,000, and enamel paintings for $50,000–$60,000 (not to speak of her gallery sales), she certainly does not rake in the millions that the men she invited to participate do. After Minter arranged the fundraiser, Planned Parenthood awarded her their 2016 Woman of Valor Award, and later that year, she collaborated with Miley Cyrus and Marc Jacobs on another Planned Parenthood fundraiser. In May of 2018, she custom-painted an Audi donated by Dave Gahan of the band Depeche Mode to yet again raise money for the nonprofit, which was offered with a starting bid of $180,000. Lastly, the rather popular buttons featuring Planned Parenthood logos that wittily read, “Don’t Fuck With Us, Don’t Fuck Without Us,” were actually made by Minter, and though neither sanctioned nor funded by the organization, they do receive the proceeds. I find that most people wearing them assume them to be produced by Planned Parenthood and not associated with an artist all.

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15 Data from www.artnet.com auction results
16 I assume Minter would be pleased by this; she generously gave me a handful of them in her studio, and does not credit herself on the buttons.
The ethical practice of Minter’s use of funds from her work, as well as the work of other artists, is clear: she uses her influence to benefit those in need. Yet while her choice of nonprofit, Planned Parenthood, is a logical choice for the sex-positive message of her work and is a widely respected organization on the Left, the ethics of her representations of women’s bodies, as I have shown, is less straightforward. Nonetheless, she both utilizes and troubles seductive mass media images of women’s bodies to garner revenue for Planned Parenthood. When asked by an interviewer if all artists have a responsibility to be advocates, Minter replied,

No, they don’t. It’s totally up to each individual artist, but most of us lean left. The only reason I stepped up this time is because I have a voice now. Before, I was just another marcher.¹⁷

Her financial success and increased platform enabled her to use her resources for those who lack them, but she does not think art necessarily bears a relation to at least advocacy if not politics.

Critical, Complicit, Consumable

Throughout this thesis I have argued for the subversive capacities of the pretty/gross as rendering palatable, even mainstreaming, that which has long been considered abject, and thereby directly confronting the strictures of taste. It is important to clarify, however, that these capacities

are limited. I have already unpacked each artist’s degree of complicity with the normativizing and oppressive representations they critique, and have shown how the very language of *pretty* and *gross* works to exclude through words that enforce norms. However, there are a number of further risks that aestheticizing abjection entails. Recall Lucy Lippard’s critique of 70s body art: one of her major fears was that such positive reception might mark the art world as a progressive and feminist space, when in fact many of its structural issues and even these body-art works still reinforced oppressive roles. She worried that these gestures and their feedback encouraged women to voluntarily perform in exactly the way the male art-world establishment wanted them to: reinforcing their difference, as well as performing nude. Not only would that risk reinforcing beauty standards and pleasing the male gaze, but, it would do so under the unassailable guise of progressive feminist values.\(^{18}\)

Therefore, the danger of the pretty/gross is that, by troubling taste, it is also necessarily complicit with normative aesthetic strictures rather than undoing strictures completely, and with unchanging (capitalistic) measures of success. In rendering the disgusting pretty, these works speak the visual language of the oppressor, the beauty industry, even if to critique it.\(^{19}\) While pretty/gross tests tolerances and tastes, it does so not by radically countering oppressive conventions but by furthering an aestheticizing impulse. The challenging imagery used by these artists has risked being read by collectors and museumgoers as game-changingly radical, rather than at once critical, complicit, and consumable.

At the same time, this work’s palatability and consumability is also the vehicle for its criticality. While rendering the gross as pretty dilutes the unpleasant taste of the critical realities it indicates, its palatability allows it to communicate to a broader audience. It is *pretty* gross, not very

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\(^{19}\) Albert Memmi likewise wrote that the two answers of the colonized were either assimilate or revolt. Assimilate or revolt. See: Albert Memmi, “The Two Answers of the Colonized” in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1991): 119-141. Originally published in 1957.
gross — pretty signaling a slight or delicate rather than an extreme degree. Sara Ahmed best provides a model for how the dialectics of desire and disgust, or aestheticized abjection, might be used as a critical strategy, writing that

the limits of disgust as an affective response might be that disgust does not allow one the time to digest that which one designates as a “bad thing.” I would argue that critique requires more time for digestion. Disgust might not allow one to get close enough to an object before one is compelled to pull away.20

By employing and simultaneously subverting tactics of attraction using techniques from commercial image production, the works surveyed disturb but refuse to be simply spit out. On the contrary, they venture into the spotlight.

Not only does aestheticizing abjection allow time for digestion and deeper reflection, but the ambiguity of the stances that Rottenberg, Minter, and Rist take is fitting, given their common subject: the problematic of representing women’s bodies without exploitation. These artists’ work reflects, rather than resolves, the quandaries they interrogate, since it is as yet unclear if ever it will be

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possible to represent the female body free from oppression. Furthermore, none of these artists claim to have fully resolved the politics of representation. Rottenberg admits, “I’m not trying to be a saint.” Rist likewise has rejected morals when they feel like confines. Recall that Minter doesn’t necessarily believe that artists have a responsibility to be advocates. All three are often queried about their politics and motives, and all admit to ethical ambiguity while questioning the possibility, use, and limits of politically-correct representation.

Minter, Rottenberg, and Rist set out to reclaim images of female bodies, but the reception of their work suggests that none are fully successful. A significant factor in their resistance to a neat ethical or critical stance is that they each address pleasure, which is often considered taboo and incompatible with criticality. Rist, in depicting her own body to explore her own pleasure, reflects the ways in which women, as the primary objects of sexualization in heterosexual culture, often experience desire as objects of desire. Minter acknowledges the shame that accompanies the pleasure she refuses to repress when looking at glamorous images in magazines. Rottenberg addresses non-normative forms of pleasure that have often deemed abject for being non-productive, disempowering, or simply non-normative. Each resists the notion that pleasure must yield to things like political correctness and critique, and resist a feminist ethics that would discourage their pleasure in favor of politics.

21 This has caused several artists and art historians to refuse to represent women’s bodies. As Amelia Jones put it, “Particularly in London and New York, feminist artists and art historians such as Lisa Tickner, Griselda Pollock, Sandy Flitterman, Judith Barry, and Mary Kelly articulated a theory of feminist visual practice that repudiated the representation or staging of the female body under the grounds that such strategies of making the body visible inevitably reproduced the structures of fetishism.” See: Amelia Jones, “1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art,” X-TRA online, summer 2008, http://x-traonline.org/article/19702007-the-return-of-feminist-art/. Notably, the bodies in this thesis are not always nude.


23 Lauren Berlant, Desire/Love, (Brooklyn: Dead Letter Office, 2012), 74

Pleasure has long been an object of suspicion; it would seem to lead toward absorption and therefore away from impassive criticality, just as seduction is thought to rob the agency of the seduced. This is shown, for example, in the previously-cited critique of Rist’s immersive projections as lulling her viewers into consent.\textsuperscript{25} Further, the feminist ethics of some of the forms by which these artists have chosen to represent pleasure have been put into question at times when the expression of female pleasure resembles male fantasy or the use of women’s bodies in advertisements. The question of true desire versus induced seduction, as well as being extrinsically rewarded versus independently willing certain behavior, raises complicated questions about subjectivity that has haunted critics’ relationship to these artists’ work. Throughout this thesis, seduction, disgust, gender, and image have generated complicated questions about agency and subjectivity. Art historian David Joselit, in questioning “how to locate subjectivity in the disciplinary world of late capitalism,” laments, “The price we pay—in unequal measure according to our race, gender and sexuality—in having to exist as images for others.”\textsuperscript{26} Capitalism, under which we brand ourselves through images, as well as gender, which exists only through modes of representation and performative acts, reveal entangled subjectivities, making any purely critical stance seem impossible.

While debates about the politics of representation have long focused on major aesthetic categories, such as abjection, violence, and beauty, a turn to more minor terms pretty and gross has helped unpack the ambient and quotidian complexities of gendered subjectivity and the politics of representation in a media-saturated age. The works of art in “Pretty Gross” reinscribe rather than critically resolve this conundrum of locating subjectivity, and thus the possibility of critical distance versus complacency as gendered and capitalist subjects.


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