

Spirituality in Abjection, Beauty in Repulsion

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Abstract—The photograph *Immersion (Piss Christ)* by Andres Serrano depicts a statuette of a crucifix submerged into a jar of reddish-yellow liquid alleged to be the artist's own urine. Being at the very centre of the photograph, Jesus on the crucifix emits a smooth yellow glow, forming a strong contrast with the dark-red background. The work has been hugely controversial, many religious people have seen it as offensive and blasphemous. The fact that an idol and a definite symbol of their religious belief is being tainted and submerged into someone's urine and being publicly displayed and appreciated deeply upset them.

Index Terms—Abjection, repulsion, spirituality.

I. INTRODUCTION

The photograph *Immersion (Piss Christ)* by Andres Serrano depicts a statuette of a crucifix submerged into a jar of reddish-yellow liquid alleged to be the artist's own urine. Being at the very centre of the photograph, Jesus on the crucifix emits a smooth yellow glow, forming a strong contrast with the dark-red background. The work has been hugely controversial, many religious people have seen it as offensive and blasphemous. The fact that an idol and a definite symbol of their religious belief is being tainted and submerged into someone's urine and being publicly displayed and appreciated deeply upset them.

However, the motivation behind Serrano's creation is spiritual. The crucifix itself is an embodiment of abjection. It depicts Jesus's suffering, horror, and execution while treated as a symbol to be worshipped and being seen as a common decoration and accessory. As a practitioner of Catholicism, Serrano created this photograph with an intention of making it to be a religious artwork. By creating this artwork, he only brought the crucifix closer to its original context of suffering and humiliation by multiplying and overlapping the abjection. Such multiplication reveals the underlying basis of Christianity with its tendency of merging, flipping, and co-existing of opposite qualities, such as death and life, as well as humiliation and glory.

II. CONTENTS

According to French-Bulgarian philosopher Julia Kristeva's book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, which was published in 1982, abjection is a state in which the loss of distinction between subject and object, or the self and others, causes a breakdown in meaning. This is what gives rise to feelings of disgust, fear, anger, and insult. This process is the human reaction to situations in which such borders are

destabilized, transgressed, and merged, which is like a defense mechanism in order for people to distance themselves from these things that poses threat to their identity. One example is that finger nails can become disgusting once they are cut off, because they used to be a part of people's body but now, they aren't. They are in an in-between state.

Some feel unsettled and opened because their expected normal boundary between a sacred deity is crossed. One of their main preoccupations as Christians was the notion of purity, and urines are obvious deemed as impure by the process of abjection because they symbolises an in-between state, of something that used to belong to our body. However, a considerable portion of Christian narrative and Christian history is characterised by the subversion of purity. The body of the Christ is already tainted with blood and wound, which are altogether deemed as abjection with urine and feces. Serrano brings out the original context of betrayal through the abjection of urine. Judas was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus, and he later betrayed Jesus, which led to Jesus execution, which is the scene depicted in *Piss Christ*. Betrayal in this sense can definitely be seen as a form of abjection in a moral sense. Judas used to be a loyal and faithful follower of Jesus, but he now betrays him. He is an apostle who no longer acts like an apostle, and the abjection lies in such in-between state.

Piss Christ is a reintroduction of the notion of which in what context and what ways should Christ be presented. He did it in order to challenge the traditional and established notions.

It was smashed with a hammer in France, since some viewers feel that the Christ's identity and sanctity is destroyed by the artwork because of him being associated with an abhorrent matter like urine. They perform iconoclasm with this act, rather than Serrano. -To the new icon created by Serrano, or to the Christ himself? When the viewer tries to destroy the work, what is actually broken is the glass, which acts as an extra boundary between the photography and the audience, making him complete and release the abjection by himself with this intentional act of breaking the boundary. The function of abjection is to expel acts that do not respect borders, positions, and rules, they are disregarding and breaking them as well.

"It can be seen as an assertion of Incarnation"

Aura supplied by the bodily fluid- the coexistence of purification of defilement

Revealing and making the audience confront the fact that Jesus's body is a real, functioning body, which brings down the elevation of sanctity." (Rambuss) [1].

Wendy Steiner: "When we do not know whether to read formally, piously, or ironically."

"why should religious art always be beautiful, or be simply beautiful?"

Actually, ugliness and abjection in Christian art can

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strengthen the degree of piety in a lot of cases. Indeed, many of the Christian art have contained ugliness and humiliation in them, especially in the vivid depiction of Jesus's suffering on the crucifix on artworks such as Isenheim Altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald.

There are three reasons that abjection in traditional Christian arts is tolerated and even appreciated by the general audience, according to Mark W. Roche [2]:

"First, for Christianity the lowliest, most wretched person, however ugly in word or deed, has an innate dignity." "The idea of the all-loving god, an idea embedded in the incarnation, makes possible the idea that all persons have dignity, all persons deserve our sympathy, and so it breaks apart genre expectations. The finite and lowly is capable of revealing and embodying a higher truth; the lowly human is evocative of transcendence."

"Second, Christianity's fascination with the ugly stems from a new recognition of the human capacity for evil." "The Christian emphasis on the will as a link or barrier between knowledge and action led to a much greater perception of the human capacity for evil." "The Christian world recognizes sin as a central element of the human condition, one related to both the fall and the need for a savior"

"Third, the ugly and repugnant were implicitly recognized as transitory and part of a larger tale of promise and redemption. The Christian fascination with ugliness is part of a larger redemption narrative. It is easier to focus on negativity, if you have the expectation of eventual harmony. Within that horizon, the human mind finds it more palatable to descend into the depths. Christianity sees suffering as part of a divine plan and so takes us beyond the dying God. Grünewald painted the crucifixion with salvation in mind; his Resurrection belongs to the same altarpiece."

According to Kristeva [3], the main function of abjection was to protect the boundaries of one's own body. Matters that are once in our body but then became outside it, such as blood, urine, excrement, sweat, as well as peeled-off skins, which are deemed as threats and induces anxiety to us, since their nature of transgressing boundaries are considered as undermining the integrity of our body's identity.

Kristeva's notion of abjection has also been developed to explain some of the processes and phenomena in society, in which it explains how certain individuals and groups of people are marginalised and stigmatised by a certain culture and society.

"According to the canonical definition of Kristeva, the abject is what I must get rid of in order to be an I at all. It is a phantasmatic substance not only alien to the subject but intimate with it - too much so in fact, and this overproximity produces panic in the subject. In this way the abject touches on the fragility of our boundaries, of the spatial distinction between our insides and outsides as well as of the temporal passage between the maternal body and the paternal law. Both spatially and temporally, then, abjection is a condition in which subjecthood is troubled, "where meaning collapses" (2); hence its attraction for avant-garde artists and writers who want to disturb these orderings of subject and society." (Foster) [4].

This statement is perfectly applicable to Serrano's art. Through *Piss Christ*, he challenges the viewers to see through the superficial connotation of abject matters such as urine,

and finding deeper relation between the abjection of it and the crucifix. Even if a considerable portion of the audience cannot see through that and finds it to be shocking, abhorrent and disturbing, and the shock effect generated by them completes the purpose of the work.

"Subjects react to the abject with repulsion and loathing in order to restore the border separating self and other. The other is 'adjected' from the self, because the abject is seen as not respecting borders, rules and positions of a society. These abject others are not only adjected by means of exclusionary mechanisms but they are simultaneously needed and produced by societies. This is so because subjects are formed by the exclusion of what they are not." (van Alphen) The context traces back to Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece. It contains two wings, below describes the painting shown when the wing is closed.

Isenheim Altarpiece is characteristic of the traditional Christian narrative with a Crucifixion with St John, his apostle, as well as virgins mourning and weeping by his side, which brings out the feeling of sorrow and salvation. "The right-way up tradition"

It was used as a reference for Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* · Another artist who constantly makes references to Christianity in a way that is deemed provocative is Francis Bacon. Unlike Serrano, who is a devout believer of Catholicism, Bacon has made multiple anti-religious and anti-Christian statements, even though not necessarily related to the abjection and provocation in his artworks that allude to Christianity.

«*Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*»

"Inversion" of the Christian model, marked by an absence of the actual cross.

Conversion of faith can sometimes be achieved through the grotesquely ugly- John Cook *Ugly Beauty in Christian Art*

Arya's "radical" interpretation that *Three Studies* is an updated version of crucifixion for the twentieth-century audience.

By collapsing the symbolic meaning of the Crucifixion, Bacon is taking the viewer from the metaphorical to the literal, where we come face to face with the 'real presence' of violence, which is correlative with the collapse of the ritual. Bacon is thus revitalising the bloodiness and violence as betokened by the Crucifixion. Despite using completely different kinds of media, Serrano's *Piss Christ* evokes and revitalises the pain and suffering of the Crucifixion in a similar way, and they serve the same purpose as the abjection in the *Three Studies*.

Facing the painting- positioning the views as the crucifiers, offers a reflection of themselves

Are the three figures the crucified or actually the crucifiers?

The sources of the three figures are still debated by scholars, but most possibly are allusions to the three Greek Furies. The Greek Furies are the mythological deities who ruthlessly sought vengeance on people who have done wicked things.

With the effect of imposing the idea on views that they are the crucifiers, the association of the figures to the Greek Furies further strengthens the horror, as if they are going to face the retribution done by the figures in the painting.

This way of redefining the relationship between the subject depicted in the painting and Putting glass on paintings is

usually what people strongly avoid. However, Bacon insisted on doing that in most of his paintings. It is through the glass that the presentation of his paintings is deliberately made ambiguous. In this way, the viewers' own image, created by their reflection on the glass, is being merged into the grotesque, brutal, and ambiguous figures in the paintings. This destruction of boundary marks caused by the overlapping of the already-abstract figures and the reflection of viewers themselves creates a new layer of abjection that augments the whole effect that Bacon tries to achieve.

"This vertical format mirrors the viewer's own bodily dimension. It functions as a Gestalt" (van Alphen) [5]. It places the views in a state that prompts them to examine their own minds with the overlapping of such horrifying figures.

"The glass dissolves the materiality of paint and what can be recognised is only the represented figure and space. It is only after some effort, after the viewer has positioned herself at the right spot and angle, that she can look through the glass and see the skin of the figure as well as of the paint." (van Alphen) [5].

"But this Gestalt effect, too, is reversed. It is the skin of the represented figure as well as of the paint that undermines, in turn, the functioning of Bacon's paintings as Gestalt." (van Alphen) [5].

"As a result the skin of the paint as well as of the represented figure becomes ambiguous. The distinction between the two can no longer be made. The materialities of paint and of the represented body are undifferentiable. The fact that the boundary between matter and representation has been crossed produces yet again the [effect] of abjection." (van Alphen) [5].

Reflect on the brutal, dysfunctional nature of humanity

Three Crucifixions represent the antithesis of the Christian narrative of the Crucifixion

"Primal moment of horror"- sacred and spiritual dimension, the heightening of gravity of the Crucifixion

Bacon's employment of the original context of the Crucifixion- revenge, sadism, mob mentality, cruelty of the leader

The painting symbolises a revitalisation of the violence at the heart of Crucifixion in the Christian tradition, which is usually diminished in the context of the Christian narrative. This is collapsed by Bacon, which brings out the primal horror.

"Far from being a dispassionate execution of justice [...] the crucifixion satisfied the primitive lust for revenge and the sadistic cruelty of individual rulers and the masses." Sylvester, Interviews, p. 46.

Shocking, hideous, brutal realism

Parallel to the Christian narrative

More appropriately located outside the institutions of Christianity - a-theology - paradoxical relationship with Christian symbol - especially relevant to the post-war, post-Christian audience

Its abjection lays in the view's confrontation with the self and their destiny, and the role of evil in humanity

Underlined: The Primal Cry of Horror: The A-theology of Francis Bacon Author(s): Rina Arya [6].

Piss Christ is more of a reinstatement for the context and institution of Christianity, while Three Studies is more of an expression for Bacon's ambivalence and the paradox of

Christianity and its symbols. The latter can be more freely located both inside and outside of the Christian context. From this place, I can start discussing and elaborate on the shock effect of abstract art, and how important does the artists' intention is in this as well as the importance of the shock effect in the art itself.

"Obviously the condition of image-screen and symbolic order alike is allimportant; locally the valence of abstract art also depends on it. If it is deemed intact, then the attack on the image-screen retains a transgressive value. However, if it is deemed torn, then such transgression is beside the point, and this old vocation of the avant-garde is at an end. But there is a third option as well, and that is to reformulate this vocation, to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde posited outside the symbolic order, but as a fracture traced by a strategic avant-garde positioned ambivalently within this order. In this view the goal of the avant-garde is not to break with the symbolic order absolutely (this old dream is dispelled), but to expose it in crisis, to register its points not only of breakdown but of breakthrough, the new possibilities that such a crisis opens up.

III. CONCLUSION

For the most part, however, abstract art has tended in two other directions. The first is to identify with the abstract, to approach it somehow-to probe the wound of trauma, to touch the obscene object-gaze of the real. The second is to represent the condition of abjection in order to provoke its operation-to catch abjection in the act, to make it reflexive, even repellent in its own right. The danger, of course, is that this mimesis may confirm a given abjection. Just as the old transgressive Surrealist once called out for the priestly police, so an abstract artist (like Andres Serrano) may call out for an evangelical senator (like Jesse Helms), who then completes the work, as it were, negatively. Moreover, as left and right may agree on the social representatives of the abstract, they may shore each other up in a public exchange of disgust, and this spectacle may inadvertently support the normativity of image-screen and symbolic order alike." (Foster) [7].

However, the shock effect is an inseparable and intrinsic part of abjection whether the artist were intentionally or unintentionally creating it. This is due to the nature of people to feel anxiety and threat when dealing with abjection, and that is the very meaning of abjection's creation and existence.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Jingyuan liu conducted the research; analyzed the data; wrote the paper all by himself.

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Hingyuan Liu is a senior student of the Masters School, NY, USA. He is passionate at history of art. He did a lot of reading in related area. After his hard work in literacy and history classes at school, he decided to go deeper researching in the abjection art.