

THE ABJECT

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The fundamental boundaries that seem to define the concepts of bodily existence come together around three categories: subject, object, abject. Anthropology has made it possible to detect a series of general symbolic lines that differentiate the status and quality of the objects/matters with which we accept a relationship of contiguity from those that must absolutely be “expelled”. Etymologically, in fact, the word abject refers to expulsions from the body. Indeed it seems that among these lines, the most constitutive for human society relate to the status of bodily products: blood, semen, saliva, excrement, tears, pus, vomit, etc. Each of these materials is loaded with a unique symbolism. And the sense of the earliest education would be above all to learn which substances we must keep away from.

All societies examine the foundational border between our body and the world around us by making it a relationship of power or threat. The becoming-object or the becoming-animal, so present in many mythologies and cultures, tell us, as a negative, how this relationship of proximity or distance is structured. Before qualifying the subjective sensation of disgust caused by contact with these substances, the abject refers to intolerable sensations if not situations: it is a good definition of taboo. That relationship to the abject thing, when it is associated, for example, with waste, rot or putrefaction, is marked by the normalized relationship to sensations, in which perception is mixed with codes. Charles Baudelaire seems to have been keen to explore that issue when taking a rotting cadaver as an object of specifically aesthetic contemplation in *The Flowers of Evil* (“A Carcass”), he gives the poem the task of recreating and experiencing beauty, including that of the abject.

The avant-garde modernists of the twentieth century proposed a revolution of sensibility; the tension between fascination and repulsion is central to that dynamic. What explains that we can put on a necklace of cigarette butts, a string of beaded fingernails clippings, or a brooch made of toilet paper? If on one hand we have the establishment of the norm (“that which is disgusting”), we always have a margin in which to attempt to reverse or relativize the perception of disgust (the sensation induced by a substance classified as “disgusting”). In that way we make a Baudelairean gesture. But that approach is limited, since the norm is also based on sensitive-sensorial workings the non-existence or arbitrariness of which it is difficult to summarily decree. The status of excrement is very significant in this respect: it participates in every transgression by contemporary artists, but their perception will in all likelihood not be the object of a positive—if only aesthetic—reappraisal.

Cat. 310
Nanna Melland
Decadence necklace,
2001–03
Fingernails cast in
18-carat gold and linen
thread
50 cm

Cat. 415
Lisa Walker
Necklace, 2016
Leather, foam, metal and
string
43 × 29 × 11

III. 15
Unknown (Spain)
Toad pendant,
16th century
Enamelled gold and
rubies
7.5 × 2.5 cm
Department of
Decorative Arts, Musée
du Louvre, Paris,
inv. OA2321
See cat. 29

Cat. 200
Carole Deltene
Seal C.D. ring, 2008
Iron
3 × 2 × 1 cm

Cat. 308
Aude Medori
Précieuse ridicule brooch
(men's pocket square),
2010
Toilet paper, silver,
stainless steel and resin
9.5 × 7.5 × 1.9