

Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, eds., *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 208 pp. 7 b/w illus., \$ 31.31 (paper) ISBN 978-0-7190-9629-7

Yani Kong

Volume 43, numéro 2, 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1054394ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054394ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Kong, Y. (2018). Compte rendu de [Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, eds., *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, 208 pp. 7 b/w illus., \$ 31.31 (paper) ISBN 978-0-7190-9629-7]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(2), 140–142. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054394ar>

of Nova Scotia—T.W. Smith's *The Slave in Canada* (1899), Sir Guy Carleton's *Book of Negroes* (1783), and the War of 1812 Black Refugee List."<sup>13</sup> The installation also includes vitrines of Black-face memorabilia, as well as artefacts and archives chronicling the history of Black Canadians, each accompanied by Hamilton's written statements. Hamilton's work, along with that of all the other artists featured in the exhibition, emphasizes the rich and complex history of Canada's longstanding Black communities.

*Here We Are Here* makes the necessary statement that issues of anti-Blackness in Canada and of appropriation in the art world are far from resolved, and offers a glimpse of the crucial work that artists and curators of colour across the country continue to do to enact change within museums and cultural institutions.<sup>14</sup> Together, these two exhibitions could have engaged in interesting and necessary discussions to complicate our understanding of Blackness, decolonization, and what institutional change means beyond superficial representation. What would it have meant for the MMFA to choose to decenter whiteness and focus on the importance of *Here We Are Here*? What would it have meant instead to begin with Black Canada? This groundbreaking exhibition should have been given the space and respect to stand alone, as had originally been intended, so that its clear message and obvious power could reverberate unabated in the minds of visitors. ¶

Joana Joachim is a PhD Candidate in Art History at McGill University.

—joana.joachim@mail.mcgill.ca

1. "From Africa to the Americas: Picasso, Face-To-Face, Past and Present," *Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, [www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/on-view/picasso](http://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/on-view/picasso) (accessed May 8, 2018).

2. "Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art," *Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, [www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/on-view/here-we-are-here](http://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/on-view/here-we-are-here) (accessed May 8, 2018).

3. *Ibid.*



Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare, eds.  
*Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016

208 pp. 7 b/w illus.

\$31.31 (paper) ISBN 978-0-7190-9629-7

Yani Kong

Rina Arya and Nicholas Chare's edited collection *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture* (2016) argues that the theory of the abject continues to be an enduring and productive site of thinking in contemporary visual culture. This volume developed out of Arya and Chare's ongoing work on the subject—Arya's *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (2014) and Chare's *Auschwitz and Afterimages: Abjection, Witnessing and Representation* (2011). In *Abject Visions*, the editors gathered writing from eleven scholars who pursue this field of study and address the abject through the manifold contemporary arts. Although the majority of essays in this collection focus on the visual arts, *Abject Visions* develops a broad range of commentary related to cinema, literature, and performance art from the late-nineteenth century into the contemporary period.

This collection proceeds from the model of abjection proposed in the germinal psychoanalytic theories of Julia Kristeva (1980–1982) and combines it with Georges Bataille's concept of "base materialism" (1934–1970) and Judith Butler's development of abjection as a strategy of performativity in which queer bodies constitute the abject figures of the heterosexual matrix (1993).

Arya and Chare's introduction to this volume provides a succinct summation of Kristeva's well-known theory, which she laid out in her influential book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Working within the

4. "Of Africa," *Royal Ontario Museum*, [www.rom.on.ca/en/of-africa](http://www.rom.on.ca/en/of-africa) (accessed June 17, 2018); Shelley Butler, *Contested Representations: Revisiting Into the Heart of Africa* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

5. Adrian Piper, "Goodbye to Easy Listening" in *Adrian Piper: Pretend* (New York: John Weber Gallery, 1990).

6. Charmaine Nelson, *Ebony Roots, Northern Soil: Perspectives on Blackness in Canada* (Newcastle: Cambridge Publishings, 2010), 16.

7. "Anthropomorphic ax blade (1200–1492)," didactic label, *Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, From Africa to the Americas: Face to Face, Picasso Past and Present*, 2018; Samuel Meredith Wilson, *The Indigenous People of the Caribbean* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Tom Kirk, "Ancient Genome Study Identifies Traces of Indigenous 'Taíno' in Present-Day Caribbean Populations," *University of Cambridge*, February 19, 2018, [www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/ancient-genome-study-identifies-traces-of-indigenous-taino-in-present-day-caribbean-populations](http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/ancient-genome-study-identifies-traces-of-indigenous-taino-in-present-day-caribbean-populations) (accessed August 20, 2018).

8. "Aimé Césaire: Sa biographie," *Fondation Aimé Césaire*, [www.hommage-cesaire.net/spip.php?rubrique8](http://www.hommage-cesaire.net/spip.php?rubrique8) (accessed June 17, 2018); Shae Collins, "Why 'I Have Black Friends' Is a Terrible Excuse for Your Racism," *Everyday Feminism*, June 17, 2018, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2017/03/black-friends-excuse-for-racism> (accessed August 20, 2018).

9. Michel Hausser, "Du Soleil au Cadastre," in *Soleil éclaté, Mélanges offerts à Aimé Césaire* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1984), Jacqueline Leiner, ed., 187; Véronique Halpen-Bessard, *Mythologie du féminin dans l'œuvre poétique d'Aimé Césaire. Contribution à l'étude de l'imaginaire césairien*, PhD Dissertation, Université des Antilles, Fort-de-France, April 1999, 315.

10. Daniel Maximin, *Suzanne Césaire: le grand camouflage. Écrits de dissidence (1941–1945)* (Le Seuil: Paris, 2009).

11. "Suck Teeth Composition (After Rashaad Newsome)," didactic panel, *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art*, *Royal Ontario Museum*, 2018.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Sylvia D. Hamilton, "Naming Names," didactic panel, *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* (2013–2017).

14. Michael Maranda, "Hard Numbers: A Study on Diversity in Canada's Galleries," *Canadian Art* (April 5, 2017) <https://canadianart.ca/features/art-leadership-diversity> (accessed June 23, 2018).

Lacanian paradigm, Kristeva introduces a theory of psychic refusal that envisages a variety of abject bodily materials—a gamut of human excretions that divulge an often gruesome, frequently moist and disquieting underside to psychic formation.

The editors note that Kristeva locates her frame in a modernist temporality, and much of the existing commentary on the abject in this book refers to a 1993 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art entitled *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, where four curators chose a selection of post-1945 artworks exploring the extreme limits of the abject body, primarily in terms of gender and sexuality. This exhibition included artworks dripping with bodily excesses, such as Robert Mapplethorpe's *Self-Portrait with Whip* (1978), Eva Hesse's *Untitled (Rope Piece)* (1969–70), and Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1974), many of which have come to represent our contemporary understanding of the abject—or at least what it looks like. As Chare and Arya point out in their introduction, this corpus of works, now largely familiar in twentieth-century art surveys, deals in our abject human materials and the horror provoked by these substances, which include dirt, hair, excrement, menstrual blood, baby diapers, and perishing food (3).

Indeed, as the contributors to this volume note throughout, the influence of the Whitney exhibition cannot be understated, yet the critique underscored here is at the level of representation, where the state of being abject is signalled by the visual character of these works (3). The Whitney exhibition explored abjection as it appeared in Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972), a plastic garbage pail overflowing with used menstrual pads, or the disturbing force of dripping wax in Kiki Smith's *Untitled* (1990), to name two more examples. The range of art included in this exhibition attests to the importance of visuality in abject art: abject art shows abject stuffs, or rather, their

invocation has become the signal of unequivocal abjection in art.

In her contribution “Queering Abjection,” Jayne Wark is helpful in pointing out that the curatorial objectives of the Whitney exhibition slip between Kristeva's fundamental work and the lesser-known ideas from Bataille's 1934 essay “L'Abjection et les formes misérables” (1970). Bataille's aims were sociological as opposed to psychoanalytic: “A critique of how the oppressors subordinate the oppressed through the mechanisms of exclusion and degradation that consigns them to the realm of abjection” (32). Bataille was echoed later in Butler's advancement of the theory of abjection, which shows the abject at work in representations of homophobic, racist, and sexist acts, and the role they play in constituting unstable subjects. Wark explains that this is the context from which the exhibition at the Whitney emerged, and how it served to highlight gender and sexuality at a time when right-wing powers had launched an attack on bodies, particularly queer and female ones. Wark argues that the show's curators were initially guided by Bataille's socio-political conception of abjection, but, in the process of developing the exhibition, this perspective became conflated with the elements of repulsion and expulsion that were specific to Kristeva's theory (33). As Wark sees it, the version of abjection that rose from this combination was a necessary counter-commentary on the context of the American Culture Wars, but it has confused a contemporary understanding of the abject in art since that period (33).

John Lecht and Ernst van Alphen's essays each point to this confusion of approach, showing how the *condition* of abjection (to be abject) and the *operation* of abjection (to abject) are mistakenly taken as one and the same. Van Alphen quotes Hal Foster to clarify: “To abject is to expel, to separate; to be abject on the other hand is to be repulsive, stuck, subject enough only to feel this subjecthood at risk”

(121). The trend in art from the 1980s and 1990s reflected this conflation, as evidenced by works such as Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987), which both represented the condition of abjection and provoked the viewer to react with disgust, thus rendering the work abject (121).

Given that so many of the writers in this volume grapple with the theoretical ensemble of Bataille, Kristeva, and Butler, and that each, in their own way, comes to terms with the limitations imposed by the Whitney curators—that is to say *what it means to name abject art as such*—the essays as a collection may seem caught in a previous time. The art they discuss is difficult to disassociate from the identity politics and power abuses attendant to the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, it is worthwhile to note that our current social climate not only reflects, but intensifies these questions of identity and power. Although the present political condition does not figure among the essays in this volume, Arya and Chare note that “the curators of the Whitney exhibition also recognized the political potential of the abject” (4). The editors also assert the continuing relevance of the theory of the abject in aesthetic and social life. Some of the essays depart from the framework put in place by the Whitney Exhibition, going beyond the largely white canon that has become associated with abject art: Wark analyzes Métis artwork, and Rex Butler and A.D.S. Donaldson's study of Chilean-Australian artist Juan Davila similarly introduces diversity.

Writings from Kristen Mey and Estelle Barrett provide further contemporary perspectives that move beyond the Whitney show. Because so much of the corpus of abject art hinges on the visual aspects of the grotesque or shocking, much related criticism centres upon the challenges of representation. Barrett's essay is grounded firmly in Bataille's conception, contending that the operation of abjection—the ambivalence, attraction, and repulsion experienced by the viewer

as they encounter art—is necessary to the aesthetic experience. As Arya and Chare point out, Barrett “[shifts] the focus from the reading of an artwork to an experiential encounter,” thus drawing the study of abjection into timely commentary on embodiment and the sensory in the reception of art, asking what is the force and function of abject works such as those produced by artist Catherine Bell, whose photographic and video works give rise to a complex of affective sensations (9).

The jacket cover for *Abject Visions* promises a “path-breaking volume” and it is clear this collection marks a useful attempt to reread the abject in the present day, however difficult it is to leave behind the temporal period and theoretical ensemble from which the abject art movement was born. The scholars in this collection demonstrate how the abject in art destabilizes the field of identity and ruptures social and political norms through disturbing confrontations with the viewer. Arya and Chare, along with their contributors, are successful in developing a critical scholarly examination of the history of abject art. ¶

Yani Kong is a PhD candidate in Contemporary Art History and an instructor at Simon Fraser University, School for the Contemporary Arts. —ykong@sfu.ca

---

**Maura Reilly**  
***Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating***

New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018

240 pp. 107 colour illus.

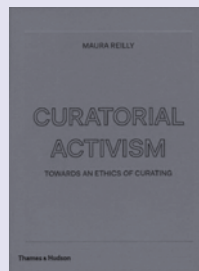
\$32.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780500239704

Marissa Largo

---

Maura Reilly's *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* is a much-needed volume in the field of criticism and curatorial practice. This

book seeks to urge art-world gatekeepers to take on the politics of difference in ethical ways in order to bring to the fore lesser-known art histories or to create radically different ones. According to Reilly, “curatorial activists” take on a variety of tactics that decenter the racism, sexism, and homophobia that have been institutionalized in museums and canons over the centuries. Prominent and well-known examples include Lucy R. Lippard, Linda Nochlin, Amelia Jones, and Okwui Enwezor—cultural workers who did or are doing the work of “leveling hierarchies, challenging assumptions, countering erasure, promoting the margins over the center, the minority over the majority, inspiring intelligent debate, disseminating new knowledge, and encouraging strategies of resistance—all of which offers hope and affirmation” (22). One of the key contributions of Reilly's book is the delineation of three “strategies of resistance” (23): revisionism, area studies, and the relational approach. While revisionism calls for the margins to be included in the grand narratives of art history as it is represented in institutions, collections, and canons, an area-studies approach goes beyond this and seeks to cultivate entirely new narratives organized around marginalized categories of gender, race, or sexuality. The relational approach is the most capacious and multivocal of the three strategies:



it exceeds linear, progressivist narrations in favour of nonhierarchical conceptions of provenance, materiality, and theme.

Currently the executive director of the National Academy of Design in New York, Reilly has developed a theoretical framework of “curatorial activism” informed by decades of feminist interventions as a curator and arts writer, but particularly as the founding curator of the Brooklyn Museum’s Sackler Center for Feminist Art. With this firsthand experience in contesting the hegemony of the art world, Reilly illuminates the social, cultural, historical, and political significance of each curatorial intervention she cites, and simultaneously provides behind-the-scenes details, such as critical reception, limitations, and drawbacks.

In the first of the book’s five sections, “What is Curatorial Activism?,” Reilly cites the trailblazing work of the Guerrilla Girls and Pussy Galore, and offers statistics that index the appalling underrepresentation of racial and gendered difference in major Western institutions. These statistics help underline the need to attend to feminist, queer, and decolonial representational politics. She discusses landmark exhibitions that took place in the US and Europe between 1976 and 2017 that revealed the critical fissures in the grand narrative of Western art history. The second section begins with the unapologetic, post-1970s subversion of two exhibitions: *Bad Girls*, curated by Maria Tucker, and *Sexual Politics*, curated by Amelia Jones. Here, Reilly outlines feminist art interventions that not only resist the masculinism and sexism of the art world, but also raise internal debates about the effectiveness of strategic essentialism in writing feminist art histories. The author examines the exhibition *Women Artists: 1550–1950*, presented at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976 and at the Brooklyn Museum in 1977. Curated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, this major revisionist exhibition sought to reinsert accomplished female artists, such as Artemisia Gentileschi and Berthe Morisot, back into the Western canon. Reilly pinpoints a disjuncture between these historically