**Chapter 1 Welcome to the Gooey, the Bloody and the Just Plain Gross**

**1.01 I Can Haz Abject Trading Cards, Plz?: Why the Abject Sings to Me**

The abject first came to my attention circa 1989. I had no idea at the age of 7 what sociological and psychoanalytic systems were. However, I did have in my possession a newly purchased package of Garbage Pail Kids. For those who were not young consumers in the 80s, Garbage Pail Kids were the baseball cards of the abject. These cards, created by Art Spiegelman of *Maus* graphic novel fame, were quite simply vile and they featured demented spoofs of Cabbage Patch Kids dolls. These adorable chubby-cheeked children, crowned with Shirley Temple curls sipped ice tea from toilets and stuffed themselves with dinner plates of gooey eyeballs, saliva dripping from their waiting mouths (Figure 1). These feral cherubim stripped off their skin to reveal bloody muscles and brushed their teeth with fresh-squeezed pimple pus.

My father had purchased, at my eager request, a pack of the cards for me from a local convenience store. My mother was repulsed (which at that age was a plus), wrinkling her nose at the card deck. Why I wanted these cards so badly is hazy, but I imagine a fellow classmate had sung their praises. Or perhaps I had noticed an advertisement for them in the back of a comic book alongside an ad for “real” x-ray glasses and toy flying saucers. The cards appealed through their astute ability to mock the insipid and saccharine Cabbage Patch dolls, the type of dolls that my grandmother loved and wanted her little granddaughter to love too.[[1]](#footnote-1) These card were more than just a sarcastic recasting of the immensely popular Cabbage Patch Kids, they were undeniably and shockingly gross.

It wasn’t until high school that I found any visuals that shook me in the same way the images of Garbage Pail Kids had through their potent combination of repellence and desirability. I was 17 and looking through a contemporary art book when I encountered the work of Kiki Smith. Instantly, her work took me back to that childhood moment of wanting to look and wanting to turn away that I had experienced with Garbage Pail Kids. Smith’s *Untitled (Train)* (Figure 2) was a challenge to regard, but one I could not quite reject. In the image, a white female figure bent slightly at the waist and strands of red beads trailed out from her crotch, spilling across the floor behind her. The figure was beautiful, like a Greek marble statue, as were the sparkling red beads. However, the image of menstruation on display was almost more than my naïve sensibilities could take. It was gross, it was shocking and my desire to look made me uncomfortable. Menstruation was a private act, something no 17-year-old girl likes to be reminded of, let alone stare at in a public space. The paintings I was shown in my high school art class were beautiful, the sculptures graceful and technically virtuosic. You were meant to enjoy those works. Finding pleasure in *Untitled (Train)* seemed impossible at first, although there was something fascinating or perhaps compelling about her work. I kept going back to those pages, to all of Smith’s disgusting but yet strangely beautiful work.

Years later in art school, I discovered pop surrealism[[2]](#footnote-2), a genre full of disgusting and compelling images. Pop surrealism was reminiscent of the beloved toys and Garbage Pail Kids of my youth, not the high art images taped to the art room walls or even the slides in my art history lecture. This new genre was simultaneously arresting and familiar, disconcerting and nostalgic and the artists were highly skilled, affording a great attention to detail. Their work appealed to my love of representational art, but differed in their concentration on more macabre subject matter: cartoon characters covered in blood, little girls who looked like dolls and other uncanny concoctions. The content was frequently gross and at times strangely comical, often made more palatable by their sleek and polished finish.

The more I looked, the more filth I saw. Disgust was everywhere: on movie screens, television, magazines and more. Films were filled with blood and gore and yet you couldn’t turn away from the “final girl” desperately running from the axe wielding maniac[[3]](#footnote-3). Television was similarly full of violence, but it also featured gratuitous autopsy scenes that took the viewer into the victim’s dead body, following the bullet as it pierced flesh and organs[[4]](#footnote-4). This is not to mention the renewed fascination with that most infamous horror movie icon: the zombie, which proliferated in video games like *Left 4 Dead*, *Dead Rising*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, appeared in films like the *Resident Evil* franchise (2002) and *28 Days Later* (2002), with television’s hugely popular adaptation of *The Walking Dead* graphic novel (Kirkman, 2006) coming soon[[5]](#footnote-5). Walking through the aisles of the book stores there were magazines advertising extreme tattooing, a glimpse into the world of Hollywood monsters and special effects and publications like Juxtapo*z* and Hi-Fructose that were devoted to Pop Surrealist art, graffiti and urban fashion. And the Internet was home to everything one could possibly imagine! Extreme body modification websites[[6]](#footnote-6) feature penile bi-furcation, clitoral piercing and scarification, a plethora of sub-cultural pornography from hentai[[7]](#footnote-7) to tub girls.[[8]](#footnote-8) This is not to mention websites like Morbid Anatomy (Ebenstein, 2014) devoted to anatomical curiosities and medical history like an online Mütter Museum, or Rotten.com, which boasts an amazing fifteen millions hits a day[[9]](#footnote-9) and houses a collection of disgusting yet fascinating mangled and contorted images of the human body, dead from any number of improbable causes. These images, whether in print or on screen, are absolutely disgusting and horrifying. Yet I, like many others, are strangely compelled to look.

This conflict between being repelled and being lured in by these images has compelled me towards the theoretical realm of abjection and disgust. I have invested time and energy in these ideas because I believe they can help explicate the complex attraction and repulsion, lure and loathing imbedded in many visuals, from the Garbage Pail Kids who play with excrement to Smith’s sculptures that drip iconographic menstrual blood. These ideas have the potential to aid in the exploration of these images in a way that can unseat the knee-jerk impulse to ignore, denigrate, or reject them. I may not have reacted in the ‘typical’ manner to unsavory images, but I have seen my mother, grandmother, classmates and professors respond in the immediate and ‘conventional’ way to these images, turning away in disgust and abjection. My own interest in these works elicits their strong disdain and judgmental retorts, “That’s what you like? But it’s so … gross. Why would you look at that?” or “It’s dark—I don’t believe in looking at dark and yucky things.” And then there is the ever-present but unspoken question, “What is wrong with you? If these images gross *me* out and make me feel uncomfortable, something must be wrong with *you* if you like to look at them.” The literature of the abject and disgust can aid in the exploration of these images and psychoanalysis can explain both the average viewer’s reaction to these works and my own very different reaction while throwing light on the rising popularity of these images. However, as I explored the abject both theoretically and in the realm of visuals, I discovered there was no text that concretely linked the theoretical to the visual. There were authors who used the abject to talk about art, but often it was shorthand for disgust and didn’t delve deeply in to how the works were abject, or what that really meant beyond appearing gross. This was particularly true of more contemporary reconfigurations of the abject, which politicized the abject as a tool for both understanding the mechanics of oppression and possibly circumventing them. No one was linking these possibly liberatory ideas to the production of disgusting images, nor was anyone refuting these images as having somehow lost their abject and potential radical status. In short, no one seemed to be talking in depth about disgusting images. The abject seemed to apply to substances and social oppression, not the images upon which these social logics were made visible. With a lack of an abject visual methodology, I couldn’t even begin to study the images I was interested in, like Pop Surrealism and the abject body in popular culture, without first rectifying this gap in the literature through the creation of just such a methodology.

**1.02 Dirt Doesn’t Exist, but Disgust Sure Does**

With disgust and the abject in mind, my project focuses on deep philosophical matter, matter which has engaged me and other scholars and artists in many hours of thought and concentration: shit, blood, urine and pus. Shit may seem to be an odd or at least distasteful topic for higher educational inquiry. The gleaming white tower of academia may seem incongruous with excrement. However, since the rise of postmodernity, the demolishing of hierarchies and the rise of the lowbrow, shit has become fair game and with good reason. It and numerous other substances make us turn away in disgust; these materials incite shame; they are the stuff that we label unclean. These corporeal visages of filth structure our experience of the world, separating what is clean and good from that which is defiled, degraded, dirty and bad (Douglas, 1966). The role these substances play in ordering our world seems enough to warrant their study. My project deals with getting underneath the “eww” response engendered by these images to see what makes them both repulsive and fascinating.

Understanding disgust is central to understanding these images and exploring their impact and popularity. I am using *disgust* to describe things that elicit or appear as if they would elicit a certain affective or emotional response, one of repulsion. Miller (1997), author of *The Anatomy of Disgust*, explains that disgust “is a serious [emotion], implicating our moral sensibility, love politics and our sense of self” (p. x). Disgust, for my purposes, encompasses both the psychic and the physical repulsion experienced toward certain materials, particularly materials that cross categories and confuse borders. As Douglas (1966) notes, “Our idea of dirt is compounded of two things, care for hygiene and respect for conventions” (p. 8). It is this ordering system that our disgust responses are based upon; thus, our disgust creates and explicates the system all at once. Disgust creates the cognitive dissonance that defines the abject.

The abject is similarly embodied in filthy and sordid materials. Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as substances that were once a part of the body but are no longer: urine, blood, tears, shit, vomit, snot. These now “othered” substances elicit repulsion and anxiety. They create a crisis of cognitive dissonance and shifted consciousness in the viewer that is characteristic of the abject. The abject is also housed in the corpse and in rot, decay and vivisection.

Many images, especially in contemporary visual culture, deploy a kind of aesthetics of disgust, a desire for and interest in those things that look like they would cause or that do cause feelings of repulsion and unease. This aesthetics of disgust is found in high and low forms, in commercial and fine art. The abject provides an entryway into the exploration of the aesthetics of disgust and why we like things that also repulse us. However, I found that the specifics of how the abject is applicable to images had not been concretely theorized or explained in an approachable and comprehensive manner.

The effect of the abject is more complex, more individualized, more long-lasting than disgust alone and is paired with a fascination and an attraction. Some have argued that there is attraction in disgust (e.g. Miller, 1997), however, I think that this is inaccurate and that what they are describing has slipped over into the realm of the abject. I say this because scholars of the abject try to understand how shit can be both a joke and a crisis, in turns exciting pleasurable laughter followed by nausea. Scholars of disgust seem to ignore where and why disgust is just disgusting versus when disgust joins with allure. The psychological shift that occurs from a brush with the abject, or an image of the abject, is more impactful than just disgust because it is accompanied by attraction or compulsion, a desire to look and to interact. This attachment to a disgusting thing actually creates a new classification system, something not quite subject (human), but more than object (a thing), the abject.

The benefits of the abject lie in its potential to radically shift viewers’ subjectivity and to reverse hierarchies of denigration as applied to marginal groups (Butler, 1993; Hook, 2006). While disgust and the abject may seem straightforward when explained as above, their varying definitions, multiple uses and characteristic ambiguity make the terms more complex and often contentious. For example, in contemporary art the abject is discussed on a regular basis, but it stands in for disgust and is often stripped of its ability to shift or strip subjectivity, its fluid ambiguity, its emphasis permeable borders and its political uses (Butler, 1993; Houser, Jones, Taylor & Ben-Levi, 1993; Hook, 2006). For example, Kaufman (1998) states that Kiki Smith’s work is abject, but never goes into exactly how it is abject, or what that means in the context of Smith’s work. In my dissertation, I explore the abject and disgust through an in-depth study of the literature surrounding these ideas and pull from scholarship a way to approach dissonant visuals that both are meant to be looked at and seem to ask us to turn away, exploring how and why this paradox works.

**1.03 Getting to the Gory Core: Research Questions**

My research questions are as follows:

*What insight into dissonant images can be gained by focusing on disgust and the abject as entryways into paradoxically appealing and revolting icons*? I propose that problematic modernist hierarchies that reify beauty and malign disgusting images are at the heart of this question and can be challenged through the use of a theory of the abject.

*What would an abject visual methodology be?* This question I frame by the ambiguous and often synonymous use of the terms abject and disgust and by a lack of literature that discusses disgust and the abject in visual art in a nuanced and specific way.

**1.04 Other Necessary Veins: Subquestions**

My supporting questions, or subquestions, are as follows:

• What are the visual characteristics of disgust and the abject?

• Where and how is the abject used in art and contemporary popular visual culture sites[[10]](#footnote-10)?

• Why is the abject both revolting and alluring?

* How might the abject intersect with political, social, or economic critiques?

**1.05 Disgusting, but Not for Me: Delimitations**

Within my study I focus on abject objects themselves, my own interaction with them and in some cases the intentions and interests of the artists. However, during the course of my research I found many interesting visual sites, theoretical veins, and methodological tools, which could have been employed within an exploration of disgusting and abject images, but are outside the purview of this study. For example, there are a multitude of visual sites that could have been used to demonstrate the role of disgust and the abject in art and popular visual culture, including most obviously other art works (Houser et al., 1993), but also children’s toys like Bratz dolls (Duncum, 2007), media sites like Jackass (Brayton, 2007), comics and graphic novels (Zolkover, 2008) and cemeteries (Chadha, 2006), to name a few.

Other methodologies could have been used to address both my sites of study and my research questions. For example, media studies has focused on reception and audience studies, especially as they pertain to movies and television (Staiger, 2005). Issues pertaining to reception and the audience could have been used to investigate who looks at disgusting images, why some people enjoy them while others simply reject them. This is an area that I would be interested in developing in the future. However, anything concerning audience in this study is cast in broad statements based on data from Internet art and toy blogs or my own personal experience and is not part of a main argument or used as primary supporting data.

Similarly, relying on Appadurai (1988), one might benefit from looking at the “secret life” of these objects. This idea comes from art history, museum studies and anthropology and could be applied to abject art, examining who looks at these images, who buys and owns these objects, where demographically and geographically the objects are found. Unlike audience studies, this approach foregrounds the object—a type of biography of things. However, this is also outside the purview of this study, since I focus on the “work” these objects do, the impact they have on the viewer, not the life of the objects themselves.

Contemporary art and visual culture could be understood using theoretical structures outside of the abject. Ideas used to approach contemporary art are seemingly limitless and others have approached pop surrealism in particular through a history of comics (Klein, Schaffner, & Nahas, 1999), a more straightforward continuation of surrealism (Jordan, 2005) and a combination of fine art and commercial or design aesthetics (Anderson, 2004). However, in each of these approaches the authors continually discuss the transgression of borders, ambiguity and bodily substances while missing the fact that their ideas synchronize with those of the abject and disgust, ignoring the theoretical elephant in the room. With these inadequacies in mind, my project fills in gaps opened up by other scholars.

Trauma studies and memory studies could be used to approach abject art, since both are often attuned toward violent or painful imagery. Freud sees trauma as a wound to the mind and following this trajectory, trauma studies “explore[s] the ways in which texts of a certain period—the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience” (Caruth, 1996, p. 22). Caruth’s work is pivotal to this new theoretical field emerging from literary studies. Her and others’ work attempts to understand the experience of war and genocide, as well as persistent racism and fear, through artistic representations of these events: survivor literature, fictional books on these types of events and artworks that memorialize these events or take them as their subject (Kleeblatt, 2002). Even Adorno’s proclamation in 1962 that “it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz” (as quoted in Kaplan, 2007, p. 21) and the field of Holocaust or memory studies surrounding this statement, is something I have pursued during the course of this study, as it deals with horror and catastrophe.

However, Adorno’s point, as Kaplan (2007) notes, is about the fear of pleasure in the face of horror,

for while I agree with Adorno that there is something ethically wrong with finding pleasure in the representations of the pain of others, the works I examine here offer pleasure that derives not from the pain of others but from the complexity of artistic representations that invite us to think critically about the Nazi genocide. (21)

Kaplan’s work in studying the aesthetics of catastrophe, specifically how these events are memorialized in artwork, as well as Butler’s (2009) work on how war is framed culturally, could be a way to approach these sites since they share a commonality of horror and disgust, violence and bloodshed. Similarly, I have considered Brown’s “Wounded Attachments”(1993) because many of the images that I study feature the wounded, broken, or truncated body that becomes the subject of identity formation and politicization in Brown’s work. I have also looked at Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1987).

However, in the course of these investigations, I have found these works to be misaligned with my own. While I respond strongly to them and can even envision some of them being applied to some of the sites of this study, the works mentioned above deal with real bodies, either literally or representationally. The sites I am studying may reference the body, even depict the body, but do not stand in for real victimized bodies. Even when the objects of study are fictional—like *Time’s Arrow* by Amis (1991), about a fictional Holocaust doctor—they represent a specific reality that my own sites do not. I have chosen not to emphasize these materials because of their application to real tragedies.

The current focus on ontology or affect—ways of being versus ways of knowing—has influenced my interest in disgust and the abject; however, this is not at the heart of my inquiry, although it is a supporting theoretical position. Pile (2010) suggests that affect is the quality of life that is beyond cognition, beyond expression and “unable to be brought into representation” (p. 8). While emotions can be named and expressed, that is, they have cognitive and representational elements, affect does not and is implicated primarily through bodily reactions. Affect is noncognitive in the sense that it happens in the body and can be seen in a bodily reaction, before cognition can take place and make sense of the event. Here I refer to Masumi’s (1992) and Sedgwick’s (2002) work. Similarly Anderson and Smith offer a “general plea for thinking seriously about how ‘the human world is constructed and lived through the emotions’ calling for a fuller programme of work, recognizing the emotions as ways of knowing, being and doing, in the broadest sense” (as cited in Pile, 2010, p. 8). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) see affect as an asocial bodily response that is made known in the passage from one state to another, the ongoing process of becoming, that is registered through intensity as an increase and decrease in power. Affect, then, is the body’s ability to disrupt social logic, and create meaning that cuts through social interpretations, confounds logic and scrambles expectations. To Sedgwick, affect offers “a reparative return to the ontological and intersubjective, to the surprising and enlivening texture of individuality and community” (as cited in Hemmings, 2005, p. 554), or a way to address specificities. For many scholars like Sedgwick (2002) affect is political. Influenced by feminist Carol Hanisch’s (1970) now famous argument that the personal is the political, scholars (e.g. Sedgwick, 2002) have shown that embodied experiences, like that of sexual desire or racial identity, involve the personal and have larger political ramifications. Moreover, intersubjective affective experiences can be a way to build community and counter political violence through empathy.

While affect is important because of the embodied nature of the abject, cognition or judgement is also important to an abject visual methodology as a way to counter emotion, so that the viewer of the abject is not simply overwhelmed, loosing the rational faculties needed to analyze and reflect on the abject experience. Because of this joined need for both emotional and intellectual input, I am influenced by and use aesthetics. While I believe an understanding of aesthetics is important to understanding art, particularly contemporary art and postmodernism’s influence on qualitative evaluations of art, my intentions here are not to prove the aesthetic value of these works in a modernist way, nor is aesthetics the theoretical foundations of my project. These works are most certainly not about beauty in a conventional manner. Kant (2009) would be appalled at toys that ooze and sculptures that menstruate. He would deem them unworthy of artistic inquiry. Similarly, many modernist aestheticians would find designer vinyl toys and pop surrealism unworthy of inquiry, as well as the theories of democracy, the power of low brow and the value of disgust that underwrite these endeavors. My work is steeped in postmodern inquiry and based in the democratic, multivocal, metanarrative oriented contemporary notion of art and culture. While this is a factor in understanding the context of my sites and my own theoretical grounding, demonstrating that these theories and sites are postmodern or exploring their fulfillment of postmodern aesthetics is not the main point of this work. However, I am still influenced by both modern and postmodern aesthetics.

Another theoretical area that I have steered away from is that of the carnivalesque. According to Hyman and Malbert (2000), the imagery of the carnival “deals with masks and monsters, bottoms and enemas, feasting giants and misshapen birdmen and a hen with fools: fools capped-and-belled, fools hatched from eggs, whole ships crowded with fools, processions of fools” (p. 9). The imagery of the carnival is rife with representations of the body out of bounds, images that stress the base materiality of the body. Shit pours from bared asses, breasts hang pendulously and fat threatens to explode beyond the skin’s container, all in a display of grotesque realism “which elevates the lower stratum above the upper regions of the body; rationality and mental resolve are replaced with bodily fluids and defecation” (p. 63). This sounds like it would be related to the abject and thus be important for my own study, and it is to a certain extent. Kristeva was deeply influenced by Bakhtin (Moi, 1986), particularly his work on linguistics. However, there are two main reasons I am not including the carnivalesque in this study. First, while the works I am looking at may be funny, I do not find them to be uproariously so. Humor may be at work, but it is not the humor of carnival, which “invokes a laughter linked to the overturning of authority; it is ‘that peculiar folk humour that has always existed and has never merged with the official culture of the ruling classes’” (Hyman & Malbert, 2000, p. 14). Like it’s boisterous laughter, the overall nature of carnival is optimistic. Hyman and Malbert (2000) explain that carnival “is authorized transgression, framed by the surrounding order in time and place. When the frame constricts, the crowd may rebel, but the essential impulse of Carnival is positive, regenerative, a seasonal excess of high spirits” (p. 75). Even when bawdy humor may be active in the images I am studying, I feel it is overshadowed by the uncanny, anxiety and an unjoyous, perhaps compulsive, impulse to look. The lack of uproarious laughter and joy signals the abject over the carnival. Even when the abject is applied to humor as it is in Limon’s (2000) work, it is uncomfortable, obnoxious and an upheaval of the parts of the self that one wishes to banish, to abject.

Second, I am suspicious of the fact that at the end of carnival, there is no permanent change; rather, carnival is a part of hegemonic control. It is a safety valve that allows for the venting of pent-up desires and aggressions, but in the end life must return to normal. Bakhtin (1984) emphasizes the therapeutic nature of carnival, but Gilchrist and Ravencroft (2009) argue that Bakhtin’s work “reveals a much deeper message about the hegemonic regulatory function performed by the licensing of deviant practices within such festivals” (p. 35).

Hence, I am concerned that carnival is “deployed to maintain and reinforce social order and, thus, [enacts] the discipline of bodies and behaviors” (Gilchrist & Ravencroft, 2009, p. 36). In this way, the carnival displays a correlation to a Gramscian hegemonic social order in that it is “maintained through forms of consent: an active mechanism of domination between rulers and their subordinates in which structures of social and political dominance are maintained through systems of co-optation” (Gramsci, as cited in Gilchrist & Ravencroft, 2009, p. 38). With this in mind, I have, for the most part, avoided the carnivalesque in this work as I feel that disgust and the abject have a more permanently impactful role on both the individual psyche and social systems.

In the end, while there were many options for visual materials to study and ideas that might help address what I was trying to explore, I found that the abject and disgust were most closely aligned with my interests and resonated most with the other ideas I found regarding my objects of study. Theoretically, disgust and the abject best allowed for an exploration of the paradoxical dynamics of repulsive art that I was trying to understand.

**1.06 Outline**

This chapter began with my own anxious feelings about strangely treasured childhood objects, namely Garbage Pail Kids. What follows is my attempt to understand my affection for those and other paradoxically disgusting yet appealing objects. It is grounded in the literature of disgust and the abject. My literature review, chapter 2, is focused on those two ideas and the bodies of literature that explain and expand upon them. In terms of methodology, I begin with an overview of the ways in which visuals and art can be conceptualized as disgusting and abject. I begin here because Kristeva (1982) asserts that the abject is best understood in regards to language and writing, something I argue against and while there are articles and even several books that tackle abject art (e.g., Houser et al., 1993; Meagher, 2003; Sandoval-Sanchez, 2005), none of them lays out a topography of the field, a map of how, why and in what ways images are abject in the depth that I do. Also, certain areas of the abject, like its contemporary refigurations to understand the structures of oppression, have not been connected to the visual, which is something that my own abject visual methodology addresses. Finally, there are elements of the abject that other scholars have not drawn out in depth, particularly the abject’s intersections with the field of Border Studies, which is something that I outline at length in my methodology and connect to visual artists and images.

Having provided an overview of how disgust and the abject function theoretically, I move on in chapter 3 to look at the construction of methodologies in general, with a particular emphasis on Krauss and Bois (2000) formulation of a methodology to best understand formlessness, or informe. Formlessness, while different from the abject, shares many similar aspects like a transgression of borders and ambiguity. While Krauss and Bois label their work a guide, not a methodology, they clearly articulate both a body of knowledge, Bataille’s “informe”, and a system to apply that body of knowledge to art, demonstrated in their guide and in the curated exhibition on formlessness. Their work stands as a guide in regards to methods, as well as a point of departure as they build the “informe” as a critique of the abject. Sandoval’s (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed* is also considered, as it links methodology, visual analysis and social justice together. While there are definite problems with Sandoval’s work, her goals, including implementing social justice, are in line with my own interests.

Following the review of my methodology, chapter 4, my data chapter, outlines my approach to an abject visual methodology. This includes not only a review of some of the methods or techniques to employ when using an abject visual methodology, like the need for context, but it also provides an extended look at different works of art, what aspects of the abject they depict or enact and how to understand or analyze these works with the abject in mind. This section acts as a kind of map to abject visual materials primarily in art, but also in popular visual culture. It is also here that I bring in theoretical ideas close to, but outside, the explicit purview of disgust and abjection, like monster theory (Cohen, 1996) and disability studies (McRuer, 2006), to help argue points that are to be found in my literature review and expand the range of the abject. Moreover, because this methodology outlines not only what to look for, but also how to understand the ways the abject functions, it can be applied to other works beyond what is covered within the data chapter itself, becoming a tool with far reaching applications.

Having provided a map to abject images and methods for approaching abject art in chapter 4, chapter 5 is an in depth investigation of the artist Kiki Smith. Smith’s work has been called abject by other critics, but it has not been thoroughly explored or analyzed in depth, or with my own abject visual methodology. This chapter acts as both a testing ground to demonstrate my methodology in depth and to provide an example of how a deeper analysis can work. In my conclusion, I look at the implications for an abject visual methodology, both in regards to its use in understanding how abject images function and also as a tool to understand the seeming proliferation of the abject in contemporary visual culture. I also discuss the implications for the expansion of the abject to address social issues in application to art, as well as the potential that my own development of the abject has. I believe that this project can have far broader implications than just the art world, even though that is the primary site of this study and the place in which I have chosen to demonstrate this further expansion of the abject.

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1. I must admit, her desire for this was never satisfied, as this dissertation will surely confirm. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For more on Pop Surrealism see Jordan, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on “The Final Girl” phenomenon in horror movies, see Clover, 1993. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on the abject in CSI, see Pierson, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Darabont, F. (Producer). (31, October 2010). The Walking Dead (Television series). United States: AMC Studios. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. BME- Body Modification Ezine, http://www.bme.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. hentai- animated pornography popular in Japan, which often features tentacles [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. an internet phenomenon which features women in bathtubs spraying and then playing in anal fluids (http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=tubgirl) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Frequently Asked Question section of Rotten.com (http://www.rotten.com/FAQ/) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I will be using the term art and visual culture, or popular visual culture, through out this project to refer to the slight division between the two. It has been argued that visual culture could easily be expanded or rephrased as haptic or sensorial to include the whole range of sensory information that is received from multi-media experiences like those of theme parks (Duncum, 2005; 2004). Since it has been established that visual culture can be more than simply visual and as most of our world is still occulocentric, I use the term visual culture. Visual culture encompasses the art world, however, art is a particular type of institutional production that often has different concerns in terms of audience and intent than the broader field of visual culture. Art as an institution refers to the museums, galleries, and academic centers that determine the conditions of the art world. Visual culture, on the other hand, often refers to advertising and informal arts and crafts communities, as well as popular media like television and films. If there is an institution at play in most visual culture, it is that of the commodity market. I refer to both art and visual culture to note that the phenomenon I am discussing, usually disgust and the abject, occurs both in institutional art settings as well as in the broader arena of visual culture, demonstrating an institutional, market, and popular interest in filth. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)