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Article

The Ecstasy of Dissolution: Psychodynamic Perspectives on Feminist Art, Abjection, and the Transformative Body

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Abstract

This article explores the erotics of fragmentation, monstrosity, and the radical reclamation of self-agency in trans-inclusive feminist visual cultures. Focusing on themes of dismemberment, cannibalism, and bodily deconstruction, it examines how artists depict a reclamation of agency, an interrogation of power, and the transformation of the abject body into a site of resistance and metamorphosis. Drawing upon Kristeva, we analyze the seemingly contradictory aesthetics of horror and ecstasy, highlighting the potential for empowerment through radical submission. Lacan's concept of *jouissance*—an experience both blissfully transcendent and painfully excessive—provides a foundational framework for navigating this terrain.

Keywords: abjection; embodiment; feminist and queer visual cultures; radical intimacy; self-agency; liberation psychology; psychodynamic theory; Lacan; Kristeva

The paradox of annihilation as a route to wholeness recurs throughout our analysis. This psychological fantasy reflects a longing to absorb and be absorbed, to dissolve the self-other divide in a connection so total that selfhood itself may not survive. Through case studies of artists including Alina Szapocznikow, Rebecca Horn, Christina Ramberg, and Katarzyna Kozyra, and in dialogue with sacred narratives such as Inanna's descent, we show how fantasies of being consumed operate as cultural critique and psychological metamorphosis. For women and transgender people, artistic self-fragmentation becomes a defiant reclamation of agency—where surrender, not resistance, offers a path to liberation.

Introduction: Desire, Dissolution, and the Abject Body

Traditionally taboo themes such as dismemberment, cannibalism, and bodily deconstruction haunt the margins of contemporary art as powerful metaphors for desire, power, and transformation. These motifs—simultaneously horrifying and seductive—reveal a complex dialectic between submission and agency, destruction and rebirth. Through feminist and post-Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks, this essay interrogates what it means to surrender one's bodily integrity, to crave obliteration, or to find *jouissance* in one's own unmaking. Contemporary feminist, queer, and transgender artists strategically employ motifs of dismemberment, cannibalism, and bodily deconstruction—drawing on post-Lacanian psychoanalytic frameworks—to explore complex relationships between vulnerability, power, and transformation, ultimately reclaiming agency and challenging normative social structures.

When artists stage the consumed body, they engage with abjection not merely as psychological terrain but as political commentary on how bodies—particularly female, trans, and queer bodies—are consumed under patriarchy and capitalism. In these works, the fantasy of being devoured or fragmented becomes paradoxically empowering: a voluntary offering that transforms violation into ritual, objectification into transcendence. Examining how feminist artists have reclaimed the imagery of the fragmented and consumed body reveals a radical reimagining of intimacy where the

boundaries between self and other, ecstasy and horror, destruction and creation become productively blurred.

For queer and transgender subjects, the aesthetics of bodily dissolution and fragmentation resonate with particular power. Scholars including Ahmed (2006), Halberstam (2011), and Stryker (1994) have demonstrated how non-normative bodies are already positioned as "monstrous" within hegemonic culture—marked as excessive, grotesque, or pathological by normative standards. In her groundbreaking essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix," Stryker deliberately reclaims Frankenstein's monster as a potent metaphor for transgender embodiment, transforming imposed monstrosity into a site of radical agency. This strategic reclamation illuminates why engagement with body horror and abjection in queer and trans art becomes not merely aesthetic but politically transformative. Such works create visual languages that articulate experiences of bodily alienation, medical intervention, and social stigmatization while simultaneously asserting control through deliberate transgression of normative boundaries. By consciously staging the "monstrous" body, these artists convert stigmatization into a form of empowerment, challenging the very systems that would render them as mere objects of fear or fascination.

What radical strategies emerge when subjects viewed as 'monstrous' within normative frameworks voluntarily engage with dismemberment and consumption in art? This essay, guided by Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, explores how these artistic choices can serve as a form of powerful resistance and self-reclamation, particularly for subjects who have found themselves on the margins of society and culture. Specifically, we refer to practices of radical resistance with regard to the bodies of women, queer, and transgender people.

Radical Intimacy and the Erasure of Self

To be devoured—literally to disappear within another's body—is an extreme fantasy of intimacy that exceeds pleasure or gratification. It evokes a longing to transcend the boundaries of skin and ego, to dissolve into a beloved or dominant other. Psychoanalytically, cannibalism symbolizes a drive toward total union through loss of self. In Lacanian terms, this desire gestures toward the *Real*, the pre-symbolic domain beyond law and language—"that which resists symbolization" (Lacan, 1978, p. 56).

The *Real* evokes undifferentiated experience: the infant's fusion with the maternal body, the obliteration of self in death, or the unknowable before symbolic order. To be consumed is to seek a return to this state—not as a straightforward death wish, but as a release from alienation and separateness. This fantasy mirrors the death drive's pull toward stillness, but with a generative twist: it imagines a womb-like reabsorption, a dissolution that is erotic as well as annihilating. Here, *eros* and *thanatos* converge—not for destruction's sake, but in pursuit of communion so total it obliterates individual identity. This paradox—annihilation as a route to wholeness—will recur throughout our analysis.

Such fantasies reflect what might be called *radical intimacy*: a connection so total it destabilizes the boundary between self and other. Desire in Lacanian theory is insatiable—not directed at a fixed object but oriented around the elusive *objet petit a*, a stand-in for what was lost upon entry into language (Evans, 1996, p. 136). Artists who interrogate the limits of embodiment and dissolution visually enact this longing for ecstatic fragmentation.

Abjection and the Eroticization of "That Which is Cast Off"

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a critical lens for understanding the grotesque allure of bodily dissolution. The abject is what must be expelled to maintain a coherent self: corpses, blood, waste—matter that once belonged to or came from the body, now rendered other. It disrupts the boundary between subject and object, evoking horror and desire in equal measure. As Kristeva writes, "One does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 10).

Abjection initiates a form of *jouissance*—a disruptive, overwhelming pleasure that fractures symbolic order. It “disturbs identity, system, order,” revealing the instability of the clean and proper self (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). This encounter recalls Lacan’s *Real*: an overwhelming confrontation with what cannot be symbolized or expelled. Artists who depict bleeding, fragmented, or edible bodies are not simply courting shock—they are rendering visible the psychic experience of abjection. These works give form to unconscious fantasies of undoing, wherein fragmentation becomes both a trauma and a mode of reconstitution.

Eroticizing the abject—wounds, meat, decomposition—reclaims what is cast off and charges it with transgressive desire. This is *erotic abjection*: the pursuit of thrill in what repels, where disgust and arousal entwine. Kristeva emphasizes its ambivalence—the way *jouissance* and dread co-exist, “swallowing” the subject in an experience that is both terrifying and rapturous. Whether within erotic imagination, kink subcultures, or staged artistic scenes, the spectacle of being cut, consumed, or dissolved activates this paradoxical pleasure: the fantasy of symbolic death, safely dramatized or sensually imagined.

Viewers drawn to abject imagery—whether in visual art or horror—often experience a similar dual reaction: repulsion entangled with fascination. The abject collapses boundaries between human and animal, self and other, life and death. This confrontation is terrifying, but it can also generate a kind of dark exhilaration—a thrill in the unbearable truth of our embodied condition. The eroticism of abject art arises from this proximity to the *Real*: an unbearable intimacy with what cannot be contained (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 1–6; Lacan, 1978, pp. 52–59).

Embodied Testimony: Szapocznikow's Relics of Unspeakable Trauma

This theme of dissolution finds resonance in the surreal sculptures of Alina Szapocznikow, a Polish artist who escaped World War II atrocities and later translated a survivor's fascination with bodily impermanence into works presenting fragmented body parts—lipstick-red lips, hands, breasts—cast in resin and seeming to melt into waxy pools. These disembodied features emerge from translucent blobs as a reliquary of a self in the process of dissolving. The effect is both erotic and elegiac: the glossy surfaces invite touch even as they portray the horrors of corporeal decay. Szapocznikow described some of these works as “tumors,” reflections of her own illness that have been imbued with a sense of loss and longing. Her “Lampe-Bouche (Illuminated Lips)” (1966) series literally transforms the female body into an offering—a luminescent artifact in the process of being consumed by light.

Szapocznikow's artistic vision emerges from profound bodily trauma and resilience. A Holocaust survivor who endured the Łódź ghetto, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen, Szapocznikow worked alongside her physician mother in camp hospitals—witnessing corporeal suffering in its most extreme forms. This history of bodily precarity was later echoed in her battle with breast cancer, which claimed her life at 47. Yet Szapocznikow rarely spoke directly of these experiences; instead, her sculptures became the vocabulary for articulating what language could not contain (Higgins, 2017). Her “Tumors Personified” series transforms medical devastation into aesthetic contemplation, while her disembodied, resin-cast body parts exist in a liminal space between commemoration and dissolution.

Through psychoanalytic frameworks, her lip-lamps and breast-sculptures can be understood not simply as surrealist provocations but as embodiments of *jouissance*—where pleasure, pain, and mortality converge in abject forms. Her work offers a particularly potent example of how the traumatized body might reclaim agency through its own fragmentation and recontextualization. When Szapocznikow cast her own lips as luminous objects, she transformed organs of speech into silent testimonies, converting the unspeakable into the visible while refusing easy consumption by the viewer's gaze.

Cannibalistic Fantasy: Empowerment in Intense Vulnerability

The desires to dismember or be dismembered, or to eat or be eaten, function as the focus of a fetishistic scenario of power and submission, and these interests are stigmatized—but not uncommon—erotic fantasies. Within BDSM subcultures, interests and desires such as vorarephilia (vore) involve erotic arousal from the idea of consuming or being consumed. In primal fantasy terms, a "prey" may imagine offering themselves willingly to be devoured by a "predator." On the surface, this offering appears to indulge the ultimate powerlessness of having one's entire essence and lived experience be reduced to meat and bone. Yet, such fantasies can invert existing power dynamics. To offer oneself—to say "you cannot take me; I give of myself freely"—is to reframe surrender as an act of agency. The subject of this gambit retains narrative control by consenting to their own obliteration. The extreme submission becomes, paradoxically, a form of mastery over one's fate.

Typically, the practice of erotic cannibalism fantasies often involves carefully negotiated consent, underscoring that much of the thrill comes from playing with control, not actually losing it. A 2014 case study on vorarephilia described it as a fantasy intersecting with masochism and submission, one that cannot be enacted literally and therefore lives in the imagination of role-players and the power exchange inherent in developing elaborate scenes (Lykins & Cantor, 2014, p. 183). It noted similarities to bondage and dominance fetishes, where boundaries and trust are essential. Thus, the erotic charge in imagining oneself dismembered lies partly in the intensity of vulnerability, and partly in the empowerment of orchestrating that vulnerability.¹

Horn's 'Unicorn' as a Ritual of Submission and Empowerment

Rebecca Horn's performance "Unicorn" (1970) offers a nuanced meditation on vulnerability and objectification. In this video piece, a young woman walks slowly through a field, strapped into a white corset and wearing a towering horn affixed to her forehead, extending precariously into the air. The woman, otherwise nude, appears like a mythical creature—part saintly virgin (the unicorn has long symbolized purity) and part fetish object for display and consumption. The imagery suggests a bride or sacrificial maiden, offered up with a horn that is phallic yet also reminiscent of a martyr's stake. As she perambulates for hours, the piece blurs lines between submission and empowerment: the woman is burdened by the unicorn horn (a metaphor for societal expectations of female chastity and perfection), yet she owns the ritual she calmly and purposefully performs.

Critics have noted how Horn's 'Unicorn' makes the performer into a living sculpture, simultaneously an object of the gaze and an agent of the ritualized performance. While the long horn, held erect by straps, visually recalls the medical devices depicted in Frida Kahlo's painting 'The Broken Column' (1944), the contexts differ dramatically. Where Kahlo's work represents involuntary trauma and chronic pain following a devastating accident, Horn's performance represents a deliberate, presumably temporary assumption of discomfort. This distinction highlights how the performer's agency in choosing this ordeal transforms what might otherwise be seen as objectification into a controlled artistic statement.

Consensual Surrender as Transformative Power

The fantasy of being consumed can offer a controlled confrontation with powerlessness. By choosing to be "meat," the subject defies anyone else's ability to objectify them without consent. Such a stance transforms the defilement from a violent theft into an intimate exchange, a gift. We see this

¹ While many vorarephiliac fantasies center on absorption and transformation, a distinct subgenre—often referred to as "Dolcett" or "hard vore"—emphasizes ritualized dismemberment and aestheticized violence. These scenarios are frequently situated in male-dominated spaces and focus on domination, spectacle, and eroticized destruction. Scholars such as Langley (2023) and Newmahr (2011) have argued that, even in their most extreme forms, such fantasies function as symbolic enactments of power, control, and erotic guilt rather than endorsements of literal harm.

empowerment-through-surrender in many kink/fetish contexts, and it challenges simplistic readings of these fantasies as mere submission and self-destruction. Instead, they can be viewed as complex psychodramas that reclaim control over trauma and vulnerability by reenacting them on one's own terms.

This theoretical framework illuminates the lived experiences documented in contemporary vore communities—online spaces where individuals share fantasies, artwork, and role-playing scenarios centered on consumption. Ethnographic research by Paasonen (2021) reveals how participants in these communities, particularly those who identify as "prey" in vore scenarios, often describe their fantasies not as self-annihilating but as transformative experiences of radical intimacy. For many participants, especially women and queer individuals, vore role-play offers a controlled environment to explore submission that paradoxically reinforces agency. As one participant in Paasonen's study articulates: "Being swallowed whole is like being held completely... it's not about being hurt but about being wanted so intensely that you become part of someone else" (p. 83).

What distinguishes these communities from purely pathological understandings of such fantasies is the emphasis on consent, boundaries, and the collectively developed narratives that frame consumption not as destruction but as incorporation—a form of intense connection that preserves rather than annihilates the consumed subject's consciousness. Veras (2022) notes that in many vore scenarios created predominantly by female participants, "the prey often retains awareness from inside the predator's body, suggesting that complete annihilation is not the ultimate fantasy, but rather a form of radical merged existence" (p. 217). This parallels the theoretical distinction between subsumption and transformation, with many vore fantasies emphasizing the transformative aspects of being consumed rather than total obliteration.

Patriarchal Objectification of Women as "Meat" or Chattel

From a feminist perspective, the trope of a woman being consumed is a visceral dramatization of patriarchal objectification. Women's bodies have long been treated as objects to be possessed, used, and metaphorically devoured by others—usually men or children. The fantasy of literal consumption exposes this dynamic by translating metaphor into flesh.

Carol J. Adams (1990) argues that Western patriarchal culture symbolically equates women with meat, reinforcing their status as renewable resources or even chattel. Her analysis of advertising and media imagery reveals how women are often depicted as animalistic cuts of flesh—such as a woman's torso rendered indistinguishable from a steak—collapsing the distinction between human and nonhuman consumption. In her concept of the "absent referent," the individuality of the woman (or animal) disappears, replaced by a generic object of desire and use (p. 42). In the cannibalistic fantasy, this dynamic is taken to its logical extreme: the woman becomes literal food.

Eroticizing this position can become a strategy of subversion. Rather than passively embodying the nourishing object, the subject eroticizes her devourability, asserting control over how her body is framed. This flips the gaze, forcing confrontation with the violence of objectification and exposing the porous line between desire and domination.

Sacred Wounds and Dresses: Sanctifying the Consumed Female Body

Contemporary feminist artists have long engaged with the symbolic overlap between eroticism, sacrifice, and religious iconography. Tracey Emin's wounded, exposed bodies—often stitched, soiled, or weeping—channel a secular stigmata, marking feminine pain as both intimate and public. In her *My Bed* (1998) and *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* (1995), the detritus of intimacy and trauma is presented not for titillation but for confrontation.

Similarly, Jana Sterbak's *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic* (1987) literalizes the body's reduction to meat. The raw, stitched-together beef garment references both religious martyrdom and aestheticized feminine objectification. It echoes Lady Gaga's infamous meat dress, but without the spectacle—Sterbak's piece hangs eerily still, drawing out the tension between fashion, flesh, and

decay. Both artists sanctify the abject body, not through transcendence but through radical immanence: pain, leakage, consumption.

These works do not merely perform suffering—they aestheticize it, drawing viewers into uneasy intimacy with bodily vulnerability, eroticized loss, and the politics of display.

The Expendable Self: Cannibalistic Metaphors in Late Capitalism

The fantasy of being consumed—devoured, used up, metabolized entirely—takes on particular resonance within late capitalist economies, where selves are rendered fungible, marketable, and increasingly expendable. In a culture that demands visibility, productivity, and relentless self-optimization, the body becomes not only a site of performance but one of extraction. Susan Bordo (1993) has argued that modern capitalist cultures shape and exploit bodily insecurity—particularly among women—as a mechanism of social control. Bodies are trained to be small, contained, legible, and desirable, even as they are treated as disposable.

Within this terrain, cannibalistic fantasy serves not only as erotic metaphor but as a psychic commentary on the social conditions that frame the self as inherently consumable. The desire to be devoured—to be wholly taken in, destroyed, or absorbed—echoes the experience of being emotionally or economically depleted, of being available until there is nothing left. It is, paradoxically, a fantasy of both surrender and agency. As one vorarephiliac subject put it: “You cannot take me; I give myself” (Lykins & Cantor, 2014, p. 183). This statement captures the inversion at the heart of such fantasies: to offer oneself willingly is to reclaim narrative control over one’s obliteration.

In this light, artists who depict consumption, dismemberment, or bodily surrender as symbolic acts are not simply aestheticizing violence. They are interrupting the logic of passive objectification by reframing the act as chosen. The grotesque becomes erotic, the abject becomes sacred. Erotic abjection here is not an invitation to pity but a demand to bear witness to the conditions that make such self-sacrifice legible—and to recognize the agency within it.

Rather than resisting fragmentation, these artists lean into it. They expose the false dichotomy between empowerment and submission, challenging a culture that equates worth with productivity and containment. In making themselves edible, so to speak, they assert the right to define the terms of their own consumption. This radical recontextualization refuses capitalist logic by transmuting the self from product to offering—from asset to sacrament.

Bound Bodies: Ramberg's Visualization of Corporeal Containment

The imagery of fragmented bodies in art directly materializes this capitalist commodification through visual language. Christina Ramberg's paintings from the 1970s offer perhaps the most incisive visual analysis of this phenomenon, depicting female torsos tightly bound in corsets, their heads often deliberately cropped out or replaced with blank planes—a literal erasure of personhood. These figures—essentially human mannequins—appear as depersonalized objects shaped entirely by external forces (fashion, fetish, patriarchy). Ramberg's works like “Probed Cinch” (1969) present a torso cinched and distorted, with a rigid bra and girdle squeezing flesh into submission. The woman inside is absent; we see only the apparatus of constraint and a mute body yielding to it—the perfect visual metaphor for the “perfectly optimized” subject under late capitalism.

As Storr (2013) observes, Ramberg's paintings explore bodily constraints as both physical reality and psychological metaphor, suggesting emotional states fractured by social pressures. The bound torsos visualize precisely the psychic fragmentation that results from capitalist consumption of bodies—where the self becomes not just divided but systematically parceled for efficient use. Vitali (2024) notes that Ramberg's work resonates with contemporary feminist concerns despite being created decades earlier, as it visualizes how women's bodies are culturally manufactured and consumed by voyeuristic looking. The corset becomes a potent symbol of how women are compelled to contort themselves (literally and figuratively) to fit ideals—effectively consuming their freedom and comfort to become marketable “hourglass” shapes.

What makes Ramberg's work particularly relevant to our analysis of transformative abjection is how she renders this process simultaneously familiar and disturbing. Her art, associated with the Chicago Imagists, draws on pop culture references including fashion advertisements, catalogs, and fetish magazines (Nadel, 2018), appropriating the very visual languages used to commodify bodies. Yet through her meticulous, almost clinically precise rendering, she denaturalizes these forms, creating uncanny bodies that exist in a liminal space between object and subject. This liminality parallels precisely the state of abjection we've explored in performance art, where the body becomes simultaneously meaningless commodity and sacred offering. In Ramberg's corsets, we see the visualization of that sacrificial gesture—the voluntary constraint that precedes transformation, the bound body awaiting metamorphosis through submission.

Religious, Cultural, and Mythological Archetypes Of Consumption and Abjection

Across cultures and epochs, ritualized acts of bodily dismemberment and symbolic consumption emerge not as gratuitous violence but as pathways to sacred transformation. These religious and mythopoetic traditions illuminate how bodily undoing—whether via ecstatic sacrifice, mortification, or ingestion—can mark the threshold between subject and cosmos, suffering and rebirth.

The Sumerian myth of Inanna offers a foundational metaphor for this dynamic. As the goddess descends into the underworld, she passes through seven gates, removing a garment at each one until she arrives naked before her sister Ereshkigal. There, she is judged, struck down, and hung on a meat hook “like a piece of rotting flesh” (Wolkstein & Kramer, 1983, p. 60). This image—simultaneously grotesque and divine—prefigures the abject body as a site of metamorphosis. Inanna's resurrection is possible only through complete surrender of her symbolic and material power, including the trappings of gender, hierarchy, and form. Her descent and rebirth have become enduring feminist symbols of cyclical undoing and return.

Similarly, in the Orphic tradition, Dionysus is torn apart by the Titans, who consume his dismembered body. From the remnants—specifically, his salvaged heart—new life emerges. The ancient Greek rite of *sparagmos*, in which an animal (or symbolically, a body) is torn limb from limb and ritually consumed, reenacts this mythic violence as a form of collective ecstatic renewal (Seaford, 2006). Dionysus embodies paradox: joy and terror, madness and ecstasy, dismemberment and regeneration. His mythic arc aligns closely with Lacan's notion of *jouissance*, the pleasure-pain excess that destabilizes psychic boundaries.

Christian theology mirrors these archetypes in ritual form. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation—whereby bread and wine are believed to become the literal body and blood of Christ—renders symbolic cannibalism not only permissible but sacred (Bell, 1992). Caroline Walker Bynum (1987) traces the significance of bodily mortification in Christian mysticism, noting how medieval female saints described ecstatic union with the divine through fasting, flagellation, and self-wounding. These forms of embodied piety echo the ecstatic self-effacement seen in other religious traditions. Kilmartin (2016) describes this as a theology of kenosis: divine self-emptying that enables union through humility and flesh.

Other global traditions contribute similar motifs. In Japanese Buddhist practice, the *sokushinbutsu*—or “self-mummifying monk”—willingly starves and embalms himself over years as a form of ultimate discipline and transcendence (Reader, 2007). Hindu *tapas* practices, including prolonged fasting, celibacy, and voluntary suffering, are similarly aimed at self-purification and spiritual mastery (Olivelle, 2008). Jewish Kabbalistic texts describe *tzimtzum*—a cosmic withdrawal or contraction of the divine—as a prerequisite for creation, echoing the idea that fragmentation precedes becoming (Idel, 1988).

While these practices differ in theology and cultural context, they share a common principle: the surrender or transformation of the body becomes a conduit to sacred meaning. In feminist and queer artistic expressions that engage dismemberment, cannibalism, or abjection, these mythic templates

resonate. They suggest that the fragmented, leaking, or sacrificed body is not merely degraded but potentially sanctified—a locus where pain is transfigured and the Real is glimpsed.

These motifs reframe erotic abjection and symbolic dissolution as more than metaphors for trauma or loss. They echo longstanding spiritual traditions that position bodily undoing as a necessary phase of becoming. In invoking Inanna, Dionysus, Christ, or the ascetic, contemporary artists summon a lineage in which the body offered is not passive but potent—a vessel of both annihilation and liberation.

Totemic Sacrifices: Kozyra's Pyramid and the Ritualization of Death

Katarzyna Kozyra's *Pyramid of Animals* (1993) taps directly into archetypal themes of sacrifice and death. Drawing inspiration from a Grimm's fairy tale, the installation features a stacked totem of four taxidermied animals—horse, dog, cat, and rooster. What initially appears whimsical quickly darkens: a nearby video documents the slaughter of the horse used in the piece (De Taddeo, 2024). This juxtaposition—between fairytale form and visceral death—forces the viewer into the role of witness, implicating them in the cultural machinery of consumption.

The pyramid reads as both altar and reliquary, a towering composition that evokes ancient sacrificial structures. The animal stack becomes a symbolic hierarchy of worth, with the largest offering at the base and the rooster crowing atop like a herald of dawn or rebirth. In this tableau, death is not hidden—it is aestheticized, made sacred. As with Inanna's descent or Dionysus's dismemberment, Kozyra's work insists that violence is foundational to transformation, echoing the premise that civilization is built on sacrificed bodies—human or animal.

Kozyra's piece does not allow for passive viewing; it demands ethical reflection. Like other feminist works explored in this essay, it leverages abjection not for spectacle, but to render visible the cultural mechanisms of sacrifice. Through this ritualized confrontation with death and hierarchy, *Pyramid of Animals* reframes the consumable body as a bearer of meaning—implicating both artist and viewer in the sacred and profane rituals that govern life under patriarchy and capitalism.

Stryker's 'Transgender Rage' and the Power of Monstrosity

Susan Stryker's landmark essay "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" (1994) offers a foundational framework for understanding monstrosity as a source of trans empowerment. Drawing on the figure of Frankenstein's monster, Stryker embraces the metaphor of the abject, stitched-together body—"an assemblage of disparate parts"—as a radical reclamation of identity outside normative frameworks. Rather than seeking assimilation, she proclaims: "I find no shame... in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being; everything emerges from the same matrix of possibilities" (p. 242). Here, abjection becomes not a mark of exclusion but a site of generative rupture.

This stance exemplifies what might be called *empowered abjection*: a deliberate inversion of cultural rejection, transforming stigma into strength. It aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, wherein repeated acts give the illusion of stable identity—an illusion disrupted by transgender bodies that lay bare the constructed nature of gender itself. Stryker's concept of *transgender rage* emerges not from pathology but from a place of fierce agency—a refusal to be sanitized, silenced, or made palatable to cisnormative structures.

This reclamation of the monstrous resonates with artists such as Cassils, who use body horror to interrogate the politics of embodiment. In *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* (2011–2013), Cassils reshapes their own musculature through intense bodybuilding, documenting the process to reveal how all bodies—especially gendered ones—are culturally produced (Steinbock, 2019). In *Becoming an Image* (2012), Cassils performs in total darkness, attacking a massive clay block while lit only by the camera's flash, rendering visible the invisible violence that disciplines trans and queer bodies.

Similarly, Hayward (2010) proposes that the trans body is not fixed but *becoming*—"a body in transition that...transforms the binaries that seek to contain it" (p. 227). Eroticizing one's own

fragmentation, then, becomes a way of reclaiming power over abjection. To say “Yes, I am flesh. Yes, I am vulnerable, penetrable, mortal,” is to locate ecstasy in what dominant culture deems shameful. Like Stryker’s defiant monstrosity, this aesthetic strategy destabilizes comforting distinctions between pleasure and disgust, life and death.

As Langer (2011) notes, transgender embodiment challenges the very conditions of legibility imposed by cisnormativity, offering instead a model of subjectivity rooted in flux, sensation, and affect. In the context of this essay’s broader concerns with bodily dissolution, artists and theorists alike reveal how monstrosity can serve as a portal to liberation—where the body cast out by the symbolic order returns, not as victim, but as visionary.

Metamorphosis Through Surrender—The Body as Threshold to Liberation

From a Lacanian perspective, the fantasy of being consumed is a desperate bid to escape the alienation of the Symbolic—the realm of differentiation, language, and law—and to rejoin the Real, a pre-subjective state of undivided being. Because the Real is unsustainable within symbolic life, this longing finds form in images of monstrosity, fragmentation, and death. Kristeva’s theory of abjection characterizes such encounters with boundary dissolution as horrifying, while Ettinger’s concept of the *matrixial borderspace* reframes them as potentially generative: a psychic threshold where connection and co-emergence precede phallic division (Ettinger, 2006, p. 14). This terrain, as we have seen, is not merely metaphysical. It is rooted in the lived experiences of objectification, trauma, and longing—particularly for women, queer, and transgender people whose bodies are regularly rendered monstrous or disposable within dominant culture.

The artworks explored here do not merely depict bodily suffering or symbolic death. They materialize psychological states that oscillate between terror and intimacy, submission and agency. Dismemberment, cannibalistic fantasy, and erotic abjection are not gratuitous provocations; they are strategies of reclamation and expression. In these works, the fragmented body becomes both altar and author—a site where trauma is not only represented but transformed. The aesthetic is often surreal, dreamlike, and contradictory, inviting the viewer into an unsettled state of proximity to the Real. When successful, such works provoke what might be called *productive discomfort*—an emotional and cognitive dissonance that disrupts binary thinking and opens space for deeper reflection.

These recurring modes of self-dismantling offer insight into how artists encode psychic processes in material form—processes that may parallel therapeutic journeys of undoing and reintegration. Like the dismantling of rigid psychic defenses in clinical work, these artistic expressions stage annihilation not as an endpoint but as a pathway to renewal.

Indeed, many of the pieces examined—from Szapocznikow’s melting lamps and Horn’s unicorn ritual to Cassils’s performative sacrifice—reveal the paradox at the heart of empowered abjection: surrender becomes a form of authorship. To say “take all of me” is not necessarily to lose oneself but to choose the terms of one’s offering. Within this paradox lies a radical form of intimacy: a longing to be so thoroughly known that nothing remains hidden—not even the flesh. The irony, of course, is that such complete exposure may undo the self entirely. Yet in the logic of fantasy, this erasure is the proof of ultimate union.

The clinical implications are significant. These artistic explorations mirror the psychic processes clinicians encounter in work with clients navigating trauma, identity dissolution, and reformation. Particularly for queer and trans individuals, the fantasy of being consumed resonates with real experiences of bodily surveillance, medicalization, and societal erasure—but also with the power of choosing one’s own transformation. Figures like Cassils and Sterling offer not only resistance but transfiguration: a re-making of the body as something sacred, erotic, and self-determined.

Rather than resolving into neat conclusions, these works dwell in ambivalence. They expose the tension between agency and surrender, visibility and obliteration, horror and ecstasy. And they insist that within the spectacle of fragmentation, something urgent and beautiful persists: a claim to be seen, devoured, and remade on one’s own terms.

As Kristeva (1982) reminds us, it is precisely at the border of abjection that we glimpse the sublime—where *jouissance* and terror entwine in a confrontation with the deepest truths of our embodied condition. In this light, the body offered in sacrifice is not merely consumed; it becomes a threshold. And through that threshold, we may ultimately discover not annihilation, but liberation.

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