



Judith Barry

Mary Boone Gallery, New York, USA

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Given the figure's recent return in painting, it's striking how little mention has been made of its appearance (and decomposition) in abject art of the 1990s. The omission may be purposeful: why dwell on the body's oozy corporeality when smartphone screens offer confectionary distractions from the abject body in daily news – from tragic images of drowned refugees, victims of war, terrorism, gun violence and police brutality? Then again, perhaps this makes reexamining the abject all the more urgent today.

Consider Judith Barry's imagination: *dead imagine* (1991/2017), named after Samuel Beckett's last and shortest novel. Re-installed at Mary Boone, the massive, minimalist cube confronts the viewer with four views of a large head, projected atop its mirrored base. The face of this nameless, androgynous protagonist – a digital composite of a male and a female actor – remains impassive despite successive defilements, dispensed by some off-screen agent until an animated video wipe washes it clean and the process begins anew. In one, the victim is doused with a substance reminiscent of blood; in another, with something resembling vomit; in yet another, excrement. One passage subjects the stoic subject to crawling insects and conjures apocalyptic images of biblical plagues. Abu Ghraib and the

US government's domestic abuses come to mind, as do all the numerous abjections endured by those reduced to bare life, cast out by the state as its projected Others. Through it all the muck-ridden face remains resolute, accompanied only by the sound of heavy breathing.

While looking at the work, one becomes keenly aware of oneself, reflected in the sculpture's mirrored base and transfixed by the video's equally repulsive and hypnotic spectacle. One is absorbed, too, by the tomb-like, monumental presence of the piece – part laboratory and holding tank – illuminating the gallery's cavernous space. If much post-minimalist work seamlessly segues with gallery architecture, Barry's pulsing monolith infects this institutional aesthetic with the messy contours and fluids of its embodied viewer. For critic Michael Fried, such anthropomorphism always lurked at the heart of minimalism, rendering its works 'theatrical', partly because many of its sculptures were human-scaled. In Barry's riposte, this body returns as abstraction's prodigal exile, infiltrating and possessing the minimalist cube in a nod to Robert Morris's mirrored works from the late 1960s. Moreover, if the discourse of abjection once offered a counter to art theory's focus on media, language and the social construction of identity, Barry's spectacularized version of the



Judith Barry, *imagination, dead imagine*, 1991/2017, five-channel video projection, mirror and wood, 3.1 x 2.4 x 2.4 m, installation view, Mary Boone Gallery, New York

corpus hangs ambiguously between the full richness of the body's organic associations and the technical apparatus that constructs, contains and renders this body visible.

Abjection 'is above all ambiguity', abjection's patron saint Julia Kristeva wrote in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980). Neither subject nor object, inside or outside, the abject is an interstitial state: a threshold space of fluid indeterminacy that both precedes and transgresses one's boundaries – hence its associations with contamination and bodily ejecta. In this sense, such renewed focus on the abject and Barry's persevering protagonist seems appropriate for this political moment, in which the Trump Administration and Republicans in Congress paranoiacally construct and police boundaries of every sort. But here it is also important to recall that the abject, abjected and cast out is not solely a position of victimhood. For Georges Bataille, abjection's other philosophical touchstone, the lowest of social ejecta – the lumpen – was also a privileged revolutionary agent. Barry's show suggests that, if anything, we must reassert the abject's indeterminacy – its illicit, transgressive non-status – to realize its sublime and destabilizing potential. Like Bataille's informe, likened to 'a spider or spit', the abject may be expelled by the dominant order, but it also has the power to subvert it.

Main image: Judith Barry, imagination, dead imagine, 1991/2017, five-channel video projection, mirror and wood, 3.1 x 2.4 x 2.4 m, installation view, Mary Boone Gallery, New York

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