

Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust

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This essay examines an aesthetics of disgust through an analysis of the work of Scottish painter Jenny Saville. Saville's paintings suggest that there is something valuable in retaining and interrogating our immediate and seemingly unambivalent reactions of disgust. I contrast Saville's representations of disgust to the repudiation of disgust that characterizes contemporary corporeal politics. Drawing on the theoretical work of Elspeth Probyn and Julia Kristeva, I suggest that an aesthetics of disgust reveals the fundamental ambiguity of embodiment, allowing us to critically attend to the aesthetic and cultural objectification of the female body.

The contemplation of beauty and pleasure are deeply embedded in the Western tradition of aesthetics. Despite their marginal position within this tradition, many women artists have continued with the practice of contemplating beauty and pleasure and their multiple and contested meanings. Scottish painter Jenny Saville (b. 1970) falls squarely within this tradition. Her work interrogates assumptions about beauty by depicting bodies that are not at all beautiful in any conventional sense. The bodies she depicts are not the refined and evenly proportioned nudes of classical art. Saville's enormous canvases, *Plan* and *Hybrid*, included in the 1997 show of young British artists, *Sensation*, depict distorted, fleshy, and disquieting naked female bodies. As with most of the work displayed in *Sensation*, Saville's paintings are sensational in both senses of the word: not only do they provoke the excitement and interest of the artworld, they also elicit sensual—even visceral—reactions. These bodies are rendered by way of surprising combinations of color. A mottled arrangement of mauves, yellows, browns, and blues seem to seep out from underneath the surface of the flesh. The unexpected use of color and fine brushstrokes compel

a spectator to get up close to the paintings. The massive size of the canvases, however, require the spectator to step back. Stepping back from the canvases means to be faced with large expanses of puckered and folded skin, pendulous breasts, and formidable thighs. In *Plan* and *Hybrid*, as in most of her paintings, Saville represents bodies rarely appreciated in contemporary Western culture. In a cultural climate that encourages women to conceal, if not excise, those parts of their bodies considered fat, jiggy, out of control, and excessive, Saville insists upon revealing precisely these features.

Unlike those artists who embody beauty, Saville's paintings embody *disgust*. They are helpful starting points for clarifying the nature of what I am calling an aesthetics of disgust. Disgust, unlike desire, is not a fashionable category for aesthetic or philosophical inquiry. This means, in a twist of Gilles Deleuze's claim that we don't know what a body can do, that "we do not know what a shameful, shamed, disgusted or disgusting body can do" (Probyn 2000, 133; see also Deleuze 1997, 123). My interest is in the ways that the experience of *disgust* can inform aesthetic practices, which include both the production of and reaction to art objects. Although Saville frequently asserts that she simply sees beauty "differently," a comment in a recent interview modifies that claim. She explains: "I don't make paintings for people to say we should look at big bodies again and say they are beautiful. I think that it's more that they are difficult. Why do we find bodies like this difficult to look at?" (Drohojowska-Philp 2002). This concern with difficulty—and this is, I will argue, a visceral difficulty—strikes me as a particularly valuable frame of reference for understanding the aesthetic system at work in Saville's paintings. Taking her comment into account, I want to argue that the success of Saville's work is not dependent upon an aesthetic practice that redefines the boundaries of beauty. Contrasting Saville's work with the more explicitly political renegotiation of representations of beauty found in the discourse of fat pride, I want to argue that Saville's work is a provocative site for the emergence of an aesthetics of disgust that can propose new modes of thinking about feminine embodiment. In particular, I want to suggest that her work addresses the problem of *experiencing oneself as disgusting*.

The question that propels this paper is this: What would it mean for a woman—an artist, an activist, a spectator—to willingly and excessively embody disgust? In what follows, I work through a number of philosophical and psychological explanations of the power of disgust. Drawing on the works of Charles Darwin (1998), Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark McCauley (2000) and Mary Douglas (1966), I argue first that disgust is something fundamental to human beings—we all suffer disgust—and second that disgust is an affect that forces us to confront our bodily existence. By drawing on the work of Julia Kristeva (1982), and in particular, her understanding of the process of abjection, I identify ways in which ambiguity underpins the relationships individuals have with objects in the world. More to the point, taking abjection into account

reminds us that bodily existence is ambiguous and contradictory. With this theoretical framework in mind, I return to the paintings of Jenny Saville and address the ways in which they can encourage a spectator—and especially a female spectator—to recognize and interrogate bodily reactions of disgust. I don't want to argue, however, that the paintings cause disgust. Rather, I look at how disgust might emerge from the recognition of a system of cultural ideals that often compels women to see their bodies in a distorted and negative manner. In this way, Saville's paintings engage in what Elspeth Probyn (2000) calls "a gut ethics." By paying heed to disgust as a gut reaction, an opportunity arises to interrogate the ethical implications of a cultural system that regularly establishes boundaries between different types of bodies: rendering some beautiful, some acceptable, and others simply disgusting.

SAVILLE'S PAINTINGS

Saville consistently paints distorted women's bodies on huge canvases. One painting depicts a woman sitting on a stool, naked except for a pair of white shoes. What makes *Propped* (1992, 84" by 72") particularly unsettling—and captivating—is its disturbed proportions. At the center of the image are the woman's crossed hands resting on an enormous pair of knees. The knees and thighs dominate the image, in theme as well as in size—each knee is larger than the woman's breasts, larger than her head. This is an image, as one reviewer wrote, that no woman wants to have of herself: "It conjured up every woman's worst nightmare of how she might look with no clothes on: huge expanses of quivering milky blubber filled with watery blue veins and scored by stretch-marks bore down on spectators like some life-sucking blancmange" (Milner 1997, 4). Strikingly, the figure in *Propped* is overlaid with writing in mirrored script that has been scratched into the paint. The sentence reads: "If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other . . ." and is a translation of a passage in Luce Irigaray's *Ce Sexe Qui N'en est Pas Un* (1977, 205). Following Irigaray's call for a feminine symbolic, Saville's paintings reclaim the female body from centuries of male-produce art that have defined women's bodies and women's beauty. "We need," she explains, "a new language, a women's language, so that we don't have to take on maleness to be successful" (Henry 1994a, 13). Saville refuses to paint nudes in the classical style and instead sets out to disrupt that style.

In *Plan*, the canvas is even more enormous (1993, 108" by 84"). Here, Saville has painted her own body, distorted and foreshortened. Her legs and belly are mapped out with contour-like lines. As with *Propped*, these lines were cut into the paint, and as the *Sensation* gallery guide describes, suggest "the marks made by a surgeon's scalpel" (*Sensation* 1997). At the center of the image is a mass of dark, scratchy pubic hair; above this, large breasts lined with blue veins. Then



Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992, 84 × 72, courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London

there is *Branded* (1992, 84" by 72"), which similarly depicts a naked woman, again foreshortened, who grips a roll of fat in her left hand. Her head, significantly smaller than the rest of her body, hovers at the top of the canvas and looks down coolly out of the frame. Like *Propped*, Saville has scratched words across the figure depicted in *Branded*: supportive, petite, precious, decorative. These are all words that arouse ideals of femininity with which this body fails, or perhaps refuses, to comply. In *Hybrid*, Saville takes a slightly different approach. Rather than relying upon a foreshortened perspective to distort the body, *Hybrid* (1997, 108" by 84") is a patchwork of different bodies, "a joining together of flesh from different generations"—the models for *Hybrid* are Saville, her younger sister, and her mother (Henry 2000, 8). This painting speaks to Saville's fascination with hybridity and ambiguity, which she has further developed in *Matrix* (1999, 84" by 120"), her painting of transsexual "gender terrorist" Del LaGrace.

Reviewers of her work regularly respond to these images with shock, disgust, and confusion. Why, they ask, does Saville insist upon making women ugly? Why does she hate women so much? Why make work that people find so disturbing? Does she hate her body? Does she hate women's bodies in general? Catherine Milner, for instance, describes Saville's work as cruel, intense, fetishistic, obsessive, loveless, unforgiving, and extremely shocking (1997, 4). Many women, however, have found redeeming qualities in the works. Hunter Davies tells of a young woman who, upon viewing Saville's work, appreciatively proclaimed, "All women will want to look fat from now on!" (1994, 21). Catherine Milner was surprised to discover that Saville gets fan mail: "Saville has been seen as a champion of woebegone fatties, and she says she gets bag-loads of post every month from fat women who are pleased she has recognised their beauty" (1997, 4). Clare Henry (1994b), who, like Milner, describes the images as "every woman's nightmare: vast mountains of obesity, flesh run riot, enormous repellent creatures who make even Rubens's chubby femmes fatales look positively gaunt," reports that among the hundreds of letters Saville has received from women all over Europe are those in which women thank Saville. "I am obese, but now I don't feel bad about it," wrote one fan (Henry 1994b, 16). As Saville regularly points out, her work is directly engaged in the interrogation of Western diet culture. She explains: "Everyone I know, for instance, goes on a diet, and a lot of people I know have been seriously ill because of it. They draw lines on their legs with a biro to mark the place where they wished their flesh stopped. And I find all that deeply disturbing. . . . Why are we doing this to ourselves?" (Milner 1997, 4). Read this way, the paintings are made to serve the interests of politics of fat pride and fat liberation, which have as central goals not only reclaiming the word "fat," but also transforming cultural representations of fat bodies.

Although there are clear parallels between her message and that of fat liberationists, there are few parallels in terms of strategy. While Saville's work speaks to the fat liberationist battle with a Western diet culture as well as with a fat

phobic culture that considers fat bodies disgusting, her approach involves neither a discourse of pride nor a straightforward redefinition of beauty. Fat liberation encourages fat men and women to reject the culturally imposed shame that is attached to their bodies and to replace it with bodily pride. The movement for fat liberation thus shares the strategies of postwar liberation movements, which tended to demystify or pathologize disgust (Dollimore 1998, 50). In particular, it shares metaphors with the gay, lesbian, and queer liberation movements of the late twentieth century. The reclamation of “fat” is analogous to what Judith Butler (1993) calls “the reworking of ‘queer’ from abjection to politicized affiliation” (1993, 124). In her campy fat liberationist book *Fat! So?: Because you don’t have to apologize for your size!* Marilyn Wann proclaims: “It’s time to take this powerful, awe-inspiring word back from the bullies! It’s time to put *fat* into the hands of people who will use its power for good, not evil!” (1998, 18). Wann has visions of a fat homeland and a National Fat Day when everyone would dress in traditionally tacky orange and hot pink kilts (1998, 123).

Even the metaphor of the closet has found its way into fat politics. In an article that places transvestite diva actress Divine at the crossroads of fat and queer, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon (1994) insist that there is such a thing as coming out as a fat woman. At one level, of course, this is ridiculous. Being fat is visible; it’s at best an open secret. At another level, Sedgwick and Moon write that the “denomination of oneself as a fat woman is a way . . . of making clear to the people around one that their cultural meanings will be, and will be heard as, assaultive and diminishing to the degree that they are not fat-affirmative” (Sedgwick and Moon 1994, 230). Coming out as a fat woman is thus a way of engaging in a “renegotiation of the *representational contract* between one’s body and one’s world” (Sedgwick and Moon 1994, 230). The photograph on the cover of Camryn Manheim’s book, *Wake Up, I’m Fat* (1999) is exemplary of this renegotiation of a representational contract. In her autobiographical tale, Manheim, an American actress who won an Emmy in 1998 for her work on the television drama *The Practice*, explains how coming out as a fat woman allowed her to recover from years of humiliation and discrimination. When, on the cover of her book, she proudly poses as a beauty queen—she wears a white sash reading “Miss Understood” over a black bathing suit, high heeled shoes and a tiara—she is refusing to be ashamed and refusing to be disgusting. This is surely an empowering and positive image. However, rather than interrogating disgust, as I claim Saville’s images encourage spectators to do, Manheim embodies a hegemonic version of femininity, sidestepping disgust altogether.

Clearly, feeling good about one’s body has value—a value feminists have recognized for decades, if not centuries. Women of all sizes need to accept their bodies rather than focus obsessively on their unavoidable failure to live up to the largely arbitrary normative standards of ideal size. However, as Probyn argues, the tactics of fat pride appear to “bypass any individual avowal and recognition

of disgust.” In the long run, she points out, such tactics run the risk of producing “cultures where shame is absent, but where disgust, blame and resentment seethe under the surface of a sanitised veneer of acceptance” (Probyn 2000, 128). The affirmation of pride may, Probyn suggests, be nearing the end of its usefulness for corporeal politics. Probyn is taking a page from Judith Butler, for whom the making visible of one’s identity—the claim to pride—is only a starting point for an intervention. Although pride has been a useful and empowering strategy by which groups have asserted their right to a take up a place within cultural frameworks, it has also forced a mainstream political correctness that encourages people to keep their disgust to themselves. Rather than acknowledging and confronting disgust, disgust itself has been rendered disgusting and shameful.

In *Carnal Appetites: Foodsexidentities* (2000), Probyn attends to what she calls “gut ethics.” In developing this ethics of bodies, or gut ethics, she turns away from the vast philosophical project of moral systems and instead takes up the Foucaultian notion of ethics. Probyn draws on Nikolas Rose’s (1996) description of Foucaultian ethics as care for the self and a “domain of practical advice as to how one should concern oneself with oneself, make oneself the subject of solicitude and attention, conduct oneself in the world of one’s everyday existence” (Probyn 2000, 4). I take Probyn’s gut ethics to refer to a process by which one attends to the ethical implication of his or her own gut reactions. That is to say, I want to insist that an immediate response like that of disgust has something to say about the ways that a person inhabits the world. This immediate and fleeting bodily experience of aversion is something that is rarely granted epistemic or aesthetic privilege. Art, politics, and philosophy often sanitize bodily reaction. Of course, sanitizing and controlling immediate, sometimes offensive, sometimes dangerous, bodily responses often has undeniable benefit. That said, I want to address the value of artistic work that engages those gut responses, extends them in time, and offers the opportunity to admit to and interrogate one’s own disgust. Jenny Saville’s work does just this. The artist sets out to “make you feel your own body” (Drohojowska-Philp 2002, F63). She sets out to make her spectators acknowledge their gut reactions. Saville’s work, that is, sets up a context in which spectators can begin to come to terms with gut feelings of disgust, that strange emotion that William Ian Miller reminds us “has a firmer hold on us . . . [and] is more basic to our definition of self, than most other passions” (1997, 250).

DISGUST

The aesthetics of disgust implicit in Jenny Saville’s paintings is founded upon the experience of being disgusting—they recall the fear of arousing disgust. In order to think about disgust, being disgusting, and the sense that one can easily

be or become disgusting, I review some of the existing literature on disgust. I begin with Darwin (1998) and psychologists Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (2000), for whom disgust is an emotion that is grounded in physiology. Their arguments reveal the extent to which disgust is often assumed to be a biological and thus natural response to things that are disgusting. Countering their arguments are writers who insist upon the social and cultural foundations of disgust. As William Ian Miller (1997) cogently points out, despite its being “the most embodied and visceral of emotions” (Miller 1997, xii), disgust is a socially circumscribed and habituated emotion established and experienced within social, cultural, and political structures and settings. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) places social structure at the center of her theory of contamination, which I read as the structural foundation upon which disgust develops. While Douglas is helpful for thinking about the ways that disgust and the disgusting are socially circumscribed, Julia Kristeva’s (1982) work is most helpful for understanding the experience of disgust and the fear of being disgusting. Reading Douglas alongside psychoanalysis, Kristeva introduces the conception of abjection. Abjection forms the basis of my understanding of an aesthetics of disgust. In short, Kristeva’s abjection offers the opportunity to theorize an aesthetics of disgust founded upon ambiguity. Unlike the approach taken by the fat pride movement, in which disgust is resolutely refused, an aesthetics of disgust founded on ambiguity offers an opportunity to both acknowledge and interrupt disgust reactions—which is to say that it allows us to feel disgust in order to interrogate its sources. By drawing on each of these thinkers, I develop an aesthetics of disgust that keeps the physical, the cultural, and the personal implications of disgust in play.

Investigations of disgust often take Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1998) as a starting point of analysis. Darwin’s explanation of disgust emerges from a story of his own experience of disgust while traveling in Terra del Fuego. He recalls that “a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness.” While the “native” was disgusted by the consistency and character of Darwin’s meal, Darwin was disgusted by its contact with “a naked savage.” This is a telling instance of disgust, for the preserved meat was, in an instant, transformed from something edible to something contaminated—despite that fact that the hand that effected this transformation “did not appear to be dirty.” For Darwin, disgust in its most basic form arises in connection with the acts of eating and tasting. Disgust means “something offensive to the taste.” (255). By emphasizing taste as it is related to ingestion, Darwin avoids addressing the moral—and thus culturally formulated—disgust that underpins his experience in Tierra del Fuego. It allows him to treat the disgust that emerges from the contact with a “naked savage” as an instinctive reaction to food that appears unusual. The problem with treating disgust as simply an instinct is that it allows Darwin to avoid the fact that his disgust is not a function of seeing his food

contaminated but is rather a function of his disgust with the “savage” himself. Refusing the food touched by the Tierra del Fuegan is a refusal of close contact with a stranger—it allows Darwin to maintain a strict boundary between his way of life and that of the stranger and his customs.

In developing a contemporary theory of disgust, psychologists Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley develop Darwin’s explanation of disgust as fundamentally connected to food rejection. They define disgust in biological terms, describing it as a “phylogenetic residue of a voluntary vomiting system” (2000, 638). Disgust is “a mechanism for avoiding harm to the body” (650) and thus functions to protect the body from poison. Like Darwin, they insist that the acts of eating and tasting are the origins of disgust. Where Rozin and his colleagues differ from Darwin is that they place disgust in both developmental and cultural contexts. That is to say, they argue that core disgust—the biological drive to protect the body—has, over time, developed into something more like moral repugnance. While Darwin failed to address the social and cultural contexts in which disgust is experienced, Rozin and his colleagues recognize that although disgust has its origins in instinctual drives, its contemporary manifestations are shaped by cultural habituation. Put another way, they use a concept called preadaptation to explain the ways that disgust as a biological imperative is co-opted for a new function, namely the protection of social orders via the regulation of moral offenses.

In developing an aesthetics of disgust, it is helpful to understand the biological foundations that Darwin and Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley propose for the emotion of disgust. For one thing, their analyses highlight the extent to which disgust is a bodily reaction. Disgust is a physical reaction, a reflex relatively unresponsive to the will. Reactions such as gagging, cringing, shuddering, or recoiling are difficult to control. They are instantly recognizable and unambiguous responses. We’ve all felt disgust in some setting or another. It feels instinctive; it feels irrepressible. The physicality of disgust is important for my understanding of an aesthetics of disgust. As stated earlier, an aesthetics of disgust offers an opportunity to pay attention to the body. The aesthetics of disgust should alert us to our bodily response, but it should also encourage us to investigate the origins of that bodily response. Despite their recognition of the role of culture, Rozin and his colleagues agree with Darwin that the origins of disgust are gustatory. While convincing to some, the gustatory origins of disgust are of little help in the analysis of the disgust that Saville’s paintings set out to elicit. Her aesthetics of disgust more fully alerts us to the social and cultural components of disgust. In order to further develop an aesthetics of disgust, then, I turn to anthropologist Douglas (1966), for whom the origins of disgust are framed in terms of pollution.

Douglas is concerned with large-scale structural frameworks that serve to organize culture. For Douglas, disgust is framed in terms of the concept of pollution. Those things that cannot be controlled, those things that refuse to

be bounded, are anomalies that cause profound cultural anxiety. In systems ordered by structures of pollution, things that are out of place are dangerous. Douglas uses the term “dirt” for matter that is out of place: “dirt is essentially disorder” (1966, 2). The main work of social structure is to impose order on a system inherently unruly (Douglas 1966, 5). Douglas’s concept of dirt and the establishment of strict boundaries between the pure and the dangerous are not motivated by negativity. That is to say, she sees the imposition of order upon chaos as a creative and positive activity: “In chasing dirt . . . we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea” (Douglas 1966, 2). This explanation is in direct contradiction to the explanations offered by Darwin and by Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley, for whom “chasing dirt” is a protective measure against disease and contamination. Where their explanations are founded upon instincts and physiological necessities, Douglas’s explanation is more squarely social constructionist.

The major point that I take from Douglas’s analysis is that there is no “natural dirt.” Dirt is the result of an object’s inability to fit into the abstract structures and ideals of a cultural system. As Douglas puts it, dirt is in the eye of the beholder. Her point is that disgust is not a condition of an object, but an effect of a beholder’s intentional relationship with an object. I want to emphasize the extent to which objects are rendered disgusting or dirty through implicit social agreements. That is to say, rules of dirt and the regulation of bodily contact with dirt are not behaviors that can be reduced to “personal preoccupations of individuals with their own bodies” (Douglas 1966, 122). Disgust, aversion, and anxiety reveal less about an individual than they reveal about what Douglas provocatively calls “the habit grooves of culture” (1966, 5).

Douglas’s theory is helpful for an aesthetics of disgust because it points to the social obligations and constraints involved in disgust reactions. Disgust is not, in this model, an instinct that protects the body but a bodily habit that serves a society’s abstract social order. This is not to say, however, that disgust has an artificial or dispensable character. Recognizing disgust as socially constructed or habituated does not mean that we are now able to opt out of disgust, or that we are now able to apply disgust selectively. It means, on the contrary, that disgust reveals something about the way our social orders are structured and how we variously inhabit those social orders. In short, disgust is a habituated emotion linked to and reflective of cultural paradigms. Disgust, however, has a firmer hold on us.

This sense of the subjective hold that disgust holds over us is evident in Kristeva’s (1982) psychoanalytic interpretations of Douglas. While Douglas attends to the establishment and patrol of culturally created boundaries, Kristeva attends to the ways in which establishing boundaries between oneself as subject and others as objects is central to psychic development. Following the

psychoanalytic framework, she prioritizes the process by which a child separates from the mother and from other objects in the world. The psychoanalytic stages map out the child's move from dependence and identification to independence and separation from objects in the world. Kristeva's addition to the distinction between subject/self and object/other is the notion of the *abject*, a concept that calls attention to the fundamental instability upon which psychic realities are constituted. Asked about the concept of abjection in an interview conducted in 1980, Kristeva explained that the term has "a much more violent sense" in French than it does in English. "It means," she went on to say, "something disgusting." Abjection is "an extremely strong feeling which is at once somatic and symbolic, and which is above all a revolt of the person against an external menace from which one wants to keep oneself at a distance, but of which one has the impression that it is not only an external menace but that it may menace us from the inside" (Kristeva 1988, 135). Thus abjection carries with it an element of crisis, or to use a term that Saville connects to her work, *difficulty*.

Subjects affirm their singularity and independence by aggressively establishing and patrolling boundaries between self and other, subject and object, the "me" and the "not me." For Douglas, the boundaries between the pure and the dangerous are secured by the practices and organizing principles of a cultural group. Kristeva's theory of abjection points out that such boundaries are fundamentally insecure. It is this insecurity that distinguishes the object from the abject. If the object is "not me," the abject is "not not me." Moving away from structuralist abstractions, Kristeva renders disgust a bodily experience, a feeling, a visceral suspicion that one is or could easily become out of bounds, unruly, disgusting. The "extremely strong feeling" raises the subject's suspicion that psychically established boundaries—as well as those that are socially constructed—are not in fact secure.

As a gut reaction, disgust is an attempt to render oneself distinct from that which disgusts—disgust is that embodied practice of cringing, backing away, highlighting one's separation from an object. But as Kristeva's theory of abjection suggests, the arousal of disgust often indicates an ambiguous and difficult relationship with the object that disgusts. An aesthetics of disgust needs to deal with this difficult relationship. As I've attempted to make clear, disgust is both a physical and a social reaction. Abjection points to the ways that disgust is also profoundly personal. This is not to say that disgust is simply a personal preoccupation, but rather that disgust reveals the ways in which social and cultural paradigms are experienced as personal preoccupations. For Douglas, disgust reveals incongruity; for Kristeva, that incongruity is not simply a threat to the social order but also a threat to personal stability. Saville's paintings are exemplary of an aesthetics of disgust that holds together the physical, the social, and the personal. Keeping the integration of these three facets of disgust in mind, I address how Saville uses disgust as an aesthetics and then, by placing

her work in the context of feminist aesthetics and feminist theories of the body, I attend to the value of disgust for feminist aesthetics and feminist art practice more generally.

SAVILLE'S DISGUST

The fat female body, laid bare on Saville's canvases, provides an opportunity to find out what disgust, and what disgusted and disgusting bodies, can do, and in short, it offers the opportunity to pay attention to the visceral reminders of how we embody social contexts and cultural expectations. Troubled by the regulation of women's bodies through dieting, exercise regimes, liposuction, and the like, Saville's work suggests that women in particular live their bodies as often verging on being disgusting. The disgust with which some women respond to the fat bodies on Saville's canvases speaks to how the fat female body is dangerous. For many women, the fat female body is the fuzzy specter that "menace[s] from inside" (Kristeva 1982, 135). By materializing the abject female body, Saville reveals what lurks in the feminine imagination. That is to say, by representing a specific idea of femininity, she speaks to the disparity between the way that many women feel about their bodies and the reality of how those bodies are perceived by others. The bodies on Saville's canvases are distorted bodies that have to do with "the feminine idea of the feminine" (Milner 1997, 4). These are bodies that are not disgusting but are *lived as if they were disgusting*.

The power of Saville's work lies in what Linda Nochlin describes as "her brilliant and relentless embodiment of our worst anxieties about our own corporeality and gender" (2000, 97). Equally brilliant, I think, is that Saville's paintings elicit an immediate and seemingly unambivalent disgust reaction—a gut reaction that reveals a physical knowledge of the contradictions between the body as it is lived and the body as it is idealized. This shock of disgust alerts a viewer to her status as an embodied, interested, and involved spectator. This is at the heart of Saville's project. In an interview with Peter Ross (2000), she explains her intent to engage spectators at a visceral level: "Ideally, I'd like someone to take a deeper breath when they look at my painting . . . to draw more breath and be conscious of their own body. To feel instinctively their own body in an animal kind of way" (Ross 2000, 6). By using the words "instinctively" and "animal," Saville is drawing out the physiological component of disgust described by Darwin and by Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley. Although I've suggested that the model of disgust promoted by these writers is insufficient for understanding how an aesthetics of disgust works, as Saville points out, the arousal of the physical components of disgust is central to her project.

Drawing out the physical aspects of disgust is, however, only a first step. By playing on disgust, Saville sets her spectators in a position to interrogate that disgust. As discussed above, one of the things that propels her work is a



Jenny Saville, *Plan*, 1993, 108 × 84, courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London

recognition of the ways that many women are “taken in by the cult of exercise, the great quest to be thin” (Davies 1994, 21). Here, Saville is speaking in a familiar feminist language, a theory of the body that is exemplified by the work of Susan Bordo (1993). As Bordo points out in *Unbearable Weight* (1993), the notion of a “tightly managed body” has come to represent contemporary Western feminine beauty and attractiveness. The contemporary slenderness ideal is less a concern with weight than it is a concern with a slim, smooth, contained body profile (Bordo 1993, 187–88). In this context, bulges and eruptions suggest bodies that are out of control, bodies that represent “uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse” (Bordo 1993, 189). Bordo draws her conclusions from analyses of contemporary popular representations of women in films, magazines, and television programs. Saville is undoubtedly reacting to these popular representations that seem to have such a negative impact upon women’s self-image. However, she is also directly engaging the tradition of painting and art making more generally. Troubled by the male dominated tradition of art—both in terms of who has produced art and the style of training contemporary artists receive—Saville’s work constitutes a feminist recuperation of the female form.

Lynda Nead argues in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* that the female nude, more than any other subject, connotes “art.” The nude is thus an icon of Western culture and the accomplishments of Western art and aesthetics. Saville’s *Propped* and *Plan*, however, are unconventional and unruly nudes, nudes that break rules and cross boundaries. Drawing on Douglas’s structuralist framework, Nead argues that the nude functions in the history of Western art as a means of transforming the natural into the cultural. That is to say, at its height, art practice transforms the naked body into the nude form. In the process, the conventions of the nude “have worked metaphorically to shore up the female body—to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other” (1992, 6). As a conventional art form, the nude sets out to control and contain the “unruly” female body. Saville’s paintings challenge the institution of the nude; they are “strategic interventions [that] disturb dominant ideals of femininity” (Lloyd 2001, 48). In the formal nude, the dominant ideals of femininity are captured by what Laura Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness” (1989, 25). As Mulvey, Bordo, and Nead point out, the female body is conventionally framed and explored as an object and an objectified possession of the implicitly male viewer. An object body is a body abstracted from concrete lived reality; it’s a body that has been quite literally turned into an object—unchanging, eternal, immanent. It’s a body that is “the ultimate in passive contemplation, existing merely for admiration and disinterested contemplation” (Worth 2001, 444). In Saville’s work, the paradigm of the male artist and female model is disrupted and the conventional objectifying gaze it engenders is thwarted. Unlike the

objectified and abstracted nudes that Nead analyzes, Saville's nudes represent bodies that are lived, bodies that are concrete, bodies that are lodged in and reflective of social contexts and cultural expectations.

By painting flesh that is puckered, scarred, and bruised, Saville's work is in direct contrast to both the traditional nude and contemporary popular representations of the slim, tightly managed, and often air-brushed female body. This work is so compelling because Saville manages to render flesh that is unmanaged and unmanageable. This is flesh that, by nature of its failure to yield to structurally imposed limitations, is unruly, anomalous, and, to use Douglas's language, out of order (Douglas 1966, 2). Saville is intrigued by flesh and the way it behaves. In her interview with Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, she explains part of her aesthetic project as "trying to make paint behave in the way flesh behaves" (Drohojowska-Philp 2002). In another interview, she explains that she sometimes thinks of her paint as tins of liquid flesh that she spreads onto a canvas (Darwent 2000, 5). After graduating from art college, Saville spent time with plastic surgeons in their offices, gaining exposure to the ways that flesh can be manipulated and to the ways that flesh recovers from manipulation in the form of bruising, scarring, and swelling. Viewing the surgeons at work, as well as surgery manuals, has undoubtedly enhanced her ability to render flesh in this provocative fashion.

At the same time, plastic surgery further alerted Saville to the larger struggle that women have with their bodies. In her interview with Drohojowska-Philp, Saville says that her work emerges from a recognition of women's struggles with their bodies. She explains: "If you are a woman and live in the West, you can't avoid it can you? A mixture of things growing up, like looking at your body in the mirror and some days you feel powerful in your body and others you want to hide" (Drohojowska-Philp 2002). Female embodiment, she seems to say, is full of contradictions—sometimes we see our bodies as attractive, and at other times we see them as disgusting. In the attempt to portray and explore the lived contradictions and ambiguities of feminine embodiment, Saville paints female figures that seem to come alive. They "overwhelm the spectator and threaten fixed body boundaries" (Meskimmon 1996, 8). Moreover, these figures are lived bodies that are mindful of the lived body that watches; or as Fran Lloyd puts it, they are bodies that "raise issues about the fears and desires associated with different bodies (the maternal, the obscene, the ageing), *including the body of the spectator*" (2001, 48; emphasis added).

While Marsha Meskimmon and Lloyd recognize that Saville's paintings attend to the spectator as an embodied subject, I want to suggest that Saville's work attends to the embodied female spectator specifically by provoking her disgust. As the example of fat pride suggests, contemporary corporeal politics repudiate disgust as an inappropriate reaction. But as Butler (1993) and Kristeva (1982) point out, that which is refused and repudiated frequently persists—for

Butler, as a “defining negativity” (1993, 190), and for Kristeva, as the abject (1982). Keeping in mind Kristeva’s and Butler’s claims that the repudiated persists, I question the tactics of fat pride insofar as it sets out to depopulate the category of the disgusting rather than to interrogate the manner by which things come to be rendered disgusting. Attesting to one’s disgust—or in the case of Saville’s paintings, being persuaded to feel disgust—offers an opportunity to reflect upon the sources of our disgust. Saville’s paintings grant female spectators the opportunity to interrogate their disgust.

Viewing *Propped* or *Plan* is an aesthetic experience that places a spectator in close contact with the abject. Keeping Kristeva’s framework in mind suggest that the arousal of disgust can alert a spectator to the ambiguous and difficult relationship that he or she may have with the object that disgusts. By depicting the fat female body, Saville portrays the abject and urges women to confront the familiar disgust that we often lodge against our own bodies in their failure to measure up to alienating body ideals. These paintings are an opportunity to acknowledge this disgust, to locate it in social and cultural frameworks, and to recognize the extent to which those social and cultural frameworks influence how we experience our bodies and the bodies of other women.

CONCLUSION

To return, then, to the notion of gut ethics, I’d like to suggest that the immediate response of disgust reveals something about how an individual has been habituated to the abstract organizational systems that structure his or her culture. For many women, the recognition of disgust is an opportunity to interrogate the problem of living ones body as if it were disgusting. Put another way, it offers the opportunity to think about what it means for women to live in a perpetual struggle with the abject female body. Saville’s paintings suggest that the abject female body isn’t merely a fat body, but a body that refuses to comply with the contemporary ideals of a tightly managed feminine form. To use language inspired by Michel Foucault (1995), the representation of the abject body speaks to the ways in which women experience social and cultural imperatives through self-surveillance, self-denial, and constant control. From the perspective of feminist aesthetics, then, Saville’s paintings “constitute a slap in the face to our waif-obsessed culture” (Nochlin 2000, 95) Rather than simply engaging in a “celebration of the flesh” (Nochlin 2000, 95), however, Saville encourages her feminine spectator to confront and wrestle with the difficulty and ambiguity of bodies.

In a reversal of the traditional nude, wherein a female figure passively displays her body for the pleasure of an implicitly male gaze, the figures in Saville’s paintings return the spectator’s stare with an appraising gaze of their own. Within this gaze, the spectator is not only caught looking, but caught feeling

disgust. One reaction might be to choke back one's disgust, to hide it "under the surface of a sanitised veneer of acceptance" (Probyn 2000, 128). A more difficult and more productive reaction would be to interrogate one's own disgust and determine what it tells a spectator about the way she physically inhabits social conventions. The paintings are thus an opportunity to feel and examine a physical reaction that seems out of our control. By paying close attention to the visceral reactions elicited by these works, I have explored the framework for an aesthetics of disgust. By reading Saville's images alongside the existing literature on disgust, I've mapped out the preliminaries of an aesthetics of disgust that holds together the physical (see Darwin 1998 and Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2000), the social (see Douglas 1966), and the subjective (see Kristeva 1982). Taken together, these thinkers help to formulate an aesthetics of disgust that keeps the multiple aspects of this strange and difficult emotion in play. By turning to the surprising work of Jenny Saville, I've endeavored to address how she engages an aesthetics of disgust. More specifically, given her imagery and her political inclinations, these works develop a feminist aesthetics of disgust. Saville's work not only exemplifies what I've called an aesthetics of disgust, it also reveals the ways that disgust can—in strange, surprising, and difficult ways—work within the framework of feminist aesthetics both by challenging tradition and by offering an opportunity to see what the disgusted and disgusting body can do.

NOTES

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the George Mason University Cultural Studies Colloquium Series in May 2002. Reproductions of Jenny Saville's paintings appear courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. My thanks to the GMU Provost Fellowship Program and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for their generous support. I would also like to express my thanks to Roger Lancaster for his close reading of an earlier version of this paper, to Debra Bergoffen, Katrina Irving, and Jeff Stepnisky for their ongoing encouragement, and to the three anonymous readers and guest editors whose thoughtful comments put me on a different path.

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