



It Lacks A Human Corpse

By

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Abstract

The body, as well as nature, is subjected to regenerative or degenerative transformations. When the body undergoes a transformation, there is a reminder of the final transformation; the final transformation into a corpse is marked with the utmost abjection. These transformations are potentially traumatic, abject and destructive. Transformation can also be associated with being monstrous, horrific, liminal and abhuman. These transformations influence people's perceptions and interpretations toward the body, be it through their own construction or that of society and culture. My intuitive process is rooted in my own personal experience of transformation and the symbolic and archetypal forms that stem from these experiences. My experiences are augmented by cultural representations of transformation; these images are saturated with things of an uncanny, formless, grotesque and monstrous nature. They are embodied in the form of fragmented bodies, hybrids of humans, machines, animals and unfamiliar beings.

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Dedication

...To the living dead.

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Preface

I recall at an early age an alignment with the monster; I would often sympathize with these creatures, imagining myself in their position, believing that I was one of them, although well aware that such beings did not truly exist. In my childish games, I would adopt the persona of one of these creatures; I would become the werewolf, the fly, the alien, the vampire, the golem, the mechanical beast, or the reanimated corpse. I would become a different monster depending on what qualities I wished to portray in the playground.

This alignment with the abhuman subject/monster stemmed from beyond merely a childhood fascination, but was also my way of finding something or someone to which I could relate my feelings of abjection (toward my abject body) and my struggle with physical transformation. Thus, the abhumans and monsters of fiction became entities with which I could relate my own experience of physical transformation to. My relationship with these forms of entities was significantly shaped by my own sympathy toward the experiences endured by such beings, especially those who were in the process of physical transformation or were the product of such a physical transformation.

The question of whether my fascination with the monster came prior to the knowledge of my own transformation or if it was a subsequent development based on the realization of my own transformation is irrelevant; what is important is that this concept continues to resonate with my work and with me.

PART I: Introduction

Introduction

It Lacks A Human Corpse emerges from my personal experience and relationship with physical transformation. I have always thought of myself as being a product of a continuous transformative process with regards to the body. This transformation is not accompanied by excitement and zeal of what is to come; rather it is met with a fear of transformation as a destructive force. As this uncontrollable transformation continuously wreaks havoc upon my body, I persistently struggle to keep contained what I consider to be myself—my humanness, my humanity—preventing it from being spilt. Unfortunately these attempts at prevention prove to be futile due to the nature of my flesh, for once transformation takes hold it consumes me and my flesh, leaving in its wake a transformed remnant, inanimate, destroyed and irreparable; its former self dead and gone.

My research situates itself within the discourse of abjection and its relationship to the concept of transformation, particularly with respect to their depiction within contemporary culture and art, which I believe subsequently influence the individual's understanding of both notions. With a focus on how I have personally been influenced by physical transformation and how this experience has subsequently shaped my interpretation of these contemporary depictions, I challenge the assumptions that culture and many scholars have made in how abjection and transformation are depicted. Namely, that abjection is solely

portrayed as a temporary state tied to materiality and that transformation is solely a regenerative, creative process.

In order to construct an alternative way of observing and understanding abjection and transformation, I focus on how I have been affected by such transformation. Since this alternate construction is based on my own cultural and personal interpretation, my goal is not so much to offer a new understanding of abjection and transformation. Instead, I aim to highlight the possibility of such novel approaches, thereby positioning these discourses—the aforementioned assumptions—as contested ones.

I believe that, through my personal experience, there has been a paradigm shift in how I perceive the concept and experience of abjection and transformation; this new insight underpins my research exploration. This shift is clearly characterized by my belief that abjection and transformation can be portrayed as both temporary and permanent—as spillage and containment.

The problem that I am exploring here originates from a personal fear, a fear of degenerative transformations upon my body brought on by disease and of things that will outlast me. This degenerative transformation upon the body has cast a long shadow upon my unconscious and conscious, as well as my own perception of the physical body. I see my own body shed itself, split itself, spill itself, destroy itself, become abject, and yet despite the fears that arise from these experiences I try to reassure myself that I hold onto something at my core: my humanity, which contains me.

In this degenerative transformation and self-reassurance of human containment, similarities can be drawn between me and the fictional creatures that are often characterized as physical monsters in culture, such as the werewolf and David Cronenberg's *The Fly*. Drawing on the symbolic value of these monsters, then, my work insists that these transformations are potentially traumatic, abject, and destructive. Moreover, in this insistence *It Lacks A Human Corpse* also reveals the possibility that physical transformation may, in fact, be the precise cause responsible for the creation of those who are considered to be monstrous, horrific, liminal and abhuman. I refer to those who are considered to show bodily deviance compared to the accepted norm, due to their shared traits with the monster: a monstrosity brought on by a physical transformation that is marked by a movement away from what is considered the human identity.

In its subject matter, this project has universal relevance but it is also deeply personal. On one hand, we are all susceptible to degenerative processes of transformation, the main bodily transformation being associated with the process of aging. On the other hand, however, my own transformation takes this general movement shared universally by all to a heightened level of meaning. It is qualitatively changed by virtue of being experienced at a quickened rate. I perceive most everything and everyone as being more permanent than myself, and this comparative permanence threatens me by reminding me of my own physical decay and impermanence. Since, as Kristeva notes, the abject is characterized as that which threatens identity, structure and order (Kristeva,

1982, 4), the relative permanence of my friends, colleagues, and family paradoxically stands in as my own personal abjection.

* * *

Following this section of the introduction, I define a number of relevant terms in order to clarify my understanding of these terms and their use within my project. I then provide the research questions in which my project situates itself and a brief description of each of my projects main concerns, concluding with an outline of the methodology used throughout the project.

The next chapter, entitled *Framework*, provides a review of pertinent literature and artistic sources. These sources have provided the basis from which my critical framework is constructed; this critical framework subsequently is what informs my work. This chapter is divided into six sections, each section focusing on one main aspect that I find influential to my research and the artwork produced. Throughout the *Framework* chapter, I have also interjected my own theorization, opinion and understanding of many of the concepts mentioned, especially in relation to my project.

Although I begin to discuss how specific theories relate and inform my research and practice within the *Framework* chapter, through commentary, interjection and personal theorization, the *Body* chapter of my paper is where I focus and elaborate on this initial discussion. This is where I return to my comments and flesh out a more informed and pertinent application of these comments and theories in relation to my work.

The *Body* chapter is divided into three sections, each with their own purpose and focus. These sections are titled: *It Lacks A Human Corpse*, *The Abhuman Within*, *The Installation* and *The Symbols*. In both *It Lacks A Human Corpse* and *The Abhuman Within* I contemplate and formulate my thoughts around the idea of how my experience of transformation and how cultural tropes of transformation have shaped the way others and I perceive and understand my identity, or rather the loss of my identity. *The Installation* section discusses the installation in terms of its construction and how this very process acted as a continuous reminder of the abject, abhuman and transformative nature of my body. Finally the body section ends with *The Symbols*, where I discuss the specifics of the physical manifestation of my work, its personal significance, as well as their potential symbolic meanings. I conclude my paper with the *Outro* chapter, here I reflect on my project's findings and the potential contributions my work may have in terms of future research.

Definitions

For the purposes of this research paper, I will clarify my use and interpretation of a number of terms.

Transformation: To me my body is a site of transformation, when I refer to transformation I mean a physical change within the body, specifically my body. I recognize that everyone has his or her own different definition and relationship to transformation. However, as discussed earlier, to me the physical changes that are associated with a transformation are considered to be a degenerative transformation upon the body. This belief is brought on by my own personal experience of bodily disease and dysfunction. Although my concerns originate from a personal experience and are of a personal nature, I believe my interest tends to be on a larger scale, since we are all subject to the degenerative transformations of bodies that are always-already transforming.

Liminality & Liminal-Beings: The word “liminal” originates from the Latin *limen*, or threshold;¹ however, for my use of “liminal,” I am referencing and borrowing from Victor Turner’s concept of “liminality” and its original intent as being meant to describe the social positions of individuals undergoing a transformation from an old identity to a new one. I am specifically interested in the idea of “liminal-beings” (or liminoid), which are entities that inhabit two worlds. These “liminal-beings” permeate the fictions of folklore, mythology and popular culture.

¹ “liminal” Def. The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 1989. Print.

Vampires, werewolves, cybernetic creatures, ghosts, hybrids between two species and shape-shifters are all considered “liminal-beings” since they are all creatures that combine two distinct modes of being into one body.

Abject & Abjection: The concept of the abject is complex and as such will be further elaborated upon in a later section of my paper. However, with that said, in order to give the reader some clarity and context for what I am discussing, I will provide a straightforward definition. It has become clear that the terms ‘abject’ and ‘abjection’ exist across numerous fields, disciplines and contexts. The broad and varied use of these terms allows them to be subject to personal and individual interpretations and understandings. The definition I provide here is my definition, which is based mainly on Julia Kristeva’s concepts. The abject are things we eject that we cannot comprehend or tolerate, because they threaten human identity and dismantle meaning. This ejection and disgusted reaction against this threat is considered to be abjection (Kristeva, 1982, 1, 2).

Abhuman: I would like first to acknowledge that to me there is no distinction or differentiation between the abhuman and the monster, rather that the monster is merely an example of an abhuman. To me, the concept of the abhuman refers to a not-so-human subject that is characterized by possessing a transforming body as Hurley notes (Hurley, 2004, 3). This transformative nature of the abhuman’s body makes the abhuman fearful of losing their identity by becoming “not-themselves” or “other” (Hurley, 2004, 3).

Containment & Spillage: My use of the word containment refers to the notion that human identity inherently values control. This idea, that human identity values control, originates from Julia Kristeva's notion that the abject by nature "[...] disturbs identity, system and order [as well as] does not respect borders, positions [and] rules" (Kristeva, 1982, 4). I believe these concepts that Kristeva mentions are all aspects of humanness, which the human subject values. Human identity must be controlled and contained, or rather there is the need to attempt to keep control of and contain human identity. This attempt to contain human identity is preposterous, because the concept of the human identity is merely an ideal that no one can truly achieve since we are corporeal and organic beings subject to processes of decay, death and dying, all of which are forms of transformation, physical spillage and a loss of the body. This spillage of the body is also marked with a movement away from the human identity, and toward an abhumanness and an eventual inhumanness (present within the corpse).

Research Questions

This project is a personal journey exploring the process-oriented nature of identity construction. It is an identity construction that is in flux due to physical changes in my body over which I have little control. Through this inquiry, I will identify the elements or concepts that for me encapsulate the meaning of this transformation, how these concepts enable me to reconcile this change to myself, and how I use these concepts to communicate the nature of this transformation to others, verbally and through my art practice.

Within this context, I will focus on the cross- and inter-relationships among the concepts of 'transformation,' 'abjection' and 'abhuman.'

- 1) In what ways does the capacity of these concepts materialize the nature of my experience of physical transformation and identity construction?
- 2) In what ways do these concepts help me communicate the nature of the physical transformation and subsequent identity shift to others in my social landscape?
- 3) Through what channels can I harness the power of these terms to externalize, through my artwork, what I am feeling, given the internal transformation of my body?
- 4) How have these concepts been used in other cultural production, by artists, authors, makers, and producers, to come to terms with such physical transformation?

The Abject & Abjection in Spillage & Containment

Utilizing Kristeva's concept of the abject I have come to develop my own definition, revolving around the idea that the "abject" threatens one's identity, threatens one's sense of self and brings one to the place where meaning is dismantled. Unlike Kristeva's theory of the abject, where its affects originate from the psyche, I take it out of this context and claim that, to me at least, abjection originates from the physical. That is not to say that physical abjection does not affect one's psyche, rather what I am trying to say is that it is not triggered by the psychological but the physical, not that one does not influence another. I know that my experience and relationship with transformation originates from a physical experience of the abject, but this physical abject triggers feelings of fear and abjection towards transformative processes, which is a psychological response. For the purposes of this project, I focus on the physical being the source of abjection, which influences the psyche.

One prominent aspect within my work is the notion that with a bodily transformation there comes a threat to human identity. This threat is due to a loss and spillage of what is considered to be human. What is humanity in the context of this paper? Humanity to me is tied to physical ability and health; I find that bodies that function better than my own are more human than myself, while others with bodies that function at a lesser capability than my own are more abject and more abhuman than myself. In a sense humanity, to me, is a construct of values put upon the body.

With the introduction of the concept of spillage to the argument, there comes with it the introduction of the concept of containment. My work is about this containment of human identity and the struggle to prevent the spillage of humanity, in order to hold onto what humanity remains. I am interested in portraying the struggle and interplay that occurs between the containment and spillage of humanity when a transformation occurs and how in both seemingly contradictory ideas of containment and spillage, a sense of abjection can be revealed.

This discourse surrounding spillage and containment is remarkably similar to the abject and abjection because both the terms refer to notions of inside and outside, and the subsequent existence of a border between the two.

The Phenomenon of Transformation as a Physical Trauma

I desire to make it known that transformation is both regenerative and degenerative. I hold the belief that there currently exists a cultural trend that portrays transformation as a positive process associated with creation and life. I believe that this is an over-generalization and a large assumption, especially if transformative processes are solely seen in this way. I find that transformation in the physical, corporal and bodily sense is often ignored. This disregard of physical transformation is because physical transformation is considered a hostile process and to actualize and accept it threatens one's identity.

Transformation, in the physical sense, is considered hostile because it is a traumatic process. It is traumatic in the sense that most physical and bodily transformations are processes that are associated with the progression of life, aging, illness, disease and death. Although, these processes are considered natural and inevitable, to me they stand to represent a threat and trauma because of my rapid experience of these processes. So what I mean by traumatic is that I know that my body is breaking down rapidly, but in response I do not accept it because it is where my meaning is dismantled and lost—if I were to accept my breakdown, it would be an acknowledgment that I am already progressing towards death.

I am not trying to say that all forms of transformation are negative processes. I believe that there needs to be an acknowledgement that transformation can be perceived as positive and negative, regenerative and degenerative. However,

this is where I mark my departure. My project focuses on the negative and degenerative aspects of transformation.

The body is an organic structure and a corporal form. When this structure's integrity is compromised due to some form of distress or trauma, or if it is reminded of its weakened state, the conflict between containment and spillage emerges.

Contemporary Depictions of The Monster & The Abhuman

There is an obvious similarity between the abhuman subject and the monster in that they share certain qualities such as hybridity, liminality and grotesqueness, as well as having an abject and transformative nature. The connections and similarities can be drawn and revealed through the use of several texts, outlined in the literature review section of this paper. Some of the key texts to mention are Julia Kristeva's Powers Of Horror, Barbara Creed's Phallic Panic and Kelly Hurley's The Gothic Body. From my point of view, the monster fits within the taxonomy of the abhuman as a subcategory. However, before elaborating on the concept of the abhuman, I would like to clarify what I mean by monster.

To me the term monster refers to the fictitious creatures that we observe in literature, cinema and other forms of popular culture (specifically Western popular culture). I propose that these monsters are not entirely works of fiction, but rather that they reveal things about ourselves through our own interpretation. I find the monster to be a creature that can encompass a variety of different physical forms, from the weak and the dying to the massive and the immortal, but no matter how diverse and differently these creatures are portrayed they share a common trait: they threaten the self and identity, by reminding us of our own fragility.

Of Mountains & Monsters

I suggest that there is a duality in how the abject is depicted; although there are two different embodiments of the abject they both trigger abjection as a response. These two types of the abject represent themselves within abhuman creatures, such as monsters. These creatures can manifest themselves in two different ways. One embodiment is that of a pathetic, weak, decaying and dying creature, which remind us of the frailty of the physical substance that the body is composed of. The other embodiment is that of strong, massive, immortal and timeless creatures that remind us of what we are not. Although they are two opposing concepts in a spectrum, they are both causes of abjection as they both remind us of the impermanence of the body.

The danger with abjection that is caused by a sense of weakness, decay and death, is that there is the potential of undermining it as a source of abjection. When we compare ourselves to something that is undergoing a process associated with weakness, decay and death, there is the tendency to relate and project their condition upon ourselves. However, there is also the tendency to disassociate ourselves from this abject transformation because it is not happening to us currently, or in the immediate future; we ignore its effects and act as if we are more permanent and less abject than the thing in the state of physical decay. I find that abjection is more saturated in examples on the opposite end of the spectrum, with creatures that embody strength, immense size and immortality, unaffected by the effects of time.

We look onto them with awe and the wanton desire to be like them.

We want to be permanent.

We want to be timeless.

We want to be like monuments.

In this desire to be like monuments, like the eternal entities of fiction such as Godzilla² and Cthulhu,³ we are reminded of the exact opposite. We recognize that our existence is transitory and dependent on the flesh that our bodies are composed of and that our existence is tied to a physical materiality that cannot be escaped. These permanent mountain-like creatures threaten our identity by combining the qualities of both sides of the spectrum of abjection; it reminds us of what we are and what we are not.

The reason behind my desire to create monuments and epic structures is to create bodies that will not decay, that will withstand the effects of time and potentially physically outlast me. Although my work is meant to represent permanence and monumentality, I am well aware that this representation is purely symbolic and that my work may or may not outlast me. In the creation of bodies that will potentially physically outlast me, I am also creating things that

² Godzilla is a Japanese movie monster that has become an international popular culture icon. I mention Godzilla because I believe his body is in a constant state of flux and transformation, yet he is eternal. The reason behind this eternal existence is that his cells continually regenerate themselves at such a rate that their growth matches the rate of their breakdown.

³ Cthulhu is one of the god-like central figures of H. P. Lovecraft's mythos. It is a creature that is commonly known for its hideous appearance, gargantuan size and the abject terror that it often evokes. According to Lovecraft in his short story 'The Call of Cthulhu,' Cthulhu is said to have an appearance that "yield[s] simultaneous pictures of an octopus, a dragon, and a human caricature [...], a pulpy, tentacled head surmounted a grotesque and scaly body with rudimentary wings" (Lovecraft, 2005, 169).

threaten my own sense of identity. The very fact that these things that I am making may outlast my physicality threatens me because they remind me of my own degenerative transformation. I accept that I am the rotting thing, but when I look upon that which is relatively timeless, that acceptance reverses and I want to be like that timeless and permanent thing.

Methodology

In this section, I define how I utilize a mixed methodology to conduct my research. This mixed methodology combines processes associated with cultural interpretation, specifically Geertzian hermeneutic ethnography,⁴ auto-ethnography, and self-reflexive methods. I subsequently demonstrate how this mixed methodology informs both the theoretical and practical aspects of my thesis. I would define my methodology as a reframing of Geertzian hermeneutic ethnography from being concerned with culture primarily, to include auto-ethnography, thus being concerned with culture's relationship with the personal.

Although culture (specifically Western culture) has constructed its own notions of the abject, the abhuman, and transformation, I adamantly stand by the statement that my own personal and subjective experience informs my work. This is not to say that I have not been influenced by general cultural conditions, but only to insist that the particularities of my subject position play a much larger role. Thus, when gathering cultural content I subsequently interpret it in order to gather my own understandings. In so far as my work refers to mass culture, this is only because I am a product of the same culture. The inclusion of the personal is the basis of the adoption of auto-ethnography.

Auto-ethnography plays a pivotal role in my research methodology because it provides a basis for personal interpretation and reflection. The content I collect

⁴ I use Geertzian hermeneutic ethnography as the means I have adopted in order to perform cultural interpretation.

from my experience and interpretation of culture, through thick description, is taken internally and utilized to construct autobiographical narratives and symbols, which explore my experience, my understanding and relationship with abjection, transformation and the abhuman.

In *It Lacks a Human Corpse*, the Geertzian hermeneutical approach I adopt allows for the collection and interpretation of different perceptions and qualities that are often associated with abjection, transformation and the abhuman, more specifically the abhuman undergoing a process of transformation. These perceptions are gathered from pop cultural, cinematic, artistic, literary and theoretical sources. As a result of this broad collection of information and the utilization of Geertzian hermeneutics' thick description, I created a multi-layered definition for abjection, the abhuman and the processes of transformation that they often experience.

Thick description is the anthropological practice of explaining, in extensive detail, the reasons behind human actions. A thick description of a specific human behavior does not just explain the behavior, but also its context. With respect to my project, this is exemplified in my approach to transformation: by definition, transformation is an instance that marks a change in appearance and/or character. However, I associate transformation with degeneration and as such, I have developed a fearful relationship with transformative processes. The context behind my fear and understanding of transformation is due to my own physical experience of bodily transformation, which manifests itself as a

degenerative process. The cultural productions⁵ that address the issues I am studying are a vast and comprehensive conceptual ground to cover and interpret, but through the use of the Geertzian hermeneutic process called “thick description” it can be simplified in the context of my research foci, which is the abject, transformation and the abhuman.

The informing agent that led to the revelation of what can be interpreted to be cultural manifestations and what of these notions resonated with me on a personal level was the process of “thick description.” This thick description led me to perform auto-ethnographic and self-reflexive meditation. This meditation, in turn, informed my artwork/research creation, a process that cyclically repeats from there.

According to Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, in Geertzian hermeneutics “thick description is the first step in the interpretation of culture. The second is the creation of theory based on this interpretation, which is a pattern-finding process” (Alvesson, 2009, 131). This pattern-finding process is essential in my use of the Geertzian hermeneutic method, within my methodology, because it culminated in the combination of all the cultural interpretation that I had made into one theoretical construct, which I explored during the execution of my work. This pattern-finding process and theory creation are evident in my use of auto-ethnographic and self-reflexive methods. I conduct these processes within the confines of a sketchbook/journal; here, I record my observations and findings,

⁵ This refers to pop cultural, cinematic, artistic, literary and theoretical sources.

utilizing both drawing and writing in tandem, to interpret their relationship with culture. I then internalize these interpretations and reflect on their meanings in order to construct connections between them, which I then refract and integrate into my own work. The entries inside this sketchbook/journal are not restricted to this sole purpose; they are also used as a communication tool in order to inform the fabricators that are assisting me on the specifics of the sculptural works I envision to create. These entries explore potential challenges and ways my work can be constructed and resolved. If these entries are unable to effectively communicate the feasibility of the desired work to the technicians, the technicians often interject their own opinions and suggestions, often providing alternatives to how these works can be created and translated into a physical and material form.

As implied through my use of Geertzian hermeneutics, interpretation is a vital part of my methodology, and this importance of interpretation led to my use of self-reflexive methods. According to Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg, reflexivity allows for an “open play of reflection across various levels of interpretation” (Alvesson, 2009, 271). Reflexivity fits well with my process because while I was conducting my research I would often reflect on the layers of collected cultural findings. These cultural reflections were subsequently interpreted and reinterpreted through an auto-ethnographic lens. This interpretation in turn informed artworks produced and these artworks were subsequently reflected upon and interpreted so as to inform future works in my project. This process where research informed and interacted with other aspects

of the research and art production is what made my methodology reflexive (Alvesson, 2009, 271).

PART II: Frameworks

The Abjection & The Object

The concept of the object is situated at the crux of my project. The object is a complex psychological, philosophical and linguistic concept that Julia Kristeva developed in her text the Powers of Horror. Her concept of the object is partially based on the earlier ideas of George Bataille; as such, both Julia Kristeva and George Bataille are pertinent to my research.

Kristeva's theorization of the object and abjection portrayed in Powers of Horror are crucial in my own theorization of these concepts. I refer heavily to these concepts set out within the chapter 'Approaching Abjection,' as they are central to my project. In this chapter, she provides an extensive, canonical and phenomenological definition of the object and abjection (Foster, 1996, 153).

Bataille defines abjection as "the inability to assume with sufficient strength the imperative act of excluding object things" (Bataille, 1970, 217). It is this inability that becomes the disgusted reaction of abjection; it is this reaction that Bataille believes is what "establishes the foundations of collective existence" (Bataille, 1970, 217), which I would like to extend to include society—possibly all of humanity. The experience of abjection according to Bataille is a universally human experience.

For Kristeva, however, abjection is defined as a violent and disgusted reaction against threats to one's existence from that which is considered other to the self (Kristeva, 1982, 1). In my reading of this, I am reminded of my concern with the

impermanent and the permanent, in that both can be perceived as other to the self, although more so with things of a permanent nature. These threats are known as being abject; they are aspects that are ejected beyond the capabilities of comprehension and toleration because they draw one toward a place where meaning collapses (Kristeva, 1982, 2). Abjection, in this sense, is a physical reaction brought on by something that threatens human identity by dismantling meaning.

The abject is continuously expelled, but never ceases to challenge the subject's sense of self and thus never settles (Kristeva, 1982, 1). This expulsion is a means of defining the borders between the self and the other, subject and object, inside and outside (Kristeva, 1982, 3-4). In order for the subject to remain oneself, the border between the self and the other must be adamantly kept against that which may threaten it (Kristeva, 1982, 3). "When one is in a state of abjection, the borders between the object and the subject cannot be maintained" (Kristeva, 1982, 2).

Kristeva continues by arguing that it is not just a "lack of cleanliness or health" that causes abjection, nor is it "a wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay" (Kristeva, 1982, 3-4), but it is also "the in-between, the ambiguous [and] the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, 4). Mary Douglas shares this idea that the ambiguous can be perceived as a threat, much like what is considered to be abject, in her text Purity And Danger, where she states, "ambiguous things can seem very threatening" (Douglas, 2008, XI). According to

Kristeva, in order for something to become abject it must be tied to a sensation that “[...] disturbs identity, system and order [as well as] does not respect borders, positions [and] rules” (Kristeva, 1982, 4).

This concept plays a pivotal role in my formulation of the abhuman and the monster, when they are introduced to the argument. I suggest that the abhuman, of which I believe the monster is a subcategory of, is abject and thus causes feelings of abjection. The nature of the abhuman and the monster are remarkably similar to the abject sharing many of its attributes, which I further extend to include the characteristics of transformation. The abhuman and the monster often embody an in-between, ambiguous and composite appearance, such as the werewolf, the fly, the elephant-man,⁶ which is similar to what is considered abject. It is this appearance of the abhuman/monster that threatens and disturbs identity, system and order. It also disrespects borders, positions and rules. It is not only the “lack of cleanliness or health” that are often associated with some of these creatures (Kristeva, 1982, 3-4).

According to Kristeva, the abject has two roles: it is the threat where meaning breaks down and it is also the reaction to such a breakdown. This breakdown marks the subject’s return to what Kristeva calls “primal repression,” a state that occurs prior to the establishment of the desire for objects, representation, the ego and the superego; a state prior to humanity (Kristeva, 1982, 12). I believe

⁶ A fictional monster has many forms; it can be an amalgamation of man and machine (as in Tetsuo), man and stone (as in the Golem), man and animal (as in the fly/the werewolf), man and earth/island (as in Godzilla) or something completely extraterrestrial.

human identity considers this primal aspect as being abject. It undermines, threatens and disturbs human identity by reminding the subject that they are still animals affected by the same bodily limitations of nature. One such limitation is physical transformation; specifically, the final transformation associated with nature in relation to the physical body being that of the transformation into corpse and the inhuman. According to Kristeva this transformation into the inhuman corpse represents the utmost abjection (Kristeva, 1982, 4).

I believe this “primal repression” is similar to the “primal uncanny” that Barbara Creed discusses in Phallic Panic. They both refer to a state unsoiled by the taint of human constructs. This is a feared primitive state, feared because, once again like the abhuman/monster, it threatens human identity, systems, order, positions and rules. It is considered threatening because it is dominated by birth, body, nature, animal and death, the same realm where the abject, transformation and the monster/abhuman are situated.

The Monster as The Abhuman

His hideous howl a dirge of death! — The Wolf Man

Barbara Creed's texts Phallic Panic and The Monstrous-Feminine elaborate on the concept of abjection and the abject, in relation to the horror⁷ genre and to both the male and female monster. Phallic Panic sets out "to explore the concept of the primal uncanny and to widen [the] view of the male monster by examining his characteristics in relation to the primal uncanny" (Creed, 2005, vii-viii).

When Creed discusses the male monster, she brings attention to the in-between⁸ and transformative nature of the monster, an observation that is central to my own definition of the monster. According to Creed the male monster is made monstrous when he enters the domain of women, animal and nature. He transforms into a menstrual monster (*vampire*), a womb monster (*mad doctor/creator*), a cannibalistic animal (*werewolf/zombie*), a blood beast (*slasher*) or a woman (*trans-gendered monster*) (Creed, 2005, 17). When Creed discusses the female monster, and its depiction in culture, she speaks to monstrosity as being something inherent to the woman. She justifies this reasoning by claiming that women are in the proximity and association with the world of the body and nature (Creed, 2005, 15). By virtue of this proximity and association with nature, the woman begins to represent and embody birth, the animal, transformation

⁷ The term horror refers to art-horror, as a cross-art, cross-media genre. See, for example, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, H.P. Lovecraft's 'The Dunwich Horror,' Ridley Scott's *Alien*, George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and in works by Goya or H.R.Giger.

⁸ The in-between refers to the ambiguous, the composite and the transitional form between two states.

and death. Thus instead of stating that the female becomes monster when it is combined with another being, as with the male, Creed implies that the female is inherently monstrous, since they are in the domain of both human and nature.

Although I am not asserting Creed's gendered approach to the understanding of the monster in my work, her text provides essential information about the monster to my project. Specifically, what Creed's text allows for is the introduction of the monster into my argumentation, as well as revealing the similarities between the abject and the monster. I propose that the monster is similar to the abject in that it represents the in-between and transformation, which threatens the self and identity, drawing one toward a place where meaning collapses. These similarities are summarized in the following quotation:

[The monster] is the border, the gap, or *in-between* space that divides life and death that is uncanny. Death is the repressed other of life, 'the void,' the 'impossible representation.' The monster, in all its forms, signals that border, brings on the possibility of death, undoes the structures that preserve the individual's sense of unity and coherence. (Creed, 2005, 19)

Jacques Derrida's essay 'Passages—from Traumatism to Promise' also discusses the monster, and further supports the idea that the abject and the monster represent hybridity and possesses a composite form. According to Derrida,

A monster may be obviously a composite figure of heterogeneous organisms that are grafted onto each other. This graft, this hybridization, this composition that puts heterogeneous bodies together may be called a monster. (Derrida, 1995, 385)

According to Creed, the monster represents death, “[it is] a rehearsal of death” (Creed, 2005, 19). I find this stance akin to Kristeva’s concept that the utmost example of the abject is the corpse. Similarly to what I stated earlier about the abject being a representation of death, I proclaim the same about the monster. Since death is a form of transformation and the monster represents death, both transformation and the monster are abject.

Theoretically my work originates from the concept of the monster—but it soon became apparent through my research and the execution of my work that it is more about the abhuman. The shift of focus from the monster to the abhuman is due to my belief that the term monster is a loaded term. I sought to discover a far more suitable term that encompassed the concerns of my research, which I believe is the abhuman. The issue with the word monster is that it can be attached to so many meanings; my main concern was making the clear distinction between the physical monster, which is the focus of my work, and that of the morally objectionable monster. Fortunately, during my research I was introduced to the notion of the abhuman.

In The Gothic Body, Kelly Hurley explores the central issue of the Gothic genre, the loss of a unified and stable human identity, and the emergence of a chaotic and transformative “abhuman” identity in its place. She defines the abhuman subject as being a subject that “is a not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (Hurley, 2004, 3). There are two aspects of Hurley’s definition of the

abhuman that intrigues me; the notion that the abhuman subject is “not-quite-human” and that the abhuman is “continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other” (Hurley, 2004, 3). This concern of the loss of human identity aligns well with my work’s concern with containment and spillage. She further substantiates this idea by stating that abhumans possess, “human bodies that have lost their claim to a discrete and integral identity, a fully human existence” (Hurley, 2002, 190).

Although I am well aware that the concept of the abhuman originates from Gothic literature, specifically the works of author William Hope Hodgson, I am not focusing on its Gothic origins, rather I am elaborating upon Hurley’s concept of the abhuman. Hurley developed her own “concept of the abhuman and its spectacle of a body metamorphic... on the basis of Kristeva’s notion of abjection” (Kutzbach, 2007, 153).

For the purposes of this document, when I make use of abhuman and monster I am specifically referring to the abhuman and its physical characteristics, not moral ones. From now on the terms abhuman and monster are interchangeable, but taking on the definition of the abhuman.

The abhuman being retains vestiges of its human identity, but has already become, or is in the process of becoming, some half-human other—wolfish, or simian, or tentacled, or fungoid, perhaps simply “unspeakable” in its gross, changeful corporeality. Or the abhuman being may be some unimaginable “thing” incorporating, mimicking, or taking on a human form, thereby constituting another kind of threat to the integrity of human identity. (Hurley, 2002, 190)

Hurley reinforces the similarities between the abject and the abhuman by addressing the conflict that they both struggle with: containment verses spillage of humanity. She does this by stating that “the prefix “ab-” signals a movement away from the site or condition [in this case the human condition], and thus [is] a loss” (Hurley, 2004, 4).

Hurley goes on by stating that although there is “a movement away from [there] is also a movement towards—towards a site or condition as yet unspecified” (Hurley, 2004, 4). I understand this to mean that the abhuman's transformation is one with an unknown end—an unknown final form. This refers back to Kristeva’s notion of the abject in that it brings one to a place where meaning/understanding collapses—it is the impossible representation. This unknown end of an abhuman’s transformation is a trigger for fear. The Gothic author H.P Lovecraft states that “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is [the] fear of the unknown” (Lovecraft, 1973, 4).

Although there is a spillage occurring, there is something that comes in to take its place, the transformed self. This transformed self is an unknown, which echoes Kristeva in that it is a place “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, 2). I believe that Creed would argue that this final act of transformation into a monster’s/abhuman’s true-form represents death and that the little transformations on the way toward this final transformation are merely little deaths.

The contained is something that is known and controlled; spillage, however, is something unknown and cannot be controlled. I find that this is remarkably similar to the crisis of containing the human self while it is threatened by the spillage of the human self, when a transformation into the not-itself and other occurs. This becoming into the not-itself can come from both internally and externally. I understand this crisis in the most literal and physical fashion as possible, in the form of disease, illness and injury. There are diseases that seem to come from within subject, such as cancer, and diseases that come from external sources. I am not really focusing on the distinction between the two, but rather that both examples change identity, specifically the human identity.

The Transforming Body & The Grotesque Nature of Transformation

Susan Sontag's 'Illness as Metaphor' provides descriptions and metaphors related to illnesses, which tends to be similar to the transformative qualities of the abhuman/monster and the grotesque. In these descriptions it is apparent that transformations associated with illness and death threaten the self and identity, much like the abject that Kristeva discusses in her theory of abjection.

I found her description of how diseases are metaphorically portrayed as being an attack upon the body intriguing. She acknowledges the observation that diseases are either perceived as a loss of self through distillation, as in the affects of consumption, or a loss of self through a growth, as in cancer:

In TB, you are eating yourself up, being refined, getting down to the core, the real you. In cancer, non-intelligent (“primitive,” “embryonic,” “atavistic”) cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you. (Sontag, 1990, 67)

Although distillation and growth are opposing processes, one subtractive and one additive, they both suggest a sense of loss and spillage and, as such, threaten human identity. She furthermore supports this notion by stating that “immunologists [classify] cancer cells as [being the] “non-self”” (Sontag, 1990, 67). It can be argued that the self in the process of becoming the “non-self” is a transformation that threatens the self and identity, since it is the self becoming something other. Indeed, becoming the ‘something other’ that it already is.

My subject position entails a transformation where my flesh lacks the component that allows for muscular regeneration to occur, due to a deformation and mutation in my genetic makeup. I believe that this destructive transformation has made my body abject. My bodily experience is suppressed and subjugated by my own flesh and the degenerative nature of the transformation it is undergoing. When my muscle tears and attempts to repair itself the tissue is not repaired with muscles, rather it is transformed into inanimate and de-forming, possibly formless, flesh. I feel as if nature has failed me.

In reading ‘Illness as Metaphor,’ it became evident to me that the vernacular used to describe illness and its metaphors is remarkably similar to that used to describe the grotesque. The similarity is that there is an intertwining of processes that are related to death and birth that are often separated. This

concept seems to relate to the grotesque. This is portrayed in the following quotations: “The one there with his swollen belly is pregnant with his own death...” and “... a cancer is a demonic pregnancy” (Sontag, 1990, 14). Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualization and understanding of the grotesque is similar to the concept of death and life being intertwined.

Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World provides an intriguing perspective on the grotesque, which relates to the concept of transformation that I am formulating. According to Bakhtin, the grotesque embodies:

A phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and becoming [...] in this image we find both poles of transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of metamorphosis. (Bakhtin, 1984, 24)

Bakhtin continues to describe the nature of the grotesque by stating that it possesses “[a] peculiar nature, entirely different from ready made, completed being. They remain ambivalent and contradictory; they are ugly, monstrous [and] hideous” (Bakhtin, 1984, 5).

Nature and the grotesque are both associated with processes of “giving birth and dying, [as well as being] conceived, generated, and born” (Bakhtin, 1984, 26). Bakhtin states that “copulation, pregnancy, birth, old age, disintegration, and dismemberment” (Bakhtin, 1984, 25) are the “direct material aspect [and] element in the system of [the] grotesque” (Bakhtin, 1984, 25). I propose that these qualities are present in the abhuman subject since the transforming flesh

of the body is the product of nature and as such is subject to the effects of transformation.

The Fictional Abhuman

I refer to fictional literature, cinema and other forms of popular culture to inform my work. I am specifically interested in how these sources depict transformation, the abject, the monster and the abhuman, which I believe all these sources refer to in some manner.

In terms of literature, I find Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis,' the collective works of H.P. Lovecraft, and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein pertinent to my project. I am interested in the theoretical aspects of Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis' laid out by Akira Mizuta Lippit in Electric Animal, specifically in how it presented the work as a hyperbolic example of alienation due to bodily transformative processes, while the other texts, specifically Frankenstein, act as narratives to contemplate through a process of auto-ethnographic reflection.

In Electric Animal (Lippit, 2000, 144-167), Lippit provides a description of human to animal transformations in literary works. I was personally intrigued with the subsection that dealt with the description of the transformation in Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis.' This chapter plays an important role in my argumentation because it shows how transformation can bring about changes that can alienate

one from others, subject to what Deleuze and Guattari⁹ call the “oedipal configuration.”

Lippit states, “in Kafka’s narratives the transformative process cannot be reversed, and the lines that separate the human and animal worlds cannot be easily traversed” (Lippit, 2000, 144). I agree with this idea that transformative processes cannot be ‘easily traversed.’ Although transformative processes cannot be ‘easily traversed,’ subsequent changes can still occur. These changes are completely different transformations with their own set of limitations, much like a progressive bodily transformations of aging, cancer and dying.

Lippit then discusses how Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming animal” is useful when looking at Kafka’s transformations (Lippit, 2000, 144). According to Lippit ‘The Metamorphosis’ addresses the notion of becoming-animal, or rather becoming-insect, which I propose is equivalent to becoming-monster/abhuman, as a reaction against the oppressive confines of familial, social, and religious structures. Deleuze and Guattari’s call this oppressive construct the “oedipal configuration.” Deleuze and Guattari believe the act of becoming-animal is a means of “absolute deterritorialization,” which is a means of escape from human subjectivity (Lippit, 2000, 144).

I do not want to escape the oppressive construct that Deleuze and Guattari define as the “oedipal configuration”—I would rather stay oblivious to this

⁹ Lippit is referring to Deleuze and Guttari’s text A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.

escape and remain within this construct, to be included, accepted and confined, in order to continue to be considered human, even if it means the instillation of limitations. I suppose I see my escape from this apparently oppressive construct, as something forced upon me—oppressive in its own right, in that my bodily transformation has forced a becoming upon me—a becoming-abhuman.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, “becoming-animal does not... promise total freedom” (Lippit, 2000, 144) it is only a means of escape and retreat. The animal being comes with its own set of limitations (Lippit, 2000, 144). One limitation that comes with becoming-animal “concerns the relocation of the [body’s] acts of articulation [and expressivity]” (ibid). With any form of change, transformation included, there is bound to be the need to cope and adjust with these changes. Although I may not be “becoming-animal,” my physical bodily transformation forces the “relocation of [physical] acts of articulation [and expressivity]” (Lippit, 2000, 144) and as such I must cope.

I am taking Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming-animal” or rather more specifically “becoming-insect,” as in ‘The Metamorphosis,’ in the most literal and physical fashion as possible. What I mean by this is that the process of becoming-animal, becoming-insect and becoming-abhuman/monster in fact represents real physical transformations.

As Gregor, the main character of Kafka’s ‘The Metamorphosis,’ becomes accustomed to his transformation into insect, his new body forces him to develop new methods of expression. The transformation not only changes his

body and physical methods of expression and interaction, but he also loses the control of his voice (Lippit, 2000, 144). With the loss of his vocal capacity, Gregor progressively plunges into an existence without the ability to communicate with words. It can be argued that a transformation that drastically forces the subject to become different than those considered as the majority changes the subject's relationship to the world, including the understanding of words and symbols.

My fear of in-existence and impermanence reminds me of Mary Shelley's depiction of the character Dr. Frankenstein in Frankenstein and his relationship with his creation, the Monster. I find that I am like Dr. Frankenstein, I read him as being fearful of mortality and the eventuality of non-existence, just as I am. In my reading of Dr. Frankenstein I believe that he feels abjection toward his own mortality and flesh, and that his creation is meant to be his way to defeat death and to prevent his own transformation into corpse, possibly even prevent this transformation in others. His desire to defeat death can be perceived in the following quotations, "If I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" (Shelley, 1996, 22).

Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption. (Shelley, 1996, 32)

In a way, *It Lacks A Human Corpse* is a project that is concerned with the issue of mortality and is somewhat my method of defeating death, much like Dr. Frankenstein. The way that I interpret Dr. Frankenstein's creation, the Monster,

is that of an entity, a body, which is impervious to the effects of time, aging and dying, in relation to its creator. Much of Dr. Frankenstein's life was determined and directed by the field of science, and a zealous desire to attain the unachievable goal, to find a solution or rather a method to defeat death. I would argue this was sparked by his own mother's death and the awareness of his own future demise, a feat that science had yet to achieve.

I hold a similar relationship to my creation: the large installation work *It Lacks A Human Corpse* as my version of Dr. Frankenstein's monster. It is an entity much like Frankenstein's monster, it is a body that is impervious to the effects of time, aging and dying comparatively to my own body. My own desire to defeat death stems from my own first-hand experience of degenerative transformation; a transformation that I believe has shaped my identity.

I often question the reasoning behind my desire and interest in creating sculpture, especially since my work, the very thing I create, becomes the thing that threatens my existence. It is threatening in the sense that the work becomes something more permanent than myself, something independent from my existence, and embodies an existence independent from my own existence. Initially the sculptural installation was meant as a way of solidifying my presence, making me more permanent, but much like Dr. Frankenstein, I became aware of its threatening nature after its creation. Ironically, rather than my creation being something that solidifies my existence there has been a realization that I have become the maker of things whose body is currently in a process of being

unmade and the very thing that I am creating is a reminder of that very process of being unmade.

In terms of cinema, I refer to a number of films that are associated with the genre of horror, specifically focusing on body horror. These films are almost exclusively dealing with transformations of the body, I specifically focus on the films, *The Wolf Man* and *An American Werewolf in London* and its extension into other forms of media, *Begotten*, *The Fly*, *Dracula* and the burgeoning pop-cultural manifestations of the vampire myth as well as Japanese films such as, *Tetsuo: The Bullet Man*.

The reason behind my interest in these fictitious figures and their experience of transformation is that they are the hyperbolic examples of the abhuman. These fictional figures remind us of bodily, often degenerative, transformations. I believe that these hyperbolic depictions are informed by the beliefs and fears that are inherently a part of both culture and ourselves. As such by looking at these fictional examples of monsters and abhumans, much can be learned about ourselves. In other words, I postulate that by understanding the abhuman we are led to question who/what we are.

A Note on The Uncanny

It is the between that is tainted with strangeness. — Hélène Cixous

There is something similar between the Freudian concept of the uncanny, and the ambiguous and composite nature of the abject, transformation and abhumans. By definition the uncanny has the quality of being “frightening... because it is not known and familiar [it is an instance where something can be familiar, yet foreign at the same time, resulting in a feeling of it being uncomfortably strange]” (Freud, 2003, 125).

The bodies of monsters and abhumans, like bodies under processes of transformation, can be considered uncanny, which refers to things that are both familiar and foreign at the same time. What I mean by this is that since bodies are a shared and common attribute of all humans, it is a familiar form. Bodies become uncanny when they endure foreign processes, such as a disease or cancer, which is a form of bodily transformation. Therefore, bodies become uncanny because these bodies become both familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously. The werewolf is an outstanding example of this since both man and wolf are familiar concepts on their own; one is human and one is animal. However, when these two familiar things combine they become a werewolf—a man-wolf hybrid, something unfamiliar. Therefore, a werewolf is uncanny because it is both familiar and unfamiliar. I believe it is pertinent to mention that I encountered the concept of the uncanny during my research. However, further

exploration into symbolism and the uncanny in Freud are beyond the scope of this thesis.

The Abject Arts

Visual artists that I deem as being influential to my research and body of work include: Mike Kelley, David Altmejd, Kiki Smith, Paul Thek, and Paul McCarthy. Although these artists vary in practice, I would classify them as artists who have been working with sculpture and installation within the context of contemporary art. My interest in Mike Kelley, Kiki Smith and Paul McCarthy's work also stems from their exploration and association of the concept of the abject within their artwork.

I am specifically intrigued by the depiction of the monster in the work of Mike Kelley, specifically the piece entitled *Frankenstein*; not only does he directly reference the monster in the title of his piece, but also he also depicts an in-between and hybrid form within the work. Kelley portrays this in-between and hybrid form by using a multitude of stuffed animals sewn together. I consider this work to be similar to Derrida's observations on the monster in that it is a "composite figure of heterogeneous organisms that are grafted onto each other" (Derrida, 1995, 385).

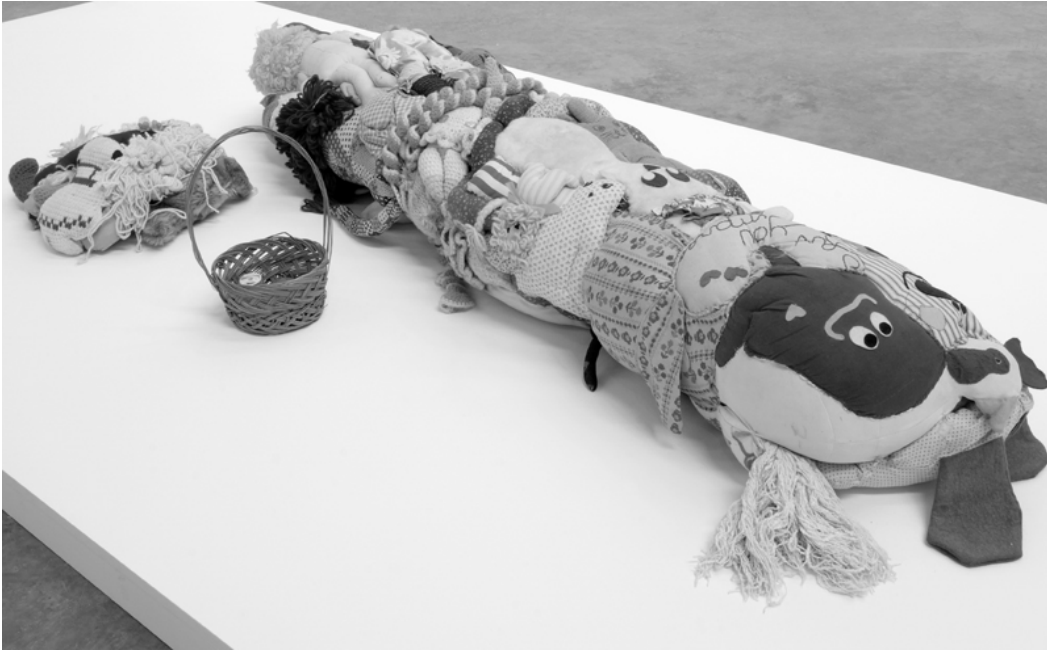


Figure 1. *Frankenstein*, Mike Kelley, (1989, Sewn, stuffed animals, basket with spools of thread, pincushion, felt, 12" x 78" x 30.") Gallery Photo.

Artist David Altmejd should also be mentioned for his depiction of the monster and abhuman-like subjects in his sculptural works, specifically in reference to repetitive use of the werewolf, (*Loup-garou 1/2* and *Untitled (Dark)*) and the human-bird hybrid figure (*The Index*). I am also referring to the werewolf concept, if not literally then in its essence. However, I associate myself with the werewolf of popular culture. I have developed a different relationship with the werewolf than to that of David Altmejd, to me it is not a positive transformative entity, a harbourer of “narrative potential” (Déry, 2006, 17), but rather it represents the uncontrollable processes that a body experiences under its own material frailty. In my work, I do construct a narrative, based on transformation, but that narrative is linear and toward an end; it is not about potential it is about demise.

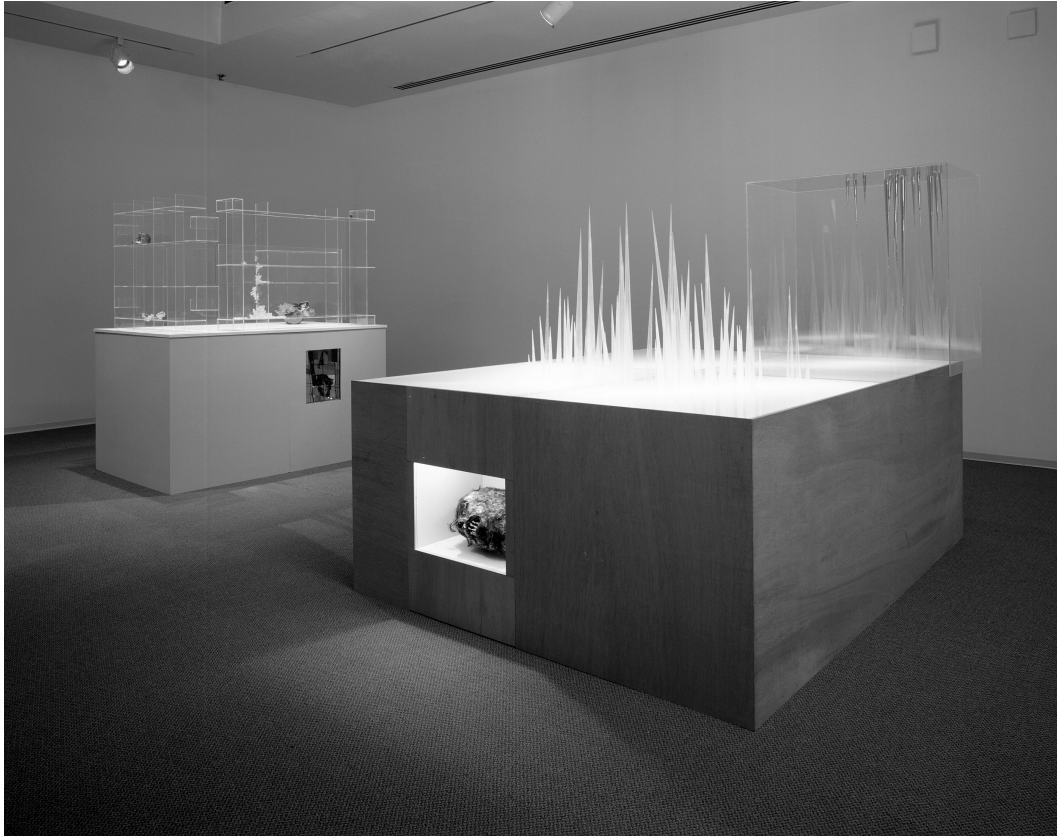


Figure 2. *Loup-garou 1*, David Altmejd (1999, wood, paint, Plexiglas, lighting system, plaster, polymer clay, synthetic hair, acetate, mylar, jewellery, glitter, 84" x 78" x 96") *Loup-garou 2*, David Altmejd (2000, wood, paint, Plexiglas, mirror, lighting system, plaster, polymer clay, synthetic hair, synthetic flowers, acetate, mylar, glitter, 96" x 72" x 84") (Photo: Richard-Max Tremblay, courtesy Galerie de l'UQAM)



Figure 3. *Untitled (Dark)*, David Altmejd. (2001, Plaster, paint, fake hair, resin and glitter, 8" x 14" x 8.") Gallery Photo.



Figure 4. *The Index*, David Altmejd. (2007, Bronze, steel, foam, resin, paint, wood, glass, mirror, Plexiglas, lighting system, silicone, taxidermy birds and animals, synthetic plants, synthetic tree branches, pinecones, horse hair, synthetic hair, burlap, leather, fiberglass, chains, wire, feathers, quartz, pyrite, other minerals, glass eyes, clothing, shoes, monofilament, jewelry, beads and glitter, 131" x 510" x 363.") Gallery Photo.

In order to comprehend my conceptualization of the werewolf and its transformation, one must understand the relationship I have with my body. I see my body drift away, flex and bend out of shape, curve, sweat, stretch, rot and peel back—spill, while society turns away, denounces, disowns and feels abjection towards it. Unfortunately, I share society's sentiment; I see those in a degenerative state, including myself, as a threat to my identity. I am like the werewolf and the werewolf must be killed because it is unlike us, it threatens us and the way we live. This is so ingrained in us that when one starts to become a werewolf, that abhuman subject who is becoming werewolf begins to hate himself/herself to such a degree that it wants to be killed, rather than live an existence excluded from society. This is why I believe werewolves and other such monsters desire companionship, it is to be accepted, it is to form a society of their own, a society of two or more similar beings—if not they would rather perish.

I am also interested in installation-based artists that are considered to be associated with the New Gothic Art contemporary art movement, which include Mike Kelley, Tony Oursler, Terence Koh and Banks Violette. New Gothic Art emphasizes darkness and horror, which I believe, fits well with the connections I am trying to make within my work.

There are monsters, the grotesque, violated or mutant bodies, the divided self, ghosts, dolls, masks, skulls, disgust and the abject. These are images filled with the colour black, decay and instability. Fear is reflected on the environment, or on to the self, or on to others. Sometimes the work is nihilistic or anarchic. (Gavin, 2008, 7)

I have been recently introduced to the work of Paul Thek, specifically with his vitrined works. I believe that my work shares a commonality with Paul Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* series, in that they both lead the viewer to "contemplate the literal and spiritual mortification of the flesh." The body is composed of flesh and flesh decays; therefore the body is in a state of decay.



Figure 5. *Untitled (Meat Piece with Flies)*, Paul Thek, from the series *Technological Reliquaries*. (1965, Wood, melamine laminate, metal, wax, paint, hair, and Plexiglas, 19" x 12" x 8 1/2"). Gallery Photo.

My reading of Paul Thek's intention in these works is to represent a decay of flesh, while simultaneously referencing a sense of containment. These works portray a duality that becomes apparent in the way each piece is displayed; each of these works are housed within vitrine-like structures resembling both an incubator and a glass casket, as if meant to preserve a rotting thing, trying to insure the permanence of an impermanent thing (although the impermanent flesh contained is actually more permanent than real flesh, since it is made of wax). Thus his works become a representation of something that is both in a state of spillage and containment. The Paul Thek's work entitled *The Tomb* (aka *Dead Hippy* by critics) should also be mentioned. I find that it deals with the display of decay and death, in relation to the representation of the body - specifically his body. Paul Thek created a replica of himself, a replica of himself as a corpse. I believe that I am producing a work that is quite similar to Paul Thek's *The Tomb* piece in the main installation aspect of *It Lacks A Human Corpse*. To me the main piece of *It Lacks A Human Corpse* is a representation of my body and a performance of the body as monumental, much like a tomb. It is acting as a reminder of my existence at its temporary nature while also acting as a reminder of the work's comparative permanence to the materiality of my body.



Figure 6. *The Tomb*, Paul Thek (installation view). (1967, Wax, wood and mixed media, variable sizes) Gallery Photo.

Focusing on my own degenerative transformation and my desire to counter impermanence may seem to be a selfish concern. Paul Thek's work reveals the possibility that it is not a selfish concern, the desire to counter impermanence, but rather that it is a shared one since "the fragile hold on life is a shared experience of the human condition" ('Can Art Change Society,' 2002, 10) and not solely a personal one. Paul Thek's work reminds me that although my work originates from a deeply personal exploration, informed by a first-hand experience of transformation and an auto-ethnographic interpretation of cultural, as well as pop cultural, examples of transformation, there is a universality present in the concepts I am working through within my work.

PART III: The Body

I. It Lacks A Human Corpse

Defining what informs my work—although a difficult task to accomplish—due to its eclectic nature, is crucial in my understanding of transformation in relation to my work. I have gathered and reflected upon a plethora of critical sources during the execution of my research, and I admit it has informed my work immensely, but I find that my personal experience has provided an original and refreshing perspective to the work. My physical degenerative transformation is progressive in nature and, therefore, its presence and affects have continuously increased over time. Its affects have recently become of significant concern because of the rise of notions of mortality. This concept has influenced the construction of my identity and by proxy my artwork. Although I have stated that my personal experience allows for an original and refreshing approach to my work, it is essential to note that I validate my personal experience by seeding it with theory. That is to say that my theoretical understanding of physical, degenerative, transformation is reliant on the concept of the abject. The abject is a crucial element that not only helps me contemplate the concept and meaning of transformation, but it also links many of the other theoretical sources to one another.

The abject is threatening because it disturbs identity, system, and order, and it does not respect borders, positions and rules. I argue that all of the aforementioned qualities are characteristics of humanity and human identity.

The closest thing that opposes this humanity/human identity is nature; nothing in nature is similar to the construct of human identity. Nature threatens humanity because it is dominated by chaos, birth, flesh/body, transformation and death, all that is considered primal. However, nature is also integral to humanity since our bodies are composed of flesh, a material inherently associated with nature.

Both monsters and abhumans are 'humans' controlled by nature and the limitations of flesh. We are all in a way like these monsters and abhumans—possessing a monstrosity and abhumaness—being creatures controlled by nature and limitations of flesh. We are all subject to the process of bodily breakdown, which is a natural occurrence. There are individuals considered more monstrous and more abhuman than others, because nature affects them to a further extent. We are all abhuman in comparison to other humans; there is always someone less abhuman and more abhuman than ourselves, often at the same time.

This is where Susan Sontag's ideas on disease from 'Illness As Metaphor' become pertinent to my argumentation. Diseases, illnesses and cancer appear to be nature attacking, invading and warring with human bodies and subsequently human identities because it threatens order, borders, positions and rules traits extremely valued by humanity. When a human body endures a processes associated with disease and illness, it can no longer fit within what is considered to be an ideal human identity. The human body should be healthy, animate and strong in order to fit with other ideal humans. Ironically we all lose

these qualities present in the ideal human, we all experience disease and disability, it is something that comes with aging, old age and death.

I proclaim that no one possesses a fully human identity, including myself. Rather I believe that a more appropriate definition for the 'human' identity is that of an abhuman one. Similarly to the way we characterize abhumans for their morphic variability, we too are subject to this variability, since bodies are of a physical and organic form they are in a state of constant flux. To most individuals this flux is so spread out and gradual that the change or transformation occurring is often unnoticeable, insignificant and non-influential. To others, this flux has the opposite manifestation; it is so severe and traumatic that it affects all aspects of their existence. A further way to see this morphic variability within us is the fact that no two people have the same physical capabilities or bodies for that matter, as one another; we are all different. Abhumans constantly fear the loss of themselves and becoming something else. I believe we all fear losing ourselves, if not in a bodily sense then in an intellectual and spiritual sense. We all dread the possibility of losing who we are, we are against the potential invasion of some foreign disease or cancer.

II. The Abhuman Within

I hold the belief that I am an abhuman subject. I would actually go as far as stating that we are all abhuman subjects to an extent; some more abhuman than others. I recall a statement that Kelly Hurley made in regards to the prefix of “ab-” and how it refers to something that signals a movement away from a site or condition (Hurley, 2004, 4). We are all moving away from a site or condition, the site and condition being of youth and health, but Hurley points out that this movement away is also marked with a movement toward. This is a movement I claim to be toward aging and death.

This similarly reminds me of the literal definition of abject, “the state of being cast off”; monsters and abhumans are just that, they are “cast offs.” Abhumans that endure a process of transformation can be argued to be cast off in different ways. The abhuman body tends to manifest as a body that is in the process of shedding its humanity in order to become something else. Thus, the abhuman body is casting off its prior form.¹⁰ The body is abject to itself; the body is abject to the body.

The body of the abhuman subject is abject to itself and its transformative nature and as such casts itself off. However, as a response to this the abhuman subject desires to return to their previous state or even attain a better-suited body, as in characters such as the fly or the werewolf, but their transformation has already

¹⁰ As in the fictional examples portrayed in literature and cinema.

begun and it is often irreversible. I personally sympathize with this notion, I often desire to possess a better body or to return to a previous state, but I know very well I cannot. My physical transformation is progressive, meaning that it cannot be reversed, much like that of the transformative abhuman, such as the werewolf. Although I dislike this transforming body I must learn to accept it, because in order to continue to exist I must rely on it. The flesh of the body is at the root of this dilemma because the body is integral for physical and material existence—without it, abhuman or not, existence is not possible.

The abhuman are cast off from society because they threaten society, since they are a reminder of the abject, impermanence and materiality. It does so by threatening society/human identity. Even when a monster reaches its final form it is still considered an outcast.

The best way for me to understand my abhuman subjectivity is by relating my experience to the cultural phenomenon and product of the monster. As I previously mentioned the monster is one example of the abhuman. The werewolf myth, and its burgeoning manifestation in pop cultural representation, is a good example of this. When the abhuman subject becomes a werewolf he is not quite man or wolf, he becomes man-wolf or wolf-man, neither one nor the other, so he does not belong to either the world of man or the world of wolf, human society or the animal kingdom. The composite where there is a combination of man and animal is not an isolated case it is merely one example. A similar example of such a creature and its ineptitude to be welcomed into either human or animal

societies is that of the Brundel-fly character in David Cronenberg's film *The Fly*. When the full transformation into Brundel-fly occurs Brundel-fly is not quite man or fly, he is man-fly, he is fly-man. This transformation where man becomes insect is reminiscent of Franz Kafka's 'The Metamorphosis,' which is yet another example of human animal hybridity. This extends beyond fictional creatures like the werewolf and Brundel-fly, where there is combination of human and animal entities; there are many other forms of composite creatures, including the amalgamation of humans and machines.

Let us take the David Cronenberg film *The Fly* as an example. In the film the main character Seth Brundle undergoes a process of becoming insect, specifically becoming fly. During the process of this becoming, Brundle's body abjects itself, it "casts off" his humanity until he is no longer fully human. At first this transformation is met with excitement, brought on by positive change, associated with super-human abilities and strength; which is similar to our first experiences with transformation when we mature from child to adult. This relationship with transformation eventually changes when Brundle starts to realize that he is gaining the physical appearance of a fly, similarly to when we realize that our existence is impermanent and that we will eventually die. There is then the realization that there is a spillage occurring—a spillage and loss of humanity, which is accompanied with the panicked desire to contain what humanity remains.

As he begins to adopt the behavior and appearance of a fly, he struggles between the spillage and containment of his remaining humanity. However Brundel is not a fly or a man; he is becoming an abhuman subject, a hybrid, a liminal being, half-man and half-fly, and as such does not belong to either human or animal realm, he is Brundel-fly.

The fly is a creature that is often associated with concepts of disease, infection and death. The human is an ideal, or rather it is the place where identity is held and as such when the human is combined with a creature, such as the fly, the border between life and death is threatened and the human becomes diseased, infected and a representation of death. This is similar to Creed's notion that the monster/abhuman is a rehearsal of death.

I recently watched a film entitled *Tetsuo: The Bullet Man*. Its premise is similar to the film *The Fly*; due to an act of human science a transformation occurs where an abhuman entity is created. Yet, unlike the fly and the werewolf where the product of the transformation was an amalgamation of man and animal, as was discussed before, the product of this transformation is a combination of man and machine, man and metal if you will, specifically composed of iron. When Tetsuo, the main character of *Tetsuo: The Bullet Man*, reaches his final form he is not quite man or machine, he is man-machine, he is machine-man, he is cyborg, a mechanical-human hybrid, a living robot weapon.

The human/animal hybrid triggers a response that reminds us of the weakness of flesh, because they are composed of flesh; in their flesh they remind us of our own flesh and its mutable, transitional and impermanent nature. On the other hand in the example of human/machine hybrids, such as Tetsuo, a man made of iron, the impermanent nature of flesh becomes an insignificant concern—since they are permanent. However, in this opposite embodiment there is still a reminder of the weakness of flesh, but not because the hybrid creature is composed of flesh, rather because it is not.

III. The Installation

In *It Lacks A Human Corpse*, I chose to represent a monumental allusion to the inanimate and possibly dead/corpse-like body in a seemingly minimal sculptural style. The intention of this simplified form was to eliminate traditional and stereotypical associations with the abject and abject art. The traditional manifestation of the abject within art is often of an impermanent nature and/or appearance (rotting things, feces, urine, orifices, skin, slime and sickly fluids). Although these qualities are considered to be abject, to me these depictions of the abject are far too literal or perhaps, literal in too limited a sense. As I previously mentioned in this document, I perceive both the impermanent and permanent as being reminders of the abject. With that said, I believe that the permanent and minimal is far more abject than the traditional notion of the abject. These permanent and inorganic objects are so unlike the bodies that we possess that they become foreign to us and come to represent the complete opposite of what we are. The fact that these objects and cultural products, such as an artwork, will outlast us reminds us that we are the impermanent thing, that we are the skin coated fleshy thing that rots, with orifices that produce and spill feces, urine, slime and sickly fluids.

Although my work is meant to represent and perform a sense of unwavering permanence, in comparison to the fleshy body it still gives the impression of transformation. Transformation becomes apparent in *It Lacks A Human Corpse* through the use of art making processes that are inherently transformative in nature. The production methods used throughout the execution of this project

include aluminum casting, ceramics and the manipulation of metal and plastics, as well as carpentry. Many of these processes deal with changing material from their initial form, a transformation if you will, through processes that include melting, pouring, firing and curing, specifically in processes associated with aluminum casting and ceramics. All artwork can be considered as being transformative in a way; a blank sheet of paper is transformed when an image is drawn on its blank surface. In terms of my process, I see my work transform from its humble beginning as a sketch to a final installation piece. The example of transformation I provide here is one where artwork is being born and created, which is a seemingly positive manifestation of transformation, but rather than supporting this notion I claim that my focus is the negative and degenerative aspects of transformation, since I believe this positive transformation is actually a reminder of the corporeal degeneration of the body.

The work I am creating is a manipulation of several materials, such as steel, wood, plastic, aluminum etc. These materials ensure that my work in some shape or form will physically outlast my conscious physical existence, which I believe ties well with the theory of the abject. The theory of the abject is integrated with the work, in subject and concept. I feel abjection toward the final work and the very creation of that work. What do I mean by this? As discussed before abjection is the disgusted reaction that brings one to a place where meaning breaks down and collapses. Although my work is an attempt to create something more permanent than the degenerative body I embody, it also

triggers a similar disgusted reaction as associated with abjection—it reminds me that my body is shedding itself, abjecting¹¹ itself, breaking down and threatening what makes me human.

This occurs on two levels, during the production of the artwork and secondly once the artwork is completed. I can conceptualize and envision what my work will look like when it is complete, but when it comes to executing the production of the work I cannot produce the work with my own bodily devices. Instead, I must rely on the assistance of others to bring my vision to fruition; to me this reliance on others is an abject reminder of my own bodily degenerative transformation. Once the work is completed and on display, its presence is also an abject reminder. It reminds me of my transformation, because it is more permanent than my existence. This expands further beyond my relationship to my work; it also presents itself with the works of others, other people, other things, anything that I deem to be more permanent than me.

The work is a sculptural exploration of the aforementioned themes and concepts: transformation, abject/abjection and the abhuman/liminal-being/monster. These sculptural explorations have been integrated into a larger installation structure, which is the final embodiment of *It Lacks A Human Corpse*. Initially, prior to the execution of the work and this document, I had planned that

¹¹ My intention by using the word abjecting is to imply the physical act of becoming abject.

my work was going to work with a cluster-fuck aesthetic¹² and be of a sprawling nature, similar to the work of Thomas Hirschhorn, due to my interest in the concept of spillage in relation to the monster, since I believed that when one “transforms” into a monster there was solely a loss of identity or rather a loss of humanity. I eventually realized, through discussion and further research that my work is more about the containment of human identity and the struggle to prevent the spillage of humanity, in order to hold onto what humanity remains and the identity that still remains—a unique abhuman identity. Therefore, a more suitable statement would be that my interests are concerned with portraying the struggle and relationship between the containment and spillage of humanity when a transformation occurs. My work gives a sense of spillage, not in the manner of work that embodies a cluster-fuck aesthetic and sprawling nature, but by focusing on the contrast between containment and spillage, inside and outside.

¹² According to Jerry Saltz of The Village Voice the term cluster-fuck aesthetic refers to “the practice of mounting sprawling, often infinitely organized, jam-packed carnivalesque installations, [which are making] galleries and museums [reminiscent of] department stores, junkyards, and disaster films.”

IV. The Symbols

It seemed to be a sort of monster, or symbol representing a monster, of a form, which only a diseased fancy¹³ could conceive. – H.P. Lovecraft

A Mad Creator or Mad Curator?

It Lacks A Human Corpse forces me to act as a curator when considering what to include within the installation and the justification and reasoning behind the inclusion of certain elements. In this section I discuss these elements and their personal significance, as well as the contemplation behind their potential symbolic meanings.

The Lack of The Literal: The Monster & The Abhuman

Within the installation, there is no literal sculptural reference to the monster unless the red coffin-like structure is interpreted as a reference to vampires. The lack of the literal depiction of the monster is due to the fact the monster¹⁴ is not where my research focus lies, rather it is about the abhuman.

Although the monster is not my focus, it is an important aspect of my research as it acted as a stepping-stone toward the inclusion of the abhuman into my project. That is not say that the abhuman is not connected to the monster, in fact the monster is one example of an abhuman. This inclusion of the abhuman

¹³ I consider myself to be of a “diseased fancy.” My “diseased fancy” has conceived a work that I believe is a symbol that represents an abhuman monstrous creature.

¹⁴ Theoretically my work originates from the concept of the monster. However, by working through the concept of the monster I was introduced to the concept of the abhuman. This introduction of the abhuman signaled a change in the direction of my research, which resulted in the focus of the concept of the abhuman rather than the monster.

allows for the concept of the physical monster to be taken out of the context of fiction and applied to real circumstances. The reason behind this is that the abhuman in concept is sympathetic to the human condition and is applicable to human experience, if not so for others it is for myself, since it is experiencing a degenerative transformation much like my own.



Figure 7. *It Lacks A Human Corpse Installation View*, Alexei Vella (2011) Artist's Photo.



Figure 8. *It Lacks A Human Corpse*, Alexei Vella (2011, Epoxy resin, wood, MDF, steel, plastic, aluminum, asphalt, silicon carbide, spray paint, latex paint, replica femur bone, lacquer, clear acrylic sheeting and polystyrene foam, 10' x 5' x 7') Artist's Photo.

A Human Framework

As I have previously discussed I believe that humanity and human identity is a construct and ideal that values the concepts of “identity, system and order, borders, positions [and] rules” (Kristeva, 1982, 4). It is a means of control and containment, which acts as an escape from the chaos of nature and the primal. This metal frame structure is meant to represent this construct of humanity that encapsulates human identity, which acts as a cage meant to enforce control over the spillage that is occurring to the physical body and subsequently human identity. This spillage of physical body is a process associated with nature, which as stated before is a threat to humanity and the human identity. However, this enforcement of control is merely an attempt at prevent the inevitable, because human identity is tied to the physical body.

The Physical Body

The red structure is an object that possesses a multitude of interpretations and meanings in the context of my project. However, it mainly acts as a symbol for the body, the body as a vessel. The body is a vessel that contains what makes us who we are in both a material and informs our conscious existence, it is what we experience life through. A coffin is a vessel as well, a vessel that contains a body; thus, the reason for the coffin-like appearance of the structure. Red is the colour of flesh and blood. The body is composed of flesh and the flesh contains the blood, hence the use of the colour red. The inclusion of the bone merely

allows for a further association with the body, since it is a remnant of the living body, yet it is also a part of the living body.

The Stalagmite

The depiction of the stalagmite structure within my work derives from several interconnected interpretations. Gleaning from the depiction of abhumans and monsters in both pop-culture and literature alike, I realized that they are often portrayed as inhabiting dark, cavernous and subterranean dwellings. I found these dwellings to be of a similar nature to the environments where stalagmites form.

Stalagmites are also constantly in a process of transformation, a slow transformation, but a transformation nonetheless. These geological growths form over the expanse of time, drop by drop and embody a seemingly permanent transformation due to their timelessness. Once again, we are at the juncture where I argue that this permanent nature is threatening and abject to us because through its permanence there is a reminder that our own bodies are a temporary, rotting and impermanent thing.

The stalagmite becomes a more profound symbol in relation to my idea of the abject, when it is placed within the context of the red coffin-like structure. In shape, the stalagmite is similar to a spike; a spike that is sharp, that can cause wounds and can pierce borders and thresholds. Instead of representing the spike as an external threat, like that of a piercing weapon, be it of wood or silver,

meant to vanquish vampires, werewolves and the like, the stalagmite comes to represent a threat and wound that comes from within. The stalagmite emerges from an opening at the foot of the coffin-like structure; it is expelled from within, protruding from an inner source, and thus wounding itself. I agree that external threats play an important part of the abjection. However, I believe all the external threats are reminders of our own internal abjections, wounds, threats and our own weaknesses.

I am well aware of the phallic appearance and placement of the stalagmite. However, the installation as a whole is a symbolic representation of an ungendered abhuman entity. The reasoning behind this concept theoretically is that the abhuman, specifically the monster according to Creed, can be male, female or an amalgamation of the two. This amalgamation intrigues me because it allows the abhuman/monster to connect to the abject on another level. This connection can be revealed through the way in which the abhuman shares in the abject's affinity with the ambiguous. According to Kristeva, the abject is ambiguous, as portrayed in the following quotation "the in-between, the ambiguous [and] the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, 4). Since the gender of the abhuman can be either male or female or an amalgamation of the two it is much like the abject, in that its gender is also a representation of the "the in-between, the ambiguous [and] the composite" (Kristeva, 1982, 4). The ambiguity of gender is revealed through the stalagmite by the fact that it is not known whether the stalagmite comes from within the body, meaning that it is a part of the body, or that it is external to the body.

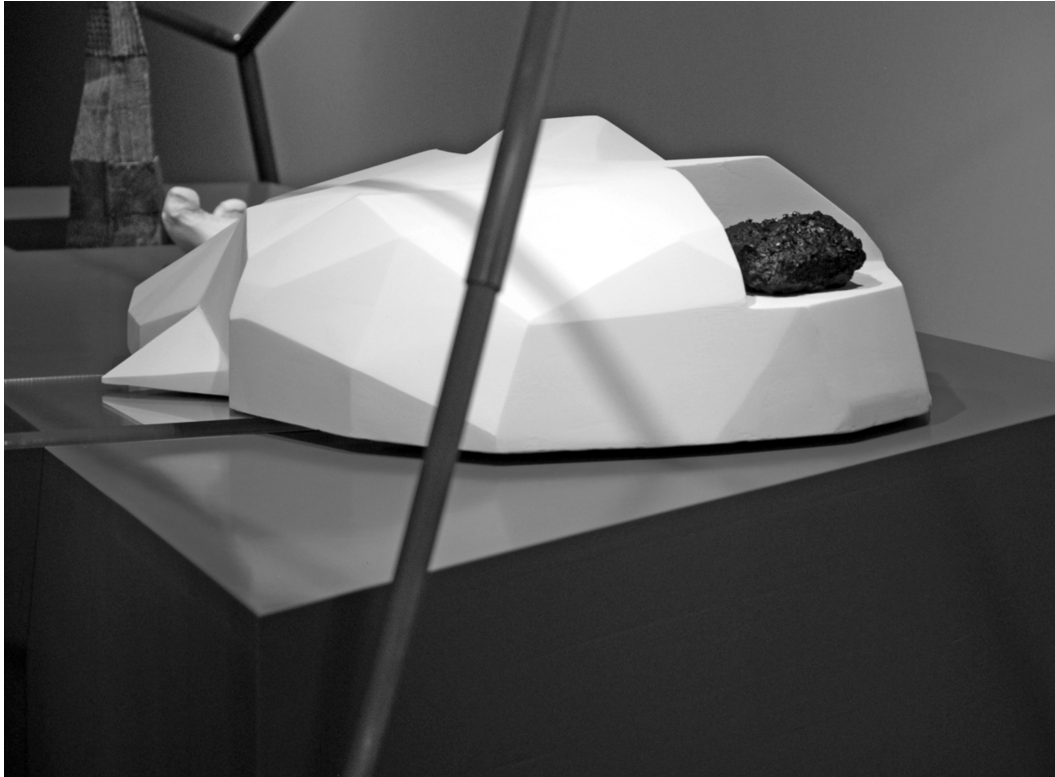


Figure 9. *It Lacks A Human Corpse* (detail), Alexei Vella (2011, Epoxy resin, wood, MDF, steel, plastic, aluminum, asphalt, silicon carbide, spray paint, latex paint, replica femur bone, lacquer, clear acrylic sheeting and polystyrene foam, 10' x 5' x 7') Artist's Photo.

The Abhuman Head, The Spill & A Reminder in Stone

The head element (*The Abhuman Head*) of the installation and the sculpture entitled the *Encapsulated Abhuman* represents the abhuman subject and as such is an important aspect and symbol within my work. That is not to say that the other objects contained within the installation are not referencing the abhuman, it is just that to me the abhuman and its identity is embodied within this head element. This head element was initially developed and used for the sculptural piece entitled *The Unwanted Abjection of The Flesh and The Sedimentation of The Mind*; at the time I was unaware of the existence of the

abhuman. Although not specifically about the abhuman, it dealt with the undesirable abjection and spillage of the flesh and the value and permanence I associate with the faculties of the mind. Once theoretically introduced to the concept of the abhuman, it became apparent that this head element was a representation of the abhuman.

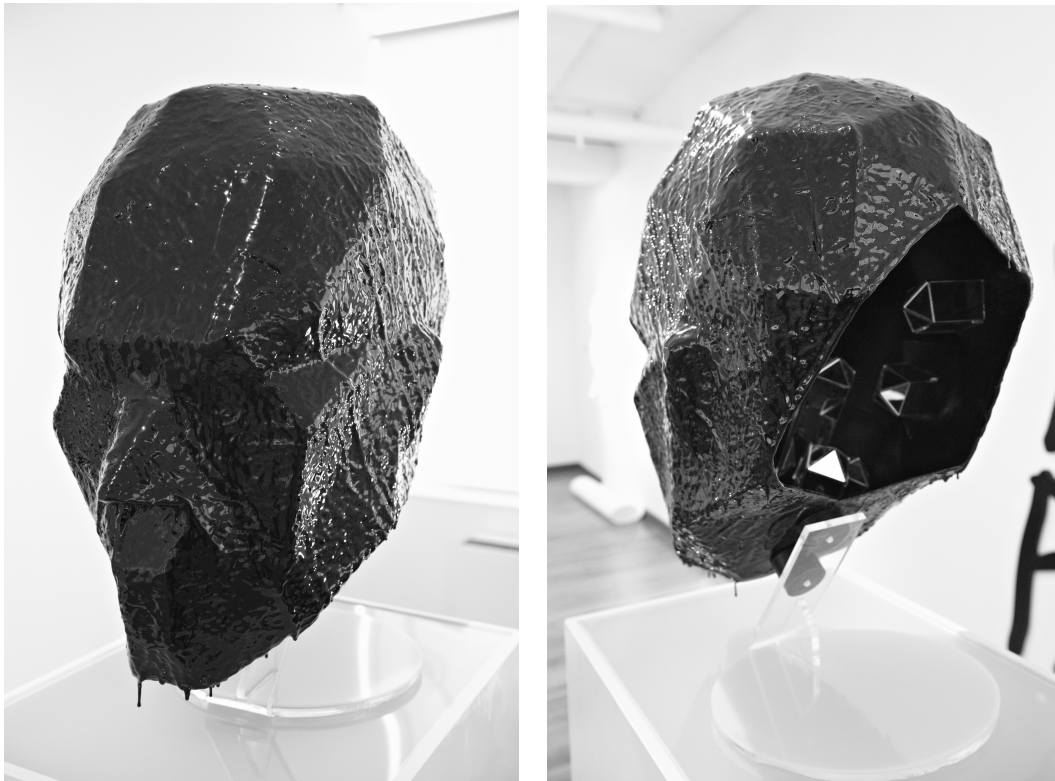


Figure 10 & 11. *The Unwanted Abjection of The Flesh and The Sedimentation of The Mind*, Alexei Vella (2010, Epoxy resin, MDF, wood, clear and reflective acrylic sheeting, fiberglass, rubber, plastic and spray paint) Photo: Lino Ragno. (front & back)

The head structure resembles a human head, but its features have become indistinguishable due to its faceted appearance. To me it has gone through a transformation, it has become faceted and has lost its humanity; it has become something else: abhuman.



Figure 12. *Encapsulated Abhuman*, Alexei Vella (2011, Glazed ceramic, asphalt, spray paint, latex paint, MDF, clear acrylic sheeting, 12" x 10" x 15") Artist's photo.

If I were to take this head and insert it into my auto-ethnographic state of reflection and interpretation I would say this head is like me, or even that it is me, in that it is losing its identity and is fearful of it. The clear acrylic step like flow, *The Spill*, emanating from *The Abhuman Head* is meant to represent the perpetual and unavoidable spillage of humanity as the physical body breaks down and spills as well. The asphalt stone surfaced with a black latex paint and shards of silicon carbide, *A Reminder in Stone*, and its relative placement within the installation, acts as a lingering reminder of both permanence and impermanence. It is a reminder that there are some things, such as the stone, that are more permanent than the corporeal existence of the body, specifically my body. It is a concern that is literally held within the abhuman subject's head and mind, specifically my mind.

Lesser Experiments in Corporeal Limitations

All the previous sculptural symbols mentioned are elements of the main installation structure (pictured earlier). These pieces were produced via the rigorous assistance of others because my physical body is unable to make the work on its own accord. I decided to attempt to produce a couple of works where I would act as the sole creator, without such assistance. These lesser works are created by the use of computer outputs, CNC, polymer clay sculptures, found objects and a combination of the aforementioned, in other words materials that I can manipulate on my own.



Figure 13. *A Reminder of Comparative (Im)permanence*, Alexei Vella (2011, Replica fetus skull, spray paint, aluminum foil, quartz crystal cluster, MDF, clear acrylic sheeting, 10" x 10" x 15") Artist's photo.



Figure 14. *Pyramid*, Alexei Vella (2011, MDF, spray paint, latex paint) Artist's photo.



Figure 15. *Spilling Void*, Alexei Vella (2011, MDF, spray paint, latex paint) Artist's photo.



Figure 16. *Wound*, Alexei Vella (2011, MDF, spray paint, latex paint) Artist's photo.

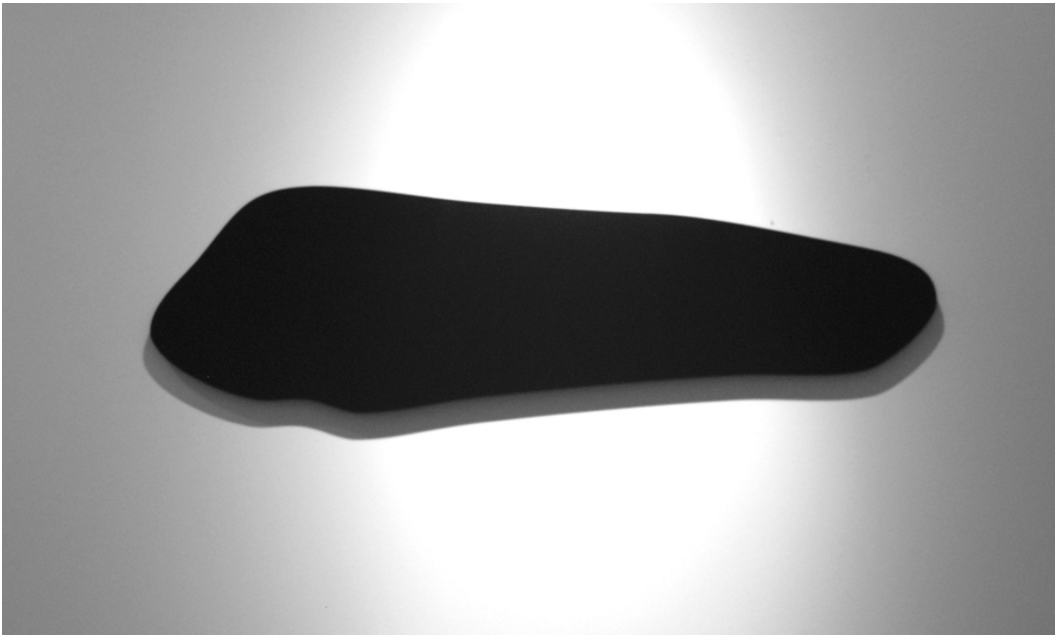


Figure 17. *The Ambiguous*, Alexei Vella (2011, MDF, spray paint, latex paint) Artist's photo.

PART IV: Outro.

Conclusion, Contribution & Future Research

This exhibition and supporting paper are a culmination of two years of research and studio-based art production that addresses the exploration of transformation, the abject, liminality and the abhuman. This exploration allowed me to immerse myself in a state of self-contemplation and self-reflection and come to terms with the personal significance and cultural portrayals of the aforementioned ideas. The content collected through this process was then utilized to produce the sculptural-based work *It Lacks A Human Corpse*.

Having finished this body of work, I can now say that I am somewhat relieved that it is completed. Although I have learned to identify myself with the abject and the abhuman subject and draw connections between the two, I am now constantly referring to myself as an abhuman subject. This project has made me extremely aware of my difference compared to the majority of those within culture. This project in its entirety has been an experience of constant abjection. It was easy to conceptualize on paper the sculptural work I wanted to produce, but when it came to the production of the artwork my physical ineptitude reminded me of the little I could do physically to manipulate the materials required to produce my work.

Prior to my research, and execution of this work, I was avoiding sculptural-based work altogether, it was as if I already knew that creating such work was beyond my physical capabilities. I was comfortable, safe and in control within

my illustration practice. It reminded me of what I could do and how I had the power to manipulate the materials and process involved in two-dimensional work. However, something inside me wanted to create something that occupied space, I suppose it was my desire to create something stronger than me, something of immensity that would outlast me. Instead of instilling me with solely a sense of pride that, with the assistance of others, I have brought my sculptural vision to fruition, I am reminded of my frailty. The work was meant to compensate for my physical lack, but this desired compensation just became another reminder of the abjection I feel towards my own abject body. I return to Julia Kristeva's insights into the nature of the abject. She writes:

It is not just a lack of cleanliness or health... [that causes abjection, nor is it] a wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay... [it is also that] disturbs identity, system and order [as well as] does not respect borders, positions [and] rules. (Kristeva, 1982, 4)

Since, as Kristeva notes, the abject is characterized as that which threatens identity, structure and order (Kristeva, 1982, 4), not only does the relative permanence of healthy members of society stand in as my own personal abject, but so does my sculptural work.

This marks a shift in my practice: initially my concerns were solely of a commercial nature, yet this current body of work has allowed me to step away from these concerns and focus on personal ones. I have created a body of work of personal significance and will continue to produce similar work post-graduation. I am intrigued and fascinated by the connections that I have started to make out from these many concepts. The journey of my identity is continuous

and as such so is my work. The transformative process that my body is currently experiencing is something that will continue to occur throughout my existence. Rather than suppressing and continuously avoiding this inherent part of my identity as I have done in the past, I plan to embrace it and implement it in my future artwork. *It Lacks A Human Corpse* began from a deeply personal place, a place I was fearful to acknowledge. I recall a time early on in my project where I would get extremely emotional when discussing my relationship to my body and the degenerative transformation it continuously experiences. However, by confronting this personal aspect of my work, I have realized that I need to step away from the personal in the making of the work. In the future there is the potential of making more personal work, but in a way that it deals with more universal themes through an ongoing scrutiny and exploration of these universal themes within the realm of the personal and the particularities of a situation, through self-reflexive experience.

It Lacks A Human Corpse engages with the medium of sculpture to draw connections between cultural tropes of the abject, the abhuman and transformation, with personal lived experiences of these tropes. Keeping in mind that both influence and inform one another, this project is meant to extend the research concerning contemporary notions of transformation and the abject through studio-based research and production with the intention of extracting theoretical concepts and relating it to personal and physical experiences of transformation.

As has already been stated, I am not fond of admitting that this project was profoundly based on my personal lived experiences and my personal affinity with abhumans and monsters of cultural production, but I must do so in order to acknowledge my contribution to my field. My lived experience is in proximity to the concepts that my works explores, and as such the production of the work is a physically taxing process for my body to attempt to produce. This inability became a reminder of my own abject and my own transformation, which is frustrating. Although difficult, I will continue to explore this transformation with tremendous focus and resolve, even though it is extremely emotional at times. To admit, accept and endure my transformation, in order to produce work, is just as difficult as the transformation I experience.

Spillage: A Postscript

The creation and installation of the work presented within this thesis were acts of abjection, as was touched upon on within my thesis document. Any acts of physical manipulation of the work by others, be it in the form of creation or installation, became threatening reminders of my own degenerative transformation due to my lack of ability to manipulate it myself. This lack of ability to create and manipulate my artwork without the assistance of others was a new experience for me, since within my illustration practice I have full control of my work and often consider myself as a perfectionist. However, due to my lack of control within the processes involved in my sculptural and installation work, I had to learn to accept and allow for the “spillages” of others, that is the

mistakes and imperfections of those who assisted me, to remain within my work. Without the assistance of others, spillages and all, my work could not be produced.

Illustration is a practice that utilizes appropriation¹⁵ to communicate to its viewers. Appropriation allows the viewer, through image, to understand an image meant to communicate a specific message; in other words, illustration is meant to illuminate its viewers. With that said, I admit that popular culture is a prominent informing agent to my illustration practice that I heavily appropriate into my work to relay a specific message. The art practice that I used to create the work in *It Lacks A Human Corpse* utilizes popular culture in a similar capacity. *It Lacks A Human Corpse* uses popular culture in a similar fashion to my illustration practice, but also appropriates other forms of culture, such as theoretical texts, literature and other artworks to a greater extent than that of my illustration practice.

At first, I envisioned my gallery show to be solely an exhibition of the large installation piece entitled *It Lacks A Human Corpse*. However, after viewing the space for myself I realized that presenting this single piece would not be a proper use of the gallery. Upon some reflection and some discussion with Luke Painter and my committee, I decided to create several supplementary works in order to make my exhibit a comprehensive show and experience.

¹⁵ Appropriation is a fundamental aspect in the history of the arts (literary, visual, musical), which consist in "the use of borrowed elements in the creation of a new work."

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Artwork

Altmejd, David. Loup-Garou 1. Galerie de l'UCAM, Montreal, 1999.

Wood, paint, Plexiglas, lighting system, plaster, polymer clay, synthetic hair, acetate, mylar, jewellery, glitter.

84 x 78 x 96 inches.

---. Loup-Garou 2. Galerie de l'UCAM, Montreal, 2000.

Wood, paint, Plexiglas, mirror, lighting system, plaster, polymer clay, synthetic hair, synthetic flowers, acetate, mylar, glitter.

96 x 72 x 84 inches.

---. The Index. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 2007.

Bronze, steel, foam, resin, paint, wood, glass, mirror, Plexiglas, lighting system, silicone, taxidermy birds and animals, synthetic plants, synthetic

tree branches, pinecones, horse hair, synthetic hair, burlap, leather, fiberglass, chains, wire, feathers, quartz, pyrite, other minerals, glass eyes, clothing, shoes, monofilament, jewelry, beads, glitter.

131 x 510 1/2 x 363 1/4 inches.

---. Untitled (Dark). Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 2001.

Plaster, paint, fake hair, resin, glitter.

8 x 14 x 8 inches.

Kelley, Mike. Frankenstein. Initial Access: Frank Cohen Collection, Wolverhampton, 1989. Sewn, stuffed animals, basket with spools of thread, pincushion, felt.

12 x 78 x 30 inches.

Thek, Paul. The Tomb. Stabel Gallery, New York, 1967.

Wood, melamine laminate, metal, wax, paint, hair, and Plexiglas.

Thek, Paul. Untitled (Meat Piece with Flies). Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 1965. Wood, melamine laminate, metal, wax, paint, hair, and Plexiglas.

19 x 12 x 8 1/2 inches.

Film

Cronenberg, David, dir. The Fly. Brookfilms, 1986. Film.

Landis, John, dir. An American Werewolf in London. American Werewolf Inc, 1981. Film.

Merhige, E. Elias, dir. Begotten. Theatre Of Material, 1991. Film.

Tsukamoto, Shinya, dir. Tetsuo: The Bullet Man. Asmik Ace Entertainment, 2010. Film.

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---. Tetsuo II: Body Hammer. Kaiju Theater, 1992. Film.

Waggner, George, dir. The Wolf Man. Universal Pictures, 1941. Film.

Woodward, Frank H., dir. Lovecraft: Fear of the Unknown. Wyrd, 2008. Film.

Appendix A. Exhibition Documentation Images

This appendix is a series of images of the artworks displayed during the *It Lacks A Human Corpse* installation at ESP Gallery, 1086 ½ Queen Street West. These images are located in the file entitled “exhibition_images.”

Appendix B. Exhibition Documentation Quicktime

This appendix is a Quicktime video file of the *It Lacks A Human Corpse* installation at ESP Gallery, 1086 ½ Queen Street West. The file name of this video file is “exhibition_documentation.mov.”