Hope of Failure: Subverting Disgust, Shame and the Abject in Feminist Performances with Menstrual Blood

by
Freyja Jónudóttir Barkardóttir

Submitted to the Department of Gender Studies, Central European University
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Erasmus Mundus Master's Degree in Women's and Gender Studies

Main supervisor: Hyaesin Yoon (Central European University)
Second supervisor: Domitilla Olivieri (Utrecht University)

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Abstract

The menstruating body has served as topic for feminist exploration regarding the systematic gendered governing of bodies and feminist embodiment theory that re-centres the body as site of analysis. Scholarship on menstrual activism has explored the diverse range of political projects focused on challenging dominant discourses and practices aimed at regulating and concealing menstruating bodies and menstrual blood. The aim of this thesis is to provide an in-depth analysis of two examples of artistic intervention into menstrual activism. This is achieved by exploring the political potential of material menstrual blood within two Danish feminist performances: Miriam Wistreich's project moistsomoist.org, a research blog dedicated to locating the agency of material menstrual blood, and Bjørk Grue Lidin's performance "Fuck Consent", performed in Berlin in May of 2015 as part of the opening of feminist menstruation art exhibition.

The analysis is informed by a mixed-media approach to research where I employ interviews, participant observation and analysis of texts and discourse. In both cases, the ability of material menstrual blood to provoke abjection and invoke affect is the focus of exploration. In relation to the moistsomoist.org project, I argue that the abject character of the performance is found in the way the menstrual blood the performer works with escapes representation. Furthermore, in the "Fuck Consent" performance, I read the performer's dismissal of the notion of consent as an example of terrorist performance, whose goal is to invoke disgust, thereby exposing the limits of some liberalist feminist politics. Finally, by identifying moments where both performances fail to accomplish an intended purpose, I suggest a queer feminist political potential in failure and negative affect.

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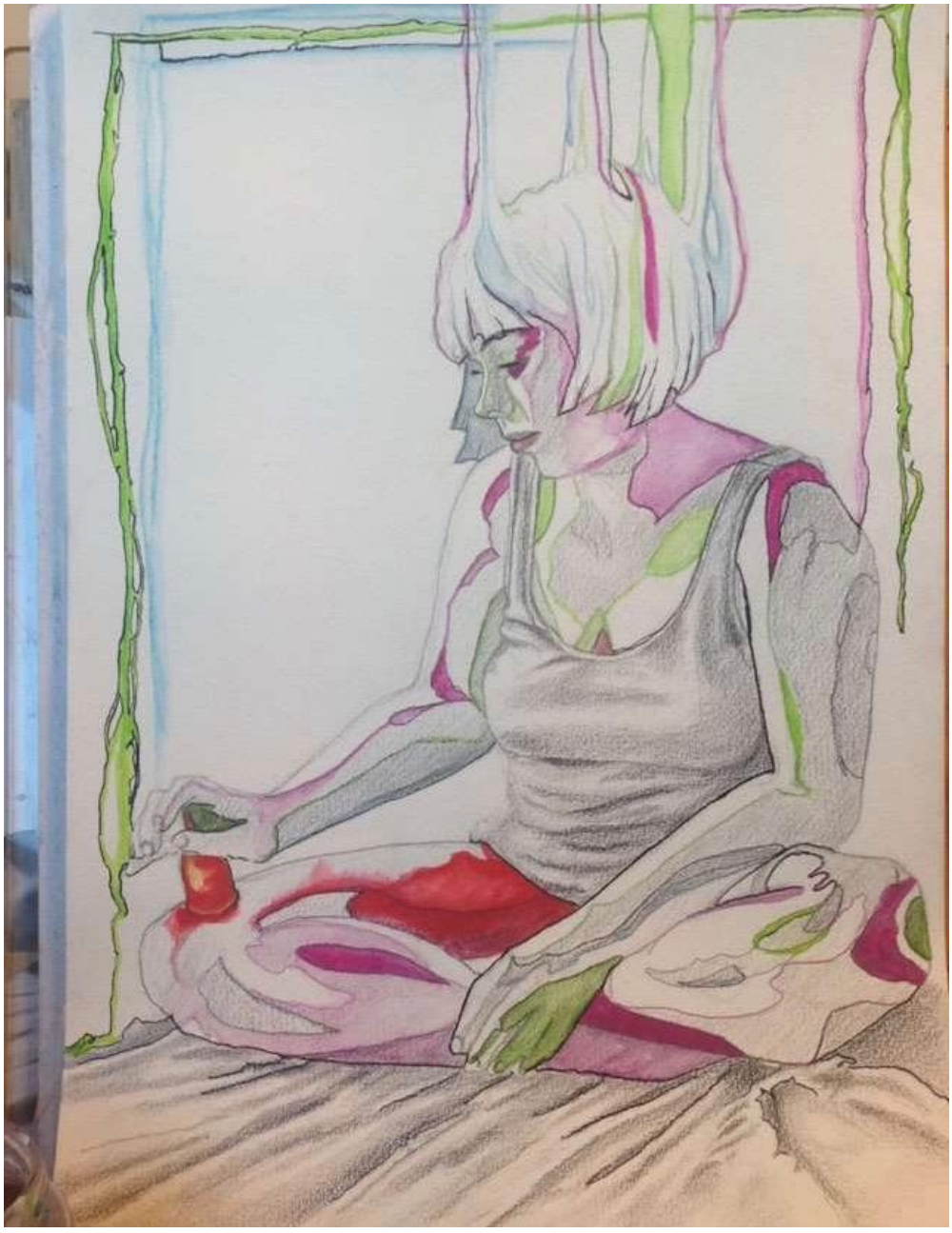

Figure 1: Hertha María Richardt Úlfarsdóttir and Freyja Jonudottir (2016), period, pencil, watercolour and ink on paper.

Chapter 1: Introduction: Let's Get This Party Started!

I started menstruating at the age of 11. One morning I woke up and found a small stain of blood in my white cotton underpants. Thinking that I knew what this meant, I remember being both scared and devastated. I threw my blood stained underwear in the laundry basket where my mother found them and introduced me to the world of menstrual 'hygiene' products. I was very lucky to have my mother at this point. My grandmother who was born a century ago in a small town in Iceland, my mother has later told me, ran crying out into the field when she first discovered blood stains in her underwear. Not knowing what menstruation was, she was certain that this was a sign of some lethal disease. I did learn about menstruation in school, and I had previously seen my mother menstruate but still, I was terrified the first time it happened to me. Terrified, because I associated menstruation with inconvenience and with shame. Ashamed of my menstruating body, I kept it a secret from my peers for years. Every month, the experience of menstruation came with hiding pads, tampons and menstrual leaks from the people around me.

Then a few years ago I accidentally bought a pack of lemon scented tampons. Mainstream marketing of a product this useless (and perhaps directly harmful because of the chemicals used) says a lot about the current "menstrual culture" (Kissling, 2006) where menstruation is dominantly considered as something to be concealed. This was a moment when it became evident to me personally that there are mechanisms in society that consider menstruation only as something to be silenced. As something shameful. Injecting artificial lemon scent into a tampon will never make the vagina or the used tampon smell like perfume,

I am sure. It was evident that the only purpose of this then is to remind people who menstruate that this bodily mechanism needs to be concealed.

However, in this thesis, I engage with menstruation activism as an ambiguous feminist politics. By menstrual activism, I am referring to the multitude of projects, whether political, artistic or otherwise, dedicated to challenging the perception that menstruation is necessarily a feminine experience and/or bad or shameful because of that. I approach menstruation as a phenomenon that is itself ambiguous, in relation to feminist and queer approaches to the world. People have their own stories about the experience of inhabiting a menstruating body and I have mine, as demonstrated above. However, they are not all bad or shameful and they are not only markers of being female (Bobel, 2010). I am not interested specifically in unravelling the cultural significance of menstruation so much as interrogating what implications it can have when working with menstrual blood in a feminist artistic manner. While menstruation is often considered a taboo, in this thesis I want to interrogate the politics of 'dismantling' this menstrual taboo. I want to interrogate what it means in terms of political implications, from a theoretical perspective, to consider menstruation as abject or as a shameful experience.

The main content of this thesis is a reading of two feminist performances that both make use of material menstrual blood. I explore how these two separate performances respond to representations of the menstruating body and menstrual blood as abject and shameful in different ways. These two projects are Miriam Wistreich's blog moistsomoist.com about experiments with menstrual blood and Bjørk Grue Lidin performance piece Fuck Consent in which the artist used menstrual blood to rub on her body and shoot on the audience. Both persons behind the performances are Danish, with the moistsomoist.org project "performed" online and in Copenhagen from 2012-2015 and the Fuck Consent performance performed in

Berlin in May of 2015. Furthermore, I ask what the political implications can be of using actual material menstrual blood. Both performances fail in some ways in their intended relations to material blood and I read this as examples of possibilities for a queer reading of the political potential of material menstrual blood. The overarching project of this thesis is thus to explore how material menstrual blood is used in these two performances to respond to the menstruating body as abject or shameful. Furthermore, I explore what the consequences are for the performances in terms of the material blood being abject and invoking affect.

The abject is a theoretical notion that I employ to explore those bodies outside of intelligibility, as well as those mechanisms of material menstrual blood that forces the subject or object outside of control (Kristeva, 1982). Menstrual blood is often referred to in theoretical contexts as an abject fluid, but what does this mean and which implications does the abjectness of menstrual blood entail? Through a careful consideration of the abject as inherently unrepresentable, I thus consider menstrual blood as a material that holds a potential of constantly transgressing boundaries through avoiding categorization and representation.

I also rely on some feminist and queer presentations of affect theory as a theoretical foundation for this thesis. Particularly, I am interested in affects shame and disgust and how these collude in some mechanisms of stabilizing collective experience and social norms. Feminist and queer intervention in affect theory is linked to feminist corporeality, in the way that affects are considered pre-discursive elements of human experience. Affects and emotions are part of shaping experience, beyond discourse and other cultural signifiers. When regarding menstruation as an experience connected with shame and menstrual blood as a material that can invoke disgust, I therefore turn to feminist and queer theories of affect to analyse what affects do in creating these experiences and what the political consequences of affects might

be. In relation to queer conceptualization of relating and being in the world, shame is of particular political significance as well as its contrasting value, pride. I consider some of the consequences of claiming both as a means of feminist or queer strategies of resistance.

Social structures, whether discourse or otherwise work to regulate formations and experience of bodies. While some bodies are deemed acceptable from a gendered and racial matrix of governance, others fall outside of the categories of intelligibility and are subject to violent regulation. The focus of this thesis is an analysis of the potential and attempts to resist these structures of governance. However, I consider that resistance to the governing of bodies, in other words body politics, that relies purely on strategies of representation and visibility implies a certain kind of uniform subject. Representation as a feminist body politics, meaning a tactics of resistance that seeks to broaden the scope of which bodies are deemed acceptable thorugh increased visibility is valuable but in some ways limited. For example, there is the constant threat reproducing the same kinds of violent normative structures that these tactics seek to deconstruct. Therefore, in this thesis I remain suspicious to tactics of increased visibility as *the* means to an end (of oppressive structures). In reference to this comes the significance in my analysis of focusing of feminist corporeality, through using theoretical notion of the abject and of affect as alternative locations for strategies of resistance.

Furthermore, by employing queer theoretical readings of power and resistance, in this thesis I try to avoid inscribing normative or positivistic analysis of both my theoretical and empirical material. Some approaches of queer theory problematize the binary structures of good/bad and success/failure associated with masculine, imperialist and neoliberal values of progress and production (Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 2009). In an attempt to resist re-inscribing these structures when producing academic knowledge, instead of reading for an underlying

truth and hidden agenda of the material only, I attempt to read for potential in the abject and negative affect while also engaging my personal experience in the analysis (Sedgwick, 2003; Love, 2010).

The topic of menstruation is interesting to feminist theory for a number of reasons. For one, there is the connection with menstruation to essential femininity or femaleness as well as the connection to the body. Feminist embodiment theory focuses on re-centering the lived bodily experience. In the tradition of Western dichotomous thinking, the body is positioned secondary to the rational mind with the body also inherently linked to femininity and the mind with masculinity. However, focusing on the body as inherently connected to femininity risks the pitfall of essentializing gender and homogenizing the lived experience of identifying as woman. Furthermore, menstruation is connected with reproduction and motherhood, as well as experiences of shame and stigma. In this way, I find that menstruation as a feminist topic exposes some of the contradictions inherent within feminist theory, that occur when conceptualizing notions of femininity, the body, nature, culture, materiality and lived experience. How to approach menstruation then, from a feminist political perspective, with the intent of making it a generally more enjoyable and less oppressive experience is complicated.

"Smear it on your face, rub it on your body, it's time to start a menstruation party!" exclaims Shannon Docherty in the title of her essay on the menarchy or menstrual anarchy movement (Docherty, 2010). I embrace this invitation by focusing this thesis on the experience of menstruation and on material menstrual blood. Meanwhile, I remain sceptical of the implied progress of a movement and positive experience of inhabiting a menstruating body and reply: It's my menstruation party and I can cry if I want to.

1.1 Review of Menstrual Activism

Naming 2015 as "the year menstruation went public" (Bobel, 2015), American feminist scholar Chris Bobel recently published a blog post[1], "Will this 2015 menstrual momentum make room for all bodies?" identifying some events in 2015 where periods gained mainstream visibility. Bobel herself is one of the main, if not *the* main feminist scholars who has done research on the topic of menstruation activism as a form of queer feminist resistance (Bobel, 2006; Bobel, 2010; Bobel and Kissling, 2011). In the blog post she recognizes an increasing interest in menstruation in 2015 from both mainstream feminist circles and media outlets. Similarly, since starting research for this thesis project, I too have experienced an increasing public awareness of menstruation as a feminist topic, although I am unsure to say with certainty whether this personal observation is due actual increased public visibility or my increased personal interest.

However, in the following I will map out some of the events connected to feminism and menstruation that have been gaining online or media attention in the past years, in reference to Bobel's blog post. Following this, I present some feminist scholarly work that has been published on the topic of menstrual activism, to set the stage for what this movement entails, in order to be able to contrast it to my analysis of the performances later on in the thesis.

One of the events Bobel mentions in the blog post is Canadian poet Rupi Kaur's photo that gained much online attention after it was removed twice off social media site Instagram in

[1] First published on Gender & Society, the official website of the peer reviewed journal of the same name, published by Sociologists for Women in Society on November 12, 2015. Later published on menstruationresearch.org, the official website of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research (Bobel, 2015).

March of 2015. The photo (see Figure 2), which was part of a series Kaur made with her sister explicitly depicting the two in different scenarios related to the experience of menstruating (Kaur, 2015 March 23), depicts Kaur lying on a bed, facing away from the camera with visible blood stains on the back of her pyjama pants and on the sheet beneath her. The photo was removed twice by the administration of Instagram, as a violation of community guidelines and, as a response, Kaur wrote a public post on Facebook where she identifies this act as an indicator of how menstruation and thus women's bodies are perceived as something shameful in the North American context (Kaur, 2015 March 25). After Kaur's photo and blog post went viral, Instagram put the photo back up and issued an apology for the incident (Kaur, 2015 March 27). There have been other examples gone viral of women posting photos containing menstrual blood to social media sites e.g. for causing abusive comments and threats from other users (Denor, 2015; Vagianos, 2015). The Rupi Kaur incident gained media attention as an indicator of gendered bias within large internet corporations such as Instagram where women's bodies are routinely governed.

Figure 2: Rupi Kaur (2015) *Untitled,* photograph.

Another example that Bobel mentions is when American musician Kiran Gandhi ran the New York marathon in April of 2015 with a visible menstrual blood stain in her crotch, again causing viral mainstream attention (see Figure 3). Gandhi explained in an interview that she didn't want the discomfort of having to use a tampon prevent her from completing the race she had prepared for for so long, and give in to society's expectations towards women to "prioritise the comfort of others at the expense of ourselves" (Gandhi quoted in McGraa, 2015). This event gained attention as an example of an increasing interest for people to speak openly about their experience of menstruating, not concealing it, as presumably would be expected.

Figure 3: Photograph of marathon runner Kiran Ghandi.
Ironically, the Daily Mail chose to censor photographs of Kiran Ghandi's "freed bleeding" run, demonstrating that menstruating bodies are subject of governing and concealment (Rothkopf, 2015).

Furthermore, Bobel mentions the recent momentum that movements to de-tax and de-tox menstrual hygiene products have gained in several countries worldwide. Menstrual hygiene products such as pads are tampons are considered "luxury-items" in tax regulation in several

countries worldwide, e.g. the UK, Canada, France and Malaysia, causing a higher tax rate than on other products (bloodydisgrace.org). Since 2015, petitions to end the luxury tax have caused policy changes in both the US and EU (Merelli, 2016; Court, 2016). Furthermore, movements to de-tox menstrual hygiene products are challenging the fact that (at least in the US) FemCare industry product manufacturers are not required to disclose the contents of their products as they are considered medical devices, meaning that menstrual hygiene products can contain chemicals without the knowledge of the consumer. The increasing awareness of these campaigns serves as yet another indicator of menstruation having become a bigger mainstream feminist issue in recent years.

A last event that Bobel mentions in her blog post, that I will mention here, is the increased focus on the specific needs of menstruators in poverty, in jails or who are homeless (Bobel, 2015). People in these conditions often have limited access to menstrual hygiene products, causing extra strain on an already precarious existence. Furthermore, I would add that discourse within the development industry on the influence of menstruation on young girls' and women's lives in the global south has also been on the rise in recent years, with NGO's and for profit menstrual hygiene promoters focused on this specific issue emerging.

These recent events and emerging discourses have created, according to Bobel and others (reference), a kind of rise of a menstrual momentum within different kinds of feminist discourses. Finally, however, Bobel warns that, although menstruation seems to have gained more mainstream visibility and momentum in 2015, not everyone is invited to sit at the table. "We need to be mindful of who is authorized to dance at the new party" she notes (Bobel, 2015), arguing that the current menstrual momentum tends to forget that, although menstruation is somewhat of a stigmatized experience, "the *entire* black body, trans body,

disabled body, and fat body, for example" (ibid.) are abject bodies constantly subject to violence and regulation for their mere existence. Bobel quotes Fanta Sylla of the blog "Crazy, Cranky, Cool" (Fanta Sylla, 2016) who writes: "So you can put period blood war paint on your face, and yes, in your context, it will probably be subversive and revolutionary. For the rest of us just going outside, walking in the streets, exposing our vulnerable, repulsive bodies is subversive and radical." (ibid.)

Bobel's book, *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010) is an ethonographic research on (mainly) US-based menstrual activism since the early 2000's. Others scholars that have done work in recent years on the gestures of menstrual activism include Amercian scholar Elizabeth Kissling, whose book *Capitalizing on the Curse* (2006) features some projects that try to "counter the menstrual conversation" (ibid.: 103) and Swedish scholar Josefin Persdotter who, in her MA thesis "Countering the Menstrual Mainstream: A Study of the European Menstrual Countermovement" from the University of Gothenburg (Persdotter, 2013) creates a cartography of some Europe-based menstrual activist projects.

Bobel's analysis in *New Blood* divides menstrual activism into two "wings"; the radical menstrual activists and the feminist-spiritualist menstrual activists. This categorization builds on the idea and characteristics of the second and third waves of feminism. She argues that the complex but scholarly overlooked menstrual activism movement is informed by values of third wave feminist politics but with roots in the second wave, making menstrual activism an excellent site for studying debates and contradictions within feminist and women's movements (ibid.: 3-8). What Bobel names radical menstrual activists is a range of people and collectives dedicated to counter the commercial industry dominating the production and sales of menstrual

hygiene products while simultaneously dedicated to, in the process, obscuring dichotomous gender categories that inherently link the experience of inhabiting a menstruating body to the experience of being female. The radical menstrual activists are dedicated to environmentalism, anti-essentialism, and to taking control of the body, "a body alienated from the self, a body co-opted by corporate interests, a body disciplined by consumer culture" (ibid.: 106). The focus of Bobel's feminist-spiritualist menstrual activists however differs, although there are overlaps between the two "wings" (ibid.: 98). The feminist-spiritualist menstrual activists in contrast regard menstruation as a sacred, spiritual and essential experience of *women's* lives, focusing on tactics of body-literacy, self-awareness and spiritualist Red Tent ceremonies (ibid.: 75-83). Where both wings are dedicated to looking for alternative views on and handling of menstruation outside of the dominant discourse and culture, what seems to separate them the most is the different views on inherent gender or gender essentialism. However, in Bobel's analysis both the radical menstrual activists and feminist-spiritual menstrual activists fit her category of menstrual activism with the differences between them illustrating a general diversity and some paradoxes inherent within the feminist movement as a whole. Many of the menstrual activists that Bobel researches are connected to college campuses in the US, especially the DIY kind of activists, and a final chapter in the book is dedicated to discussing the racial diversity (or lack thereof) in Bobel's research. The activisms that her book identifies is predominantly white and middle class. Bobel herself recognizes this as an indicator that the menstrual activism movement fails to incorporate a diversity of experiences and needs when it comes to menstruation and thereby marginalizing for example women of colour (ibid.: 138).

Elizabeth Kissling argues (2006), similar to Bobel's radical menstrual activists, that the Femcare industry plays a large part in creating a culture where menstruation is taboo, and she

identifies the existing menstrual culture as “a society in which women are sold pills to suppress their cycles and menstrual products are designed not only to conceal all evidence of menstruation but to be themselves concealed” (ibid.: 122). On the gestures of menstrual activism, which she calls the “menstrual counterculture” (ibid.: 103), she discusses some initiatives interested in creating a different discourse on the phenomena of menstruation, e.g. people promoting alternative sanitary products and a couple of “virtual museums of menstruation” (ibid.: 103). Her discussion of the menstrual counterculture, primarily in the US, also includes policy change initiatives directed at tampon regulation because of chemicals in products, environmental concerns and menstrual stigma promoted by companies to market their products. For example, she compares the discourses of commercial menstrual sanitary products and alternative, ecologically sound products, observing that in the latter "menstruation is understood to be a fact of life that one must accept, rather than hide or control" (ibid.: 97). What the different initiatives that she discusses have in common is a wish to challenge the dominant discourse on menstruation that posits menstruation as something shameful and to be hidden away, a discourse of which the FemCare industry is a huge enforcer. Some alternative initiatives discussed, however, like “Vinnie’s Tampon Cases” (ibid.: 114-118) are more focused on creating an alternative discourse for niche marketing purposes rather than an engagement with a more enjoyable, less stigmatized experience of being a menstruator. Kissling’s book mainly serves as a critique of an industry promoting menstrual sanitary products by relying on and reinforcing stereotypes of menstrual stigma and shame.

The aim of Josefin Persdotter’s thesis is to identify and characterize what she calls the Menstrual Counter Movement (MCM) in Europe, broadening the scope of how menstrual activism is defined in reference to Bobel and Kissling’s work. Persdotter criticises Bobel’s

categorization of the two "wings" of the menstrual counter movement as an oversimplification, and geographically and linguistically narrow (ibid.: 11). Herself a menstrual activist and artist, Persdotter approaches European menstrual activism systematically, identifying 78 different online representations of European MCM work of which she interviewed 14 for her project. I find Persdotter's gesture of broadening the cartography of the category of menstrual activism to include European projects a valuable analysis.

However, what all three menstrual activist scholars are lacking in my view is an in-depth feminist theoretical analysis of the work of the activists, or what the specificity of these different political projects entail, in terms of a theoretical feminist perspective. Furthermore, the category of activism is very loosely defined (if at all). I find that doing activism and creating a (positive) change are too easily interchanged in the scholarship on menstrual activism, creating a lack of critical analysis of the work of contemporary menstrual activists, regardless of how we wish to name or categorise the "movement".

The above summary of the category of menstrual activism, including popular media events and scholarly engagements, was intended to introduce the reader to this diverse category. As is evident from Bobel's analyses, the feminist movements as well as menstrual activist movements are extremely diverse and in some cases directly contradictory, e.g. the different approaches to gender essentialism in the radical menstrual activists and feminist-spiritualist menstrual activists. The movement she describes in *New Blood* is diverse, although her research, as mentioned, includes predominantly educated and white menstrual activists. The work of whom is even in some ways exclusionary.

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, I approach the experience of menstruation as an ambiguous event and topic of feminist political engagement, to which different groups have different ways of responding. I have chosen to focus in this above review on examples of events and projects that have been acclaimed, also in my personal experience, by many mainstream media outlets. Several of these projects, especially Kaur's photo and Gandhi's marathon "free bleeding" seem to have gained attention not only for sparking a conversation about the governing of menstruating bodies but also as indicators of an emerging feminist awareness, thereby implying a kind of feminist progress. I find that all of the above mentioned examples touch upon very relevant and real, although different, manifestations of experiences of the violent social governance of menstruating bodies. However, I remain sceptical towards mainstream media's appropriation of the feminist or menstrual movements. These examples mentioned above, that have gained much mainstream attention are not just indicators of an emerging feminist or menstrual movement but they are also shaping the discussion on this topic. As mentioned, the scholarship on menstrual activism has been focused mainly on the experience of certain groups (white, educated, North American or Northern European). Even though these examples that I have listed are diverse, there are still groups and experiences that are invisible to this supposedly emerging feminist menstrual movement, just as Bobel herself also recognizes and warns against.

1.2 Abject Art and Bloody Feminist Performances

In the following I give a brief introduction to the notion of abject art as well as some examples of feminist performance art, specifically works focused on menstruation. I consider some of the use of menstruation as a theme or material in art practices as an expression of menstrual activism.

In 1993, The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York showed an exhibition titled "Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art" (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008). This exhibition became one of the events that established 'abject art' as a category of artistic expression, referring in the example of the Whitney museum exhibition to art work that would invoke "involuntary physical reactions in the spectator by means of excess and desublimation" (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008: 66). The exhibition at the Whitney museum did not only feature then current works (ibid.). Although the notion of abject art started being used in the 1990's, works preceding this time period were and are also considered under this rubric. 'Abject art' thus has been considered since the 90's as a specific mode of artistic expression since, where focus is especially on the body, on the feminine, and on these as excess (Ross, 1997). Much menstrual art then, or art that uses menstrual blood or the menstruating body as topic or tool, can be considered under this rubric. Furthermore, abject art is often considered closely related to expressions of feminist art, as these tend to often focus especially on the body and on the feminine. In the following, I will present some of the most notorious examples of feminist art, especially performance art and menstrual art to give a background to the performances I will be analysing in-depth later on in the thesis.

Regarding feminist art coming from the Anglophone part of the world, especially focusing on performance and menstruation related projects, two American artists from the

1970's predominantly stand out; Carolee Schneemann and Judy Chicago. Schneemann's by now classic performance, "Interior Scroll" where a naked Schneemann drew a paper scroll from her vagina and read from it (Schneemann, 2016). Schneemann's performance which was performed in 1975 in East Hampton, NY and at the Telluride Film Festival in Colorado is in many ways considered a milestone in feminist art as well as performance art. With the performance, Schneemann sought to put focus on the vagina as well as the power of knowledge and who can claim it with the scroll (ibid.).

Chicago's two pieces, *Red Flag* (1971) and *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972) (see Figures 4 and 5) both have the menstruating body as a topic of feminist inquiry. *Red Flag* is a photograph of Chicago pulling a bloody tampon from her vagina, something that many people "in a stunning display of menstrual denial" (Bobel, 2010: 47) mistook for a bloody penis, exemplifying according to the artist "the damage done to our perceptual powers by the absence of female reality" (Chicago as cited by Bobel, 2010: 47).

Figure 4: Chicago, Judy (1971) Red Flag, lithography.

Figure 5: Chicago, Judy (1972) T*he Menstruation Bathroom*, Installation.

The Menstruation Bathroom, however, is an installation that was included in the *Womanhouse* project, a collective project where Chicago along with colleagues and students installed several mixed-media works into an abandoned house, (commenting ironically on women's domestic role) (Heller, 1987: 198) Chicago's bathroom installation included trash bins overflowing with used menstrual products and stained underwear hanging on a laundry line. The bathroom in Chicago's piece has been portrayed as a place where "abjected and rejected female bodies are confined to 'deal' with 'dirty' processes." (Green-Cole, 2015).

New Zealand art historian Ruth Green-Cole has written about the significance of menstrual blood in art, noting that "artworks that deal with menstruation in many different ways are important because they work against negative stereotypes and actively re-value gendered blood; showing it in a positive, defiant or ambiguous light" (Green-Cole, 2015). She notes that while there is a tension between different approaches to menstrual art, for example because of different approaches to the significance of gender or biological essentialism in these

pieces, that is still of great siginificance for feminist politics because “there is no one right or correct way to understand what menstruation, menstrual blood and taboo mean” (ibid.).

Figure 6: Jenkins, Casey (2013) *Casting off my womb*, still photograph from performance.

Green-Cole’s analysis of menstrual art is again an attest to the ambiguity of menstruation as a political phenomenon. Not all women menstruate, not only women menstruate and there is no one experience of inhabiting the menstruating body. Another different but more recent example of performance art with material menstrual blood was Australian Casey Jenkins’ “Casting Off My Womb” (see Figure 6), performed in the gallery DVAA in Darwin, Australia in 2013 (Jenkins, 2013; Winter, 2013). Every day during the 28-day performance, Jenkins would sit in the gallery, knitting with yarn coming from inside of her vagina. Every day, she would insert a new wad of yarn inside her and knit continuously from it creating one long scarf, and of course some of those days she was menstruating which affected the appearance of the yarn. Jenkins’ performance was “about assessing and being

intimate with [her] own body" (Jenkins, 2013) rather than focusing specifically on the menstruation as material or social signifier. However, Jenkins' performance seemed to gain much attention for its novelty use of the vagina as a tool in the crafting process.

Finally, I will mention the Spanish performance collective Sangre Menstrual who, in 2014 took to the streets of Madrid dressed in white, with red stains that resembled menstrual blood on their crotch. Their explicit aim was to fight the menstrual taboo by provoking which representations (none, almost) of menstruation and the menstruating body are allowed in public (Ruddick-Sunstein, 2014).

These examples are just some of the more visible projects that have used menstruation as a topic in feminist performance art. Again, their approaches and aims differ as of course their geographical and cultural contexts differ, as well as perhaps their attitudes towards menstruation, inhabiting a menstruating body and doing performance art. This brief introduction and overview has been meant to set the stage for and somewhat situate the following analysis of two specific examples of feminist performance using material menstrual blood in this thesis. Especially Schneemann and Chicago are considered pioneers of feminist performance art. Therefore, I have included them here to provide an historical background of feminist performance art in my cultural context. The example of Jenkins' performance introduces somewhat of a different approach to performance, although it resembles Schneemann's "Interior Scroll" in its execution with drawing something from the vagina. Her performance does not focus specifically on the experience of menstruation but treats it as part of the process of working with her vagina as an instrument. Finally, I have included Sangre Menstrual as an example of feminist performance with menstrual blood as an explicit political intervention. Their performance focuses on claiming the right to inhabit a menstruating body

in public without being governed or concealed, as also, in my interpretation, an intervention into a general oppressed experience of identifying as female.

1.3 Research Questions & Thesis Design

In this thesis I analyse two separate performances that both use material menstrual blood as a tool and focus for some kind of a feminist political exploration. The two performances are Miriam Wistreich's project moistsomoist.org, a research blog dedicated to locating the 'agency' of material menstrual blood, and Bjørk Grue Lidin's Fuck Consent performance, performed in Berlin in May of 2015 as part of the opening of a feminist menstrual art exhibition. Both artists are originally from Denmark and both were interviewed in an article in the Danish national newspaper "Information" in September of 2014 on the emerging menstrual momentum in Scandinavian feminist politics (Nygaard, 2014). In the article, the journalist asks why menstrual blood is still taboo, considering that bodily fluids have already been used for decades by artists and activists, in different attempts to provoke and transgress boundaries of acceptability. The newspaper article references both Miriam and Bjørk as connected to the emerging Danish menstrual momentum, although neither would neccessarily self-identify under this rubric (interviews). However, both projects use material menstrual blood and this is why I have chosen these two projects as the topic of my analysis. In choosing these two projects, it was also important that both person's behind them are relatively unknown but by focusing on them I gesture that the work is just as valid of an example of menstrual art or menstrual activism.

The research questions that guide the analysis of this thesis are the following: *How is contemporary art/activism, as exemplified in the case studies of this thesis responding to representations of the menstruating body as abject and as shameful? How are contemporary feminists in Northern Europe subverting menstrual shame, using material blood? What role does the materiality of menstrual blood play in each performance, in reference to notion of the*

abject and in invoking affective reactions of shame and disgust? What are the implications of using material menstrual blood in terms of feminist politics in the two performances?

To answer these questions, I analyse the two projects through a (queer) performance critique, based on a mixed-media analysis including interviews, participant observations, text and discourse analysis. The theoretical foundation of my interrogation of the projects are feminist readings of the non-contained body and the abject, and feminist and queer readings of affect theory. The performances are read as collections of moments where the use of menstrual blood engages both performer and audience in a collaborative re-iteration of the meanings associated with menstrual blood and the menstruating body from the lens of the abject and affect.

Following this introductory chapter, I present the theoretical foundation of the thesis as well as a discussion of the methodological approach and research methods employed, in chapter 2. The in-depth theoretical discussion of theoretical concepts of performativity, the abject and feminist and queer affect theory serves to construct a structure of the theoretical lens from which I will later analyse the two performances in chapters 3 and 4. On the methodology of the thesis, I reflect on some of the implications of employing a feminist and queer lens to analyse performance as well as discuss the process of collecting and analysing material for the thesis.

In chapter 3, I focus on Miriam Wistreich's online project moistsomoist.org, and in what way abjection plays a role in her explorations of the agency of menstrual blood. The performance piece "Fuck consent" performed by Bjork Grue Lidin in Berlin of May 2015 is analysed in chapter 4, where I posit that Bjork's critique of the notion of consent and her

invocation of disgust in the audience serves as a terrorist intervention into liberal feminist politics. In chapter 5, I present my conclusions.

1.4 Contributions

With this thesis I want to contribute an analysis of the way that some people respond to society's governance of menstruating bodies. The cartographies made by Kissling, Bobel and Persdotter provide insightful knowledge on the aims, contexts and relevance of menstrual activism. By focusing on two specific examples, however, I wish to contribute with a more in-depth and theoretical analysis of how menstrual blood and menstruation come to represent a somewhat ambiguous politics in both examples. I posit that a normative politics preoccupied with increasing visibility or breaking taboos is limited in the way it implies a certain kind of homogenous subject and recreates structures of exclusion and inclusion. With this, I also seek to contribute to a debate on body politics and visibility, furthering the connection between politics of menstruation and politics of the body. Part of the aim of this thesis is to contribute to the limited scholarship on menstrual activism. By raising critical questions on the gestures of abject art using menstrual blood, the aim is to problematize further the workings of menstrual politics.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Within the genealogy of feminist theory lies a vast amount of contradictions and debates. For feminist theory seeking to address the specificity of oppressions of bodily functions or relations to the body, on the one hand representation of the body is considered part of a masculine logic while on the other hand the body functions conceptually as a site of feminine expression in contrast to this masculine logic (Bray and Colebrook, 1998). The gestures of feminist embodiment scholarship in general focuses on re-centering the "lived bodily experience within feminist theory" (Tyler, 2009: 78). Feminist embodiment stems not only from an acknowledgment of the body being traditionally linked with the feminine in Western though but also from an understanding that "the body is a social text marked by a society's regulatory systems" (Creed, 1995: 127). With the body considered a specific site of gendered governance, the notion of body politics refers to various gestures of resisting these violent and oppressive regulatory mechanisms.

A central debate within much feminist scholarship is the struggle to mediate between theories of biological or gender essentialism and social constructivism. Biological or gender essentialism refers to the idea that certain values are inherent to femininity and masculinity. Furthermore, in a patriarchal structure, those values associated with masculinity or the male position are generally deemed of more worth than feminine values. Therefore, feminist theory has been interested in challenging this value hierarchy by engaging with and promoting topics associated with the feminine. However, the problem with this essentialist way of thinking is homogenizing the experience of identifying as "woman" and over-simplifying in a binary position the complex structures of how gender works. Social constructionism in contrast,

renders gender not as inherent to biological factors but as categories that are historically and culturally specific. Constructionism renders gender separate from biological sex, and renders it socioculturally changing and changeable (Lykke, 107). Social constructionism has contributed to a conceptualization of gender as a social and cultural category, independent from biological factors, widening the scope of the discussion. One of the main critiques of social constructionism however, is that it leaves the existence and experience of physical materiality undertheorized (ibid.: 107). A range of feminist scholarship in the past decades has addressed this lack of engagement with corpomaterialities within feminist discourse, e.g. feminist new materialisms.

Menstruation as a feminist topic then, is of specific interest not only because of its inherent connection to the feminine but also because of the way it intersects with notions on the lived experience of bodily matter. "Menstruation is both a biological event and a cultural event; the biology cannot be separated from the culture, and neither is a predetermined category with consistent impact on women's [people's] lives" (Kissling, 2006: 2). This writes feminist scholar Elizabeth Kissling, although I would oppose to positioning biology and culture in a dichotomous relationship. The topic of menstruation thus can be found in an interesting contradictory position in regards to feminist approaches to the world as it can be explored both as a signifier of essential feminine experience and as a socially constructed reality which shapes the experience of gender (and sex).

In this thesis, I have chosen to analyse the use of material menstrual blood in feminist performances from the perspective of scholarship connected to Bulgarian psychoanalyst and feminist scholar Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, and feminist and queer interventions into affect theory. I have chosen these bodies of scholarship in part because of their simultaneous

relation to corporealities. The effect of the abject is described by Kristeva in very physical terms, as invoking physical reactions. Affects, furthermore, are experienced partly as physical reactions to external stimulation.

Thus, a specifically significant point of interest regarding the topic of menstruation is the material fluidity of menstrual blood. As a fluid, menstrual blood has the ability to "seep through the cracks to make binaries unatenable, and render the reiteration of dichotomous norms nonsensical" (MacDonald, 2007: 353). In this context, menstrual blood takes on an ability to deconstruct that goes beyond symbolic representations and into its materiality. What this renders, is an added dimension of conceptual potential. In this thesis I consider the material abilities of menstrual blood in regard to both the actual material blood and its affective invocations.

In the following, I present a discussion of the theoretical foundation of this thesis as well as the methodological approach and methods employed in analysing the empirical material. This chapter is divided into three main parts; discussion of scholarship related to the abject and female corporeality, a discussion of affects shame and disgust in relation to queer and feminist politics, and a discussion of my research methodology. Although the theoretical and methodological sections in this design are presented as somewhat separate, they however continuously overlap and inform each other.

2.1 Female Corporeality: Abject Bodies that Bleed

2.1.1 Julia Kristeva's Abject

Kristeva's abject is a concept founded in psychoanalytic theory. It informs for Kristeva part of what is understood as the Symbolic, one of the three Lacanian orders. The abject is Kristeva's feminist intervention into Lacanian psychoanalysis, focusing in extent on the feminine and the maternal. Kristeva's abject is neither object nor subject but rather a *process,* something she refers to as "that impetus, that spasm, that leap" (ibid.: 1). The abject avoids representation and definition and thus it cannot be defined what the abject *is*. Kristeva explains:

> (…) what is *abject,* on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master. (Kristeva, 1982: 2)

Kristeva writes about the abject as challenging both positions of subject and of object (ibid.: 1), while imposing a moment where the boundaries between the two are blurred and "meaning collapses", as written above. As examples of the experienced moment of the abject, Kristeva mentions the physical reaction to repulsive food and the encounter with the corpse. The physicality of the abject is important as Kristeva integrates material physical experience to the discussion of representation and meaning that the abject entails. Kristeva describes a subject's relationship to repulsive food stuffs and the corpse as physically embodied reactions. On repulsing food stuffs, she mentions the skin that forms on milk as an example of the abject embodied:

> When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitful as a nail pairing – I experience a gagging sensation

> and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. (Kristeva, 1982: 2-3)

The encounter with the corpse, another example of abjection, is described by Kristeva as "death infecting life" (ibid., 4). It is not because the corpse is dirty as effect of its death that it provokes abjection but because it "disturbs identity" (ibid.). The corpse, representing the immanent fate of death in every subject breaks down a border imagined between the life and death of the subject. The prevalence of death implies a process of "becoming an other" (ibid., 3) where again boundaries of subject and object are obscured.

Kristeva's abject has been embraced as an analytical category in some feminist theory as a concept that challenges borders and categories (Tyler, 2009). One of these feminist authors is Barbara Creed who analyses the appearance of the monstrous feminine in the horror genre using the abject as an analytical catalyst (Creed, 1995). Kristeva's abject is caused in part by "the collapse of boundaries between inside and outside" (ibid.: 136) which Creed explains as one of the characteristics of the monstrous body that horrifies in the horror genre. Creed focuses on the monstrous feminine as the female monster, a depiction that invokes different fears and insecurities in the always imagined male spectator than the male monster would (Creed, 1993: 3-7). The body, Creed argues "has functioned as the debased "other" within a series of binary oppositions" (Creed, 1995: 127) within Western Thought, with the body also always connected to the feminine. However, Creed's analysis of the body-monstrous represented in horror reads the body there as a representation of societies fears and fantasies (ibid.: 129). In this way, Creed's analysis centres the body and redeems it of the role of "other", as an expression of feminist embodiment scholarship. Creed argues that horror plays more on the fear of one's own body than the fear of death itself (ibid.: 128), just as Kristeva's abjection provoked by the

corpse is a fear of one's own impending death. Centring the body as site of analysis, Creed's analysis uses the abject to show how the feminine represents a fearful outside in patriarchal society (ibid.: 157).

While the abject provokes boundaries to collapse, this mechanism also highlights and re-inscribes the same boundaries. Imogen Tyler criticizes feminist theory that uncritically looks to the notion of the abject as a kind of theoretical solution to "challenge and/or displace the disciplinary norms that frame dominant representations of gender" (Tyler, 2009: 82). What she argues is that Kristeva's abject "disrupts the social world *in order* to secure social norms" (ibid.: 84). While working on the borders of symbolic categories, the transgression and collapse of borders that Kristeva's abject entails also serves to stabilize categories by exploring what lies within and what lies without. Furthermore, Tyler mentions as an example that Kristeva posits the maternal as abject when explaining her theory, thereby reproducing a violent exclusionary practice of maternal abjection, instead of challenging the cultural and historical categorization of the maternal as abject (ibid.: 91).

2.1.2 Pollution, Bodily fluids

In her influential anthropological work *Purity and Danger* (1966) Mary Douglas explores the cultural and symbolic derivation of pollution and taboo. Dirt, she argues, is never absolute but rather dependent on the interpretations of cultural groups. However, she notes that "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience" (ibid.: 2), making practices of pollution and taboo elements of constructing social order or social values. Douglas notes how menstruation and menstrual blood is approached differently in different historical and cultural

contexts. Mary Douglas' work has been in highly influential and can often be found mentioned as a classic example of a cultural relativist approach to what dirt *is*. Her famous quote, that dirt is "matter out of place" (ibid.: 36) connects concepts of dirt, cleanliness, and subsequently pollution and taboo with systems of social order. Stating that dirt is matter out of place, she is stating that there is a social order that governs what matter is deemed acceptable according to cultural and historical circumstances.

Elizabeth Grosz reads both Kristeva and Douglas in the search for finding the significance of bodily fluids for sexual categorization of bodies. Inspired by Kristeva (and Douglas), she argues that fluids hold a specific value as they seep through bodies and borders, illustrating the relationship to the outside. Body fluids remind us that the body is not isolated or singular but rather exists within a border to the outside (Grosz, 1994: 193-194).

Grosz argues that bodily fluids do not all hold the same values and indeed there is a hierarchy of body fluids. She argues that scientific models of fluids (hydraulic models) usually represent the male bodily fluid as singular, as "the only fluid exchanged" (ibid.: 195), moving between bodies to a resting point which is the female body. This model of bodily fluids is another mechanism of constructing the masculine as universal. The lack of literature on male bodily fluids, she argues, in opposition to growing amounts of literature on e.g. menstruation demonstrates that male bodily fluids are thought of somehow as neutral in contrast to the female bodily fluids (ibid.: 199).

Furthermore, Grosz criticises Kristeva for characterizing menstrual blood as polluting but not semen. Where Kristeva distinguishes between non-polluting and polluting bodily fluids, she posits menstrual blood and excrement as polluting but semen as non-polluting, along

with tears. Polluting bodily fluids "poses a threat to the center – to life, to the proper, the clean – not from within but from its outermost margin" (ibid.: 207). However, Grosz questions why menstrual blood fits into this category for Kristeva, but semen not, causing her also to question whether it is because semen while not menstrual blood, is less threatening to men (only)? Grosz like Imogen Tyler is somewhat hesitant to embrace Kristeva's work as feminist, pointing out the foundation of a gendered bias upon which her theory lies.

Within the same line of thinking, Shauna MacDonald reads a potential in the fluidity of menstrual blood, advocating for more fluid theoretical scholarship on the topic (Macdonald, 2007). She conceptualizes the menstrual leak as performance, understood as a mode of transforming rather than mimicking (ibid.: 342). Patriarchal society, she argues, drawing on Mary Douglas among others, is founded in an understanding of the self-contained, masculine body as ideal, positioning a leaky female body as irrational, Other and impure. The control of menstrual blood, which is done both physically and linguistically with e.g. sanitary products designed to conceal the fact of the menstruating body and menstrual taboos silencing verbal expressions of menstruation, works to keep in place patriarchal structures. Academia, MacDonald furthermore argues, is affected by the menstrual taboo with female as well as male scholars resisting to engage with the topic (ibid.: 347). However, MacDonald reads a positive potential in scholarly engagement with the topic of menstruation:

> Menstrual leaks in particular threaten women's performance of the masculine ideal. They announce to the world that women are not men, cannot be men, and so cannot exist in the world as men do. (…) They mark in blood that we are somehow different, at which point our dualistic masculine ideology reminds us that because we are different, we are also less than. Yet the leak also potentially exposes the inconsistency of such dischotomous thinking, the arbitrariness of our dependency on binary opposition and neat categorization, and leads to a critique of the modern, masculine/rational paradigm (MacDonald, 2007: 348-349).

Reading this positive performative potential in menstrual blood, MacDonald imagines feminist scholarship that not only dares to mention and embrace the material menstruation and menstrual leaks but by doing so disrupts the masculine binary order of contemporary Western society. The kind of scholarship that MacDonald is advocating entails a lack of control, as the leak cannot by definition be controlled. However, she imagines that this lack of control might perhaps also entail a better foundation for relating to others (ibid.: 354-355).

2.1.3 Performativity and abject bodies

Judith Butler uses the abject as a language to explain the relationship between outside and inside of (material) sexed bodies in the heterosexual matrix. In the introduction to "Bodies that Matter", Butler rhetorically asks how the performativity of gender is connected to the materiality of the body (Butler, 1993: xi). The theory of gender as performativity renders gender as performance, a reiteration of norms that in effect creates the idea of an original or essence (ibid.: xii). This reiteration of norms requires an inside and an outside, that which is included and that which is excluded. Butler then renders that every iteration "requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings" that "form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject" (ibid.: xiii). The abject bodies co-constitute the intelligibility of what falls inside the heterosexual matrix and thus she asks about the political potential of the abject. Oppression, she argues in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", "works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects" (Butler, 2004: 126). Thus, she contexts to embracing identity categories as *the* mode of resistance to oppressive structures, as they serve to reinstate regulatory regimes (ibid.). Instead, she articulates a potential for

resistance in the realm of the unintelligible or abject, as "a rallying point for resistance" (ibid.: 127). Butler proposes "collective disidentifications" (Butler, 1993: xiv) as a potential for disruption and resistance stemming from those bodies deemed unintelligible to regulatory structures. What this might mean in terms of feminist politics of menstruation is an invitation to keep exploring that which remains outside of normative structures, in reference to menstrual blood and menstruating bodies. Furthermore, menstrual politics that relies only providing alternative representations of menstruating bodies, to the dominant discourse, in turn end up reproducing the same structures of governance.

The Abject provides an analytical tool for conceptualizing the experiences and bodies that lie outside of compartmentalizing categories re-iterated through discourse. Kristeva's abject, the subsequent feminist theorization of the potentiality of menstrual blood and Butler's presentation of abject bodies all provide examples of thinking of menstrual blood as pushing outside of categories or intelligibility and the political potential herein. In relation to my research, and the two performances analysed in this thesis, these examples become important when asking what material menstrual blood can do, and does in the performances, in relation to the notion of the abject.

2.2. Affect theory and the politics of shame and disgust

In the following section, I explore the significance shame and disgust for feminist theory on embodiment and politics of menstruation. I discuss some of the important theories of affect theory, specifically those that deal with the experience of shame. Feminism is preoccupied with shame for a number of reasons, partly because women are socially and historically more often linked to emotion and that has generated a focus within feminist debate on emotions as silenced but also stigmatizing phenomena (Probyn, 2005: 81-82). However, I am interested in affects shame and disgust in relation to the two performances analysed in this thesis not only because menstruation is considered shameful but also because of the connection of affects to corporealities.

2.2.1 Introduction to Affects

Psychologist Silvan Tomkins considers as the basic sets of affects; "shame (…) interest, surprise, joy, anger, fear, distress, disgust, and (contempt ("dissmell") (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995: 5). He writes that while there is no consensus on the number or characteristic of "basic affects", his list serves as an attempt at a structured approach (Tomkins, 1995: 74). Affects, according to Tomkins, are the "primary motivational system in human beings" (34), therefore his affect theory presents a system that complicates the discussion of the extent of a person's free will.

Furthermore, affects can be distinguished from feelings and emotions, although not all scholars (e.g. Sara Ahmed) writing within affect theory practice this clear distinction. Cultural theorist Eric Shouse explains that while feeling is a personal sensation experienced by a person

according to their previous experiences, emotion is a sincere or insincere display of this feeling, and that affect is rather a non-personalized and non-conscious experience (Shouse, 2005). Affects are *prepersonal* according to Shouse, and are thus significant as they occur unrelated to the will and consciousness of a person (ibid., 2). Referencing affect theorist Brian Massumi, Shouse describes affects as *intensities* (ibid., 6), without which an individual would not be able to "feel" a feeling. The experience of intensity or affect (interchangeable according to Massumi) can not be regulated by consciousness. Furthermore, Shouse argues that affects are "transmittable in ways that feelings and emotions are not" (ibid.), which is what creates in them greater potential for social impact.

Furthermore, queer theory's "turn to affect" (Hemmings, 2005) if often connected with Eve Kosofski's Sedgwick's engagement with shame as a constitutive part of the experience of "queer" (Sedgwick, 2003). Along the same lines, shame has provided a potential conceptual framework for strands of queer theory interested in challenging the normative and often exclusionary mechanisms of "pride politics" (Halperin and Traub, 2009).

2.2.2 Affects as stabilizing norms

Transmittability, or in this case "stickiness" of affect is something that feminist affect theorist Sara Ahmed focuses on in part. When writing within affect theory, Sara Ahmed does not clearly distinguish between affect and emotion. In her book "The Cultural Politics of Emotion", Ahmed asks what emotions do, exploring "how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies" (Ahmed, 2004: 1). She is interested in the way nations are created as entities within borders, through a hierarchicized system of emotions. She

locates emotion not within objects but between bodies, moving and "sticking" to create difference and hierarchy. Importantly, Ahmed's theory of affects is not inherent to a body or an object. She gives an example of a child and a bear, asking "Why is the child afraid of the bear?" (Ahmed, 2004b: 7).

> We have an image of the bear as an animal *to be feared,* as an image that is shaped by cultural histories and memories. When we encounter the bear, we already have an impression of the risks of the encounter, as an impression that is felt on the surface of the skin. This knowledge is bodily, certainly: the child might not need time to think before she runs for it. But the 'immediacy' of the reaction is not itself a sign of a lack of mediation. It is not that the bear *is* fearsome, 'on its own', as it were. It is fearsome *to* someone or somebody. So fear is not in the child, let alone alone in the bear, but is a matter of how child and bear come into contact, unavailable in the present, which allow the bear to be apprehended as fearsome. The story does not, despite this, inevitably lead to the same ending. Another child, another bear, and we might even have another story. (Ahmed, 2004b: 7)

Following this, Ahmed proposes an understanding of affect as economy (2004a). She draws on Marx to describe affective economy as one of relationality. Subjects or objects do not *have* emotions but are effected by them (Ahmed, 2004a: 120), in a "rippling effect" which creates the sticky effect of emotions between subjects and objects. Ahmed's interest in affective economy lies again in analysing the way a nation's symbolic borders are built, perpetuated and increased through circulations of affect. The affect laden notion of the terrorist supports the creation of a dichotomy of us and them, and a nation border that needs to be protective, perpetuated by the fear inscribed in the terrorist subject.

The common theme in both Tomkins and Ahmed's affect theories is the focus on affect as something that creates and perpetuates norms. Tomkins explains how the affects contempt and shame strengthen the sense of community and thus creates basis for norms and hierarchy:

> Just as contempt strengthens the boundaries and barriers between individuals and groups and is the instruments par excellence for the preservation of hierarchical, caste, and class relationships, so is shared shame a prime instrument for strengthening the

> sense of mutuality and community whether it be between parent and child, friend and friend, or citizen and citizen. (Tomkins, 1995: 156)

So while shared community might hold political potential and be a site for support and allegiance, shared community is also catalyst of the social norms that constitute hierarchies and mechanisms of silencing. The affective economy is also a mechanism through which categories and borders are constituted. Ahmed uses as an example of what affects do, the notion of the terrorist and how this notion supports the categorical divide between what lies inside and outside of the nation. The terrorist, according to Ahmed is the ultimate agent of fear, is "those who seek to make others afraid (less mobile or less free to move) as well as those who seek to cause death and destruction." (Ahmed, 2004a: 128). However, the fear connected to the terrorist is not inherent to his being, as affects do not reside in subjects or objects in Ahmed's optic but rather the fear that the terrorist represents is invoked by the relationship between the nation and the terrorist. The fear of the terrorist supports the idea of nation as something that is confined and needs to be protected. The terrorist is ultimately a threat to national borders, to norms. Connected to the previous discussion in section 2.1, on the role of the abject in transgressing norms and boundaries, Ahmed argues that "the transgression of the border is required in order for it to be secured as a border in the first place" (Ahmed, 2004a: 132). In this way, one can argue that affects work in some way similar to the abject. With affects as well as the abject, we find mechanisms of transgressing boundaries of categories which in effect affirms the existence of these boundaries.

Furthermore, feminist scholar Clare Hemmings criticises the "affective turn" in critical theory, a scholarly tendency to turn to affect as a means to resolve some of the issues connected with the "linguistic turn", or the increased attention within social and cultural studies on how

language constructs realities (Hemmings, 2005). She specifically takes issue with the theory of Brian Massumi and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick celebrating affect as new, which she claims is built on a narrow reading of cultural theory. Hemmings' hesitancy towards affect theory's critique of critical theory's turn to poststructuralism warns that the affective turn is not autonomous or innocent and holds the risk of instating racial and sexual differences.

Hemmings' critique in some ways links back to Imogen Tyler's critique of feminist theorists' use of the abject as a mode of transgression. What both seem to be critiquing is an uncritical promotion of theoretical tools as solutions of feminist theoretical problems. Both point to ways in which these notions, the abject and affect in their own ways somehow also stabilize oppressive structures of categorization and exclusion.

After having presented a suggested reading of what affect theory entails, keeping in mind the cautioning of Clare Hemmings, I will continue on to discuss the specific theories on shame and disgust and how these have been read to influence theory on body politics.

2.2.3 Shame and Disgust

Of specific interest of this thesis in regard to affect theory, are affects shame and disgust. How these affects work and where their their theoretical and political potential lies. This is because the menstruating body and menstrual blood are often associated with shame and disgust. Menstrual activism in particular is preoccupied with challenging this association.

Feminist philosopher Elspeth Probyn (2005) uses affect as an analytic tool, exploring the potential of Tomkins' accounts of shame for feminist theory. Shame is positive, she argues

(ibid., xviii). Meaning that she does not regard shame in a dichotomous relationship to for example disgust or pride, but rather as an experience can move us, and posit transformations. On the significance of shame for feminist theory, she writes:

> Shame, it is argued, can entail self-evaluation and transformation. To consider shame is not to wallow in self-pity or in the resentment that accompanies guilt. It is to recognize that the reduction of interest that prompts shame is always incomplete. As such, shame promises a return of interest, joy, and connection. This is why shame matters to individuals. And it is why studies of shame are important. (Probyn, 2005: xiii)

This reading of shame posits an open-endedness, and renders shame as a site of potential rather than an experience to preferably be avoided. This exploration of shame is somewhat similar to Sedgwick's use of shame in relation to queer politics, which I will return to later on in this chapter. In connection to this, it becomes relevant to consider the political tactics employed in feminist body politics focused on un-shaming, or eliminating the experience of shame connected with inhabiting for example a marginalized body. In reference to the examples of menstrual activism presented in Chapter 1, some motivations to broaden the representations of menstruation in public stemmed from the experience that the menstruating body and menstrual blood is shameful and should be hidden away. However, a politics that seeks to reject shame by increasing visibility and representation might be missing out on the potential within shame for transformation that Probyn here gestures at. Furthermore, a representation of menstruating bodies and menstrual blood as removed of shame seems to indicate a rather limited scope of representations.

Probyn argues, furthermore, that shaming is a tactic both criticised and employed within feminist debate. Feminism is preoccupied with shame for a number of reasons, partly because women are socially and historically more often linked to emotion and that has generated a focus

within feminist debate on emotions as silenced but also stigmatizing phenomena (Probyn, 2005: 81-82). She criticises how the use of shame in feminist or queer politics can invoke exclusionary practices. This relates back the limited scope of representations, where there furthermore emerges a risk of then shaming those who would experience shame. Probyn asks: "How do you voice your own shame *and* a collective one without shaming again the objects of that shame?" (ibid., 101).

On the workings of shame, Tomkins (1995) writes that both sources and expressions are multiple. "One man's shame can always be another man's fulfilment, satiety or indifference" (ibid., 149) he writes, inevitably extending the possibilities for what we can imagine as shameful. However, the reason for shame is often connected with not receiving excitement or joy where we expected. Furthermore, shame is often experienced in response to an encounter with another. For example, if another individual with whom one identifies does not share an expected mutual excitement or joy, then this might also invoke shame (ibid., 154). Disgust, in contrast, involves an experience "in which there is least self-consciousness" (ibid., 134). Disgust is experienced as a reaction to responding with contempt to an object, and where the source or object of the experience holds the most attention as opposed to the self. Disgust is "a literal pulling away from the object" (ibid.), engaging the lips, nostrils, stomach and whatever body part confronted with the object.

Building from this, Probyn (2000) furthermore argues that disgust might be actively considered in corporeal politics. She discusses the political strategies of fat acceptance politics, questioning the scope of the kind of politics that advocate a sense of pride in the fat body, seeking to completely eliminate any trace of shame or disgust (ibid., 128-129). Distinguishing between shame and disgust, she argues through a reading of Tomkins' theory that disgust both

repels us from and pulls us towards that which we find disgusting, creating a kind of communal experience. The danger is however when the consensus on what is disgusting goes unchecked but which might also serve as a foundation for rethinking subversive politics? Probyn quotes Deleuze in "we do not know what a body can do!" (Deleuze quoted in Probyn, 2000: 128), arguing for a rethinking of corporeal politics that does not necessarily seek to be pleasant, or un-disgusting:

> To publicly eat disgust and feed shame may be to steep ourselves in the murk of our body's toxins, shameful desires and disgusting knowledges. If this doesn't sound salubrious, it may well be that the project of rethinking the politics and ethics of our bodies is an uncomfortable one. Yet how could we hope for it to be otherwise? (Probyn, 2000: 143)

Following this introduction to shame and disgust and the political potential in these affects, in the next section I will discuss shame in relation to some queer theory and queer politics in relation to the notion of pride.

2.2.4 Shame and Pride

When discussing the politics of shame, in relation to bodies and experience, what can be considered the opposite notion, "pride" is of much relevance. "Gay pride does not even make sense without some reference to the shame of being gay" (Halperin and Traub, 2009: 3) argue David Halperin and Valerie Traub in the introduction to an ontology on "Gay Shame", on the importance of the notion of shame in pride and identity politics. They argue in this introduction for a more complex approach to queer politics, different from the pride movement's tactic of "complete destigmatization of homosexuality" (ibid., 3).

The risk of shame, for one, should not be let to hinder people, deviant from the norm from expressing themselves. This would be to comply to silencing, oppressive mechanisms of oppressive regimes of power. Furthermore, there might be, like discussed in the previous section, a communal power found in the experience of shame. Shame is a normalizing mechanism, forcing hierarchies but might also hold a political potential in its collective potential.

A key figure in the discussion of shame within queer politics and the limits of the "pride" strategy is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who identifies shame as a core of the experience of queerness (2003: 63). Based on Tomkins' theory of affect and presentation of the functions of shame, Sedgwick reads the experience of queer as inherently linked to shame. She posits that we can think of shame as one of the identity markers or collective experience of those experiences categorized as queer. And thus, shame is not necessarily an experience we must fight against, she writes:

> (…) "healthy" or "unhealthy", shame can be seen as good because it preserves privacy and decency, bad because it colludes with self-repression or social repression. Clearly, neither of these valuations is what I'm getting at. I want to say that at least for certain ("queer") people, shame is simply the first, and remains a permanent, structuring fact of identity (…) (Sedgwick, 2003: 64)

Importantly, Sedgwick's definition of queer does not rely on a person's sexual or gender identity, as she argues that "there are lesbians and gay men who could never count as queer and other people who vibrate to the chord of queer without having much same-sex eroticism" (ibid.: 63). Rather, it remains arbitrary but is somehow linked to this experience of shame. Queerness however, for Sedgwick, seems to always originate in an experience of shame based on exclusion from normative structures. Since shame is the origin of the queer identity in this reading, politics of un-shaming or pride would be to deny a part of one's identity.

Instead, Sedgwick posits that some "powerfully productive and powerfully social metamorphic possibilities" (ibid.: 65) might be found in looking towards the experience of shame and then in some way embracing it.

One of the problems of affect theory is the seeming neglect of differences in experience. The taxonomic structure of Tomkins' theory of affect does not immediately provide a way of thinking of individuals as dynamic beings in different social and cultural settings. Judith Halberstam criticises the romanticizing gestures reclaiming gay shame, in opposition to pride (2005). They take specific issue with the lack of racial sensitivity in celebrations of shame, stating that "after all, the critics of homonormativity and pride are, like the homonorms themselves, white gay men" (ibid., 222). They shame/pride binary instated by some pride critics then again fails to account for the complex nuances of identity and experience. For example, Halberstam argues that "shame for women and shame for people of colour plays out in different ways and creates different modes of abjection" (ibid., 223).

A critique of subverting shame in body politics would need to be sensitive towards intersectionality and situated knowledges. Oppression through shaming mechanisms might be a very real experience and "shamelessness" a very acute, necessary tactic. However, it is the reliance on visibility and representation as the only means to an end of resisting shaming mechanisms that I still take issue with. While accepting Sedgwick's invitation to rethink shame as an identity-forming experience that cannot in that sense necessarily be rid of by claiming "pride" in being outside of the norm, I still remain sceptical towards essentializing shame as an inherent "queer" experience.

Similarly, shame is not an experience necessarily linked to the experience of menstruating. While we some people might find it useful to try to un-shame the experience of inhabiting a menstruating body as a means to making the experience more pleasant and less stigmatized, it would be a similar violence to posit the need for un-shaming on any menstruator. For one, because of difference in experience but also because of the collective potential that there might be to find in experiencing shame as a menstruator.

2.3 The Methodology

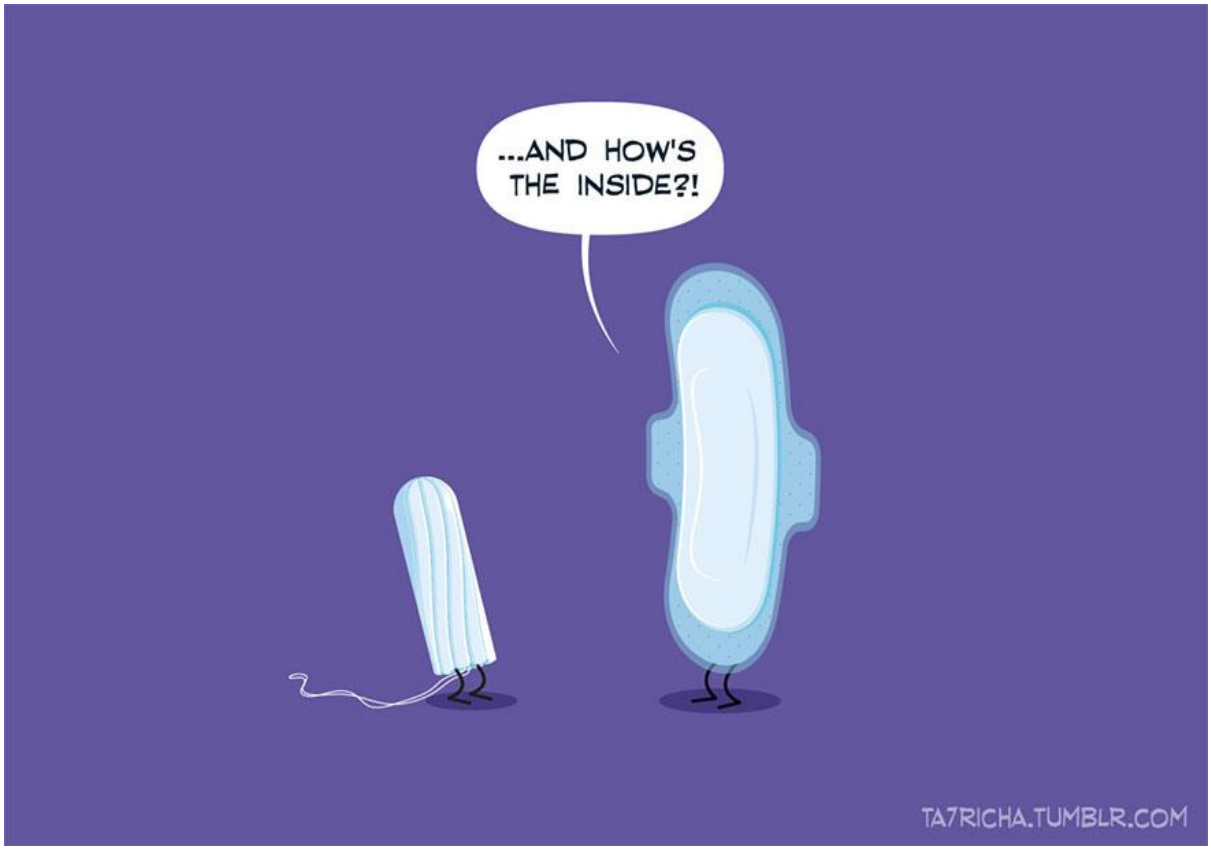

Figure 7: Salim Zerrouki, *Untitled*, cartoon.

"…and how's the inside?!" says the pad to the tampon, referring to how one has a different point of view than the other. Besides being entertaining, I find that this cartoon in some ways encapsulates the role of the researcher and what might be relevant to a discussion of research methodologies and perspective. The pad obviously does not have the same experience as the tampon, or the same perspective from which they experience the menstruating body. The comedy of the cartoon also lies in knowing that although the pad can ask about the inside, they can never fully understand the experience of the tampon's perspective. When reflecting on research methodology, as I do in the following section, I reflect

on the processes of asking questions and constructing perspectives. Although the pad and the tampon have different experiences and speak from different perspectives, this interaction portrayed by the cartoonist, where the pad asks the tampon to share their insights and perspective on the world, might be approached as a moment where meaning is co-created between the two in a manner of performance.

In the following, I discuss how I have approached the research process for the development of this thesis, and the research methods and methodologies which inform my analysis. I begin with a presentation of how the theoretical foundation of the thesis informs my methodology and writing and end with a presentation of the methods which I have employed in collecting and analysing the empirical materials.

2.3.1 Intertwining queer futures, abject scholarship and personal stories

The following is a discussion of how my research methodology, analytical methods and written presentation of the thesis is informed by feminist and queer theoretical scholarship, some of which I have already engaged with in the previous sections. Even though I have structured the theoretical framework and methodology as separate parts, they are deeply connected and constantly in dialogue with each other. Especially when using the notion of "queer", as a theoretical tool to disrupt normative structures of power and knowledge, it becomes important to also interrogate the way one, as a researcher, participates in reproducing certain structural hierarchies (Browne and Nash, 2010). Therefore, I begin this following section with introducing some queer theoretical gestures which highlight the ways in which this notion of 'queer' becomes integral approaching knowledge production and critical thinking. I then present the ways in which I have utilized these suggestions in my own work,

where I incorporate scholarship on auto-ethnography as a research method and Helene Cixous' notion of écriture feminine as a way of doing feminine writing. Furthermore, I also reflect on some of the ways that the theoretical notions of abject and affect influence parts of my research methodology.

"Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world", writes José Esteban Munoz in the introduction to *Cruising Utopia* (2009: 1), in which *hope* is analytically invoked "as both a critical affect and a methodology" (ibid.: 4). While rejecting radical negativity where disruption is a goal in itself, Munoz's hopeful queer methodology, or utopianism, views queerness as "a temporal arrangement" (ibid.: 16) where "the here and now is a prison house" (ibid.: 1) and possibilities can always be imagined in the horizon. Furthermore, Munoz's utopianism draws on Sedgwick's reparative reading approach to queer theory (ibid.: 12) and rejects negativity for the sake of negativity merely.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reparative reading is an intervention into the ways that we do theory in the social sciences and humanities (2003). Reparative reading does not necessarily mean repairing something that was previously broken. Rather, it is building a whole from several pieces. Sedgwick presents reparative reading as a response to, but not exclusionary of, what she calls paranoid reading (ibid.: 149-150). Not exclusionary to because the reparative reader is also always paranoid. However, it is an alternative. The way that we traditionally do critical theory is dominated by this paranoid reading, which is driven by "seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge" (ibid.: 130). Critical theory is always searching to eliminate the element of surprise, by revealing that which is hidden. An example of paranoid reading is feminist scholarship´s reading of psychoanalytic theory. There is prejudice that the theory and the

theorists are influenced by a gendered way of viewing the world. This suspicion makes feminist and queer theory paranoid, according to Sedgwick. Embracing the unavoidable element of surprise in life, the anxiety and dependency that surrounds us as individuals in a social setting has different potential than that which we gain from the hermeneutics of suspicion.

When employing a queer theoretical lens to academic research and writing, I intend not to critique for the sake of critique itself, nor to give normative solutions to "problems". Rather, I seek to problematize the here and now, for example some of the notions related to body politics, menstrual shame and feminist approaches to this. However, I try to avoid primarily looking for hidden truth, as a form of hermeneutics of suspicion. I attempt this by reading for potential in the abject and negative affect in both performances, notions which could be discarded as signs of failure. Instead, I aim to do like Sedgwick's reparative reader, who "undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks" (2003: 150).

The use of the theoretical notions of the abject and queer and feminist explorations of negative affect furthermore influence the research methodological approach. In reference to the gesture of focusing on abject in theoretical analysis, art historian Joseph Leo Koerner writes the following reflection:

> Academic protocol, of course, would be changed were the abject to be our object. During lectures, slides would be projected unfocused, or at a manic pace, or towards the audience, or in raging sunlight, or not at all. Talks would vary from *soto voce* filibusters to single, ear-splitting screams. And conferences would be held, unscheduled in elevators, to Muzak versions of Wagner's *Perseival,* or in hotel check-in lines when all the rooms in town are triple-booked, or in unattended shuttle buses filled with an overwhelming scent of artificial pine (Koerner, 1997: 5-6).

Koerner's comical and somewhat absurd rendition of how academic work would be different with the abject as object provides, in my opinion, a valuable example of the way

normative practices and structures are invisible unless we actively search for them. Why are conferences not held unscheduled and in elevators?

When working with affect theory, and the concepts of shame and disgust in particular, I have also been forced to reflect on how I experience these affects in my personal life and how they affect me. In an attempt to expose myself as researcher, in order to explore the boundaries of negative shame and the boundaries of researcher and researched, I have included in the thesis images and personal anecdotes.

As I have explained in the previous section, the theoretical foundation of this thesis is based on feminist scholarship focused on transgressing boundaries of categorizing. The threat, however, in conducting research for a thesis based on this kind of academic scholarship is that by conforming to norms of academic practice, the written thesis ends up perpetuating the same structures that it seeks to, at least in some ways, disrupt. Shauna MacDonald advocates for "research that flows, [and] scholarship that bleeds" in order to potentially "transgress the boundaries of modernity/patriarchy and to imagine new, connected ways of being." (MacDonald, 2007: 354). The challenge remains, however, how to perform this kind of leaky scholarship? Écriture feminine, the alternative feminine practice of writing proposed by Hélene Cixous as a resistance to the masculine economy, is inherently impossible to define while it remains a physical act. Within writing, she argues, lies the possibility to resist "the locus where repression of women has been perpetuated" (Cixous, 1976: 879). With écriture feminine, Cixous invokes the idea that to resist hegemonic systems of oppression, ways to do things *differently* must be found within any practice, especially in writing.

Some research methodologies actively and explicitly interrogate the role of the researcher as a part of the process of knowledge production. Auto-ethnography, for example, is a research methodology in which the boundaries between researcher and researched are actively and systematically blurred. Through actively engaging with personal diary-entries, biographical accounts or interviews with people with whom the researcher is in close relationship, their own engagement with the research topic also becomes subject to analysis (Philanterou and Allen, 2005). It can be argued that this research methodology in many ways transgresses categories and disrupts hierarchies of what is considered the proper obtainment of knowledge and thus, valid data. The benefits of applying auto-ethnography is that the researcher heightens their personal sensitivity towards the research subject, which can be especially beneficial when researching sensitive topics, or to avoid making unnecessary generalizations (Philanterou and Allen, 2005).

In spite of the arguments for the value of auto-ethnography as a methodological conduct, I find that endeavours to categorize attempts at écriture feminine or to perform leaky scholarship under this rubric, would be to undermine the strategies of resistance implied with *different* writing. Creating an academic category to fit or justify a kind of writing that seeks to disrupt structures would only recreate structures. With an awareness of the academic practice of auto-ethnography, as well as a sensitivity to doing writing, developed by Cixous' écriture feminine and the transgressive potentials of the body of theory engaged with in this thesis, I attempt to, where possible, present different writing. This different writing takes the form of personal anecdotes and memories, engaging in the analysis a reading of my personal affective responses and by complementing the text with images.

2.3.2 Performance critique as a mixed-media method of analysis

On the aims of performance studies, performance scholar Peggy Phelan writes that while at first the discipline would approach performance as "expression of human signification" (1998: 3), performance studies have, in the last couple of decades, moved towards viewing performance rather, as an extension of but not separate from, lived experience. On the complexities of the expression and form of performance, she writes: "Part of what performance knows is the impossibility of maintaining the distinction between temporal tenses, between an absolutely singular beginning and ending, between living and dying." (ibid.: 8). What performance is for performance studies, then, she writes, is this "between"; between temporal tenses, between beginning and end and life and death. The aim of analysing performance from this perspective entails locating these "betweens".

I approach both of the projects analysed in this thesis as performance. Bjørk Grue Lidin's performance, Fuck Consent, fits what can maybe be described as a traditional understanding of performance as it was performed within a given time frame to an audience in a given place. The project moistsomoist.org, however, by Miriam Wistreich, was performed mainly on a website, expanding the time and place towards possible infinity. I chose to approach this project also as performance in order to analyse the different elements such as the form, content and participant experience, in the same way as I do with Fuck Consent. Furthermore, I approach these performances not only as performed *by* a performer *to* an audience, but rather as moments of collaborative re-iteration of meaning. Therefore, I also engage a reading of my personal affective responses to the performances in the analysis.

In both cases, I engage with performance material, both written and visual, as well as interviews with the persons behind the performances. The research methods employed to approach the empirical material analysis consisted of elements from different disciplines and practices. As already mentioned, my research methodology is informed by a critical queer, feminist perspective, where the aim is to remain aware of the hierarchies and structures present and reinstated in my own practice of academic work. I have used the terms queer, auto-ethnography and ecriture feminine to explain this approach but what I want to emphasize is that while I take from all three notions, I do not subscribe to any one in particular. As previously mentioned, I find that to do this would be to re-inscribe another set of categories and hierarchies. Although I cannot ever avoid this process, I aim to be conscious of such moments where and when I can be.

Regarding the collection of empirical material, I have relied on a combination of participant observation and interviewing. In the process of participant observation, at least a feminist understanding of this, the researcher finds themselves as the primary medium in observing and taking part in activities or moments they are researching, engaging in creating through "a synthetic cultural account" (Stacey, 1991: 112). This last part is important because the researcher in the participant observation should not be regarded as neutral or innocent in the exchange of the observation but as an active co-constituter of knowledge (Detamore, 2010). I approached the performances analysed in this thesis (as well as the interviews – I will return to this point later in this section) as an ethnographic participant observation, that included field notes on what I experienced in others and myself (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995).

Three interviews were conducted for the analysis of this thesis. Two with Miriam Wistreich and one with Bjork Grue Lidin. All three interviews were unstructured, conducted

in private, and organized through personal contact over email and Facebook. However, I did not know either of the respondents personally prior to the research. Unstructured interviewing, is where the researcher does not have to rely on an interview guide with questions and themes that need to be followed in a specific order (Bernard, 2006). However, the unstructured interview is not necessarily informal; there is a purpose intended with the situation which both researcher and respondent are aware of. The benefit of the unstructured interview, however, is letting the respondent "express themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace" (ibid.: 209).

In the case of moistsomoist.org, the performance discussed in Chapter 3, I interviewed the person behind the project, Miriam Wistreich on two separate occasions; once over Skype in April of 2015 and a second time in person in Copenhagen in February of 2016. Both times, the interviews were more unstructured than semi-structured because, although I had prepared some questions to ask, the flow of the interview was determined completely by how our conversation developed.

I met Bjørk Grue Lidin, the artist behind Fuck Consent, in Berlin in May of 2015. The main focus of the case study discussed in chapter 4 is the performance piece performed by her on this occasion, the opening of an art exhibit in Neukölln. Methodologically, I conducted a participant observation at the art show in Berlin, observing and taking notes of my impressions of physical conditions and demographic, conversations etc., including an informal chat with the artist before the performance. Two days later, I conducted an interview with Bjork in person in Berlin at a café. This interview too was unstructured, with the topic of conversation revolving mostly around the Fuck Consent performance, her reflections on the course of events following the performance, and Bjork's political approach to feminism and her work.

My interview approach was informed by a "postpositivst" view of knowledge and meaning, where meaning is not considered something "out there" for the researcher to find but rather that "the research process itself as an integral aspect of the construction of knowledge about society" (DeVault and Gross, 2007: 176). This meant that I did not approach the people that I interviewed as a source to access an underlying truth, in terms of, for example, paranoid reading, but rather that meaning about the performances, their work and us was created while in the interview setting.

This however raises some ethical concerns as well. As all interview settings were somewhat informal and the process non-structured, some of what was shared during the interviews might not have been intended as material for an academic analysis, as this was personal or sensitive information. However, during the analytical process, I have remained aware to not include material that would expose sensitive information about my respondents, who are not treated as anonymous as their projects were already somewhat public.

By invoking myself as audience member and co-constitutor of each performance, I also rely on observations of my own affective responses to the performances as text. In experiencing the performance, I also become part of the performance. Observing myself and my personal responses as part of the creation of knowledge in terms of the performances also links back to how I view the interview setting not as a place where I seek to "find" meaning but where meaning is constantly being created. Thus, the border between researcher and research is unclear and hierarchies of meaning become destabilized, as meaning is to be found as much in the reconstruction of a scenario as the scenario itself. I see this also as rejecting the "institutionalized expectations for some mythical, discreet separation between researcher and

the researched" (Detamore, 2010: 181). In this way, the interview setting and the participant observation merge also in praxis.

Regarding the analytical approach to the empirical materials, I have relied on a combination of discourse and text analysis. By text analysis I refer to an analysis of the structure and content, both written and visual in both performances. Here especially, I rely on an understanding of performance as a multiplicity of expressions which, in collaboration create meanings. With discourse analysis, I refer to an analysis of how some themes of content seem to be systematically reproduced in the way the ways the performances are explained and made sense of. Discourse, here, refers to an understanding of language and texts "as sites where social meanings are created and reproduced, and social identities are formed" (Tonkiss, 1998). My analysis of the texts and discourses is mainly driven by interrogating how the notion of the abject and affects 'shame' and 'disgust' influence the content and motivations of each of the performances.

The benefit of this kind of interdisciplinary, mixed-media analysis is that by relying on a multiplicity of approaches and angles, one can better be aware of some of the limitations of a research methodology or method (Kitch, 2007). However, the difficulty lies in doing each method and discipline justice, as it is difficult to be an "expert" in every field. I have chosen this (undisciplined) multiplicity of approaches to the analysis partly as a form of rejection of confined categories but also because of the nature of performance as operating simultaneously on different levels of form, text and temporality.

Chapter 3: Failing the Abject: The moistsomoist.org Project

When I was fifteen, my best friend was a boy named Aleksander and the two of us used to hang out together almost every afternoon in his basement bedroom, watching torrented episodes of South Park. I remember clearly one day when we were sitting there on his bed, how I suddenly had the familiar feeling of warm liquid escaping my crotch and moving through the fabrics of my clothes and underwear. I looked down at where I was sitting and surely enough, as expected, a bright red menstrual stain had appeared on Aleksander's white bed sheet. I felt extremely embarrassed but somehow my fifteen-year-old self was sensible enough to know that there was no way out of this situation other than to tell him. Aleksander didn't understand, he was just shocked to see blood and worried that I was hurt somehow. While I kept insisting that it was fine, just a little inconvenient, he kept asking what was wrong.

To me, the memory of this moment represents a moment when a boundary was created between my friend and I. The bright red menstrual stain on Aleksander's bed, and the fact that he didn't understand what this meant, represented a moment when there became evident a difference between the two of us. I was embarrassed that I was menstruating, he was worried that I was hurt.

Entering the website moistsomoist.org is similar to entering any other kind of personal blog. You have to click on the different images to get to the actual blog posts, there are tabs with different information to discover and exploring the website's content takes some time and focus. However, the site's contents can be explored according to one's own speed and interest. In the blog posts and photos, Miriam treats menstrual blood as a material that might do or represent something other than the social signifiers we commonly attach to it. Examining the contents of the website closely, one finds a quite original interrogation of a person's relationship to inhabiting a menstruating body and to the blood that comes from it.

As in my interaction with my friend, the blood outside of the body came to represent something other than menstruation or menstruating bodies. While my friend didn't understand the meaning, it came to represent mainly a difference between us, in our experience.

The following chapter is an analysis of Danish artist and academic Miriam Wistreich's project moistsomoist.org, which I categorize as located somewhere on the boundary between performance, research and art. Miriam works with material menstrual blood, considering it as an abject fluid. Driving her project is the interrogation of where the agency of material menstrual blood can be located, once it has left the body.

I argue in the chapter that Miriam's project is political partly because it focuses on menstrual blood, a material that is commonly invisible and because of menstrual blood's connection to the female body and feminine sphere. I furthermore argue that the abject-ness of the menstrual blood she works with is not inherent in its "other" status as a female bodily liquid but presents itself momentarily each time the menstrual blood avoids categorization and representation. Abject art, I argue, is not abject only because it represents something that is commonly invisible but also because it creates a space where moments of abject can occur, exposing boundaries of categories, in terms of both materiality and signification. Furthermore, I explore how the moistsomoist.org project invoked an experience of shame in Miriam's own relation to being the person behind it and posit this "failure" as a potential for a queer political understanding of the potential of performance using material menstrual blood.

3.1 What is MoistSoMoist?

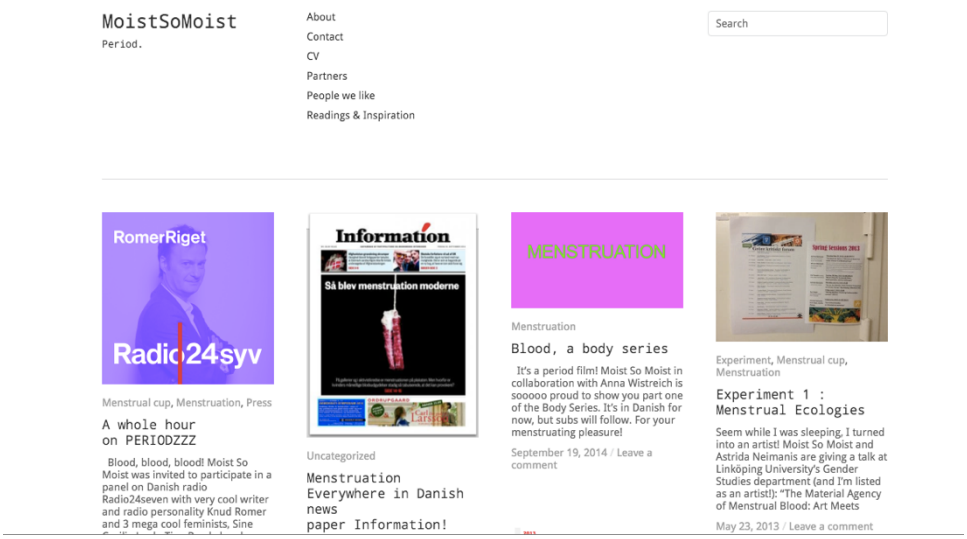

Figure 8: Screenshot of moistsomoist.org, taken 15.03.2016

Moistsomoist.org is a blog about experiments with menstrual blood. The blog consists of a total of 48 posts, the first posted on April 13, 2012 and the last on February 23, 2015. When reading through the blog posts, however, a unique world unfolds. MoistsoMoist presents a narrative of a journey of affect and academic thought taken on by the woman behind the blog, Miriam Wistreich, as she starts to interrogate the life of her menstrual blood. Miriam takes on scrutinizing the seemingly trivial experience of menstruating, and the usually discarded material menstrual blood to open up new possibilities for feminist and queer relations to the bodily process of menstruation.

The idea for the project started when Miriam found herself in a classroom setting at Goldsmith University College in London, led by professor Lisa Blackman on the abject. The discussion was on abject bodily fluids and in connection to this, the instructor suggested students to spit in a glass and see if they could then drink it, noting that while one can spit into

a glass, the idea of swallowing it again is not imaginable. Once the spit is outside the body, it is abject, and cannot re-enter. According to Miriam, what surprised her the most in this class was the reaction to her mentioning of menstrual blood as an example of abject bodily fluid. While discussions of spit and faeces generated lively discussion within the group, her mentioning of menstrual blood left the group silent. This was, to her further surprise, within a classroom setting she describes as "a kind of queer safe space" and "a place where you'd think you could talk about anything" (Miriam, interview April 24 2015, my translation from Danish). Inspired by feminist new materialism scholarship and the abject, Miriam started moistsomoist as a series of experiments under the tagline of trying to "locate the agency of menstrual blood" (ibid.). She chose the form, the blog because this was the form she was used to using in her program at Goldsmith's.

The two main components of the project are what she calls “Experiment 1” and “Experiment 2”. Experiment 1 is what the blog is most remembered for, or what is most often described as what the blog does, although the experiment was never actually carried out all the way through the way that Miriam had designed it. In experiment 1, the idea was to collect menstrual blood from different menstruators along with a narrative of their experience of inhabiting a menstruating body, putting material blood and the body at the centre of exploration. Interested in "how matter could become the starting point of an embodied narrative" (Experiment 1: Collecting, April 17 2012), Miriam’s initial vision was a collective project where different people donated their collected blood along with "the story of how the menstruator who had donated the blood, [and] their experiences with harvesting a liquid that is normally disposed of" (ibid.). Experiment 1 was intended as a kind of collection of stories and experiences in the experiment of (dis)placing the bodily function of menstruation along

with the menstrual blood in focus. While still searching for people to participate in Experiment 1 (which then never happened), Miriam started by collecting her own blood in a small jar to try the experiment on her own body. She kept the jar in her apartment, and blogged about her reflections as well as posting images of the jar.

Figure 9: Photographs of the jar (Experiment 1: Preliminary testing, April 17 2012)

Experiment 2 refers to an interactive installation that Miriam made in cooperation with Swedish Alexandra Jönsson at the Feminist Materialisms conference held in Copenhagen at the University of Copenhagen in April of 2012. The installation consisted of a 'collection station' set up in a bathroom at the university where the conference was held, where menstruators could dispose of used tampons, pads or fresh menstrual blood from menstrual cups into different containers, for experimental purposes. Questionnaires were also provided for the 'donors' to fill in information about their donation if they wished to do so. Using the

language of feminist new materialism, the aim of the experiment was to create "a situation in which menstrual blood is treated not merely as an abject fluid with no value, but as an agent that opens a possibility of different interactions with the menstruators' leaking body." (Experiment 2: A Material Conversation; April 18, 2012).

Several blog posts on moistsomoist.org are not directly related to the two experiments but are rather Miriam's reflections on her experiences, the methodology, or links to articles or video clips on the topic of menstruation. Experiment 2, the installation at the Feminist Materialisms conference was reported about in the University of Copenhagen newspaper (Klokhoej, 2012). Furthermore, Miriam twice spoke about moistsomoist.org on Danish radio (Moistsomoist on Danish National Radio!: April 30, 2012; A Whole Hour on PERIODZZZZ: February 23, 2015) and was featured in the Danish National newspaper, Information, in September of 2014 where the journalist asks why menstrual blood is still taboo and mentions moistsomoist as part of a small menstrual revolution currently happening in Denmark and Sweden (Nygaard 2014).

Figure 10: Photographs of the collection station (A Material Conversation - Moist So Moist @ Feminist Materialisms, April 27 2012)

3.2 Locating the feminist, queer political in Moistsomoist

According to Miriam, an interest in menstruation or menstrual blood uniquely was never what drove her to do the project. Rather, it was the experience that menstrual blood was considered so taboo, for example in her class at Goldsmith's. Her political interest, she states, wasn't in the specific significance of menstrual blood but in the way bodily fluids are approached and not approached. In our interviews, Miriam has iterated that it wasn't because menstruation is menstruation that she chose this particular fluid as her focus, but because it was especially *abject*. According to her, it could as well have been "semen or faeces or something else" that she experimented with, the focus was mainly on it being "some kind of material that comes out of the body" (Miriam, interview April 24 2015). She does however recognize how menstruation has certain political associations. She mentions that while her project was political she didn't initially view it as activism, because she didn't have a specific goal in mind. Rather, the purpose was to conduct an experiment, of both the body and research methodology.

In Elizabeth Grosz' discussion of bodily fluids, she criticizes Kristeva's categorization of semen as non-polluting while menstruation (and faeces) is polluting (Grosz, 1994: 206-207). This, according to Grosz, is an example of a gendered bias in how bodily matter is associated. According to Miriam, the political implication of focusing on menstrual blood instead of for example semen, are a focus on invisibility and hysteria rather than maybe a stronger focus on "reproduction and the global economy" (Miriam, interview April 24 2015). I think that questions of reproduction and the global economy can be just as relevant to a discussion of the significance of menstrual blood, although they might not seem as apparent at first glance. This, however, could be due to the gendered nature of something like the global economy, where

feminine values tend to be overlooked. A focus on menstrual blood instead of semen highlights gender in a way that semen might not, as the masculine is the dominant point of departure. Miriam's categorization of semen as connected to the global economy and reproduction while menstruation is more connected to invisibility and hysteria confirms Grosz' argument that bodily fluids are subject to a gendered bias. The larger aim of Miriam's project was to locate the "agency of menstrual blood", as a queer, new materialist inspired interrogation into imagining 'new' conceptualizations of menstrual blood. Connecting this to the discussion of a gendered view on e.g. global economy, giving agency to a traditionally feminine associated materiality such as menstrual blood also works to give voice or agency to more feminine values.

A couple of times, Miriam mentions in the blog the significance of being *that girl,* the menstruation girl who will openly talk about menstruation, to the discomfort of her peers. In one post, titled "That vacant look", she reflects on the way many heterosexual men she encounters meet the idea of her project with silence and "that vacant look" (That vacant look: April 22 2012). Speaking from a feminist, queer political position, Miriam interprets this response as a sign of taboo and invisibility inscribed in a traditionally feminine associated experience such as menstruation. Thus the political implication of Miriam's project is also a representation of a traditionally invisible experience. In Barbara Creed's analysis of the monstrous feminine as a site of the abject, she argues that the unveiling of the monstrous feminine exposes patriarchy (Creed, 1995). I would agree that focusing on the abject, that which repulses, disgusts and forces us outside of ourselves (Kristeva, 1982) indeed exposes the dominant position from where knowledge and meaning is created. Then the silence stemming from a man's confrontation with the topic of menstruation could be explained by his lack of

association with this "other" topic. Although Miriam personally wants to avoid being connected only to the politics of menstruation, a part of the political project of moistsomoist is mentioning the commonly unmentionable.

In a way, my friend Aleksander's response to my leaking menstrual blood on his bed sheet resembles this discussion of the "vacant look". It wasn't due to lack of interest, however, that Aleksander wouldn't engage in a conversation about menstruation but because of lack of knowledge or experience. He had probably never, or rarely before been confronted with the topic of menstrual blood because the general silencing of this topic in our social context. Although the silence was in some ways broken, between us, because of the lack of understanding of the issue from his side, the conversation didn't actually develop further than to a common agreement that I was not physically hurt. Rather, the menstrual blood stain established a difference between the two of us. In this sense, Miriam's political project of mentioning and materially focusing on menstrual blood reinstates or illuminates differences in experience.

3.3 Searching for the abject

Kristeva's abject is neither subject nor object, it cannot be located within space or time but rather she characterizes it as "that impetus, that spasm, that leap" (Kristeva, 1982: 1). Furthermore, Butler's account of abject bodies is those bodies "outside" of the heterosexual matrix. The abject in Butler's understanding are those experiences that cannot be deemed intelligible within the heterosexual matrix, however, they are constitutive. Without the outside abject bodies, the heterosexual matrix would cease to be (Butler, 1993).

What abject art is or what abject art seeks to achieve can thus be difficult to define. Critical of the way much feminist theory has used the abject as an analytical tool, Imogen Tyler argues that "abject art" does not make sense because the abject can never be represented (Tyler, 2009: 82). While I might agree that "abject art" in the understanding that this is art representing the abject does not make sense, one could argue that art is not only about representation and that what can be categorized as "abject art" does not necessarily seek to represent or locate the abject but rather works with the notion of abject as an analytical tool. Tyler's critique of feminist theory's "reading for the abject" (Tyler, 2009: 82) is that it re-inscribes the cultural myth of the maternal as abject. Kristeva argues, according to Tyler that the abject's ability to transgresses social norms functions to again enforce their existence (ibid.: 84). Butler argues the same as her abject bodies lie outside of what is intelligible, constituting the "inside". Furthermore, Butler find that there is political potential in practices of collective disidentification to be found within the sphere of the abject (Butler, 1993: xiii-xiv).

Analyzing manifestations of abjection in visual art, Julián Daniel Gutiérrez-Abilla asks how abjection might function in "the construction or de-construction of the representation of

feminist and queer subjectivities through the desublimated body" (Gutiérrez-Albilla, 2008: 65). Here "abject art" is not viewed as kinds of representation of the abject but rather as sites of manifestation of the abject. Although perhaps only temporarily, he argues that "by refusing the regulatory regimes of social identity, these social fantasies produce a non-assimilable narrative that includes those who are outcast by the social symbolic, thereby producing a crisis of signification and representation" (ibid.: 80).

Miriam refers to the notion of abject on moistsomoist (Kristeva, along with *The Powers of Horror* is listed as a source of inspiration under the "readings and inspiration" tab) as something prevalent in her work. For example, she writes:

> My immediate, physical reaction to other menstruator's abject fluids is deep felt, embodied disgust – even the imagined situation provokes me. Before this I mainly thought that people who were squeamish about periods were silly. I get it now. (Experiment 2: other people's blood (on disgust): April 25, 2012)

This interpretation of the abject implies that any bodily fluid that has left the body is abject. Menstrual blood then, is always abject. There seems to be no question here of whether or why menstrual blood would be considered abject, rather it is because it is outside of the body. However, what Miriam seems to "get" in this example is the "thrust" of the abject. Referring to food loathing, the reaction to the skin on the surface of milk, Kristeva writes: "The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck." (1983: 2). This, Kristeva writes, is an elementary example of abjection and this is what Miriam here seems to "get". What she is describing is a physical reaction of negative affect, disgust, when handling a colleague's donated menstrual blood. Although disappointed in herself, she describes this feeling as "deep felt, embodied". I disagree with her interpretation of menstrual blood as per definition an "abject fluid", thus locating the abject

within the fluid. However, I would argue that what she is describing here is an example of abjection, invoked by the encounter with menstrual blood. What this example then shows, is that the encounter with menstrual blood, especially other people's menstrual blood provokes the thrust of the abject within a person. As we have established that the abject is not something that *is* but something that *does,* the prevalence of the abject in moistsomoist must be approached from something other than identification or recognition.

This point can be connected also to the theoretical discussion of affects from the previous chapter. As Sara Ahmed argues, affects, or emotions are not inherent to an object but "stick" and travel, between entities (Ahmed, 2004a). Just like the abject then, in this sense the disgust Miriam describes as felt towards the menstrual blood does not stem from within the material itself but is an effect of the interaction.

The overarching project of moistsomoist is inscribing agency to menstrual blood. This project is, in a way, exactly what locating abject and disgust not as a characteristic of material menstrual blood but an effect of the interaction with it, does. Part of how Miriam experiments with this project is storing her blood in a jar and reflecting on how the contents of this jar, which she keeps inside of her apartment, makes her feel. She writes:

> Yes, this does sound weird, but really did take me a while to stop feeling like a bit of me had been deposited into a jam jar. I don't mean that a little Miriam was trapped inside a glass jar screaming to get out. What I mean is that the "me" "not me" dialectics that is a core psychoanalytical argument when dealing with abjection didn't feel very relevant – it was very much still me. Only after some time, when I had become accustom to the experiment and process of harvesting/collecting did the liquid cease being me. (Experiment 1: Preliminary testing, April 17, 2012)

Here she reflects on how she feels that the menstrual blood in the jar still, when outside of the body and deposited in a jar feels like a part of her. Kristeva's abject is a process of the subject, the child, "rejecting improper and unclean elements that are reminiscent of his/her initial fusion with the maternal body" (Gutiérrez-Albilla 2008, 67). However, Miriam in this case does not reject the blood in the jar. Thus, again, the menstrual blood *is* not abject. Even though Miriam describes it as an abject bodily fluid, the process of abjection hasn't actually occurred while she still describes it as part of herself. I read the project of giving agency to blood as rather a questioning of the categorization of menstrual blood as inherently abject. An experience that Miriam might have had when she realized that menstrual blood was regarded as taboo when she first started mentioning it in relation to the notion of the abject.

Furthermore, the abject in relation to moistsomoist.org is provoked by Miriam's refusal to comply to standards of form, thus creating a project that cannot easily be categorized as art, research, perversion or self-exposure (although it may be characterized in some ways as all of the above). The project does not necessarily comply to academic standards of stating a specific purpose and procedure of researching a certain problem. Rather, Miriam explicitly claims a conscious rejection of academic standards in her work, as a means of opposing normative structures:

> Moist So Moist is a project that is *as* deeply engaged in researching ways of producing knowledge that challenge norms as it is in unearthing the knowledge itself; we are looking to build a feminist methodology at every step of the project. This means thinking about the implications of adhering to academic research standards, and I think my problems with these standards, however useful they may be to general/normative academic production, is that they would force the project to work within a tradition that is (dare I say it?) fundamentally patriarchal. (Experiment 1: On academic research standards and feminist strategies; May 28, 2012)

Whether regarding moistsomoist as a research project on the significance of menstrual blood within a theoretical new materialist feminist framework, or as an art project illuminating the abject status of menstrual blood, the scope of the material itself does not fit directly into any box. I find that in this rejection of categorization also lies an abject value of the project. By refusing categories of form, for example in the way that the research project moves from theoretical to personal text, the project embraces a kind of abject character. However, as with the nature of the abject, the process of transgressing norms serves to reinstate or constitute those norms. As Miriam writes, standards of categorizing are fundamentally patriarchal. Relating this back to working with menstrual blood and the abject as gendered, I see again a focus on the "in betweens" or unmentionable in this gesture of not complying to structures of categories of form.

3.4 Negative affect as a possible queer future or, the success in failure

Some of the intentions of moistsomoist failed to be achieved. For example, the collaborative part of Experiment 1 has never been carried out (yet)[2]. Partly, it seems, because Miriam eventually lost interest in the moistsomoist project and partly because finding participants proved difficult. There is a part of the blog where Miriam describes a growing ambivalence towards the process of collecting menstrual blood for her experiments. In the blog post titled "What I did this summer", she writes that "[I] was unpleasantly surprised to feel my former joy in collecting diminish until I decided to take a small break" (What I did this summer: October 15, 2012). On the experience of feeling less enthusiastic about collecting blood, she writes that she is "unsure whether to ascribe it to inconvenience or hegemonic patriarchy" (ibid.). Nonetheless, she expresses disappointment in this loss of interest.

During our second interview, in January of 2016, Miriam told me that when thinking back at the project today, she feels somewhat ashamed. She explained that she now is experiencing shame in relation to the project although she didn't at the time when it was happening, or being performed. Not only is she ashamed because of the topic but especially also because of what she now considers amateurish practices in the way the experiments were practically executed. She said that for example, she feels embarrassed about the clumsy tags made to present the experiment, and how it wouldn't comply to proper practical practices of fine arts, comically referring to people educated from the Royal Danish Academy of Arts, stating that "I'd rather that they didn't see it, those people who make plaster casts and things

[2] She did mention in our second interview in January 2016 that she still wants to make it happen. So in that case the performance is not exactly over yet or cannot necessarily be said to have failed yet.

like that" (Interview January 30, 2016). Regarding her position as the person who publicly talks about periods, as much as a personal as political project, this was also an aspect of the process that she eventually grew less fond of, causing a growing ambivalence towards the project itself.

> I got tired of blogging for example. But I think that mostly I was tired of carrying that [weight], because it's kind of like coming out all the time. (...) There is kind of a constant outing-aspect in it. That you are constantly confronted with. You are constantly confronted with your own weird otherness. And I think that by the end I really couldn't handle that, affectively. I just couldn't handle being the weird one all the time. The menstrual girl, menses-Miriam (Interview 30.01.2016).

Linking this experience back to the notion of the abject, I wonder whether the loss of interest that she is here describing can be seen as part of the working mechanism of the abject. For example, as mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, an embodiment of the abject is that while we can spit in a glass, we cannot swallow it again. Once something is abject, in this case the saliva leaving the confinement of the body, it cannot re-enter or be re-emerged. In this case, Miriam's experience of a loss of interest in being "that menstrual girl" emerges once she has detached herself from this part of her identity, the "that girl" identity has become abject from the confinement of "Miriam" and thus cannot re-enter. Politically, this would mean that while working with the abject can serve certain political purposes, like illuminating a part of menstruation or menstrual blood that is culturally hidden or inscribed with gendered meaning, the abject still remains an unstable and unpredictable tool. In this case, one could also argue that menstrual blood does or has assumed agency, when invoking the experience of shame in Miriam.

In Judith Halberstam's book *The Queer art of Failure* (2011), the author presents the thesis that instead of recreating categories of success, the general logic of the structures of success and failure could be put into question. Arguing that failure is a trace of queer existence

and always has been, the possibilities of failure can be explored for the benefit of queer politics. They write:

> (…) failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers. And while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life (Halberstam, 2011: 3).

In this sense, failure serves as a catalyst for disrupting or questioning normative hierarchies and structures. Failure, Halberstam furthermore argues, "recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent" (Halberstam, 2011: 88). Just like Judith Butler's political project with abject bodies, I would argue, this presentation of potential of resistance does not imply an alternative separate from the prescribed norm but a space of disidentification through embracing the outside within the "inside".

In the case of Miriam's moistsomoist project, failure is not necessarily a choice but a consequence of the work that she does and has done with menstrual blood and the affective responses to this work. In Halberstam's book, they explore failure as a practice that "can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (ibid., 88), an 'alternative' that illuminates the shortcomings and paradoxes of a normative capitalist logic that "requires that everyone live in a system that equates success with profit and links failure to the inability to accumulate wealth" (ibid., 88). The fact that failure in Miriam's case in not a direct choice, brings us back to the question of the agency of the blood. By attempting to locate agency within menstrual blood, by treating the material blood in the jar as an actor that is maybe and maybe

not a part of her own body, she experiences shame that may be interpreted also as failure. In this way, the blood as an actor can be said to have invoked this affect and failure.

Combining this thesis of failure with Sedgwick's approach to shame within what can be understood as queer, we might explore the possibility that Miriam's "failure" in reaching a desired goal with her project serves a purpose other than being a negative experience because of something gone wrong. What this entails is that there no longer are winners and losers or right and wrong. Rather, this approach assumes a broader acceptance of existence. Exclusion based on the failure of success, meaning the ability to "measure up" becomes in a way irrelevant. Halberstam argues that accepting failure under some circumstances might offer "more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (Halberstam, 2011: 2-3). Emphasis here on *being in the world,* in the sense that we are not discussing normative right or wrongs but a way of being.

In terms of contemporary menstrual activisms, and the examples we have seen mentioned in Chapter 1, the goal of the actions performed was often to create more visibility of menstruating bodies or at least the space to be visible when menstruating. This is also part of Miriam's intended goal. Although increased visibility might be successful, what we see in the example of Miriam is that increased visibility did not necessarily mean more happiness, or less shame, or 'empowerment'. Here we might find again the significance of thinking in line with Halberstam's focus on failure as an imagined path to other ways of being in the world. Empowerment in form of the visibility politics that I read in some of the menstruation activism examples from Chapter 1 implies a certain kind of politics of good and bad or success and failure where the former is the intended goal. However, when thinking in line of Halberstam's argument, the goal becomes rather to resist this homogenous logic of thinking, of essentially

resisting the dominant normative structures already in place. And by following this line of thinking, failing might provide the potential of more creative resistance and creative being.

What I would like to question here then is the idea that abject art or abject activism is intended to *do* or *change* something. Gutierrez-Albilla's analysis of abject art reads contemporary art not just as illustration of a "psychoanalytical theory of abjection" but rather *as* a psychoanalytic theory of abjection (Gutierrez-Albilla 2008, 66). Is the abject art project unsuccessful if it makes the artist or activist feel uncomfortable afterwards? There is this moment while provoking boundaries that we can or do feel very empowered and comfortable with what we are doing where the purpose is also to be uncomfortable. There seems to be a pattern of Miriam feeling ashamed or uncomfortable when thinking back on her project, but is that bad? Or, in other words, could failure, accompanied by negative affect, be considered a queer detanglement from the governing mechanisms on menstruating bodies?

3.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have analysed the (non)prevalence of the abject in Miriam Wistreich's approach to menstrual activism in her project moistsomoist.org. Interested in the possibilities of abject art, I looked for the prevalence of the abject in the way Miriam approaches menstruation and menstrual blood in the project. The abject, most famously presented by Julia Kristeva, presents an analytical category for articulating the experience of falling outside of social and/or physical norms. Menstruating bodies and menstrual blood fits this category. However, the aim of this analysis of the moistsomoist.org project was to highlight the ambivalence of speaking of abject being and abject matter, in relation to menstruation. An ambivalence that is here perceived as the nature of the abject rather than a problem. The nature of the abject is escaping representation and defying norms or categorization. Through the analysis, I propose that working with the experience of menstruation as abject as a means to reach an intended goal of change is destined to fail. However, I furthermore present the idea that failure can be embraced if only as an indication of the continuous presence and non-presence of the abject. If the abject is perceived to transgress norms only to reinstate their existence, then failing, being ashamed or Other might offer a more creative way of being.

Chapter 4: Disgustive Terrorist Performance: The Fuck Consent Project

Figure 11: Photograph of Credo, from "Fuck Consent" performance in Belin.

Ready to plant a perversion, I took the two guns in my hands. I started shooting. At the wall. At the ground. At the audience. (Lidin, 2015)

Bjørk is slim and white and pretty and she has long, blonde hair. We are in Neukölln in Berlin at the opening of an art exhibition curated by Spanish/Italian collective “Hic est sanguis meus” which in English means “This is my blood”. I am in the audience, sitting on the cold concrete floor and Bjørk is performing as part of the opening of the show. There are about 30 or 40 people in the audience, half are standing and half are sitting on the floor. Bjørk enters from the back of the room, wearing her hair in a pony tail, a black crocheted mask covering her face, frighteningly high black platform heels and a long black dress with slits on each side that go all the way up to her hips. When she squats down, facing the audience, we see her genitals exposed.

There is a row of jars containing different nuances of red liquid lined up on the floor of the performance space and I feel my stomach turn as I watch her pour the dark and thick contents of one jar into her palm and rub it on her thighs and legs. She nonchalantly plays with the red liquids, pouring them from jar to jar, hand to hand, while intermittently forcefully grinding it on her pale bare skin. It is not explicit to the audience that this liquid is menstrual blood but I know it is and it makes me feel like I want to throw up. She takes up two plastic water pistols and fills each with menstrual blood. Slowly.

At some point Bjørk stands up and extracts a menstrual cup from her vagina. She pours its ingredients onto her thigh and rubs. Then she places the empty cup in her mouth where it stays for the rest of the performance. With the crocheted mask and the absurdity of her handling of the menstrual blood, she reminds me of visual depictions of aliens or underwater creatures. Half way through the performance, she starts handing out the empty jars to members of the audience. Some people reluctantly accept. One man shakes his head but when she insists, his friend accepts the jar. A woman from the audience stands up, extracts a filled menstrual cup from her vagina and pours its ingredients into one of Bjørk’s jars. Her blood is a bright red. The two of them embrace each other.

By the end of the 20-minute performance, Bjørk, squatting in front of the audience again, takes up the two toy guns and points them at the wall to the right of me. Two thin squirts of blood hit the wall onto which the Credo is projected. She stands up, looks across the audience and starts shooting in our direction. I hide my head under my jacket as I notice small stains of red forming on the white shirt of the man sitting in front of me. I feel a stir in the audience, hear angry voices mixed in with joyous cheering. After about a minute, I get out from under my cover and see that most of the audience has left, as well as the artist.

In this chapter, I analyse the performance piece "Fuck Consent", performed by Danish artist Bjørk Grue Lidin, in Neuköln, in Berlin, in May of 2015. The analysis is informed by a participant observation, as well as an interview with the artist conducted a few days after the performance itself, and by an article written by Bjørk on the performance, published online by the radical feminist publication HYSTERIA, of which Bjørk herself is editor (Lidin, 2015). The performance was part of the opening of a feminist art exhibition called Hic est sanguine meus, which is Latin for "this is my blood". Bjørk's performance was part of the opening act and she didn't have any other works in the exhibition. At the end of the performance, she unexpectedly shot at the audience with actual material menstrual blood, which resulted in her to eventually be expelled from the space.

The performance piece, like Miriam Wistreich's moistsomoist.org project, uses material menstrual blood, and could be categorized in the category of "abject art" because of its corporeal component. However, I read the fuck consent performance as less of an engagement with politics of menstruation than a political project to challenge some of the values of liberalist feminist politics. I interpret Bjørk's gesture of rejsecting consent as part of a critique of a liberal feminist definition of consent and agency, which universalizes bodies and identities and fails to recognize that not everyone has the privilege of being in a position where agency and consent are granted.

I argue in this chapter, that Bjørk Grue Lidin's performance piece exposes a fear of non-contained menstrual blood, making her categorizable as a kind of terrorist performer (Muñoz, 1997: 91). The terrorist, furthermore, is a significantly affect laden notion (Ahmed, 2004a) that posits the construction of something "inside" to be protected. I argue that the performance, by re-approriating handling of menstrual blood, e.g. through Bjørk rubbing it on her body to no

means, exposes boundaries of feminist politics and menstrual activism relying on tactics of visibility and representation while provocatively deconstructing the meaning of consent.

Without suggesting or supporting the rejection of consent tactics per se, I explore Bjørk's critique of consent as a challenging of the liberal subject position that some feminist politics of menstruation and shame impose. Furthermore, like in the previous chapter, Bjørk's handling of menstrual blood left her in a precarious position when a rash developed on her skin subsequently to the performance. I connect this to the ambiguity of menstrual blood, hinting at a queer space for a utopian queer conceptualization of material menstrual blood.

4.1 The gesture of rejecting consent as critique of liberalist feminism

Figure 12: Alessandro Russotti (2015) Photo of "Fuck Consent" performance in Berlin.

The performance is an explicit critique of the notion of consent. Bjørk seems to be focusing on the notion of consent not specifically in reference to the use of the term in feminist politics on sexual violence but in regard to what it implies in terms of a liberal mode of the subject.

Projected on the side wall of the performance space was Bjørk's Credo (see Figure 11), reading: "1. FUCK CONSENT. 2. CONSENT FUCKED. 3. FUCK SENT. 4. CON FUCKED. 5. FUCK." The gesture of rejecting consent ran through the entire performance with subversive gestures made by her that invoked disgust in the audience; such as rubbing blood on her body, extracting a menstrual cup from her vagina and placing it in her mouth and finally culminating in the spraying of the audience with blood was the ultimate violation of the rights of consent.

Every time my stomach turned as a member of the audience, the performance touched me, invoked affect in me, changed something in me. Had I given permission to this?

Bjørk explains that her objection to consent was provoked by the "I Heart Consent" campaign in the UK while she herself was living in London (Bjørk, interview May 25 2015). The "I Heart Consent" campaign was started in London in 2013 with the University of London Union Women's group distributing stickers around several campuses with the slogan "I Heart Consent", resulting in a larger debate on the need for consent campaigns on University Campuses (http://iheartconsent.com/about%20). Consent in this context is referring to sexual consent and the campaign later, in dialogue with students and activists developed guides for facilitating consent workshops and facilitation trainings (ibid.). The I heart consent workshop guide uses the overall slogan that consent is "mutual, active, respecting boundaries, comfortable, retractable, checking, willingly given" (workshop guide, p.1). Furthermore, they rely on British sexual offences acts from the 2000's to claim that "sexual consent can be defined as - the agreement to engage in sexual activity with the freedom and capacity to do so" (ibid., 3).

Bjørk explains being provoked by this campaign as it was clear to her that not everyone has the privilege to claim the right to consent. Furthermore, according to her, a campaign promoting consensual sexual practices seemed to re-inscribe the idea that women are vulnerable and need protection. Instead, Bjørk told me, she wants to demand the right to be insecure and vulnerable. Security and insecurity are constructed realities she noted, adding that as a white woman, "I think that the best way for me to challenge [my positionality] is to demand the right to be in insecurity" (Bjørk, interview May 25 2015). She told me that her objection to campaigns like "I Heart Consent" was not to reject the fact that rape exists but to obscure a

certain logic. In a sense, she explained to me, she wanted to rape the audience and their view of the world.

Literature theorist Elaine Scarry explores the notion of consent in relation to the body and feminist politics (Scarry, 1990). She traces the notion of consent in social politics to Western philosophical ideas of the social contract, freedom and nation. Consent and the body are completely intertwined in Scarry's article and she writes that the body "becomes the locus of the act of consent itself" (ibid.: 875). Furthermore, in the "consensual relation" (ibid.: 880) there is a transgression of the physical boundaries of the body. In marriage, which she posits as an example *of* consent, there occurs a "reciprocal transfer of rights of the body to the other person" (ibid.: 883). When placing the body as the locus of consent, one could argue that Bjørk's dismissal of the audience's right to consent is a certain invasion of their bodies as well. A kind of rape, then.

Regarding the performance, Bjørk describes the rubbing of blood on her skin in her article as "an unaspiring attempt to uphold redundant ideas of 'agency', 'democracy', and 'consent'" (Lidin, 2015). She furthermore writes that these ideas "stabilize liberal conditions in which stigmatization is believed to stem from individual, stigmatized bodies" (ibid.). The act of rubbing menstrual blood on her skin certainly came across as absurd and invoked in me a physical reaction of disgust.

I interpret her rejection of consent and these "liberal conditions" as an intervention into accepting a feminist politics that is blind to the oppression and violence caused by some structures that they too are a part of reinstating. By denying us, the audience, the right to consent, Bjørk exposes how it is only under certain material and social circumstances that an

individual is in the position of an agent that can or cannot consent. Who has the right to ask for consent and who has the right to give consent is not a universal condition. It is on the basis of this understanding, that I interpret her contestion of the notion of consent. When she says, then, that she would demand the "right" to be vulnerable and unsafe, as a woman, I interpret this as a way of rejecting any kind of governing of what she as a white woman can or cannot do. Even though being "safe" might be generally preferred, this is also part of a hierarchy and a normative system of governance.

Consent implies a certain subject position, one who is "free" and with "agency" to agree or disagree to "transfer rights of the body". It also assumes an autonomous body and fails to recognise cultural and historical inscriptions of these. Butler's theory of performativity contends matrixes of power and regulatory practices in which performative (re)iteration functions to include identities, bodies and ideas, and exclude others. In subscribing to a politics of consent, where a person has the "freedom" to agree to engage in sexual activity, like promoted in the "I Heart Consent" campaign, a certain set of matrix of norms is performed. I argue that Bjørk's performance challenges these liberal conditions by refusing to adhere to the rules of the curators and organizers of the exhibition space. By creating a moment where she forces the audience to be exposed to material blood, through shooting and handing out jars, she also challenges our individual agency, freedom and consent. Furthermore, when transgressing the boundaries of her own body in rubbing blood on her skin and disrupting structures of what bodily material goes where, she also challenges categories of liberalist subject positions in terms of what constitutes a body.

4.2 Breaking the fourth wall, invoking shame

"Breaking the fourth wall" is a theatrical device that refers to the deconstruction of the invisible barrier between performer and audience (Davis, 2015). The metaphor of the fourth wall builds on the idea that performers and audience are separate, the former something for the latter to consume. Although gestures of breaking the wall and disrupting the role of the audience as anonymous voyeurs have been performed for decades, it is in modern theatre that the "breaking of the fourth wall" has been used more specifically as a commentary on the absurdity of perceiving the theatre setting as something separate from "events in the real world" (ibid.: 89).

In Tomkins' exploration of the workings of shame, he puts extra emphasis on the role of looking and especially voyeurism. "Man is, of all the animals", he writes, "the most voyeuristic" (Tomkins, 1995: 144). According to Tomkins, looking is the most used of the human senses, creating the act of looking and being looked at as especially governed. He furthermore posits that "there exists a universal taboo on looking" (ibid.). Mutual looking, he writes, is the most intense experience of looking, in which a "sharing of affect" (ibid.) occurs, that effects in a loss of control. In Probyn's reading of what affect does, based on Tomkins' theory of affects, she notes that the experience of disgust needs a certain amount of acknowledgment of an other besides the subject position (Probyn, 2000). Disgust is when "we feel the proximities of objects and people that we fear will invade our bodies through our mouths" (ibid., 139), creating a moment of collectivity. Shame, in effect, is the bowing of the head that happens as a result of the invocation of disgust. Affects shame and disgust are both invoked in the encounter with something outside of the subject position.

Bjørk's performance challenges the idea of the fourth wall, affectively engaging the audience in the performance, positing a consequence of looking and being looked at in return. As a member of the audience, I experienced physical disgust in looking at her rub menstrual blood on her skin while being acutely aware of the presence of all the other people in the room. The fourth wall is also challenged when she stands up and hands out jars to the audience and finally when she makes the audience the target of the shooting with blood. The consequences of her performance is that we, as audience, are forced to face our own intimate relationships with menstrual blood. There is no "escaping" to the position of voyeurs, unaffectedly contemplating the meanings of the looked upon experience. As a member of the audience, I felt my stomach turn when seeing what she did with the blood. An affect that I experienced as disgust. Being there, together with the rest of the audience was experienced as a confrontation. As audience, we were affectively engaged in the performance, co-constituting, also as performers, an experience of menstrual blood as disgust invoking. Maybe not all menstrual blood, and not necessarily the menstruating body as signifier but to watch material menstrual blood being grinded onto a person's bare skin invoked disgust.

Probyn advocates for "publicly eating disgust and feeding shame" (Probyn, 2000: 143) to explore the possibilities of what the body can do, in this instance from the perspective of what affects can do. In regard to Fuck Consent, one can argue that Bjørk publicly ate disgust and fed shame while forcing the members of the audience to do the same. The effect of these actions was also the display of menstrual blood as something that does invoke disgust and maybe also shame as a result.

Furthermore, Tomkins explains that the purpose of disgust is to keep us away from contact with potentially harmful external objects:

> Contempt-disgust is fundamentally a defensive response which is auxiliary to the hunger, thirst, and oxygen drives. Its function is clear. If the food about to be ingested activates disgust, the upper lip and the nose is raised and the head is drawn away from the apparent source of the offending odor. If the substance has ben taken into the mouth, it will be spit out and the head drawn away from it. If it has been swallowed, it will produce nausea and it will be vomited out either through the mouth or nostrils. (Tomkins, 1995: 135)

Probyn's suggestion to eat shame and feed disgust refers to a kind of feminist body politics that is willing to explore further what the body can do. By rejecting shame and disgust as negative affect, the experience of which should be minimized, we might not be exploring the full political potential of the material body. I want to argue that in the Fuck Consent performance where the artist manages to invoke disgust and challenge the fourth wall between audience and performer, she also manages to expose some limits or exclusionary practices of a feminist politics occupied with visibility of menstruating bodies. The material menstrual blood invoked a response not necessarily coinciding with the general theme of the menstruation exhibition where, in my interpretation, menstruation was supposed to be represented as "natural" and accepted. By displaying images of bloody genitals, colourful wombs and caricatures of menstrual shaming (see Figure 13 for examples), the aim of the exhibition seemed to revolve around lifting a shame and stigma of the feminized menstruating body and creating a broader space for more variety in representation.

However, what became clear through the Fuck Consent performance was that the way we can approach menstruation as feminists is also limited, contained and governed. I read the invocation of disgust by material menstrual blood and the anger towards being physically confronted with it as an example of menstruation as not always being representable as "natural" or positive.

Figure 13: Photographs from “Hic est sanguis meus” exhibition on menstruation in Berlin in may of 2015.

4.3 Fuck Consent as terrorist performance

In reference to a discussion of the role of abject art, Gutierrez-Albilla (2008) discusses the role of the art institution or space in the performance of "abject art". If the institution accepts the transgressive gestures of the artist, then wherein lies the transgression? If the institution "accepts and subsidises transgression" (ibid., 66) he asks, is the institution then creating "an illusion of freedom to the artist that reinforces hegemonic systems, such as patriarchy and heterosexuality, and end up implicating the artist within the very same normative structures, precisely by the commodification of her/his artistic practice already at work?" (ibid.). In this scenario, both artist and institution (I realize that this categorical divide might not be so clear in practice) are implicated in reinforcing regulatory norms and categories. This is relevant to the Fuck Performance piece because the piece was experienced so controversial that the organizers asked Bjørk to leave and never come back. After the performance, as I was leaving, I saw the Spanish curator of the exhibition from the "Hic es sanguis meus" collective in heated conversation with a man connected to the actual exhibition space. I heard her shouting "I didn't know! She said she wasn't going to do it!", clearly referring to Bjørk's performance.

Throughout the performance, Bjørk violated the organizers and audience, broke our trust and left us feeling unsafe. In reference to Gutierrez-Albilla's wondering about the transgression of norms, one could ask which structures were challenged and by who. However, we might keep in mind how affective or abject transgression of norms serves also to reinstate those same norms. As has already been mentioned, affects (and emotions) work in the way that they stabilize norms. Affects can serve as justification of the creation and protection of a certain subject that fits to uphold certain norms. The same characteristic is true of the abject. The notion of the abject is a moment in which boundaries are exposed. Although the abject defies

the subject and object positions, the effect of this is a reinstating of boundaries. Again here, we are confronted with the limits of performing abject art.

In José Esteban Muñoz's analysis of the performances of Vaginal Davis, a queer performer of colour from L.A., he presents the definition of the performance as *terrorist drag* (Muñoz, 1997). It is "terrorist insofar as she is performing the nation's internal terrors around race, gender and sexuality", he writes (ibid.: 91). Muñoz distinguishes the notion of terrorist drag in Vaginal Davis' performance from what he calls commercial drag, which is mimicry mainly for the sake of mimicry. Commercial drag, he explains, depends on mimicry as its main intervention while terrorist drag exposes and confronts the fears of a nation (ibid.). These different approaches to performance invoke different types of affect and produce different political interventions. He quotes Felix Guattari on the specific political intervention of performance group "The Mirabelles", who go beyond mimicry in their approach to performance:

> They [The Mirabelles] resort to drag, song, mime, dance etc., not as different ways of illustrating a theme, to "change the ideas" of spectators, but in order to trouble them, to stir up uncertain desire-zones that they always more or less refuse to explore. The question is no longer to know whether one will play feminine against masculine or the reverse, but to make bodies, all bodies, break away from the representations and restraints on the "social body"" (Guattari as quoted in Muñoz, 1997: 85).

The effect of The Mirabelles' performance, according to Guattari is a forced exposure to concealed desires, which goes much beyond politics of representation. In reference to this, it would be relevant to reflect on the content of performance theory where "pure" mimicry is non existing and where reiterations always produce something new as well as the illusion of an "original" (Butler, 2004).

The significance of terrorist drag, in contrast to mimicry, however, is the ability to invoke fear and, as Muñoz puts it, an uneasiness in desire. Vaginal Davis plays with identity markers of race, gender and sexuality in a way that is constantly disruptive to the expectations of the viewer and which confounds the logic of that same identity. Vaginal Davis' terrorist drag is, in the framework of Muñoz' analysis, a process of disidentification, where the performer employs a process of assimilating to values of dominant culture to subsequently disrupt these dominant narratives through tactical misrecognition. This is, furthermore, connected to Sarah Ahmed's account of terrorism in relation to affective economies, where she posits that the fear inscribed in the terrorist figure simultaneously constructs the nation, as well as the terrorists, as separate entities. Affects, in this case fear, function in relation to the terrorist to create boundaries of inside, or the nation.

Furthermore, Muñoz notes the significance of the relationship between performance and praxis in Vaginal Davis' interventions, writing that Davis' terrorist drag "engenders, sponsors and even *makes* worlds" (Muñoz, 1997: 96). Vaginal Davis' performance of praxis

Figure 14: Photo of my jacket after the Fuck Consent performance, with stains of menstrual blood.

imitates while disrupting, and it in this sense manages to catch the "betweens" of performance as mentioned in Chapter 2 (Phelan, 1998: 8). Furthermore, there seems to be a sense of going beyond or disrupting the chain of iterations that works to produce the idea of original or essence (Butler, 2004).

In the same way, Bjørk's performance with menstrual blood was a lot more than just the representation of menstrual blood. The way that I interpret most of the art work at the exhibition and the performance piece prior to Bjørk's, the aim was to in some way disrupt dominant discourse on menstruation to then create more space for a different discussion. Which can be compared to commercial drag. However, I read that Bjørk's Fuck consent performance does more than that. I parallel the Fuck Consent performance to this analysis of Vaginal Davis' terrorist drag insofar as Bjørk also exposes a fear. In this case a fear of non-contained menstrual blood. In a way, she uses elements that were already there; menstrual blood and feminist representation, to disturb the situation and invoke fear in a process similar to disidentification. Blood that invokes disgust and that transgresses boundaries of containment clearly invoked a fearful reaction in the audience. For how do we make sense of disgust invoking menstrual blood in the context of a feminist politics resisting representation of menstrual blood and the menstruating body as shameful or Other?

Furthermore, when employing the notion of terrorism, I think it is important to also reflect on the racial politics embedded in this phenomena. The definition of terrorism is to invoke fear but as we know, for example, that while a white person can shoot dozens of people in the attempt to scare, and not be named terrorist, a person with darker skin does not have to do much more than just that to be perceived as one. In this case, it becomes important to reflect on the meaning inscribed in Bjørk's appearance and body type. For what does it mean for a

white, able-bodied woman from Northern Europe to discard an audience's right to consent in the name of those who might not be in the position to claim consent or agency? Bjørk too is aware of the meanings inscribed in the representations of her body, writing that:

> While relying on the material blood in the performance, was it possible to break the cycle of female subjectivity and instigate a changed symbolic? Could I reconfigure the colonisation that manifested my symbolic space as white woman? (…) By reappropriating menstrual blood could I convince the audience that nothing significant stemmed from my flesh, uterus, armpit hair? (Lidin, 2015)

She writes that she is attempting to "reconfigure the colonisation" that stems from her white skinned body. I read this as a kind of subversion of racialized roles and categories, for example the terrorist. In this case, one could argue that Bjørk's terrorist gestures does hold significance insofar as she is claiming the terrorist identity (not explicitly) and subverting the meaning inscribed in race and gender.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in relation to Chris Bobel's presentation of the 2015 menstrual momentum, some critiques of menstrual activism have been made where white menstrual activists are criticised for not acknowledging the privilege of having menstrual blood being the only part of your body which is considered abject, and subject to violent governance. I find that Bjørk's critique of not all bodies being able to claim the privilege of consent and agency reconciles in some ways with this same critique of white menstrual activism. This analysis of Bjørk's performance as terrorist can then be connected back to her critique of the notion of consent. By claiming this role of the terrorist she, through the performance exposes limitations of menstrual politics, insofar as only some representations of menstrual blood and menstruating bodies are acceptable in the context of Hic est sanguis meus. I find that this parallels what I interpret as Bjørk's goal of violating the audience and rejecting the notion of

consent. Which was to present the critique that only certain bodies, in certain material and cultural situations would hold the privilege of the rights to consent.

4.4 Abject performance of menstrual blood

In the interview, Bjørk told me how, after the performance, she had gotten dressed without cleaning the menstrual blood off of her skin and woke up the following morning with a rash on her legs and thighs (Interview, Bjørk May 25 2015). She told me how this led her to start worrying for a while about the potential danger connected to the blood entering the pores of her skin. Since the blood was collected from several different friends and acquaintances, she started going over in her head which people had donated blood and what kind of bacteria or infection their blood then might have exposed her to. However, when telling this story, she did express an awareness of the irony of her worries about the rash from the menstrual blood, when she with Fuck Consent had just claimed a politics that entailed the right to be unsafe.

One could say that this example exposed her own compliance within the systems she is contesting in the Fuck Consent performance. Which, in turn, is not necessarily bad or wrong, or diminishes the effect of the performance. However, it does exemplify a certain failure in reaching an intended purpose. Thus, I want to link this story of the rash and Bjørk's subsequent worries about a possible infection back to the discussion of agency of material menstrual blood and the potential "success in failure", as presented in Chapter 3. In the previous chapter, I have argued that the "failures" of the moistsomoist project actually come to represent moments where the menstrual blood in a way assumes agency and exposes limitations of attempting to represent menstrual blood or the abject. The same could be argued happens in this example of

Bjørk's rash. By invading her skin and in a sense "colonising" her body (Interview, Bjørk May 25 2015), the blood assumes agency and invokes affect.

Furthermore, a theoretical political problem that I keep returning to is that transgressing boundaries reinstates boundaries. This means that in looking for something *different* (a space outside of dominant discourse), we in effect reinstate the dominant discourse to which we are responding. The significance of Butler's conceptualization of abject bodies, that exist as unintelligible, as the constitutive outside of anything susceptible to norms of the heterosexual matrix is that they are *unintelligible.* Meaning that as soon as something can be iterated or becomes tangible in terms of definition, it is also becomes subject to normative structures. Or rather, subjectivation occurs through discourse. The mechanisms of performativity works to position bodies and experience outside and inside, deemed acceptable or unacceptable. What the analysis of abject menstrual blood does then, is to say that visibility of menstrual blood recreates categories of domination. Demanding visibility does not deconstruct hegemonic shameful discourse on menstruating bodies.

What I want to posit then, in connection to the discussion of failure as a means of disidentifying with normative structures, is whether this queer turn to failure might hold political potential for detanglement from the problem described above. The example of Bjørk's reaction to the rash suggested her own compliance in reproducing normative structures of governance. But perhaps there is not a way to avoid these structures but to look towards the moments where we fail to do so, as a process of disidentification?

Figure 15: Bjørk Grue Lidin and Agata Cardoso (2015), *Chapter 1,* available at http://www.hystericalfeminisms.com/chapter-1/
Photo of Danish artist Bjørk Grue Lidin published as part of collaboration project "chapter 1", with Agata Cardoso by radical feminist periodical HYSTERIA.

4.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have focused on the implications of Bjørk Grue Lidin's explicit dismissal of notion of consent and how to interpret the gestures of the Fuck Consent performance as an intervention into liberalist feminist politics. Furthermore, I have argued that the invocation of disgust with menstrual blood exposes some boundaries of feminist menstrual politics, where representations of menstrual blood and menstruating bodies are meant to challenge a culture and system where these topics are deemed shameful or something to be concealed. Subverting systems of regulations, I argue, by challenging representations and claiming an identity outside of dominant discourse works to reinstate these same normative systems. Through rubbing material menstrual blood on her bare skin, nonchalantly playing with the blood, the Fuck Consent performance invoked in me a physical reaction of disgust. This is one of the effects of the functioning of the abject. The Fuck Consent performance, I argue, managed to create a moment of unease and physical provocation, displaying menstrual blood as an ambiguous phenomenon that escaped categorization.

Finally, I have presented the example of how the material menstrual blood in a way assumed agency and gave Bjørk a rash subsequent to her controversial performance. This experience triggered her to worry about health risks connected to grinding blood on her skin, exposing her own compliance with a system she herself was contesting. This mechanism illuminates again, I argue, the ambiguity of working with menstrual blood. Like in the previous chapter, I present this example of "failure" as a moment to locate a queer feminist political potential in the abject and negative affect connected to material menstrual blood.

Conclusions

While menstruation is a relevant topic for feminist analysis in regards to the gendered governance of bodies, the broader theme of this thesis is an interrogation into some responses to this governance, or menstrual body politics. The rather limited scholarship on menstrual activism, has focused on creating cartographies of the diverse range of projects dedicated to countering the mechanisms that posit menstruating bodies as inherently Other, shameful and to be concealed. In this thesis, I have provided an in-depth analysis of two examples of feminist performance that both make use of material menstrual blood, as examples of contemporary artistic intervention into menstrual activism. The aim of this analysis has been to contribute to the scholarship on menstrual activism with a theoretical and in-depth analysis of the ambiguity of the topic of menstruation, in terms of feminist readings on the abject and feminist and queer writings on affect theory. Furthermore, the aim of my analysis has been to contribute to the scholarship connecting politics of menstruation to some parts of the broader scope of feminist body politics.

I chose the two performances, Miriam Wistreich's moistsomoist.org and Bjørk Grue Lidin's Fuck Consent as the focus of my analysis because both use material menstrual blood in their work. Other menstrual art projects use symbolic representations of blood, as for example was the case in many of the works included in the menstrual exhibition Hic est sanguine meus discussed in Chapter 4. Partly, I am interested in the significance of material menstrual blood instead of symbolic or discursive representation hereof. Furthermore, I chose these specific performances because both persons behind them are relatively unknown and less mainstream. The objective of focusing on lesser known projects comes from a feminist political

perspective of appreciating and giving space to those experiences that lie outside of dominant discourse. By dedicating the focus of this thesis to these two relatively unknown performances, I furthermore gesture that this work is just as relevant and important as canonical projects.

By emphasizing a focus on *material* menstrual blood, I have intended to locate the significance of corporeality in contrast to symbolic representations of menstrual blood. As I have explored in Chapter 2, on the scholarship on leaky bodies, bodily fluids hold a performative potential of exposing boundaries not only in terms symbolic deconstruction but in the way material fluid seeps and leaks. Therefore, in this thesis I have focused on performances using material menstrual blood, exploring what political potential this materiality might hold.

Both performances are responding to the menstruating body as abject, and as shame or disgust invoking, although in different ways. Moistsomoist responds to blood as abject and affect invoking, by asking where the agency of menstruation can be located and putting focus on the actual material blood. By focusing on material menstrual blood as an agent, Miriam's project illuminates the workings of the mechanisms of the abject. The abject is a moment where meaning collapses, it cannot be defined and thus not represented or categorized. I situate the moistsomoist project as abject art although I also argue that this mode of defining art holds limitations of its own. The project's way of avoiding categorization in terms of form (is it art, is it research, is it a website?) serves to illustrate the nature of the abject within the project itself. By interrogating the nature of material blood and defying prescribed practices of doing art or academics, moistsomoist responds to menstrual blood *as* abject rather than trying to avoid this abject mechanism. Doing abject art, I argue, is destined to fail as the abject per definition is un-representable. Instead, however, the case of Miriam Wistreich's abject art exemplifies

some of the mechanisms of the abject. And this is where I identify the project responding to representations of menstruating bodies as abject, and shame and disgust invoking.

In the Fuck Consent performance, material menstrual blood is utilized as a tool to challenge certain liberalist structures that some feminist politics subscribe to reinstating. I have argued that the invocation of disgust by the performer, by rubbing blood on her bare skin and subsequently shooting it on an unexpecting audience, furthermore exposes limitations of menstrual politics focused on re-inscribing menstruation as acceptable or "natural". The Fuck Consent's performance's response to the menstruating body as abject and shameful, in this case, is by using it as a tool to invoke negative affect, to criticise exclusionary politics.

Through focusing on the abject, and negative affects shame and disgust, and how these come to influence the performances, I have posited an ambiguous reading of the experience and feminist politics of menstruation. I have argued that politics of visibility and representation, where the aim is to broaden the scope of how and which menstruating bodies are presented, is a limited politics in the way it risks re-inscribing the violent normative structures that it seeks to oppose. Furthermore, a politics of un-shaming commonly shameful experiences such as in this case, menstruation, is not necessarily the only way to subvert stigmatization of menstruating bodies and gendered governing through shaming. The gesture of subverting shame, as I have explored in chapter 2, is not necessarily without its complications. The notion of shame has been discussed in depth in relation to queer politics, and I have presented a reading of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's writings on shame as well as the authors of the anthology *Gay Shame* and Judith Halberstam's response to this book. Sedgwick posits shame as an experience central to what constitutes the experience of queer. She argues that the category of shame repels bodies and experiences to the margins of norms and in this case the experience

of shame can be considered a constitutive element of queerness. Rethinking shame as a constitutional queer phenomenon invites a rethinking of these strategies of getting rid of shame. Then, subverting menstrual shame, as I ask in the research questions to this thesis, might not be only about avoiding shame, but in some ways accepting shame as one of the mechanisms that shapes our experiences and existence. The gesture of subversion lies rather, then, in disrupting the idea that shame is intrinsically bad or an indicator of a less worthy experience.

The moistsomoist project responds to shame, again, by focusing on the blood as a material with potential agency. In doing this, Miriam avoids positioning the experience of inhabiting a menstruating body or working with menstrual blood as shameful and subject to concealment. Otherwise she would not be able to put focus on the blood as agent. In the moistsomoist experiments, there is, however, a constant encounter with perceptions of menstruating bodies as shameful and stigmatized, as exemplified through the explanation of getting "that vacant look" from male colleagues and acquaintances, and as exemplified in Miriam's ambivalence towards actually feeling shame for the project in retrospect.

In the Fuck Consent performance, Bjørk Grue Lidin invokes herself as a kind of terrorist performer, exposing fears of uncontained menstrual blood within the liberalist feminist menstrual politics. Within this gesture, there lies an element of taking position on the margins. Or taking position outside of normative structures, as a way of challenging these. In reference to Sedgwick's writing on shame, the queer experience of being on the margin is one often provoked by shame. In this case, Bjørk subverts shame in the Fuck Consent performance by actively engaging with a position of shame.

In relation to Judith Butler's feminist politics, I have presented a reading of how abject bodies play a specific role in her writing as a potential for resistance to regulatory regimes through collective disidentification. The abject bodies in Butler's theory are those unintelligible bodies and experiences which lie as a constitutive outside to the normative and regulative structures that she calls the heterosexual matrix. I have argued, following this, that the political potential of the abject is dependent on unintelligibility and non-representation. For, as soon a subject or experience is articulated, it has become part of the structures of regulatory regimes. Furthermore, a theoretical political problem that has reoccurred throughout this thesis is the way in which gestures of transgressing norms also always reinstate these in the process. Regarding my analysis of the two performances, then, the attempt to identify subversive gestures becomes complicated. Because identifying subversive gestures, where the performance provides an alternative representation to a norm, also serves to reinstate that norm.

Therefore, an important part of my analysis has become the moment where the performance "fails", or something unexpected happens. In chapters 3 and 4 I have presented examples of how performance with material menstrual blood left the projects in a place of vulnerability and perhaps a sense of failure. In the analysis of both performances, I have identified moments or aspects where each artists experiences a kind of failure of their intended purpose with the projects, where the material menstrual blood seems to assume agency and affect them both in unexpected negative ways. Both performances in themselves were experiments in creating or representing something unexpected but the significance of the moments of failure was that this was where the persons behind the performances also lost control. Identifying these moments of "failure" has structured my interpretation of implications of political possibilities when working with material menstrual blood.

Another important part in writing this thesis and analysing the empirical material has been the reflection of how my personal experience, in terms of sometimes inhabiting a menstruating body and in terms of affect, relates to the theoretical discussion. The need to include personal anecdotes and presentations of personal personal affective stems from a somewhat political perspective on the role of academia and academic writing. Writing from a queer feminist perspective, it is important to me to try to be aware of the power structures that my academic work partakes in re-inscribing and upholding. Inspired partly by Cixous' notion of écriture feminine, which is meant as a way to challenge the masculine economy of knowledge and writing, I have tried to find ways to incorporate my embodied and affective experience through personal anecdotes and images. Furthermore, when writing in this, I expose myself as a vulnerable individual. I have found that when writing from a personal perspective in academia, there is an increased feeling of risk of failure. By actively including in the analysis my personal perspective and affective experience, the aim has been to deconstruct the illusion of objectivity when it comes to production of knowledge. By positioning myself in a position of vulnerability, I have attempted to contribute to a rethinking of the role of the researcher as well as engage myself in the experiences that I am writing about.

Furthermore, this approach to conducting the analysis and writing the thesis is connected some of the implications the use of material menstrual blood had for the persons behind the projects in terms of affect. In this case, as discussed above, this notion of failure has come to represent in my thesis the queer feminist political potential that I read in the ability of material blood to invoke shame and disgust and expose the abject. In failure, in terms of Judith Halberstam's queer theory, we might find a possibility to avoid or subvert some regulatory structures of violence and oppression. A queer turn toward failure might make it possible to

incorporate and accept a wider diversity of experience. Furthermore, it might serve as a tool to counter or avoid some of the mechanisms of governing the menstruating body.

At last, then, "hope of failure" comes to represent a queer feminist exploration into the political potential of not avoiding abject being or experiencing negative affect. Although I (somewhat ironically) hope to pass this master's degree, with this thesis, I celebrate representations and experiences of menstruation that do not comply with normative and prescriptive binary positions of good and bad.

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