

Susie Bright

Susie Bright is the best known lesbian sex writer in America. She was editor of the pioneering feminist erotica magazine, *On Our Backs* (whose editorial policy proclaims, "Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian!") and *Herotica: a collection of women's erotic fiction*. Known as the "X-rated intellectual," she has packed theaters across the country with her workshops, lectures and lesbian safe sex demonstrations. Some of her articles—delving into rarely discussed topics such as vaginal fisting—have been published in her recent best-seller, *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World*. Besides writing five books, numerous articles, X-rated film reviews (for *Penthouse Forum*), and appearing in a dozen TV, film and video productions, Susie has given some classic sex-educational presentations—particularly, "How To Read a Dirty Movie," which was illustrated with sizzling film clips. Susie Bright lives in San Francisco with her daughter, Aretha. She can be contacted at 3311 Mission St. #143, San Francisco, CA 94110.

Part I

♦ ANDREA JUNO: Tell us about your background—

♦ SUSIE BRIGHT: If you knew what it was like to be ten years old in 1968 in Los Angeles, I shouldn't have to explain further! My family was influenced by the counter-culture and the politics of the '60s. At the time I was going to a parochial school, and my parish girl scout troop collapsed because of *Beatlemania*—this was when John Lennon was saying the *Beatles* were more important than Jesus. In meetings, all we wanted to do was play *Beatles'* albums and scream and get sexually excited until we peed in our pants!

It was a time when people were dressing up as hippies for Halloween. Reagan was the governor of California, and I was so vehemently against his administration, his treatment of student protestors and his attitude toward the Vietnam War that I did my own neighborhood campaign. I used a crayon that Crayola has now discontinued—"Red Orange"—and made several posters against Reagan's election campaign, signing them, "Concerned Citizens of California." I made about 9 signs and couldn't spell "Concerned Citizens of California" right, even once! I stuck them surreptitiously on people's mailboxes.

My parents lived outside America during the '50s and then returned. They were very interested in the Civil Rights movement and the Beatnik movement and the Folk Music movement . . . all of the *questioning* of the U.S. establishment which was taking place in the "all-American way"—my parents were not the most radical people on earth. As the "counter-culture" grew, I felt very affected by it in a revolutionary way, like: *something was very wrong here*. It's no accident that by the time I got to high school and started meeting radicals and underground newspapers and socialists and Yippies and acid-dropping freaks, it was right up my alley—I had been waiting to grow up to be part of that group.

I wanted to change the world; I wanted to be in a big circular waterbed with all my friends, sharing the "Bohemian" ideals of sexual freedom and imaginative social welfare.

♦ AJ: There was something in the air then; changing the world was not disconnected from changing sexuality in the world—

♦ SB: If you're raised Catholic, you get a lot of very explicit information about the "Do's and Don'ts" of sexual morality. And if you're up for questioning any of it, you're going to have a field day! When I started masturbating I didn't even know the *word* until years later. I thought the devil had gotten inside of me, but I was

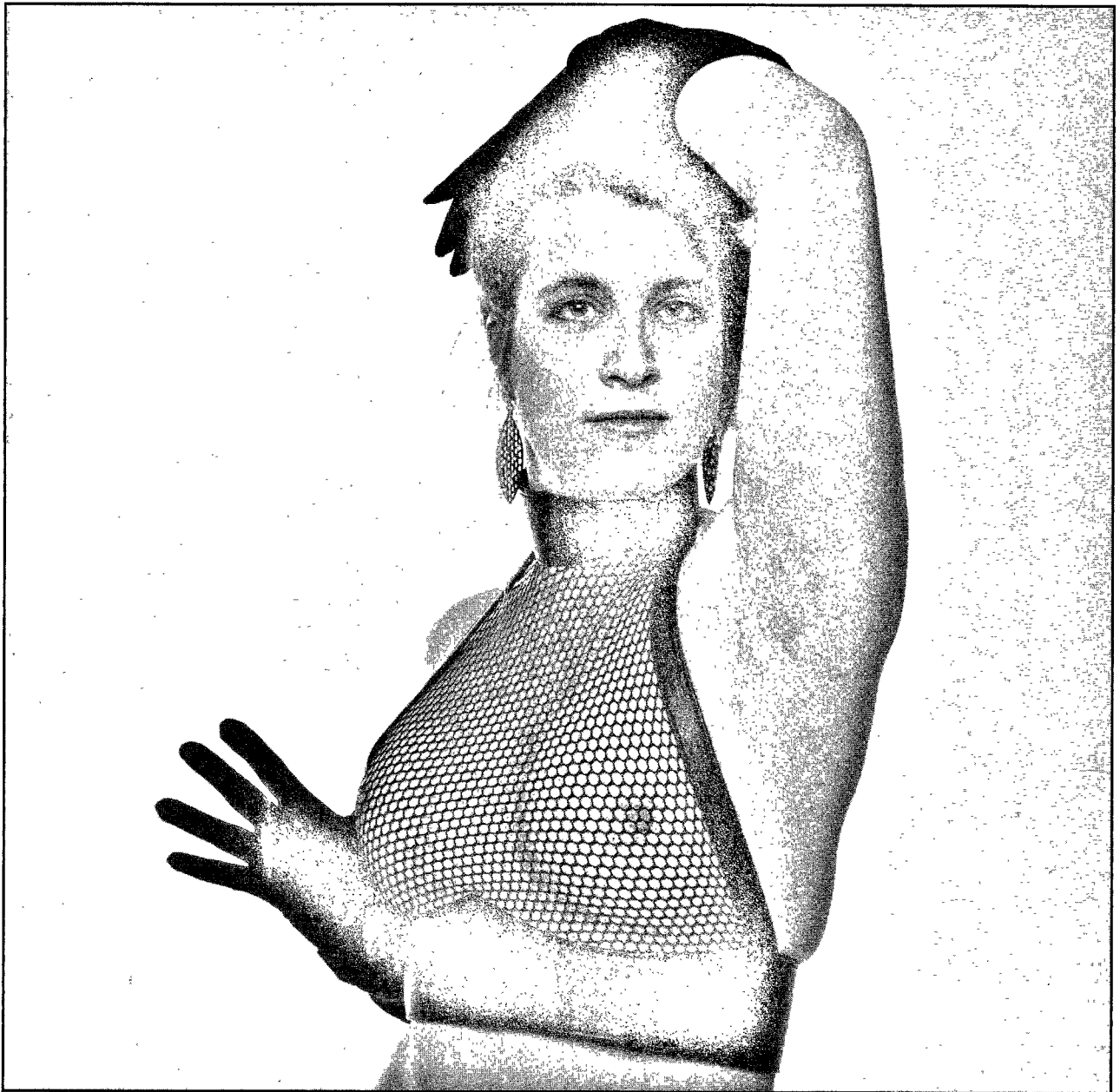


Photo: Jill Posener

somewhat accepting of that—like, there wasn't a whole lot I could do about it. One thing I *did* do was: I stopped going to confession, because I couldn't imagine talking about this to a priest. The only people in the church I could relate to were nuns who were taking off their habits and letting you see their hair for the first time, organizing anti-war *masses* outdoors with painted banners.

At that age, if there was a God, it was Mom—and my mother was divorced. She would never take communion because she'd been "excommunicated," and she was really mad about that!

◆ **AJ:** Why—because she had been divorced?

◆ **SB:** Yes! Consequently she would go to church with me, not take communion and make sarcastic remarks about the priests the entire time. So I was getting these mixed messages: even though we went every Sunday,

she was always making fun of the church and its hypocrisy. She would tell me stories about when she was little and you were never supposed to look at your body, and how patent leather shoes would reflect up your dress and reveal something . . . and how the nuns put talcum powder in your bath water so you would not see your body as you were bathing. She told me these stories to show how silly and stupid these ideas were.

However, when it came to talking about sex itself, my mother was shy. Once I was listening to the *New Lost City Ramblers* sing about when God discovers that Adam and Eve have pinned fig leaves over their genitals. I asked, "Mom, what does 'pinning leaves' mean?" And she turned really red and couldn't tell me. The next day she gave me a little pink book called *A Baby Is Born*. She wanted me to have a scientific, rational approach to sexuality so I wouldn't be scared by it like when she was growing up.





Susie's first performance, Berkeley, 1963

but she couldn't *talk* to me about it—so she gave me a book.

My parents gave me the gift of reading. When I was a kid, the only thing I got punished for was reading *too much*—I got my books taken away, because I wouldn't do my chores. Reading introduced me to a lot of grown-up ideas at a young age. Also, my mother was (and still is) very theatrical and loved to dance and *make-believe*, so I always had a big bag of clothes, high heels, pearls and hats to dress up in.

We moved a lot. Not having any continuous real-life friends, I had a major make-believe world. I had my sack of clothes and dolls and that was my only consistent social life: my little world. I would put on these little exhibitions and performances. My mother was my only dependable audience, and she loved that. Lots of moms want their little girl to learn to dance and sing and make music and just be "Little Miss Vivacious"—my personality was potentially that, anyway.

I often wonder about the question, "What's your background?" because either a normal or an unusual back-

ground can be used to justify a person becoming a deviant, a pervert, or a Bohemian. If I said, "I came from a white-bread, 2.5 children WASP family," then my rebellion would be a "textbook example." Yet if I had "liberal" or divorced or otherwise unusual parents, that also would explain why "she became the raving queer she is today."

♦ AJ: You can twist anyone's background to support any theory you want. Like you, I grew up in the '60s and think something very special happened then that to some degree I'm lamenting, because the next generations won't have that feeling that you can *change the world*. I think this generation feels so defeated that they don't realize they have the right to get outraged—they're just *surviving*!

♦ SB: I know; that feels really sad. It's funny because those of us who were influenced by the radical politics of the '60s—we were rejecting everything. We were rejecting a two-party system; we were rejecting the nuclear family; we were rejecting "job security"—all these things that other people had embraced as part of the future. We had optimism; an attitude of "Why the fuck *not*?" We felt we would "Bring the War Home" to this country; that political issues were meaningful, organizable and that you could *do* something about them. In the '70s by the time I was old enough to participate as an adult, I thought the movement was over. But compared to what's happening now, it was *thriving*.

Yet things have come quite a ways since I came of age sexually. The Gay Liberation movement grew, sexual minorities of all kinds began making their presence known (both in erotic and political ways). That's very exciting. Traditional left politics never knew what the hell to say about sex (except, "If it's under capitalist society, it *must* be bad"). Plus, our culture is so easily titillated by sex that it's hard to get beyond the shock value.

I think people *are* interested in doing art or political work on sexual issues—they want to have a sense of humor *and* they want to seize the state! They want to turn things upside down, but they refuse that pedantic approach that politics had before. Now they insist on the necessity for beauty; they want a sense of the surreal; maybe they want a sense of the spiritual; maybe they want a sense of the visceral. They just want a multi-dimensional approach to social change, and sexuality is so complicated that it really spits in the face of people who want to dogmatize their political issues.

♦ AJ: How did you start to identify yourself as a lesbian—or do you?

♦ SB: I started identifying with all kinds of sexual fantasies by just reading about sex. I didn't have any sexual experience at all—not even a kiss; not even holding someone's hand. It was just me and my sexual fantasies and my masturbating (although all that was very powerful) until I was 16.

My first sexual experience was with a man and a woman, and in one afternoon I went from no kissing to *everything*! I was very pleased with myself, and also felt this was an omen that I was bisexual (to me, "bisexual"

was more of an anthropological than a political term). I was aroused by both the man and the woman and felt comfortable with both. I was so overimpressed by the "first-timeness" of it all that I really can't say what specifically stimulated me; I was just excited to be doing something. It all felt like the most natural thing in the world: to kiss *her*; to kiss *him*—to be with two people at the same time. I had my utopian dream then: I imagined that everybody was bisexual . . . and that if everyone would just get over their "hang-ups," we could all be having such a good time!

Then I became introduced to lesbian politics and the idea: "Why be with a man when you can be with a woman?" And there were all these reasons why. Now I completely disagree with the notion of having *reasons why* anyone goes to bed with anyone else, because my attractions have led me down so many strange paths with both men and women that there are no rational justifications or explanations. This is a perfect example of people trying to mix linear-brained politics with sexuality. Even though it was stimulating to ask: "Why do you feel you need to be with a woman?" or "Why do you need a man's approval to be an exciting, successful woman?" Politically, those questions were very arousing, but sexually, they didn't necessarily ensure *gratification*.

♦ **AJ: This is a key issue: taking a political stance, yet not being dogmatic about the varieties of sexuality which defy facile categorization—**

♦ **SB:** I was seduced by the feminist ideal of lesbianism—it made perfect sense that a woman would know best how to please and care for another woman. It was appealing because of course I loved women; women are fantastic; and anything that promotes women and loving women is *where it's at!* So those ideas were very easy to embrace. I enjoyed confronting the way I'd been raised to be a "wife" or "mother" . . . how I had been invested with certain notions of "femininity" that didn't fit me, and that I was longing to throw off my shoulders. I was *happy* to rebel. At the same time I was having affairs with women that didn't follow any particular lesbian-feminist prescription, but I wasn't taking myself to task for it: this was *life*. I had my political ideas and tried to incorporate them into my personal life, but when they didn't fit I lacked the insight to understand *why*; I needed to grow up a bit.

Sometimes I think, "What else could I do?"—I was 16. I still don't understand myself, and now I'm 33. Because I was too young and too scared to go to bars (I didn't know anything about gay bar life or the old gay world), the only lesbians I had contact with were women who all wore a certain "uniform" and carried a certain set of politics—and that's what I thought "lesbian" was. I didn't know any gay men whatsoever.

There was so much excitement uncovering the things we were fighting for, that I didn't stop and think, "Why is it that at my underground newspaper every woman involved in this collective has slept with each other, and none of the men have?" [laughs] For a long time I never

really paused and thought about that; I just loved my group and was very loyal to them.

I'm proud of the fact that I was a member of the longest-lasting high school underground newspaper ever published in this country: *The Red Tide*. It fought a very important court case: the right of high school students to publish anything without prior censorship (just because they're minors), and I was the plaintiff in that case (it wasn't settled until long after I was out of high school). We won, although in a practical sense the victory was rather hollow, because ever since I graduated, high school students have more and more become prisoners in a little cage . . .



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♦ **AJ: When did you graduate?**

♦ **SB:** I would have graduated in '76, but I left a year earlier. By that point I had joined a *grown-up* socialist organization which had come out of the "New Left." Our plan was to merge the student movement with the working class movement . . . to organize important unions and industries until we could do like the "Wobblies" had done, and force a General Strike!

So in the mid-'70s I got a solid, first-hand introduction to trade unionism. It was hard to just attend *high school* when I was on the ground floor of starting a teamster rank-and-file group—at five o'clock in the morning I'd be leafleting every teamster bar in L.A. county. Then I'd get a bundle of *Red Tides* and distribute them to other high schools in the district (because we had our *own* politics: "Narcs in the Schools!" or our "Gay Liberation" issue or our "Free Palestine!" issue—*whatever* was going on, we had something to do with it). I'd get to school around 9 AM and be *exhausted*. The idea that I was just supposed to sit there and discuss something like Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*—I thought, "Are you kidding me?" I had a taste of influencing *real life* politics; I was writing propaganda on important issues of the day, and didn't feel like writing term papers on "Caste Systems in India." I was in Marxist study groups 3 nights out of every week, and didn't have time to participate in high school *bullshit*—so I left.

I wanted to start *Red Tides* all over the place. *Red Tide* was in Los Angeles and we joined forces with this incredible group in the Bay Area called the "Contra Costa Socialist Collective" which was formerly the "Red Polar Bear Party." It was a group of kids at St Ignacio Valley





High School—you never know where some band of radicals is going to emerge—but these kids turned things upside-down there. They did guerrilla actions against tract homes, they did environmental zap actions before *Greenpeace* was even on the scene—

♦ AJ: These were *high school kids*—

♦ SB: Yes, and a lot of us were living outside our parents' homes in communes—high school student flop-houses. I left home when I was 17; I was lucky in that my father encouraged me. Some kids ran away and others—well, their families didn't *care*. We were busy little bees; after joining forces with the Contra Costa group, we decided to branch out to the Midwest. Realizing we were predominantly white, we wanted to have a more multi-racial organization, so a group of us moved to Detroit and started the first *Red Tide* to hit the urban Midwest.

That was really incredible: you'd write about everything unfair going on in your high school—from the non-union lettuce in your hamburger to the fact that the principal was expelling anyone who wore a hat because it meant they were a gang member... to lies told in U.S. History class about black history or Indians... to criticizing the sexism in the school—you name it. We critiqued how some of us were being trained to be janitors or to be unemployed, while others were being tracked to go to college.



People *are* interested in doing art or political work on sexual issues—they want to have a sense of humor *and* they want to seize the state! They want to turn things upside down, but they refuse that pedantic approach that politics had before.



♦ AJ: It's amazing that high school kids could do things like that. I remember when I was in high school we stopped school for a day to have a moratorium against the Vietnam War. I don't think that would happen nowadays—

♦ SB: We had a high school strike against the war! We brought Jane Fonda to our high school in '73 when she was fresh out of Hanoi, and her talk was so intense that after the school bell rang and they yanked her microphone, a whole group of us just walked out of school to a nearby park to continue doing a *teach-in* against the war. And this was when Nixon was in Cambodia.

Our high school administration was so angry that they said the only way Jane Fonda could speak was if we had an "opposing view." So Bob ("B-1 Bomber") Dornan (one of the most successful right wing politicians from

Southern California) came to speak, and basically his position was, "Bomb Hanoi!" He and his wife were raving lunatics. We were attracting a lot of attention, and Ron Kovac (the Vietnam vet against the war who wrote *Born on the Fourth of July*) and other members of his veterans' group showed up. They were right in front in their wheelchairs heckling Bob: "Look at me, bud—I served in this war and I don't agree with you!" And Dornan's wife lost it—she started beating on these guys in wheelchairs with her purse! That kind of stuff I just don't see happening in high schools anymore. . .

We had "Women's Week" which was our alternative to the "Girls' Week" that was sponsored by our idiotic girls' dean (who was a dyke, of course). The *Red Tide* women got together with all the other feminist union women and formed this women's group. We decided we wanted a birth control information seminar, a lesbian panel, self-defense classes, a Holly Near concert, a "Women's History Day" . . . all to counteract the "Powder Puff" football cheerleading brigade and the "Mother/Daughter Bake Sale." And we did all that!

This was before I ever thought I would have children—at that time I didn't think it was "right" to bring children into such a shitty world. I knew people couldn't believe that *teenagers* could be this politically active and intellectually aware, and have the brains and the know-how to pull these things off—yet we did. This whole idea of the *empowerment of young people* was no small thing to me; we did it and were very effective, very powerful. From that point on I was very excited: working with young people and knowing the potential that's just *sitting there*—they have an enthusiasm that—when you get older, you just can't recapture ever again.

So . . . four of us white kids from California went to Detroit to organize an all-black chapter of the *Red Tide* in the inner city schools—this was in the '70s when Detroit was the first city hit by the Recession. And we weren't doing a "Just Say No" campaign—we danced and fucked and smoked dope all the time! A couple of us were the most talkative and best-informed about the "politics"—the rest were better at making small talk and selling dope! The combination of the two would bring people around—both the ones who were ideologically attracted, and the people who went, "Hey—cool party, check it out!" But the combination worked. It was a very exciting group of people in a much more repressive environment than Los Angeles.

I remember when we had a Midwest "teach-in" for high school students on *apartheid*—before that became a household word. We arranged for some wonderful speakers from South Africa to show up, and planned all kinds of other events. In order to provide an excuse for kids to get out of home, we printed these fake forms advertising some liberal "YMCA" kind of program, but in reality the kids were coming to our *Red Tide* anti-apartheid symposium. At the end of the day everyone was tired out and came to my house to have spaghetti.

Like I said, we were a pretty hard-partying group, but

at this point everyone was so pooped they were just lying around on sofas waiting for the spaghetti to get cooked. All of a sudden there was a hideous pounding at the door—it was the *cops*! I was trying to gather my wits about me; the police were so angry and violent—it was obvious that, to them, something was a really big deal. I stepped outside the front door and asked, "What's going on?" and they sneered, "None of your fuckin' business!" They were swearing at me and being really abusive—it was one of those events you need a video camera for.

I asked, "Why should I let you in my house without a warrant?" and one of 'em took my arm and twisted it behind my back, pulled his gun on me and said, "Open the fuckin' door!" So I opened the door, feeling responsible for everyone sitting inside (who ranged in age from 13 to 20). And I saw the fear in the cops' eyes and realized that they weren't afraid of me the way I was afraid of them. I was afraid of their guns and of them assaulting us, but they were afraid because we were an interracial group of young people just sitting around peacefully—and they couldn't comprehend that. Somebody had called them because they saw black and white teenagers sitting together in a living room—that's why they had come.

Then they blustered, "We have information that you are holding a kidnapped police officer inside!"—yeah, *right*! Luckily, because it was such a totally innocent situation, I think even *they* saw that their fears were overblown—there was *nothing* going on. But it made everybody—the whole establishment in Detroit—very upset to see this group of black and white teenagers just socializing (and organizing) together. This caused the most incredible sexual terror and security panic. And this kind of social reaction happened over and over again—this raid was just the most *violent* manifestation of it. The police went away after ordering our group to



Susie (right) just out of high school with best friends Kim Anno (left) and Rebecca Hall at a Pro-Choice Demonstration in Los Angeles, 1978.

disperse. Of course I got in a lot of trouble because it wasn't my apartment—it was some older grown-up's, who was not too pleased at the turn of events during our "spaghetti dinner."


◆ **AJ:** What happened after the Detroit organizing group?

◆ **SB:** Well, our teamster organizing in particular was successful—so successful that it split apart the group and I was expelled!

◆ **AJ:** Why?


◆ **SB:** It was just *horseshit*. We didn't know what to do with the success we had with the teamsters—we had created a rank-and-file group that set into motion the first national strike in the history of the teamsters, as well as a union reform group called "Teamsters for a Democratic Union." People were arguing about the best way to approach this. Some felt we should fit in with "mainstream" teamsters as much as possible—therefore every-






one should sew an American flag on their jacket, get married and listen to Country & Western music and sort of "put on the dog" to impress these "working-class" people. Others felt that *those* are not the teamsters who are interested in socialism or revolutionary feminism or sexual liberation or fighting racism—the kind of people who support that are young people, part-timers, blacks and women. So there was this real "What approach do you take?" quandary.

Success was looming large—in fact, I would say that success was what broke up the group! At the time it was over issues that in retrospect seem very petty now. But I think the break-up had to do with *not knowing how to handle success*. Everyone had put this "trust" in one central body and thought that we all agreed with each other—but we *didn't*, really, and we didn't know how to cooperate and work with our differences.



I found out *everybody* has some kind of gay history—either gay people in their family, or they've had a homosexual experience.



I had to get out of Detroit because politically it became really ugly—I was part of the "opposition" and I had to leave. So I went to Kentucky where busing had started only the year before, and the sole white people defending the black community were Communists. When I arrived in Louisville I was taken to a house where someone greeted me with, "Well, you're gonna need *this!*" and handed me a shotgun. I asked, "Where should I keep it?" and the reply was, "I'd sleep with it if I were you!" Like: *Welcome to Louisville!*

When the group broke up, the guy who'd given me his shotgun was on the other side. When he came over to take back his gun he was so tense—I know there was this tiny part of him that wondered if I was going to blow him away—we'd been fighting so passionately. And when I handed him the shells (which let him know that the gun was empty)—well, all the blood just drained out of his face!

After that, I talked to my dad and said, "All right, I guess I'll go to college." I didn't know what to do; my world had been broken apart. Being in this group had been so intense, like being part of an ultra-ultra cadre; there were some "cultish" aspects to it, where you think you could never fuck anyone outside the group, or that nobody on the "outside" could possibly *understand* you. And it was terrible—when the group fractured, a lot of people felt very debilitated and depressed.

♦ **AJ:** The '60s had that sense of community and

trust. When it ended, a lot of people felt abandoned. Suddenly it was like: "You're on your own now!"

♦ **SB:** Right. So I went to college in Southern California and sought refuge in Women's Studies and Theater, and it was very exciting because it turned out I was in one of the most radical Women's Studies departments in the country, with rootin' tootin' lesbian feminists. Even though my Marxism made me critical of some of their positions, I needed this; I needed a good dose of something other than what I'd been feeding on.

It was exciting to see that commitment and expansion. This was a time when the Feminist Women's Center was beginning in Los Angeles, and we were doing the whole "Do your own speculum," "Do your own birth control"—"Do your own *everything!*" We were exploring "the Body"; self-help groups were really popular, and self-defense classes were really popular. This was right when Andrea Dworkin's anti-pornography "issue" had started to become known. But it hadn't completely dominated the women's movement yet; other things were in the air.

In theater class, the very first collective project we did was on lesbianism, and I was the only person who actually had some lesbian experience. That was my first experience as "Susie Sexpert"—I knew something that nobody else knew; I had *hands-on* experience. This show was particularly memorable because of the prettiest girl in the cast—a blonde princess, the only one among us who had had the perfect romantic sexual awakening with a man on a sailboat and a sunset. The rest of us had experienced more squalid initiations—one person had been raped, someone else had done it in the dark and hated it . . . but hers sounded "picture-perfect." Yet she became the biggest dyke in the entire group!

Years later, "Mary" is still the most committed dyke I know—right up there, a Kinsey "6." Everyone can empathize with the excitement of bringing someone "out" for the first time or being someone's "first." And I was the first woman she ever kissed! She had the reaction everyone wants when you kiss someone for the first time: she fell back on the sofa, turned bright red and her eyes rolled back in her head. She let this incredible sigh come out and breathed, "I've never *felt* anything like that before." She could barely catch her breath, yet all I did was kiss her! I felt like Prince Charming waking up Sleeping Beauty; it was a devastating experience.

In Long Beach, which is on the edge of Orange County, I was attending a college which was a little hotbed of radicalism. I worked as an extra in Hollywood movies, and also was in an experimental theater group called the "Frankenstein Theater," doing "demolition derby" versions of Greek myths. For money we would act out Mark Twain stories at senior citizen nursing homes and insane asylums. I was "The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" at every funny farm in Southern California.

This was when the Briggs Initiative in California was being promoted. Briggs, a conservative Republican, was trying to outlaw anybody in the public school system who would say a decent word for gay people. His posi-

tion was: if you were gay, you should be fired; and if you support people who were gay, you should be fired. This marked the birth of "Gay Power" as we know it in the state of California, because people started coming out of the closet and demanding that the public know who the gay community *was*. For the first time I went from door-to-door saying, "Hi, I'm gay. My name's Susie and I want to talk to you about this initiative and why you should vote against it."

This was a very powerful experience for me. I had hundreds of conversations with different individuals, and found out that *everybody* has some kind of gay history—either they have gay people in their family, or they've had a homosexual experience themselves. So this is an issue that anyone can talk about. That was a big change for me; in terms of issues gay politics and gay liberation provided a much bigger framework than the lesbian-feminist scene I had been exposed to. And I got introduced to bar life for the first time, and working with gay men, and all this was much to the better in terms of my understanding of sexual politics and a sexual liberation philosophy. I began to realize that the sexual liberation message had something in it that feminist theory didn't have, just as feminist theory had something that Marxist theory didn't have. So I was piecing sections of theories together—

♦ **AJ:** What does feminism lack in terms of sexual liberation?

♦ **SB:** Well, feminism is a discussion of gender and oppression based on the premise that men are "better" than women. Feminism's position on sexuality is: women have a right to control their own bodies; women know what is best for our own bodies; our sexuality is as powerful and lustful as a man's; and our sexual integrity is right "up there" with a man's. This might be a legitimate feminist "take" having to do with an idea of equality (not sameness, but prerogative, initiative, dominion, power—and control, too)—

♦ **AJ:** Back then, the Andrea Dworkin-types were very influential in the feminist movement. You were a pioneer in bringing porno and erotic issues out into the open—

♦ **SB:** The Separatist point of view put *patriarchy* as the core issue the world revolves around, whereas the "Sexual Liberation" message was about differences based on sexuality; the idea of undermining a sexuality based on procreation and the maintenance of the nuclear family. It went further, in not just *criticizing* the fact that stereotypical sex roles were restricting, but advocating that sex roles had erotic possibilities if you *subverted* them! Eroticism gave a spin to some of feminism's lessons, and that made a lot of sense to me.

I knew that from the time of the suffragettes, feminism had always been split between—well, Emma Goldman's a perfect example when she said, "It's not my revolution if I can't dance to it!" (and here she was clearly talking about fucking). Now we can read her love letters and learn that she had "G spot" ejaculations and was bisexual

and was *this* and *that* and that she loved sex; she felt part of her sexual politics was to embrace "free love"! When I read her memoirs I thought, "Nothing has changed—I feel exactly the way this woman does! I am a free love enthusiast!" That's what they called it then; that's where I'm at now. She was promoting a very strong, exciting vision of women's sexuality.

On the other hand, there were always feminists who in the old days were epitomized by Carrie Nation; she felt that women were moral guardians and that femininity was a Vice Squad! Sexuality to her was "male"; and maleness was almost equated to a *rapist mentality*. And that idea really appalled me, because it took all the sensitivity and diversity and power behind what drives masculinity and femininity and just reduced it to really ugly, ugly stuff.



In every culture, whatever is taboo gets eroticized. In this country, it's black-white relations, incest and rape. Any taboo subject is often a well of sexual dynamite.



♦ **AJ:** Well, Andrea Dworkin's conception is similar; when she teamed up with the fundamentalist Christians against porno—

♦ **SB:** If you understand that Andrea Dworkin is the reincarnation of the Marquis de Sade, her whole thing makes sense! She's a severely repressed sadist. I just have to say: read her novel *Ice and Fire* as a companion piece to Sade's *Justine*, and you'll realize that they are the exact, same story: a woman who tries to be virtuous, who tries to do the right thing, and what happens? She gets fucked in the ass in a really mean way, over and over again. Not in a nice way, but in a mean way! And when I read in the *New York Times* that Andrea Dworkin has a special place for dishes that her partner hasn't cleaned properly (so he can re-scrub them), I thought, "This is all too clear and too painful! Why isn't everyone noticing this?"

Recently I compared myself to Andrea Dworkin, because she's the one other person in America I can count on to look at any situation and locate the sexual politics. I really appreciate that about her: the fact she finds the sex in *any* issue. She has a radar for the masculine/feminine, top/bottom confrontation in life, and you can bet she'll find it. And her research is brilliant. Of course, the two of us deviate in terms of what we consider the outcome or conclusion.

For example, she wrote an article on Israel for *Ms.* magazine. She talked about growing up Jewish; her early feelings about Zionism; her departure from it; visit-





Virgin Machine, a film by Monika Treut.

ing Israel. And then one thing she talked about (that no other travel/tourism writer would ever discuss) was: pornography in Israel. I was fascinated—I want to know *everything* about pornography all over the world. She said, “They don’t have porno magazines as such; it’s more a part of everyday life. It’s in magazines you can pick up anywhere.” And she revealed that popular symbols, styles, locations and props recall images of the holocaust, citing “Trains, showers, long dark tunnels, very skinny women, weirdo doctor-nurse garb”—she had this long list of “evidence.” Essentially she was describing a *Night Porter* scenario of all these different elements that one might call *holocaust fetishism* (an eroticization of the holocaust, but not in a blatant way). Then she went on to say how much this *sickened* her. I’m sure that what she observed is quite true, in terms of those images.

Where I go from there is: I see that in every culture, whatever is horrifying, whatever is beyond sane social comprehension—all that is considered “taboo” gets *erotici- zed*. In this country it’s black-white relations, incest and rape—everything that is beyond “typical” understanding. Any taboo subject is often a well of sexual dynamite. Sexual taboos involve catharsis; they are not about butterflies and daisies and pretty walks along the coast (those are all very “nice” and you might have great sex involving any of those) but typically our most powerful fantasies have to do with images that are dominating,

violent, unequal, and cruel . . .

One could have these fantasies and perhaps feel insecure about them, like, “Am I a cruel person?” or “Do I believe in these stereotypes and prejudices? Do I support these fears that manifest themselves in my fantasies?” And you may get to a point where you feel quite confident and say, “Well, as a matter of fact I don’t.” I’m sure that for people who find themselves sexually moved by some of the awful history of the holocaust—it’s quite a contradiction to deal with; you can’t just sit back and think, “Why am I, a Jew, turned on by any of this? How can I be? Am I self-loathing?” Although—that’s one way to handle it.

Another way to deal with this is to feel confident about what you believe in, your understanding of history, and your sense of right and wrong, and realize that your sexual fantasies are not some kind of *McGuffey’s Reader* on how to live—they’re *sex*. And sex takes anxiety and prohibition and all these things we become numb or rationalist or linear with—sex takes them and just rips them out of your clit! It handles that kind of material in a completely non-rational manner. I’m not *surprised* that holocaust imagery would be the hot porno topic in Israel, anymore than I’d be surprised that religion and history and war in any culture you visit has had a tremendous impact on the sexuality and what is considered “exciting” and “titillating” in that culture.

◆ **AJ:** Didn't you write a column for *Penthouse*?

◆ **SB:** For over two years I wrote a column called "The Erotic Screen" for *Penthouse Forum*. It was a nice opportunity. *Penthouse* had a "radical" editorial staff at the time who loved *On Our Backs* and decided they wanted to include a video column. They asked me, "Would I take a crack at it?" I was nervous at first, because I didn't know a lot about video, and I was very critical of what I knew to be *out there* so far. Not for those typical Dworkin-ite reasons, but for my own.

I felt most porn videos were mediocre and they condescended to the audience; they were supposed to appeal to your sense of guilt and your assumption that all such videos are "crap, but I'll get off on it anyway." Most of them were completely oriented to what the male raincoat-wearer is supposed to be preoccupied with. They were *insulting*!

I didn't have a VCR so I had to go to adult theaters and watch them, and I made some incredible discoveries. In these disgusting stinko theaters, every once in a while on the screen something would happen that would just make my mouth hang open. Sometimes because it was so sexy, and sometimes because it was moving or consciousness-raising in a way I could never have foreseen. I treasured those little moments, and was thrilled to have the opportunity to write about them.

I quickly realized that I was not able to give "erection-ratings" to movies and write in a facile way about what was being ground out of the porno factory that week. It was much more interesting to write essays about *life* and use pornography to illustrate my point. So if I wanted to talk about war or guns, I'd talk about pornography where all the women carried high-powered weapons. Or if I wanted to talk about prostitution, I'd include some porn movies that had that as a theme. If I wanted to talk about incest, I'd talk about incest on the screen.


Sometimes I'd do behind-the-scenes stories, like the father-son relationship in the porn industry which I believe is the heaviest family bond in American business! I know stories that would break your heart. My favorite one is about the young man I met at a porno convention who was selling gay tapes; he looked like a young street hustler himself. I began talking to him and he said, "Yeah, I'm in business with my dad." I said, "No kidding! How'd that come about?" He said, "Well, I didn't know my dad growing up; I was raised by my mom and never saw him. I got in a lot of trouble; I got into drugs; I joined the Navy but kept fucking up so they kicked me out.

"I ended up in Hollywood hustling and doing bullshit scams. There was this bar that catered to rich, soft queens looking for people such as myself. One night I walked in and saw this blonde, balding guy at the end of the bar. I went over to talk and he took a special interest in me; he kept delaying me. He didn't go for what I thought he was going to go for; he kept wanting to talk, and kept looking at me in this *very strange* way. He kept drinking and I kept drinking and I was getting really bombed when he pulled his wallet out and said, 'You're my son!' and showed a


photo of me that was taken before I joined the navy.

"He said, 'Your mom's been sending me pictures of you all these years. I have pictures of you and your siblings.'" Well, the son *freaked*; he tore out of the bar and went on a bender for a week because he just couldn't deal with it. But at some point he came to and went back to that bar and sure enough, there was his dad . . . who asked, "Do you want to go into business with me making gay porn movies?" The son answered, "Yes," and that was all she wrote.

I soon discovered that fathers and sons are very important in this business. *Family* is important, because the family are the only people who support you and love you and know you as human beings instead of as "pornographers"—which is how the media views you. Customers, after all, have no sense of "you." Pornography exists in such a twilight zone that the only people who see you for who you are, is your family. So there's this embrace of one's children that's really powerful.



There is no commercial child pornography, period. That's just been the battering ram of the right wing to close down 1) legitimate sex education of young people, and 2) the whole media of eroticism.




When I had my child, Aretha, no one sent more sentimental greetings and bouquets than my friends in the porn business. They were the ones who were like the Italian grandparents—they just went bananas. They would say, "There is nothing more precious than your children." [laughs] And that's part of the reason they get so upset about accusations of child pornography—because they're *parents*. They're very protective of their kids.

◆ **AJ:** Is there child pornography in—

◆ **SB:** *There is no commercial child pornography, period.* That's been used as a hideous "pink herring" or something! Every despicable act that humankind has thought of is probably on videotape somewhere, now, and it doesn't have to involve a child for it to be ugly. Really sick things have happened and sick people have profited and gloated and god-knows-what over them. But these things that really spark our sense of horror and evil are *not* really available on the commercial market—you just can't walk in and get them anywhere. And that includes child pornography—that's not something that has *ever* been readily available.

On the other hand, this country is so sex-negative that a book like *Show Me* was virtually run out of the country. The photos showed little children, young adults and






adults in the nude; it showed genitals, bodies and differences between men and women; what men and women look like when they make love; what a pregnant woman looks like, etc. This was a children's book which was produced in Scandinavia —


♦ AJ: I saw it; it was an incredibly humanistic, almost New Age presentation —

♦ SB: Very New Age, yet it was hounded out of this country. I know I started having sex when I was a teenager; I know that sexual feelings among children and young people are very powerful and vital, and to say that they don't exist is appalling! It's just as appalling as an adult exploiting a kid's sexual inexperience and lack of power. It's sick to be *ignorant* — people get taken advantage of because they're ignorant. So when people say "child porn" to me, it means nothing but *political rhetoric* — because in practical terms it simply doesn't exist.

An individual's story about someone using or abusing a child — that *means* something to me. But don't talk to me about "kiddie porn" because that's just been the battering ram of the right wing to close down 1) legitimate sex education of young people, and 2) the whole media of eroticism. When progressive-minded people (erotic artists, whatever they call themselves) are trying to create new words, pictures and ideas and bring diversity, creativity and quality to this medium, it really hurts us to have critics and nay-sayers saying, "Well, we don't know if we can buy this; after all, *you may be child pornographers!*" That kind of instant condemnation terminates discussion; there's nothing more to say once that label has been dropped . . .



**In porno movies, why does the man
always cum on the outside? What's
the point — I believe he came!**



♦ AJ: So what are some of the discoveries you made?

♦ SB: I learned that pornography employs a language of directness that is like four-letter-words: it shows everything without comment. It's like, "Here it is. People try to color this a certain way, but here it is. Here's a cock and a vagina jumping up and down on each other. This is what sucking looks like. And this is what somebody's big fat butt looks like." It's all *right there*; it doesn't try to make it be anything other than what it is.

It's like yelling "Fuck!" in a crowded theater — it's a language everyone knows but no one wants to admit to. What's hard to understand about porn movies (when you're new to them) is: there's all these *rules* that you begin to realize are *de rigueur* — that on the face of it doesn't make any *sense*. Why do they have a certain kind

of sex act in the first five minutes? Why do you see the same sex acts in the same positions over and over? Probably the most famous question is, "Why does the man always cum on the outside?" What's the point — I *believe* he came!

Some of these "rules" are like vestigial remnants from the early days of porn: "they're *really* doing it; this isn't simulated; see, he's having an orgasm, there's the cum — *see, see, see . . .*" All they needed was to throw a wet hanky at you! These "rules" for a "successful" porn movie bypassed certain basics: good acting — who cares? Good script — who cares? Women's sexual satisfaction — who cares? None of this was that important.

Nevertheless, you do have real people having real sex in these movies. You also have directors who work in this medium for a lot of different reasons. Some of them want very badly just to make movies and are using this genre as a way to work. Others are sick of the hypocrisy in Hollywood, plus they want to *say something* about sex. And *those* kind of directors and actors who were more sincere (as to their own sexual energy) I would find fascinating to watch; I'd really look forward to watching them and I'd become their fan.

I began to develop some ideas: "A lot of feminists want to know: What do women *want* out of erotica?" And there is a certain "list" of requirements, such as: we want to see women cumming. That's so far ahead of everything else on the list, it's hardly worth it to get into anything else. I would rather see women getting turned on and cumming and seeing the look on their faces as they come down from their orgasm — I'd rather see *that* than almost any of the other criteria on my list, like: "Nice looking people," "nice looking location," "inventive dialogue," "meaningful plot" — all that I could take a bath on if I could just really vicariously *live* through the woman's sexual arousal.

But the question is not just, "What would women like to see?" — it's what *everyone* would like to see. I think there's a gross *underestimation* of what the male viewer would be interested in. I mean, after you've seen a few pussies and a few breasts — after you're over your "nudity threshold," well, there's more to it than that. At first you may just be amazed to see the act being done, but then that gets a little *wearying . . .*

I remember a group of us gals from *On Our Backs* were in Times Square for the first time. We'd heard that in New York City it was legal to show men and women having intercourse on stage, and we wondered, "What did that look like? How would they perform?" So we went to one of those huge sleazoid showplaces where they have hundreds of booths with seemingly all pre-op transsexuals behind door number one, and a dyke with a whistle around her neck supervising the entire floor, and a headliner somewhere who's doing a striptease number, and peep show movies, and it's all organized around taboos and voyeurism and seeing body parts, and this is what the big hit is: *talking dirty*. We're having a field day; we're the only women in there . . .



Susie with Christian Mann, one of her mentors in pornography.

Photo: Honey Lee Cottrell

◆ **AJ: Was the place sort of sticky?**

◆ **SB:** They have lots of janitors with mops who are constantly running in and cleaning up. Some guys clean up after themselves, and some don't, you know . . . but these mop-up crews keep pretty busy—at least in the better places they do. When I first started going to adult theaters I had this *fear of fluids*. But it wasn't as bad as I thought. Some places have this unaccountable odor—I don't know *what* causes it!

Anyway, we finally found the room with the male-female love act. Five of us went in, and there's a small circular stage about 6 feet in diameter, with folding chairs that aren't even unfolded leaning against the walls. The room is painted black. We got the folding chairs out and sat down. It was cold—no heat in the room. A few other men trickled in. It was dead quiet except for us talking—that's one of the things I *hate* about porn theaters: you're not supposed to *say* anything—even carry on a normal conversation.


◆ **AJ: Why not?**

◆ **SB:** You're supposed to be in your own private world. The unwritten law is: "Don't let anybody intrude!" and "Don't bring the real world into your private fantasy world . . . just let everyone be all by themselves; imagine it all alone, with no laughing, no giggling, and no gossiping"—and that's just not *fun*! I was always the person who would be reacting out loud in a porn theater,

whereas everyone else would be so deathly quiet, except for the occasional "heavy breathing thing"—but even that would be quite subdued.


So . . . the first song came on. I was used to striptease being a variety act in that something different happens with each song, in terms of how many clothes come off or what the dancer reveals. This sleepy, soft, round, plump black woman came out who reminded me of a koala bear. I thought she might be *really tired*—but perhaps that was her way of being sexy. Slowly she took off her clothes to one of those Marvin Gaye "Fuck me, baby" songs—and that was all right. Considering the setting, it was pretty sensual.

Then the guy who had taken our tickets walked onstage, dropped his pants (but left his shirt and Nike shoes on), and the woman started sucking him. I realized that this was partly to show off an oral sex act, but also to get him hard. The ticket-taker had a nice build, but it was rather distracting that he hadn't taken his clothes off for us, the same way she had. Then, there was this *critical moment* when he got it up, and she *quickly* scooted into a position where he could slide it inside her. There was a little bit of pumping and then all of a sudden (it seemed to happen simultaneously) he pulled out *soft*, and the song (it was a record) went *scratch*! Someone just *boom*! lifted the needle up, the lights went on and the show was *over*! Basically: he lost his erection, they yanked the song




off, and the show was over. The harsh fluorescent overhead lights came on, so all of us girls got up, the male pulled his pants back on and started being the janitor/cashier again.

We left wondering, "What kind of a love act was *that*?" We're lesbians—I'm sorry, we were dissatisfied. So we gave the guy a hard time: "Hey, we wanted *more* from you! You have a nice body but you didn't *do* anything with it! You didn't even bother to take your clothes off. There was no foreplay, no grace—I mean, all of a sudden you lose your hard-on and the show's over?!" And he was completely mystified by our criticism; he just said, "Well, what can I say? You do 7 shows a day—you're just *tired*!" And I'm sure he *was* tired. But you can see that this whole set-up was designed around the idea that "Now you're going to *see* it—and it's going to be 'shocking' or 'lurid' or 'gross' or 'outrageous'!" Not: "This is going to be a *truly erotic experience*."



When I first started going to adult theaters I had this *fear of fluids*.
Some places have this unaccountable odor—I don't know *what* causes it!



◆ AJ: Do you think it was erotic for the guys sitting in the audience? What was their reaction?

◆ SB: Mute. I don't know. The first time I ever saw a photo of people having intercourse it stimulated me—it was both scary and exciting. But it didn't take long before photos of body parts in certain positions had very *limited* arousal potential. I mean they're *okay* as an opening, but I want more. And I get angry that just because something like this has been *forbidden* to me, it's supposed to provide enough excitement for the day?!

I'm much more excited by something that gets me on a lot of different levels. I'm not trying to sound high and mighty—I mean, I've used pornography as a vibrator sometimes. There've been times when I go, "Get out the 'All Anal Action' tape and let's watch it!" and just focus really hard on certain pictures and get my own fantasy machine going to just supplement all the other atmospheric elements I might want . . . and *get off* on that. There's a place for that that's sexually legitimate. It's just . . . what's so frustrating about commercial pornography is that it doesn't have a lot of aspirations, it doesn't have a lot of ambition, it accepts the stigma and the Twilight Zone that porn is put into.

In some ways I fully expect Hollywood, rather than the pornographers, to be the ones that bring explicit sexuality back to the cinema, because it's the indepen-

dent directors in mainstream movies who are demanding more. They're the ones that got "NC-17" instituted, and who say, "I'm not going to change my whole script and my whole idea because some Puritan thinks I can't show this in my movie!" And they're right!

◆ AJ: There seem to be different erotic "requirements" for men and women. If this cinematic formula hadn't worked so well for men, wouldn't they have changed it?

◆ SB: I think men don't speak up and demand what they want. I think men accept this Faustian bargain: that they can have all the sexual entertainment and thrills and chills they want . . . but only if they agree to keep their mouth shut and accept guilt and shame. There's the underlying guilty thought that: "If they were a *better person*, they wouldn't need this. They must be *awfully lonely*; they must be awfully ugly; they must be awfully insecure to have to resort to this *terrible vice*."

So it's like being a cripple. The product is designed for cripples, and the audience is treated in this most patronizing way. But I don't buy that; I think, "There are plenty of men who are looking for something more"—I meet those kind of men all the time. I met them when I worked at the "Good Vibrations" store selling vibrators, and I met lots of them when I was writing my porn columns for *Forum*. There are plenty of men who, without shifting their masculine point of view, will ask for what women are asking for.

I can't tell you how many letters I get from men saying they want to see women cum in movies—*of course* they do! If you like it in your life, why wouldn't you want to see it in a movie? There's nothing as exciting as feeling that your partner is *responding* to you. There are lessons to be learned from gay men's porn, which has been a better-made and more sophisticated product overall. Of course, many tapes are total crap, but because gay men place a higher *esteem* on porn as both sex and cinema, there have always been more ambitious artists involved in it, and more respect for what it's all about. Yet those lessons have been lost on straight pornography.

◆ AJ: Is there good porno now?

◆ SB: The people who are trying to produce more and give more are so oppressed by the political climate that they can barely operate. For example, *On Our Backs* can't get the minimal distribution that any braided rug manufacturer could get for their products. We're denied loans from banks because they say the nature of our business is "corrupt." Can you imagine a *Savings and Loan* telling us something like that?! You can't get a credit card or fire insurance because the nature of your business is "corrupt"?!

◆ AJ: You've actually been told this?

◆ SB: Yes—everyone's been told this! Part of the reason porn became so insular, and certain publishers bought their own printing presses, etc, is because of problems getting material printed. So I end up back with my Marxist viewpoint: "Freedom of the press belongs to those who own one."

So, when you have "institutional" pornographers being so conservative and disinterested in innovation (they've had a formula that has made them a certain amount of money and they're not really interested in changing) and then you have the mainstream that disdains *sex*—well, the *innovators* find themselves in a really difficult position because they're told that what they're doing is quasi-legal, is socially ostracized, and that in just trying to do "normal" business you're going to be cut off at every turn.

I mean, how many people have asked me, "What's a smart, attractive, talented person like yourself doing in this business? You'll ruin your life!" And I know what they mean, because to some people being involved in the sex industry is like pushing heroin (although I think heroin pushers have a better time of it!). I feel sorry for those of us in the sex business who are trying to do something new. Because the public has such an urge to say *No*—to be critical and say, "Well, this isn't what I had in mind!" or "I just don't find *anything* you do sexy at all!"

I really could care less what people *don't* like about a porn movie—do you know how easy it is to turn to any stranger and say what you *don't* like in a porn movie or sex story? It would take quite a bit of vulnerability on your part to turn to someone and say, "This excited me!" Then you would have to reveal something about yourself. All our lives we've been hearing pejorative opinions on sex, and no one has even 3 minutes to talk about what they *do* like about it.

◆ **AJ:** Are you working in video now?

◆ **SB:** Well, my old partners in *On Our Backs*, Nan Kinney and Debi Sundahl, were interested early on in creating lesbian-made videos because they didn't exist. The two of them are responsible for a small crop of new movies in which the actresses can be identified with lesbian culture and authentic lesbian sex. That's really thrilling, but these efforts are tiny. More and more books of women's erotic short fiction are coming out, but that's just a beginning—there's so much more material.

When I edited my essays on lesbian sexuality into a book, *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sexworld*, I had to laugh because so many of the topics I included are not mentioned in print anywhere else in the world. I mean: there's nothing written about vaginal fisting—why? People have been doing it for years—why don't they *say* anything about it? Why did I find myself being the first "lesbian" mother-to-be talking about sexuality and pregnancy in an open and honest way? It blows my mind. I wanted to read everything under the sun when I was pregnant, and I could not find information about sex and pregnancy except advice like, "Well, if you don't feel like having sex, we completely understand" and "After awhile, the missionary position will become difficult." Or, "Perhaps you might raise the subject of oral sex with your husband, although he will probably throw up when you mention it!" I mean, this is all so sex-negative—I hate it! So my work's cut out for me.

◆ **AJ:** When did you start *On Our Backs*?

◆ **SB:** Debi Sundahl started *On Our Backs* in 1984, and I contributed my writing and sold ads for the first issue. The second issue I became the editor.

◆ **AJ:** Where did the title *On Our Backs* come from?

◆ **SB:** In its classic sense, *On Our Backs* is sort of the perfect expression of how subversive sex is, because having sex is about the only time you get to be on your back *and* calling the shots. Usually when you're on your back somebody's got you at a disadvantage. But sex is so wonderful: because positions and situations that might be *unfortunate* to be in (outside of a sexual arena) can be very powerful and exciting when they're in a sexual setting. So *On Our Backs* is kind of a humorous, tongue-in-cheek reference to the power of being on your back and getting fucked, and how fabulous it can be!

It was also an ironic rebuttal to the feminist slogan, "Off Our Backs!" A feminist news journal called *Off Our Backs* has been around for years; I read every issue and still have piles of them saved up. *Off Our Backs*, unfortunately, took a very classic Dworkin-ite anti-porn position and really ruined their sexual politics as a result of it.



There's nothing written about vaginal fisting—why? People have been doing it for years.



◆ **AJ:** What's *your* slogan?

◆ **SB:** "Entertainment for the adventurous lesbian!"

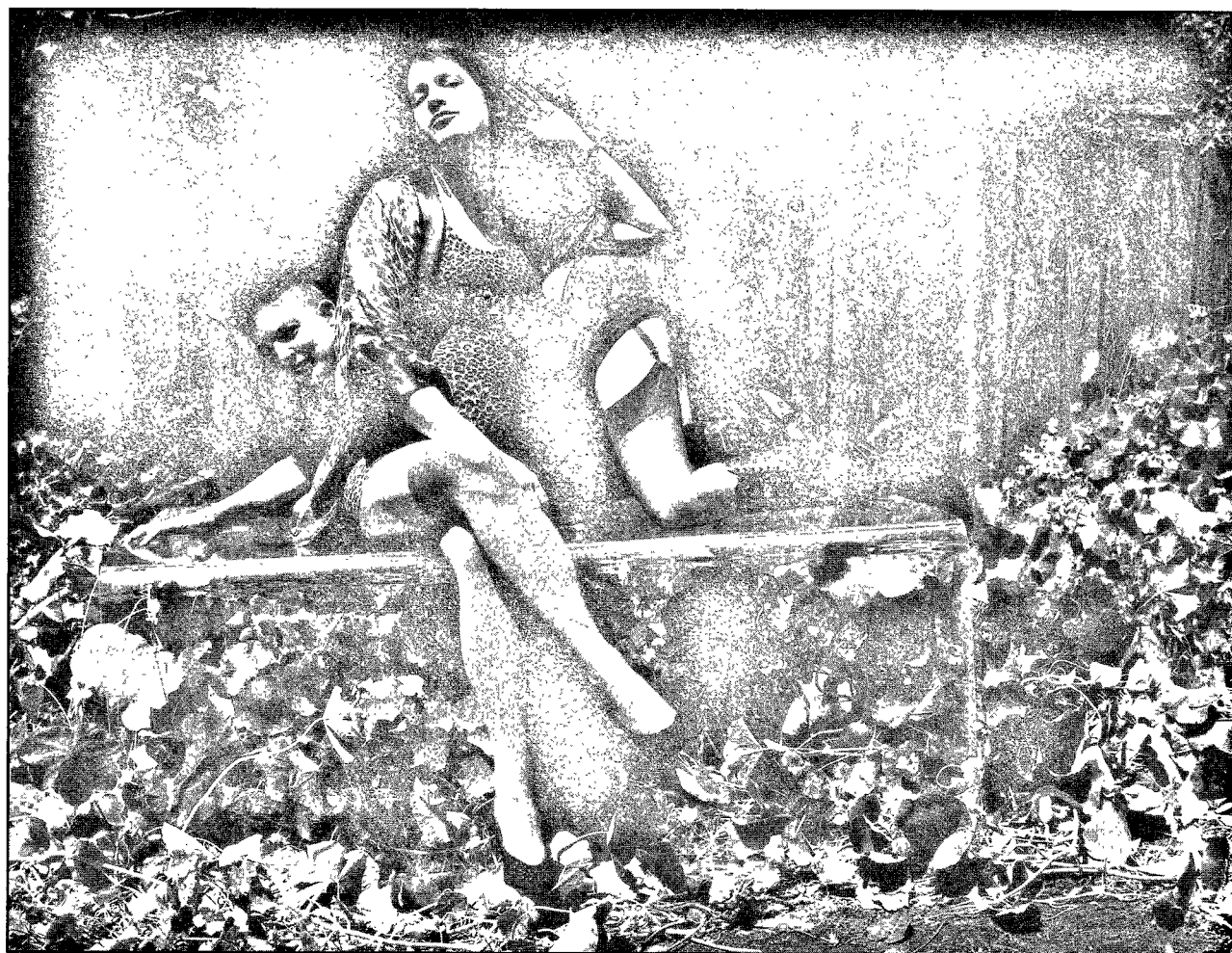
◆ **AJ:** *On Our Backs* contains such irreverence and humor and fun and pleasure mixed with some very serious deciphering of power inequities . . . *Do you ever get shocked at how this country has devolved since the '60s—slid backwards in terms of sexual consciousness? How do you analyze what's going on?*

◆ **SB:** Earlier we were talking about this nervous breakdown among radicals in the '70s where those of us on the inside suddenly felt isolated and alienated from everything. All of a sudden we couldn't take "consensus" for granted. As for the ideas we initiated in the '60s and '70s—well, we never did convince the whole country that we were "right."

Those of us who were genuinely interested in "breakthroughs" have become more and more sophisticated. We've brought new people in who didn't have to go through all the prior stages (and in some cases we've lost a few). But our evolution has had unanticipated results—I mean, who would have guessed how popular vibrators are today? This doesn't show up on any kind of Gallup poll as an index of sexual openness in this country, but it is!

Meanwhile, people who objected to '60s radicalism and '70s New Age ideas have also become more sophisticated. At first they may have just been taken aback and





Susie pregnant, with Lulu in back.

Photo: Honey Lee Cottrell

thought it was all some sort of horrible generation gap, but both sides have come a ways, and have developed constituency and ideas and analysis and a far-reaching social agenda. It used to be, "You young people are getting out of hand!" (like, you're questioning things and in general just being 'naughty', but when you grow up you won't feel like this anymore.") But these people grew up and some of them got even more *out there*. Then the people who were critical had to say, "Well, obviously it's not just a matter of being 'naughty'; we have *ideological differences!*" And this is what I miss about no longer being in *Red Tide*: really intelligent people would sit around and talk about ideas all night long until we came to some incredible (or dismaying) conclusions. I don't have those kind of discussions anymore. I miss my *study groups*—

♦ AJ: I think we all do! I think that's a widespread problem now: we all miss the dialogue, the conversation, the getting together in cafes and hacking out topics 'til dawn over espresso or god knows what, and really having the community to talk things over.

♦ SB: I don't feel pessimistic in the sense of "We lost!" because we *have* made gains. On the one hand there's this phenomena of pornography being persecuted by the federal government to an insane, unbelievable degree . . . but on the other hand you have sex movies readily avail-

able in any mom-and-pop video store (although big chains like Blockbuster who only carry "family" videos are killing these little stores—*don't patronize them!*). Those two realities exist side-by-side. You have tremendous homophobia along with an unprecedented presence of gay visibility that is unbelievable. And the more outspoken sexual life is, the more you're going to hear the thunder and the lightning. The "enemy" isn't going to admit, "Oh, gee, I guess we were wrong!" There is going to be a confrontation.

You have the social phenomenon of something like AIDS which creates a context for anal sex to be talked about on the 6 o'clock Evening News, and for people to have to negotiate and speak about sex in a way that isn't a '50s prom date sensibility. Things are changing in technology and medicine, in our lifestyles, in women's independence and *enforced* economic freedom—now, whether you like it or not, you have to support yourself. These sexual issues are not going to be suppressed—they're just going to get more and more *livid* and *vivid*, I think.

Today in the paper there was an article about how rap music is being diluted (its politics, its lyrics), and how Vanilla Ice is a perfect example. They say his lyrics are about women and partying and getting high. But I read some of his campy lyrics about "Check out this girl/I take

her home/she shows up in handcuffs and tall leather boots . . ." and thought, "There you go—it's that fabulous S-M consciousness that's sweeping the nation!" There's not a sitcom or popular song around that doesn't contain some tongue-in-cheek humor about kinky sex!

Kinky sex is so popular now . . . one stop at Macy's lingerie department tells the whole story! There's a lot of playful embracing of sexual hi-jinx . . . people aren't necessarily calling it "S-M" and proclaiming, "I'm into leather sex!" and joining leather clubs and going the whole political nine yards, but there is this openness about sexual subjects that we've never had before—at the same time they're being condemned.

Something like the *Meese Commission Report* is the perfect example: I masturbated to that report until I just about passed out—it's the filthiest thing around! And *they* know it! They made bondage a household word; everybody knows what bondage is now because of the Meese commission—you read all about it in the papers. The right wing's tactic is to titillate—show you the thing they want you to get mad about—thus triggering your shame and guilt feelings but discouraging deeper, contextual analysis. Well, that works with some people, but for other people it's like, "Hey, *check it out!*" They're amused, intrigued—whatever, with the result that it then becomes an open subject instead of a closed one. While on the one hand we're having attempts at censorship that are ugly and hard to believe, at the same time the list of topics that one *cannot* discuss seems to be getting smaller. Certainly sexuality has become a wide-open issue to be talked about. And it's no longer just doctors or professors pontificating—the hottest new "product" is amateur home porn videos.

◆ **AJ:** But is just talking about sex equal to sexual liberation?

◆ **SB:** When topics like safe sex and sexual risk are on everyone's mind before they hop into bed with somebody, that's a sign of the times that shows sexual fear—but it also shows that these are topics everybody feels free to bring up. The fact that anyone can rent a porn video and take it home without guilt implies a democratic notion that *everyone* can talk about/express opinions about sex, not just academics or authorities. . .

The right wing mind-set thinks: if you put a certain image or thought out, everyone's going to take it *one way*; that somehow everyone's going to have a single, identical reaction. And that accusation gets put to "pornographers" all the time. If you show a picture of two people fucking—then *ohmigod*, the whole social fabric's going to unravel, and people are going to do hideous things to each other!" I really hate that kind of belittling of basic intelligence. So talking about any taboo topic, especially on a popular culture level, must have *something* to do with liberation, because the more diverse points of view and contexts and interpretations that get expressed, the more the idea of authority in any area of life gets shattered . . .


◆ **AJ:** Are strict definitional labels of gays and lesbians (as important as they are for a political move-

ment) also a trap within the gay community?


◆ **SB:** *Yes*, I find that to be true. Declaring that you're gay is very important for a Civil Rights movement, because you have to be able to identify yourself and announce what freedoms you seek. The problem is: we want the privileges that heterosexuality bestows—legally and socially, in terms of recognition and empowerment, plus being able to have your *family* recognized—that's what it's all about. And—to not be discriminated against—just a basic anti-bigotry, pro-fairness message. So in that Civil Rights sense, calling oneself "gay" is very important.

But when it comes to describing *who you are*, what your erotic identity is, who arouses you, what your sexual life has been all about—then saying you're "gay" becomes more and more meaningless as every minute passes. The more people who come out of the closet, the more meaningless it becomes. We can't just say, "Oh, we're all together here on a yellow submarine." That's like me being in my little socialist group and thinking that we all felt exactly the same way about everything. How stupid! Yet that's a common sentiment in small gay communities: a really intimate—*incredibly* intimate—feeling. Usually people never feel that way except when an earthquake comes—then suddenly everyone identifies with each other—but oppressed minorities feel like that *all the time*. And that feeling gets shattered when your group gets too big, and the differences become better-known.

In some ways I've come full-circle from my early idea that everyone was bisexual. Now I don't believe everyone is "an equal mixture of this and that"—an equal mixture of masculinity and femininity. I think sex has a spectrum like the color spectrum, and that it isn't as important to say "I'm red" or "I'm yellow" or "I'm green" or "I'm purple" as it is to shatter stereotypes and misleading information.



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early idea that everyone was
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When it comes to sex, people telling me what they "are" means less than nothing—they might as well say they're a Communist or a feminist as to tell me that they're gay—I have no idea what that means anymore. It was supposed to mean something *sexual* at one point; it was supposed to mean something *political* at another point. If you're a woman and you tell me you have a powerful attraction to another woman, and describe what you did in bed with her, and how that felt to you that night—well,



Photo: Jill Posener

on a kind of "Be Here, Be Now" basis I can understand or empathize with that experience.

I can also see what the gay community as an *oppressed* community has created, because every oppressed community always has the best culture going on—the best music, the best clothes, the best parties! To overcompensate for the fact that we are denied more boring parts of legitimate life, we prosper in the illegitimate and the imaginative parts of life—and that's exciting! I like that heritage—it's very powerful. And lots of so-called straight people are just dying to be part of that aesthetic, that sense of humor, that gay "thing" that is just so irresistible and attractive. Instead of being "possessive" about it and saying, "No, you can't come in; you have to be gay, and gay means A, B and C," I think we should display more *largesse*: This is ours; we created it; it's very powerful; it's very attractive; and people who understand the point of view or the aesthetic or the 'Bohemian' qualities of it should be embraced. And whatever their sexual life is will hopefully add to it all.

So . . . these kind of discussions are one thing, and talking about a woman's right to control her body in countries where women are considered entirely and completely second-class, is quite another.

♦ AJ: You have to reclaim what society's taken from you, and that means reclaiming the labels used against you, from "bitch" to "slut" to "dyke" to—

♦ SB: Sure—that political power of language is very important. But let's change the context for a minute. If I'm looking for a sexual partner and someone tells me she's a political lesbian, this is absolutely meaningless to me in terms of whether I'm going to have a good time with her, or find intimacy with her. I mean—we might be able to have an interesting *political* discussion, but that's not necessarily going to translate into an erotic infatuation. And this in itself has become a political issue: the

idea that you can expect a certain kind of "sexual life" from someone because of what they call themselves in front of the "establishment." Like, "I'm in Queer Nation!" Well—*so what?* Politically that means a lot to me, but sexually it's misleading—I'm not sure what you mean by that. Does it mean you're uninhibited?—if so, I suppose that's pretty good! But I honestly don't know what it means. And it's very difficult to talk about what's at the core of our sexual identities. Because there's probably not a group or movement around that to-

tally speaks for you—that you can wholeheartedly join without reservations, and create a political platform. Sexuality's still quite personal.

I remember an old study group in which we had this long Lenin lesson on "bending the stick" . . . how you have to take a certain position to an extreme for awhile, not because it's the "true" position, but because it has to be done in order to end up in a "middle" or "correct" position. It's very important to put forth a "community" idea of being gay—I've contributed to that; I've worn the "Dyke" button to make that point. And now I find myself bending the stick in the opposite direction and saying, "Labels are misleading; they encourage false assumptions, and are not a very sensitive or accurate way of talking about sexuality. Don't try and pin *me* down. I have lesbian sex, but to call me a 'lesbian' doesn't mean a whole lot anymore."

Of course, no one wants to be called "straight" because that just sounds like the squarest thing on earth—no matter how fiercely you may be attracted to the opposite sex! Since I'm single, people always ask me, "What do you think your next partner will be: a man or a woman?" And I'm always hoping that my friends will ask me some really brilliant question that'll help me in my quest to find love and romance. But *that* question is so disappointing—because I've never fallen in love with anybody just because they were a man or a woman! That's never been *up there* with what got under my skin. I suppose people are trying to help me "narrow it down," so they know where to put my "personals" ad or which club to send me to—like some sort of efficient matchmaking device. But that depresses me. I feel most at home with people sexually who enjoy the distinction of masculinity and femininity; who don't want to merge it or blend it all into some kind of bland soup. If there's any sexual politics that I identify with in my cunt right now,

it's *gender-fuck*—that probably appeals to me the most.

I'm always threatening to get out of the *lesbian* magazine business and into the *butch-femme* magazine business—there really should be a magazine for people who are attracted to butches, and another for people who are attracted to femmes. Sometimes this just seems like the classic way the cake is cut: instead of having to endure all these letters from people saying, "Oh, everybody in your magazine's too hard and cold and masculine for me," and other people saying, "If you show one more woman with lipstick, I am going to throw your magazine into the trash." Let's just make it really *simple* for the whole world, and say, "You want to look at this kind of person—here you go. You want to look at their opposite, here you go."

For me, sexual tension means masculine and feminine confrontation and confusion—that's what's exciting. For other people "top" and "bottom" scenarios are the most important kindling—what starts the fire. And others will insist that "warm, sunny days on the beach" are the kindling for their sexual desire—but I don't believe it! Because *I* like making love on the beach more than anyone—I like all those "vanilla" activities a lot, but that's not where my sexual taboos are at. That's *too* nice!

Some people wish that nice things were what pulled all of our sexual triggers (and some nice things do—I mean *tenderness* is an aphrodisiac to me), but you wouldn't feel all the soft and tender things if you didn't have something else to compare them to. They wouldn't have the *cachet* and the charged meaning they have if you didn't compare them to their opposite.

Part II

◆ **AJ:** Can you talk about Good Vibrations?

◆ **SB:** I was working at Good Vibrations, the feminist sex shop in San Francisco, after I left college in '81. In college I'd been very fortunate in that I'd gotten in on the last "experimental" year of a university (UC Santa Cruz) that was reorganizing itself back to "the three R's." But previously it had offered a wide latitude of studies for student investigation, and I'd told them, "Look, my major is Sexual Politics." I had spent my last two years of school mostly living in San Francisco working in different political groups, and the focus of these groups was more and more on the politics of sexual liberation inside the gay community. How did we talk among ourselves about sex? What did we present to the straight world about sex?

There were a lot of battles between people who felt that gay civil rights would be ruined if we put our sexual liberation message *out there* (we'd ruin our chances for acceptance from the mainstream) . . . and other people who said, "If we don't bring out Sexual Liberation now, we're going to be cornered later on." And sure enough—this was already happening: different aspects of the gay community were being labeled as "bad" and other aspects as "good." People who had sex in the park were

bad and should be disowned; people who had leather sex were equally disreputable. It was OK to be gay—as long as you were sexually bland, and as unprepossessing as possible.

I masturbated to that *Meese*
Commission Report until I just
about passed out—it's the filthiest
thing around! And *they* know it!

◆ **AJ:** That's just transferring conservative, status quo values to—


◆ **SB:** Yeah! The idea was to convince straight people that we eat just like you do; we comb our hair; we go to the dentist; we do all these things just like ordinary people—to try and make us seem less like monsters. But gay will always mean *sex* to the public, and for gays to not acknowledge this sexual perspective seemed crazy to me. I was very interested in us *not* dividing ourselves between who were the "good" gays and who were the "perverts." At first this was more from a political position, but as time went on I realized that I was more of a pervert than I was some sort of Middle-American "gay mainstreamer."

So I started meeting other people in the Gay History Project here—all sorts of artists and activists who were interested in sexual liberation. *Samois*, the lesbian SM group was just starting, and absolutely every lesbian who was at all interested in sex was joining up. However, interest in SM was almost secondary to just plain being interested in *sex* and wanting to be in a pro-sexual environment—because the lesbian social milieu had for so long been unsexual. Discussion of fantasies and erotica had been pushed under the bed way too long. And *Samois* was this huge breakout—an *extreme* breakout—and it polarized the community very quickly.

You also had people talking about "butch" and "femme," which meant that talking about masculinity and femininity was rearing its little head (instead of everyone being in this androgynous mudpile). Suddenly people were talking about "differences" and "opposites attracting," and the excitement and importance of having a sexual or erotic identity—we all didn't want to just look and act like Mister Potatohead in bed.

All this was going on when I left college. Like everybody I knew in San Francisco, I didn't have a job and was having a hard time finding work. One of my idols, Amber Hollibaugh, broke up with her girlfriend who was another idol of mine, Honey Lee Cottrell. Honey Lee worked one day a week at Good Vibrations. And she was so unhappy about her break-up with Amber that she left California, and I got her job working one day a week.


Honey Lee had sold me a vibrator at Good Vibrations




a couple of years back and it had changed my sex life forever—I was very pleased to be working there. The owner, Joani Blank, had started the store as a way for women to be able to buy things like vibrators that would help a woman reach orgasm, without having to go to a sleazy adult shop. You could be in a *women's* environment.

The shop was very tiny and nobody knew about it. If I had a couple of customers come in all day, I felt very lucky. But what was great about it was: people would come in and talk at length about their sex lives with me, perceiving me to be an expert—even when I was very new on the job. And I just ate it up! I read every book in the place, and I would talk and talk with people—I was so grateful they would be candid enough to describe their sexuality to me. And I could see that I had a talent for communicating about sex, that I was at ease discussing *anything*. I wasn't judgmental—I mean, the last thing a sex educator does, is say, "You WHAT?!" When somebody describes their fantasies you listen—that's one of the best things you do: you *listen* and you accept that how people feel and fantasize is "natural." The whole idea of "perversion" really doesn't fit into my point of view. There are people who don't have compassion or empathy for how others feel, and who tread on other people—that's what the issue of *consent* is all about. But there's nothing that anyone would think of erotically that would shock me, or that I would think is harmful.

◆ **AJ:** To even have a concept of "perversion" is to subscribe to the Christian belief that the body is evil. Christianity defines "perversion" as any sex that isn't for procreation. Anyone with any liberation—gay, lesbian, feminist—has to re-evaluate *desire* in the body. And it becomes no longer a question of what's "perverted" or what's not.



Joani always thought the vibrator addiction paranoia went straight back to the fear that hair would grow on your palms if you masturbate too much. *There's a tremendous fear of liking sex too much.*



◆ **SB:** Well, when I started working at Good Vibrations there was very little for women to read . . . about the sexual feelings we have. There were a couple of books by Nancy Friday about women's fantasies, and I read them and realized, "My god, I do fantasize; it's just that these things are so naughty and taboo I didn't even admit to myself that I *thought* these things." There were a

couple of old books by Anais Nin like *Little Birds* and *Delta of Venus*—and that was *it*. There was no *modern* women's erotica; the only thing that was contemporary and by women was *Samois'* book, *Coming to Power*, which was about a specialized topic. Women were really upset to come in and not find any women's erotica—because there *was no* women's erotica. At this time the store was only selling vibrators, a few other sex toys, and a handful of books.

◆ **AJ:** I went there in '79 and was so impressed that I wanted to make a film documenting it. But then I left school. It had a little museum of antique vibrators—

◆ **SB:** People would always look at the museum first if they were really nervous, because anything from the *past* doesn't seem as threatening as something that's happening right now . . . that you might actually *use* in your sex life. But I tried out some of those museum relics in the try-out room and some of them worked splendidly.

◆ **AJ:** That's right; there was a "try-out" room, too!

◆ **SB:** That's probably the mark of a successful sales clerk at Good Vibrations: being able to convince someone that they can go use the try-out room and nothing terrible's going to happen—I'm not going to peek through the keyhole, and they'll be able to walk out and not have everyone burst into laughter or *stare* at them. It's hard to tell someone what a vibrator feels like if they've never felt it; it's like asking, "What does milk taste like?" You have to try it. And in fact, the sensation is so strong you can feel it through your clothes. Only once in six years of working there did I ever see someone just come into the store, disappear into the try-out room, and come out 20 minutes later. That *floored* me! This woman just "dropped in" to have an orgasm—then left.

My mouth was open, because usually people say, "Okay, all right, I'll *try*." And they run into the try-out room and all they're doing is touching it to their pants for two seconds and going, "Oh, that kind of feels nice," and then they run back out. But to have someone actually *luxuriate* and moan behind the door—that was unbelievable!

◆ **AJ:** Was she moaning?

◆ **SB:** Yes.

◆ **AJ:** By the way, did you make a sale?

◆ **SB:** Oh no! She was a total *user*. She just came in, used my try-out room, and *left*. But this fits people's fantasy of what it's like to work at Good Vibrations. One time I had some underground comix folks including the late Dori Seda come in—she was this wild girl who looked exactly like Olive Oyl out of the *Popeye* cartoon. She said, "I want to do a shoot here—will you close the store? It's gonna be this scenario where this girl comes in to try out the vibrators, and the vibrator clerk ties her up, and then there's a whole bondage scene, and . . ." She was so goofy, I really wanted to do it! And sure enough, Robert Crumb and his assistant and the girl models came in and we did a "photo funny." I got to do the vibrator bondage since no one else really knew what they were doing, and I said, "This is what people think goes on here

every day of the week"—and of course it doesn't; it's much more serious.

Actually, people often come in really concerned: something is *not* right with them, and they feel very secretive and isolated about what worries them—when in fact everyone has about the same five concerns! With women, the top question is: "Why is it so difficult for me to orgasm?" Either they never have, or they can only have it under certain circumstance, like, "I could only do it with Harry," or, "I could only do it with my shower massage," or, "I could only do it with *this, that* and the *other thing*." And this means that people are afraid to try something new, are afraid that it won't work, or are afraid that the vibrator *will* work and then they won't be able to have an orgasm any other way.

But there is something really wonderful about orgasm, which is: the more you have it and the more different ways you have it, the more versatile you become! And it's hard to change; you really do cling to one particular pattern that will give you pleasure. But to find another way by which you can achieve that same satisfaction or even *greater* satisfaction—this only opens your body up to break the habit again and again. People who change their eating habits notice this too: at first it's so hard not to eat the same things, but once they start experimenting, then they want to try more and more!

◆ **AJ:** We have such a paucity in our language about how to discuss the body and orgasm. There is that myth about the vibrator: that you'll just get addicted to it—

◆ **SB:** Well, Joani always told me that she thought the vibrator addiction paranoia went straight back to the fear that hair would grow on your palms if you masturbate too much. *There's a tremendous fear of liking sex too much.* When we make love, as much as everyone wants to cum and see stars and feel the world turn, we *resist* intense sexual experience more than we embrace it. And it's very difficult for us to *let go*. The idea of "letting go" makes people think they're just going to *lose* it—they won't get up and go to work the next day. I think that sexual repression really is key to the work ethic: the idea that if you pleased your body, you wouldn't be compelled to bring home the bacon, or wax the floor anymore—all those things that you make yourself do because you *have* to. And I think that in a romantic love culture, we sometimes have brushes with that, because often people will have a romantic experience where the rest of the world blacks out and you can't concentrate on anything else—you're in such a state of euphoria. With masturbation you don't have that "romantic" part, but you certainly do have a euphoria and a satisfaction and a *lack* of inhibition that is incredible.

◆ **AJ:** Well, if people really were loving or revering their bodies, and really enjoying themselves with or without a partner—this would probably change the world. People would think twice about going to a job they're totally alienated from . . . You were saying there were about 5 things women want—

◆ **SB:** Well, orgasm is the Number One thing for women. One of the most intense cases for feminism is: not being able to orgasm is not a man's complaint. (I have yet to meet a man who couldn't achieve orgasm.) And to think that so many women can't . . . and to think about what that means—to have never experienced a sexual climax in your life?! To me that's worse than getting 59 cents to the dollar; it just shows how women are divorced from their sexual capacity, and how passive our lives are supposed to be. On any given day in Good Vibrations—that could make me *cry*.



**I wanted to tell why vibrators
were the best thing that had
happened since sliced bread!**



Men are concerned about being able to get an erection when they want . . . and being able to cum when they want. I would describe it that way rather than use words like impotence or premature ejaculation, because those are terms that have just been used to *devastate* men—they don't describe what's really going on. I visited the Kinsey Institute recently and one of the librarians pointed out that in Victorian England, the *only* reason a woman could divorce her husband was if he were impotent. So if a woman actually brought a case to court, she would have to bring charges that he could not *perform*. And this is one of the oldest, most profound insults in this Puritanical culture that anyone can think of: that's *it*—he cannot perform.

I started *On Our Backs* with Debi Sundahl and Morgan Gwenwald because there was nothing for lesbians . . . because lesbians are so invisible. But truthfully speaking, there's nothing for *anybody*. There's very little sexually *meaningful* literature for men or women, gay or straight—for any sexual persuasion. There's only a few precious things—most of which have been censored or forbidden at one time or another. There's only one book for men, *Male Sexuality*, by Bernie Zilbergeld—one book, and he did this in the '70s—about the demands this culture puts on men for work and sex, and why this screws men's sex lives up. I would think there would be a *million* books on this subject—and there's *one*.

◆ **AJ:** What about *The Joy of Sex*?

◆ **SB:** That was horrible! I can hardly believe that was such a popular book. You can open up any random page, read one of the questions, and want to bury your head in shame. The author, Alex Comfort, is the guy who said that lesbians don't fuck, they don't do penetration—it's essentially the same as that book in the '60s, *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*. I remember being in grade school and hearing about that one . . . somebody had tried to steal one from their



Susie with Honey Lee Cottrell

Photo: Mariette Pathy-Allen

parents' bed-table. That turned out to be filled with inaccurate information—same thing with *The Joy of Sex*. It was a great marketing ploy—to promote something to mainstream American couples answering questions about your sex life, and it certainly promoted the idea that sex was a wonderful thing to have—but it was filled with inaccurate and prejudiced information.

◆ **AJ:** What about Dr Ruth?

◆ **SB:** She's contemporary, and also she doesn't publish books. She's a celebrity. She's another subject.

This is another subject, but women would come in to Good Vibrations and say, "My husband doesn't want to have sex with me anymore, and I think it's because my vagina's too big." This is another complaint that would send me into a total *rage*. *Everyone*, including women, knows much more about male genital anatomy than they do about female genital anatomy—in fact when I give talks to groups of lesbians, first I show them a picture of a penis just to *orient* everyone, because everyone knows what a penis looks like, but people don't really know what their clitoris or vagina or clitoral structure looks like—that's why when something comes along like the "G Spot," everyone thinks it's some kind of joke—because they don't know what women's sexual organs look like. If we *knew*, we wouldn't be so ignorant and say so many bigoted, stupid things.

First of all, a vagina is *not* a hole that comes in various

sizes; it's a *potential* space, and it's closed all the time. Its vaginal walls are muscles, and when something enters it, it opens to receive *just that much* and then closes again. People act like it's a pinball machine that you throw something in and see how long it takes to come out. And you can have strong muscle tone or weak muscle tone.

During childbirth you use incredible muscles to push that baby out—I mean, that's quite a feat. Childbirth is the biggest sex act of all—having just had a child, I can talk about this. And afterwards, you might want to do these exercises called *Kegel's*, which somebody originally thought of as a remedy for urinary incontinence—for women who were having a hard time controlling their bladder. But they also strengthen your vaginal muscles . . . and this is the same muscle that squeezes when you have an orgasm. So actually, having lots of orgasms will also improve your muscle tone! When you squeeze off your pee when you're going to the bathroom, that's a *Kegel*. You can do them all the time and they will improve your muscle tone and they will make you more orgasmic. In fact if you do 20 in a row, you'll realize that you've made yourself wet, and that you feel slightly aroused—it automatically does that.

But the idea that you should do these exercises because your pussy isn't tight enough is crazy. Most of the guys who bring that up—if the truth be known, that's not what their problem is in terms of getting turned on or

getting off—but it's an effective way to stop arguing about having sex. In other words, maybe he wants to get his cock sucked. Maybe he wants to get fucked in the ass, or maybe he wants to fuck his wife in the ass. Maybe he has homosexual fantasies. Maybe he feels weird about her body in general since she had a child. Maybe something about seeing her as a mother has changed his fantasies about her—who knows?

◆ **AJ:** These attacks are usually about a man's lack of honesty regarding what he truly desires. Usually this is a whittling-down attack to make the woman feel bad—it's about control.

◆ **SB:** It's a very effective way to ruin your sex life! And it's the same thing if a woman tells a man, "You can't satisfy me because your penis is too small." That's like saying, "You can't satisfy me because you have red hair," or "... because you're only five-foot five." If the "reason" has something to do with your body, there's not a whole lot you can do about it.

◆ **AJ:** It's basically dishonesty about the fact that you have problems in the relationship with that person, and can't directly communicate.

◆ **SB:** So it's this dead end maneuver... Also, women would come in and ask, "I heard that using *ben wa* balls will help strengthen my vaginal muscles." Well, *ben wa* balls are the pet rock of sex toys—they don't do *anything*! If you put them inside you, you'll forget they're there—again, because the vagina's a potential space. It either hugs them or it doesn't hug them; they either sit there and you forget they're there, or they fall out and—! Whatever they do, they give you no sexual pleasure.

So I say to women, "If you want to practice exercising and have some fun at the same time, use a vibrator and make sure you're having an orgasm at least five times a day!" or, "Get this dildo; you might enjoy using it, and practice hugging and squeezing the dildo as you're playing with your clit (or whatever you do to get off)." And when I start talking to them in terms of, "If you really want to *do* something about this, you're going to have to start *cuming* more often," this just blows out their whole "My boyfriend doesn't want me anymore!" preoccupation because I'm talking to them about *their* sexual pleasure. And initially they didn't come in because they wanted to have orgasms—they came in because they felt bad that their lover had rejected them—


◆ **AJ:** They felt self-denigration instead of righteous indignation over the fact that *they're* not being satisfied—

◆ **SB:** Some of the questions that would walk into the store wouldn't even be said out loud; they'd be kind of *silent* questions. We had a big controversy with the owner, Joani, who didn't want to have dildoes in the store because she was so exasperated with everyone adoring "the phallus"—she just wanted to get the phallus out of her store entirely! And I had to say to her, "Look, I've got lesbians banging down the door for dildoes! I know that's not supposed to be what lesbians want, but that's


just because we've accepted this dishonesty that there's nothing physically pleasurable about fucking—and there is! It's very stimulating; people aren't just doing it because they've been "brainwashed by the patriarchy"—it feels good! And some people have these gender-bending fantasies—who knows what everyone's reasons are, but they want them." Joani and I would laugh a lot about the fact that *I* (supposedly the radical lesbian) was taking the pro-dildo position, and *she* (the suburban straight housewife—she's not *really*, but she likes to pretend) was taking the reverse. But eventually that gave way...

A real common event would be: the lesbian couple that would come in the store and start circling closer and closer to the cupboard displaying the dildoes and the harnesses. And it was usually up to me to "break the ice" and start talking about them in a very normal way, because a lot of people are there buying something like that for the first time. Also, if you buy a harness, it's obvious you're going to experience this *make-believe* of having a cock—and usually when you first put one on, you burst out laughing! Or you cover your hands and you blush—you feel so silly. Nevertheless, just to have something *dangling* from you in that part of your body is an extraordinary experience.

And then to begin using it with your lover—at first it's awkward, because you don't have any sensation in the plastic, so it helps to be really familiar with your hands to begin with. Accept that the first time it's new, it's embarrassing—mostly because of your own inhibitions. Once your inhibitions are down and you're not either having performance anxiety (that you're not going to do it "right"), or feeling, "What kind of a woman am I—strapping on this enormous lavender cock?" Once that's done away with, you could start having a really good time!



I feel sorry for any man who has
never been penetrated—again, it's
that *fear of intensity*.



◆ **AJ:** In your lecture, "How to Read a Dirty Movie," you showed a film clip of two women with a dildo that was very hot—

◆ **SB:** *Sexcapades*, with this older woman producer and this younger woman actress on the casting couch.

◆ **AJ:** There's something very liberatory about the blurring of (and playing with) gender identities. You have these two feminine women going in and out of "male" roles; the older woman's saying, "You bitch, you bitch, fuck me!" and the younger woman with the dildo strapped on is playing the "male" role. Some-

thing in us is released (in the sense of a desire system) that is challenging to our fixed notions—

◆ SB: Lee Carroll is dirty-talking Sharon Kay through her first dildo experience. And the way she instructs Sharon to use the cock—stroke it, fuck her, tease her with it (all these things that she wants)—in a sense she could well be instructing a *man* to do the same thing. Not all men are that sexy with their cocks—in fact, I think too many of them take their sexual identity and their masculinity for granted. Of course, when women start playing with masculine sexual energy, well—first of all it's taboo. But once you start playing with it, it had *better* be erotic—it's not part of our "natural" body, so the only reason to use it is to turn yourself on . . . learn something about yourself you didn't know before . . . put yourself in a different sexual position than you would ordinarily be in.

My first attempts at SM were more like a *Laurel e³ Hardy* film than either evil or liberation!

The same thing (regarding dildoes and harnesses) would also happen with a lot of men-and-women couples that would come in. This is what I call one of the biggest secrets of the last two decades: the popularity of anal sex has become *outrageous*. And this despite AIDS which has really dampened a lot of anal sex interest in the gay community, but among men and women it's incredibly popular—particularly with men who want their female lover to fuck them in the ass. And they're always very shy when they come in, too, and need extra-special attention, because . . . of course for a man to say he likes anal sex—to be penetrated—well, socially the stigma is: he's saying that he's really not a man, that he's effeminate—so then, *what is he?* Of course, most of the men who want to get fucked put out a very "masculine" facade—they're not the kind of person who walks into a room and you say to yourself, "I know that man wants to get fucked in the ass!"—I mean, you would *never* know!

The stigma attached to this is just a stupid prejudice; in fact, being entered by somebody is a very *profound* psychological (as well as physical) experience. Submitting to someone else's fingers or cock and letting them fill you up is really intimate—who wouldn't like that? I feel sorry for any man who has never been penetrated before, because they haven't experienced something sexually that's *so* powerful—again, it's that *fear of intensity*.

For a woman to say that she likes to be fucked in the ass doesn't have anything to do with homosexuality. No one would think you were a lesbian, or think you were any less of a "woman." It's more like: "you're cheap and

easy and fast and don't have any morals and anybody can do *anything they want* to you—you're trash. You would let somebody touch you in such an unladylike way—ladies aren't supposed to be interested in that kind of thing." So, that about covers the top ten concerns at Good Vibrations.

◆ AJ: *How did you start On Our Backs?*

◆ SB: As I was saying, all the staff at Good Vibrations were painfully aware of the lack of contemporary erotica for women, and the lack of any literature for lesbians—literature which emphasizes sexual identity. Lesbianism had become a political stand, not a sexual preference, and it was time to bend the stick the other way.

First we had *Samois* who put out their book, *Coming to Power*—political essays and erotica, including the first lesbian story I ever got off on reading: "Girl Gang Bang." That story did *so much* for me—I was beginning to think I would never be able to find a "home" in a lesbian erotic scenario, but thanks to that story I did! Now previously, when I lived in Los Angeles I had been doing theater, and all my friends would be trying to win an audition for a Burger-King commercial—that's what theater was *about* in L.A. But when I came to San Francisco, I discovered that you could have the most obscure poetry reading in the world and people would come to it! You could do performance art and total strangers would come see you and appreciate your work. So I was in heaven. I put on this show called "Girls Gone Bad" which was very controversial at the time. I think about what we did—we talked about Catholic school, we read from pulp novels, we wore lingerie and tore it off—now all of that would be just so much Madonna-videos-under-the-bridge, but at the time it was really exciting!

What this show was really about was a contemporary take on the "damned if you do, damned if you don't" rivalry between madonnas and whores, and what happens when women speak frankly about sex and defy the prejudices and the sexual script expectations. I loved doing that show. (This is embarrassing to admit, but so often my sexual adventures have begun with, "Oh, I read this in a book," or some other *intellectual* idea I want to try out. Sometimes I think I'm very unoriginal; I have to *read* about it before I get the idea.) Anyway, after reading what *Samois* was putting out and hearing these debates about SM, I went to my lover and said, "We have to *try* this, because I have to find out whether it's evil incarnate (like some of my friends say) or whether this is the new sexual liberation."

Actually, my first attempts at fetishistic SM were more like a *Laurel e³ Hardy* film than either evil or liberation. At Modern Times bookstore I had been reading some of my poetry where I talked about threatening my lover with a knife in bed (erotically). Somebody heard me reading these poems and a few days later I got a letter saying, "Hi, we're two gals starting a magazine called *On Our Backs* . . ." When I read that I burst into laughter because I knew *exactly* why they were making fun of the feminist newspaper *Off Our Backs* which had been deni-

grating the sexual voices coming up in recent years. This particular paper had been condemning all the discussion about SM, butch-femme, kinky sex—saying this was “wrong” and “anti-feminist.” And here were a couple of women starting a magazine that turned that title on its head.

They said they really enjoyed my poetry—well, can you imagine? My poetry was so obscure that out of all twenty people who heard it, I couldn’t believe I would get a letter like that. And it continued, “Would you like to submit some of your writing?” So I sent in some erotic work I had done, and also offered any help I could give. I had been doing “commie” papers, underground papers, trade union papers and other radical propaganda since high school—I knew a little bit about how to make it happen.

Eventually I called the phone number on the letter and asked, “What’s up? I’ve been waiting *every day* for you to publish this magazine!” And they invited me over to meet them. When I did, I realized they were new to all this. They had some great material, but no money. The first contributors to *On Our Backs* included people who are some of the most popular lesbian writers today. I think about Joan Nestle’s story in that first issue; about Tee Corinne; Honey Lee Cottrell did our first centerfold—a take-off on *Playboy* which we called “Bull Dyker of the Month.” I did my first “Toys For Us” column because I wanted to tell why vibrators were the best thing that had happened since sliced bread—there were a lot of really great contributions to that first issue.

One of the founders, Debi, was a stripper. She knew so many gay strippers that she said, “Let’s have a ‘Lesbians Only!’ strip show to raise money for the first issue”—and that’s exactly what we did. I sold ads to everybody I had met through Good Vibrations; we sold advance subscriptions to people on the *Samois* mailing list, and Debi organized this incredible strip show. The first one was at the Baybrick Inn, a lesbian bar here, and the second was at Caesar’s Palace, which resembles a lost Havana nightclub.

It was so much fun having those shows—the strippers were so excited to be performing for women. And the *women*—it was like taking kids to Disneyland for the first time, because women are not accustomed to gathering together for a *lustful* purpose . . . to be enjoying something *sexual* together—that never happens with women. (It happens subliminally when you’re with other girls at pajama parties, but not on purpose!)

Then we took our first issue to the Gay Day Parade and hoped it would sell enough so we could pay the printer the other half we owed—and fortunately it took off.


◆ **AJ:** So this struck a real nerve in the community?

◆ **SB:** It was incredibly popular. In terms of the variety that can be found in the lesbian community, the lesbian feminist press reflects a very minority point of view—there probably has never been a press which is so *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive* with regard to whom it’s


addressing. By and large this press said [about us], “They’re racist, they’re anti-Semitic, they’re anti-feminist, they’re woman-hating, they’re sick, they’re objectifying, they’re demeaning”—we were called every name in the book! Or, people who were being “objective” would like *one* thing in our magazine but tear apart everything else. Nevertheless, the reaction of your average-dyke-on-the-street was, “Give me one *now!*” Obviously lesbians were starved for some kind of *sexual* recognition.

We started discovering things we hadn’t been realized. For example, before *On Our Backs*, you rarely saw lesbian faces in print unless they were *dead*: a photo of Gertrude Stein. You just didn’t see pictures of contemporary women who were gay. But in *On Our Backs* that started happening on a regular basis: you could look at all these different girls and say, “Migod—she’s gay and she lives in Iowa!” (or wherever). Secondly, there was no national lesbian magazine—there was nothing that lesbians all over the country could connect to and read, that was like *On Our Backs*. Also, our production standards were wildly slick compared to anything that had come out of the lesbian community before.

There’s always been this talk that lesbians don’t have as much money, but it’s not like lesbians as a whole are below the poverty line. That isn’t the reason the lesbian press never had anything that looked professional or slick . . .



I finished a lecture and someone asked, “How come you dykes are all so fat and ugly?!”




◆ **AJ:** I think that’s true of a lot of fringe groups: basically, they internalize and perpetuate their own ghetto-ization.


◆ **SB:** Working on *On Our Backs*, you had to learn how to become a journalist, a graphic artist, a business person—which is always shocking to artists and revolutionaries who don’t think of themselves as having much going in the left brain. You don’t think of yourself as a *business person*, you think, “I’m trying to smash the state and destroy sexual inhibitions!”

◆ **AJ:** Taking responsibility is important, regardless what you do creatively. Our society is so full of these sick dichotomies: either/or syndromes where either you’re a sterile business person, or you’re a creative nut who can’t function—


◆ **SB:** *On Our Backs* offered a voice for a lot of incredible talent that had no place to be expressed before. I also found that my columns, “Toys For Us” (in which supposedly I was dispensing sexual advice: I might visit a lesbi-



an community in Chicago and describe what it was like, or tell about how I got pierced, or write about fisting) turned out to be "milestones"! I mean, no one had ever written about vaginal fisting before, and they still haven't—to the best of my knowledge. There were so many things to write about. I'd always loved to write but had never had such a devoted and diverse audience as I found in *On Our Backs*. And what I learned at Good Vibrations talking to people about sex, I channeled into this column. I found I could use humor to make everybody let their hair down about issues that otherwise no one would talk about.



Don't you shudder if
somebody calls you "straight"
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♦ AJ: Didn't you also begin lecturing in the school system about sex instruction for children?

♦ SB: I always did that. Some of my friends who worked in the public school system were instrumental in setting up programs where "Dick and Jane Homo" come to sex education class and talk about themselves (both in high school and college). Here, essentially you're laying yourself open to anything anybody wants to say, because in general young people won't hold their prejudices back. Plus, you tell them, "Please don't try to be polite." So if you've finished your lecture and someone asks, "Well—how come you dykes are all so fat and ugly?" instead of saying, "Well—I never!" and stomping out, you have to stand there and reply, "Do you think *I'm* fat and ugly?" (When that happened, for a second I was so crushed.)

But what that student asked reflects a fairly common prejudice: that the reason women turn lesbian is because they're too fat or ugly to attract a man. "If you have to turn to women, you must be so unattractive that a *man* wouldn't be interested in you." On the one hand, women who are lesbian aren't worried about whether their pussy is too big or not, or whether they're blonde, or whether their bust is big enough—lesbians do not impose the kind of sexual demands or pressure that straight culture puts on women. That's a very pleasing and comforting part of lesbianism—not to always have to think your makeup's on trial, in order to find a partner. But . . . lesbians are just as attracted to beauty as anybody. And we certainly have our standards about what we do or don't find attractive . . .

I remember I had this book from the '40s which gave "secret" insights into lesbians. One chapter contained

this sentence: "Some of the most beautiful stars in our Hollywood galaxy are secret lesbians." I always *loved* reading that sentence, because the other side of the dyke who doesn't get her hair styled, doesn't wear makeup, and has a beer gut . . . is that: many lesbians are totally entranced by beauty and glamour. Some people call them "lipstick lesbians," but this has been going on a long time—Greta Garbo was one of the most beautiful women in Hollywood; so was Marlene Dietrich—all these women have passed away now, so we can *talk* about them. But just imagine who the *contemporary* stars might be who are bisexual or gay, and the answer to that students question is both 1) you don't comprehend the diversity of lesbians; how many different kinds of women they are, and the different kinds of "looks" they're into; 2) is the idea that: if you aren't into men, you must not have any personal aesthetics or care about your looks? (Do I have to mention that the person who asked this question must have weighed 200 pounds, didn't comb his hair, and wore really ugly, mismatching clothes? It was like the pot calling the kettle black—that was an outrageous question.)

So I did lectures; I kept doing my performance art, but more and more just getting out the next issue of *On Our Backs* was the performance—I didn't have time for anything else. We went from quarterly to bimonthly; we created the idea of a lesbian pictorial. When we started out, there were three women who had done lesbian erotic portraiture: Honey Lee, Tee Corinne, and Morgan Gwendwald—and that was *it*. We put together pictorials of couples or single women, sometimes in a documentary style or sometimes to create a fantasy. It was thrilling—we were looking at every gay and straight men's magazine to see, "How do you lay out a pictorial? What's a pictorial all about?" and we were also completely rejecting the "standards" for those pictorials. Our women were very diverse and individualistic in their looks, and we were very excited to see the reaction to these women.

I remember with Honey Lee's centerfolds, "Bull Dyke of the Month." She got 3 responses: 1) the people who wanted to call her up in the middle of the night and talk dirty; the people who had found their dream dyke. 2) people who asked, "What is this ugly dyke doing in the middle of *On Our Backs*? I'm so disgusted. If you want to know what a good-looking woman looks like, I suggest you look at *Penthouse*." And that was a very strong lesbian reaction: "I do not like looking at butch women, thank you very much. This embarrasses me; I don't identify with it, and get it out of here!" 3) (and this happened mostly among lesbian feminists) women who would say, "Wow! This is really great: to show a woman who is not the conventional pretty babe. But it doesn't turn me on, and I don't know *what* I'm supposed to do."

This sounds so young and innocent now, but a cornerstone of lesbians exploring sexuality is: we had a political point of view informed by feminism about how "we should accept ourselves, and love ourselves." And then, when we had to talk about our fantasies and what turned

us on—well, granola didn't necessarily turn us on! Even though that was what we ate in the morning, that isn't what we wanted to look at pictures of. And to this day, this issue still bothers people.

◆ **AJ:** It bothers people who really want *Playboy* types?

◆ **SB:** Some of them might have wanted *Playboy* types; some of them may have wanted James Dean—who *knows* what they all wanted?! Honey Lee's centerfold was erotic but it was also making a point: you could enjoy the "political" point and not get off on it, or you could get off on it *and* enjoy the political point. It was startling to realize that a lot of women weren't accustomed to looking at pictures with an attitude of *subjectification*. People would say incredible things like, "How can I look at this picture and masturbate? For all I know, this woman might be a *racist*. She might be a child-beater. She might be a *meat-eater*. She might be mean to her cats. How do we know what she's *really* like?"


This is like the foundation of an education in the arts, or when you grow up as a child and learn about what's "real" and what's fantasy; what's "pretend" and what's "not pretend." You can look at a picture and imagine anything you want; it doesn't matter who the person in the picture "is" or what they "really" do—that's beside the point. I think part of our consciousness knows that very well—but there's part that's *troubled* by it. I think this issue comes up for our models who aren't professional. Almost all the models who posed for *On Our Backs* were amateurs, first-timers, who had to learn and realize that people would look at that picture and imagine anything they pleased. That's very difficult for a newcomer. And if you're a feminist, it's even more difficult because there's this idea that someone is going to "exploit" your image and think something about you that you don't want them to think!

◆ **AJ:** We have a whole phallic Judeo-Christian mind/body split culture that also is very afraid of creativity. Creativity, fantasy, eroticism, playfulness, artifice, and all the arts are interconnected to social change or "revolution." A lot of women who should be involved in feminist/planetary revolution aren't, because of the pressure of "Who's more feminist than thou?" Or, "If I actually have desire that's not 'politically correct,' then . . ."


◆ **SB:** As *On Our Backs* developed and I began to travel and meet people in other cities that read the magazine, I started to realize that this ideology that people call "politically correct" was maintained by so few people—the ideology itself is hypocrisy. These few people (who couldn't even live up to it) were the only ones who even believed in it; meanwhile, everyone else could really care less. I mean, if a person isn't being sexually open, it's not because some important lesbian is telling them they can't—it's because of very simple, powerful inhibitions and taboos you've had since you were a child. Which is a much more honest depiction of why people aren't more out there about their erotic identities. It isn't because of

peer pressure within a politically dogmatic milieu; it's because your mama told you not to do it—and that's the bottom line.

I think about all the silly things I didn't do when I was first sexual because I thought they weren't "politically correct." I remember not fucking my girlfriend because that would be "patriarchal" and "objectifying" her. I remember the first time a man ever spanked me in sex—I had an orgasm and I remember thinking, "Ohmigod!" As soon as he had stopped, I pulled myself up in a very pristine way and said, "Don't you ever, *ever* do that again!" and made this little note to myself that "he was probably mentally ill." This was *after* my orgasm! Now I'm so embarrassed—I wish I could write him a "Thank You" letter now (but who knows where he is?): "I'm sorry—I was so wrong, you were so right!" And I was objecting to that because of peer group pressure. When I really think about my most serious resistance to sexual exploration, it isn't because of the things I learned in the '70s from my political idols, it's because of my Catholic Girls' School education, and the kind of little girl I was brought up to be.



The first time a man spanked
me—I had an orgasm, then said,
"Don't you ever, *ever* do that again!"



◆ **AJ:** I believe we have to position ourselves outside of the society for political gain and strength and mobilizing, such as taking on a lesbian moniker for political reasons: proclaim "I'm a lesbian!" or, "I'm gay!" or, "I'm in ACT UP!" or whatever. But when we get to areas of sexuality and desire, what do we want a revolution for? It's to have a more enjoyable life.


◆ **SB:** I've come full circle on these labels. At first I was so angry about lesbianism being devoid of any sexual content, but now I feel that to tell someone you're "lesbian" or "gay" says so little about what your *sex* life is about that it's almost useless. I'd rather just have it be a *political* label now. I can't believe I've come that far. When I was 16 I remember being very excited when I got my first "DYKE" pin. I wore it to a demonstration and I wore it to school, and I fucked both boys and girls. I did that then and I do now. Putting a "DYKE" button on challenged all those people who thought that I was straight (they *never* think there's a gay person around them); it challenged their idea of what a dyke "looked like" or "was"—and this was worth *every second* of it! I'd do it a million times over. This was an example of a political statement that I couldn't possibly regret.

As far as finding women I was attracted to—I'm not attracted to all lesbians; I'm not attracted to all women.


You know what I'm talking about—there's this thing: "Well, if you're *gay*, it's a wonder I haven't ripped your clothes off!" Just as homosexuals are supposed to be compulsively attracted to anyone of the same sex . . .

♦ **AJ:** That's such a homophobic attitude: If you're a lesbian (or gay), you sexualize the world. Whereas we don't assume that every straight woman wants to fuck every man that walks by. Somehow with gays there's the myth that you're not only assumed to be "available," but also "desirous" of anyone else who's gay.

♦ **SB:** You have to be a nymphomaniac—yes! So of course it's helpful to be able to say you're a lesbian, or introduce yourself as a lesbian as a shortcut, because lots of times it's not appropriate for you to say, "Here's what my erotic identity is all about. It won't be in one word; it'll take a paragraph or two"—if you can even describe it at all; it's hard. Lots of times it's largely unconscious; most people haven't given it a lot of thought. Everyone's supposed to be straight; boys are supposed to be attracted to girls and want to do a certain thing in bed (and vice versa), and to deviate from that at all puts you in a "queer" category.



I can't think of another
subject that binds people
together as clearly as *sex*.



To tell people about the Kinsey scale, and that we're on a continuum from 0 to 6, and that most people are not 0's or 6's but are somewhere in the middle—that's one thing. But the other thing is: *why* is that so unpopular as a way to describe people? In fact, the labels people use (lesbian, gay, bisexual) depending on the time, place, bus stop you're sitting at, and words you use, mean a lot more than who you fuck.

For example, a recent issue of *Bay Times* reported this raging controversy about bisexuals in the gay movement. One fellow who was just being very candid said he thought men who called themselves "bisexual" were really saying that they liked men and women—but they like women a little bit *better*. He qualified this, "Well, maybe *some* people don't mean this, but that's what everyone understands you to be saying." And I thought that was a good observation on his part: that when we call ourselves these various names, we're not speaking "clinically" or being understood clinically; we're being understood with whatever's in the *air*; whatever our peers are deciding this label means politically and culturally. Language can be very frustrating!

I remember for my 1990 New Years Column I decided I wanted to be like Jeanne Dixon or Andy Rooney and make all these predictions and demand that people start

"Doing things for the '90s!" And my Number One demand was: "Do not tell me what you are, tell me what you *do*. Because your labels mean nothing to me anymore."

I remember when I would tell people I was a socialist; it was totally hopeless—what the fuck does that mean anymore? If you tell somebody you're a "feminist"—very little meaning is clear. Labels only work when there's about 5 people who are using them—as soon as anybody else starts agreeing with you and using that label, it becomes more and more meaningless. The thing that's so funny about the gay movement is: the more people that come out of the closet and say, "I'm queer and I'm proud and I'm out of the closet and I could give a damn what anybody thinks about me anymore!"—the less "inclusive" our gay label becomes. And there's kind of a *mourning* of that passing, like, "Gee, we all used to be in this family and know each other so well, and understand what we could expect from each other, and now we can't do that anymore." You can't assume that the gay person sitting next to you shares your political point of view, or your family background, or your sexual interests.

♦ **AJ:** We have to have a different structure if we're going to survive as a human species. Can't we conceive of a gay or lesbian movement that would include "straight" people?

♦ **SB:** But the fact is that *nobody* wants to be 'straight' anymore. Don't you shudder if somebody calls you "straight" because they see you with a man? Because you don't *feel* straight; you feel you're much more complex than the word "straight" would indicate to anybody.

♦ **AJ:** To somebody like Jesse Helms we're all going to get locked up anyway. The question is: how do you have a revolutionary movement that's inclusionary rather than exclusionary?

♦ **SB:** A sexual liberation movement, in order to be truly integrated and at its most powerful, would be a movement that *already* took gay civil rights for granted. And as long as there is institutionalized homophobia and gay discrimination in terms of jail, housing, jobs, marriage and all that—as long as that exists, the sexual liberation movement is going to be *stunted*, because those things are so important—they're like a big boulder lying on top of everybody's face—you can't breathe.

The people who are most interested in the sexual liberation aspect tend to be people who are living in Bohemian communities where they aren't often faced with the State sticking its morality up your ass, right? It only happens every once in a while, where suddenly we realize, "Ohmigod, my partner just died and I'm not being allowed into the hospital!" Then, when things like that happen to you; when you've been totally out of the closet for *years*, your mind is blown! You can't *believe* you're being treated like this, because that's not where you're at intellectually, and nobody you know *socially* is like that.

When we're among ourselves and we're writing and talking and discussing, we feel like, "Oh, give me a

break—I don't care about the Equal Rights Amendment." Our mind and our sexual desires and our sophistication about our culture has gone 'way ahead of fighting Jesse Helms; we're on another planet! And it's hard to be patient—I get exasperated with the mainstream gay political movement because being out of the closet is such *old* news to me. But when I travel, I can see how much of an issue it *still* is for so many people for whom that just isn't possible. When I go to Arkansas to speak, they don't even put the word "gay" or "lesbian" on the flyer advertising me because if they did, none of the gays or lesbians would come! Because no one would want to be *seen* going to an event that proclaimed "gay" or "lesbian" on the leaflet—that's how crazy things are!

This is difficult for me to accept: the fact that I'm more interested philosophically in sexual liberation and in pushing artistic boundaries than I am in joining the Democratic party and trying to get Mr XYZ elected. That's not my bent politically or artistically—I don't want to do that. Yet I know that my chances for a really broad sexual liberation movement are hampered by the fact that basic civil rights are not, and have never been, secured.

◆ **AJ:** I keep thinking that the crisis is so deep in this culture, and the polarization between the rich and the poor so deep, that in order for any dispossessed groups to make any ground, we're all going to have to band together somehow. It was so disheartening to read recently how blacks pressuring for Civil Rights legislation were so upset about gay and lesbian demands—it's like, the resources are so scarce that all the disenfranchised groups are fighting each other over these pathetic crumbs. Then, of course, the power structure wins. Take your typical white WASP Republicans—they are very bonded together; they don't have much in-fighting. So how can all us dispossessed create a place where we can all work together?

◆ **SB:** Well, sex is a great common denominator. I've had people come up to me after my talks and ask if I felt that some of my observations about men, women and sex roles only pertained to whites, or to the middle-class, or to an "American" point of view. It's funny because I thought, "If you knew me and the way I grew up—Irish-Catholic working class, but education was a big deal—and the kind of schools I went to, and the kids I grew up with . . . then *yes*, a lot of my observations come from that point of view." But women's sexual oppression, unfortunately, is so worldwide that there's really no one who could get up and say, "Well gee, with the way I grew up as a woman I couldn't possibly relate to the kind of sexual oppression *you're* talking about." Forget it! I'm crossing that barrier because women have more in common about sexual denial and invisibility than we have differences. I can't think of another subject that binds people together as clearly as *sex*. That's been essential and key to my work. Everyone I meet who tells me something about the way they grew up and their sexuality is letting me in on *another piece of the puzzle*. ◆ ◆ ◆

Books

Susie Sexpert Vol II
Herotica II (editor)
Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World
Herotica: a collection of women's erotic fiction
How to Read a Dirty Movie: essays on erotic film & commercial pornography

Periodicals

On Our Backs (Editor, Summer 1984-May 1991)
Penthouse Forum (Film Columnist; Contributing Editor)
Young Lust Comic: 20th Anniversary Edition (Co-Editor)
Good Vibration Erotic Video Library Catalog, 1989-present

Articles

"Masculinity in the 90s," *Esquire* Oct 1991
 "Lesbians in the 90s," *The Advocate* Jan 1990
 "1968-1988, 20 Years of Erotic Film," *Forum* Jan 1989
 "Contemporary Women's Erotica," *Lambda Rising Book Report* 1988
 "When Women Talk About Sex," *Utne Reader*, Fall 1988
 "Profile of Chris Rage," *The Advocate* Sept 1988
 "The Bloom in Women's Erotica," *Whole Earth Rev.* Fall 1986
 "Safe Sex Behind the Green Door," *Forum* 1986

Classes/Lectures

"Reading, Writing and Rethinking Erotica" 1-Day workshop
 "How To Read a Dirty Movie," a film clip/lecture presentation
 "Politics of Sexuality," a semester-long program, UC Santa Cruz
 "All Girl Action: the history of lesbian eroticism in Hollywood, hardcore and alternative cinema," a film clip/lecture presentation
 "Sex in Public Erotic Expression, Censorship, and Sexual Repression," lecture
 "The Bloom in Women's Erotica," lecture
 "Reading, Writing and Rethinking Erotica," sex-writing workshop ("Learn how to write a killer orgasm scene. . .")

Television, Video & Film

Phil Donahue Show, May 1991
Gay & Lesbian Erotica in the US, BBC Documentary by Clare Bevin, Fall 1991
People Are Talking, talkshow produced by Nina Sullivan, 1989
News at 10, special documentary feature on women's erotica by Abby Sterling, 1988
Peril or Pleasure: feminism & pornography, video by Andrea Torrice, 1989
Stripped Bare: women in the sex industry speak out, video feature by Caitlin Manning, 1988
The Virgin Machine, feature film by Monica Treut, 1988

Articles & Interviews

have appeared in *Playboy*, *LA Weekly*, *SF Chronicle*, *Rolling Stone*, *Mother Jones*, *SF Examiner*, *Toronto Globe & Mail*, *Frisko* magazine.