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The emergence of non-standard bodies and sexualities

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FORUM

The emergence of non-standard bodies and sexualities

In the context of 'feminist pornography,' I feel compelled to begin this essay with a certain amount of skepticism because I think the term 'feminist porn' is so heavily front-loaded with rules of political correctness and so inscribed with feminist politics of the 1980s and 1990s that the category itself becomes a turn-off. Perhaps my personal experience of the time period, and the fact that I so thoroughly bought into the ideology, is why I look back only to see the contractions it caused to the sexual expression of female artists in particular. The prohibitions of second-wave feminism in relation to the display of women's bodies has always been troubling – if a woman was traditionally beautiful and had a body that mainstream America might be able to objectify, then it was her feminist duty to cover it and make it unappealing to male eyes. Second-wave feminism developed a language, a dress code, a philosophy and ideology to which women who called themselves feminists were expected to conform. You could not be a 'good feminist' if you flaunted or sexualized your female body. In response to this, artist Hannah Wilke's 1976 poster used an image of herself in a pin-up pose, semi-nude from the waist up, a white oxford shirt with sleeves rolled up pushed off her shoulders, fists on her hips, a man's tie knotted around her neck, with her signature tiny vulva sculptures stuck to her naked upper body and face. The piece is entitled *Marxism and Art: Beware of Fascist Feminism*. I became aware of her work and that poster when I was a graduate student in photography at the University of New Mexico in the late 1970s. Hannah Wilke represented everything positive about what feminism had theoretically proposed for female liberation, but she also critiqued the restrictions that feminism itself had additionally placed on women.

I find the same problems in early feminist porn: the repression inherent in foundational (first-wave and second-wave) feminist theories and the requirements necessary to create pornography with feminist or woman-centered sensibilities seemed always to return to a notion of what was 'correct' for women to do or to enjoy. I am making a distinction here between a feminist pornography that developed in the 1980s and 1990s primarily as a reaction to anti-porn protests and the writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon, and the more recent third-wave feminism of the twenty-first century that is much more in alignment with the complexity and actuality of female desire, fantasy, and pleasure. This more contemporary genre of porn (still categorized as feminist even by the women who make it) is informed much more by queer theory and queer identity than it is by conventional feminism. For lack of a better description, this post-feminist/third-wave porn makes little, if any, concession to political correctness.

As I tell my classes when trying to explain to young artists what the term 'politically correct' means, there was a time in the not too distant past – the 1960s

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through the 1990s – when political correctness had its place and served a noble cause. I believe feminists started it, bringing attention to the inequities of the workforce, violence against women, and the ways in which white men in a patriarchal culture exert their power and privilege. Political correctness defined the terms of political and cultural engagement, particularly in regard to language and behaviour for both men and women. Every day we see the positive results of the ideas that were infused into western culture through the determination of feminists.

Unfortunately, political correctness has become an intellectual prison within which an extremely limited dialogue can take place, and when applied to pornography, any attempt to assume an understanding of what women want to see results in a stilted, if not humorous, parody of what women want. Despite my resistance to the content of what I would recognize as 'feminist porn,' the issues of female agency, work conditions, the value of labour in the sex industry, pay equity, the legitimizing of the sex practices of women, are all undeniable accomplishments inherent to feminist porn, some of which is being absorbed into mainstream companies as best practices.

I have seen a lot of porn – all kinds, from extreme hard-core heterosexual and gonzo porn to bondage and discipline, sadism and masochism, specific fetish genres (hirsute, big beautiful woman, grannie, midget, girl on girl, inter-racial, amateur 'real core,' etc.), gay, lesbian, queer, cartoon, animated porn, and the list goes on. I have also made it; I was the content provider for the queer porn site sssspread.com that ran from 2001 to 2004. Our tag line was: 'The prime porn site for hot femmes, studly butches, and lots of gender fuck!' Although I would definitely call myself a feminist, I would *never* say I make feminist porn. Why? Because I see no reason to make porn that conforms to a protocol of politeness and correct behaviour. Porn is a site of resistance to cultural restrictions on pleasure. It is about being aroused in an uncontrollable way and feeling something in your body. It is about what we fetishize, what we need to get off. It is about fantasy, not reality. It never has been and it never should be politically correct.

I am interested in porn for two reasons: I actually enjoy a lot of it, 95% of which would be vilified by anti-porn feminists and perhaps even some pro-porn feminists; and it is the most problematic and politically incorrect of any form of visual representation, still or moving. As an artist who considers herself a cultural theorist of sorts, and who makes photography and video work that is often described as pornographic, I find reactions to pornography endlessly fascinating because it places in the spotlight the irrational individual fears that mirror the cultural fears and obsessions surrounding the body, pleasure, and the difficulty of controlling bodily sensations that arise when looking at something that turns you on.

With that long introductory caveat, I shall move to the topic I was supposed to respond to – non-standard bodies and sexualities. The website sssspread.com put me in touch with some of the most remarkable queer activists, artists, students, sex workers, and scholars I have ever met. They were committed to putting their bodies, their sexualities, their sexual practices, and their wide spectrum of gender identities on display for all to recognize, enjoy, and consume. They were proud of their bodies and were without self-consciousness about their non-conformity with mainstream culture or porn. The females to males were mesmerizing. Some were still binding breasts, some had undergone upper body surgery, and some were only hormonally altered with surgery still under consideration. The testosterone-induced bearded face

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and the hair-covered body with prominent breasts of one of my participant/collaborators provided several moments of intellectual processing and a reality check on my own unconscious staring. But he was there for my camera because he wanted to be seen. In this group of actor/collaborators, male-identified butch dykes and the high femmes oozed a sexuality that was both intimidating and intoxicating. All of the people I have worked with were hyperaware of safer sex concerns – gloves and condoms on strap-ons became fetish accessories that few scenes were without.

'Queer porn breaks all rules – it's a place where anything goes, where everything is possible, where each body is objectified and fetishized because it wants to be.'[1] It does not conform to a specific behaviour. Queer bodies revel in their difference, creating a world of idiosyncrasy in the way they enact everything from vanilla sex to masculinity or high femme, from blood sports and violence to tenderness and aftercare. The participants of this project always created their own scenarios; as I realized early on, their sexual practices were far more substantial and complex than anything I could script to direct. I was simply the documentarian trying to keep enough light in the environment and keep cords out of the camera's frame.

> Beyond the bodies of its subjects and the desire for those bodies by viewers, there are actually many more similarities than I would have imagined between queer and straight porn. (Perhaps the difference in bodies is so huge as to make the similarities seem irrelevant.)

The gender presentation in the performance of sex becomes the point of comparison. Unless the scene I was shooting was simply two women taking their clothes off and having 'lesbian' sex, there was an overwhelmingly hetero (male/female) and gay (male/male) narrative embedded in the scenes. I will clarify here that, except for two shoots with a trans woman and trans man, everyone on the site identified as either a biological woman (some of whom were male-identified) or a trans man. The specific variations on gender presentation within that group were extremely varied. It was not until I started to deconstruct what I was seeing that I realized how apparent the binary masculine and feminine presentations were:

> In a sort of feminist sense, queer porn is politically correct for queers because queer bodies are in it having queer sex. But the scenarios that these queer bodies engage in are those that feminists inveighed against for at least twenty-five years. When did it become OK for two women to have multiple-holed penetrative sex? To fetishize the phallus? To strap on a dildo and have a female partner engage in fellatio? To hyper-sexualize femmes? Or to have a male born person identifying as a pre-op female transsexual strap on a dildo and fuck a male-identified butch dyke in his pussie? Or to have a transman who was a butch dyke get fucked in the ass by a gay man? Of course this isn't the full range of gender expressions and combinations. I'm certainly not complaining, but having been a feminist since the mid-1970s, an anti-porn feminist I might add until 1988, I'm absolutely astonished (and parenthetically thrilled) at the way things have entirely reversed direction. This seems so right to me – a gender fluidity that embraces every historical aspect of every kind of sexual act between two or more people, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

> We can forever analyze porn as having a social significance for the understanding of power, sex, and gender, and as being a political and politicized cultural form of production. But what it will always come down to, whether it's gay, straight, lesbian, dyke, trans, queer or whatever, is that porn is produced as a tool for sexual stimulation,

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primarily masturbation. Porn is made to get people off. In order to do this, bodies must not only be highly sexualized, but objectified, fetishized, exotified and made to accommodate very particular kinks. Embracing the need to objectify and be objectified, to fetishize and be fetishized, to play the willing victim as well as the victimizer, opens up a mine field that will be difficult to traverse, but it is a more intellectually provocative and exciting terrain from which to understand who we are as complex sexual beings.

Note

1. All quotations in this essay can be attributed to a paper I wrote for the 2005 conference Art and Politics of Netporn held in Amsterdam, and the subsequent 2007 publication of conference papers in *C'Lick Me: A Netporn Studies Reader*, edited by Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, and Matteo Pasquinelli. This publication is available as a free download online: http://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/24.pdf.

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