

## UNEASY BEDFELLOWS

CONSIDERING THE ART OF THE  
PORNOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC EYE PROJECT

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Amelia Hitchcock, *The Muse*, Archival Digital Print, 2013.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this paper was supported by the Marsden Fund Council from Government funding, administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand. Sincere thanks to Marsden for their support. My sincere thanks to Professor Nicola Gavey, your encouragement and support for my contribution across multiple roles in this project has been invaluable. To all those working on the project; Associate Professor Virginia, Associate Professor Linda Tyler, Paulette Benton-Greig, Rachel Liebert, Octavia Calder-Dawe, Alex Antevska and Jade Le Grice; thank you, one could not ask for a more inspirational group to work alongside. Thanks also to Judy Hitchcock and Helen Madden for their technical support in the development of this text.

Special thanks to Magdalena O'Connor, Aaron Gash, Soleil Launiere, Tessa Nikopoulos, Priscilla Northe, Bianca Beebe, Bex Hughes, Elspeth Fougere, Lydia Zanetti, Jess Holly Bates, Amy Blinkhorne, Kati Hickey, Jessica Mills, Briar Vivian and Gayle Hogan for all your energy and creativity in bringing The Porn Project to life, and for your ongoing support. To Intentional Space, and all the artists who submitted work, and to all the venues that hosted The Porn Project, thanks for making it possible.



## PREFACE

Pornography in the Public Eye: Ethics and the Art of Engagement is a Marsden-Funded research programme being conducted at The University of Auckland from 2012 – 2015. By utilising a variety of research methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches, the project aims to “make space for critical discussion around the misogyny, sexism and racism within mainstream pornography” (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2013, p. 1). In one branch of this programme Critical Psychology engages with Art, harnessing a variety of creative practices to provoke critical discussion and social change.

This essay is the outcome of a Summer Scholarship as part of the Pornography in the Public Eye project. My role in the project has been multifaceted – I am a practicing artist, curator and researcher, and was involved in the capacity of each of these roles. I participated in the early discussions about the overall project, and subsequently participated in Research Group discussions for *A Different View*, contributed art to the exhibition, co-curated *The Porn Project*, with Rachel Liebert, working as a research associate on the project, and produced this essay. Implicated as I am within the various elements of the project, I have endeavoured to give a fair accounting of what occurred, from my subjective position.

All of the images in this document were exhibited during the Pornography in the Public Eye Project and are used with the artists' permission.



Jess Holly Bates and Lydia Zannetti, *Butch // er*, Performance as part of *Exhibitionists*, The Porn Project, 2013. Photo: Aaron Gash

## INTRODUCTION

Addressing Pornography through art is no easy task when the end goal is cultural critique; regardless of where personal politics situate you within the various debates about porn. The Pornography in the Public Eye project sits at an intersection between many fields – academia, pornography, contemporary art, feminism, activism – which collide with past and present socio-historical contexts, providing complex terrain to navigate. This essay is designed to describe and contextualise the creative approaches utilised by the Pornography in the Public Eye programme, outlined below, and is intended for a non-specialist audience; it functions as a basic introduction and a limited survey of the field – a mere scratching of the surface of a myriad of interconnected discourses. To this end, I focus on the efficacy and paradox of art activism, feminist art and activism, and the intersection of art and porn, concluding with a brief, personal reflection on the outcomes of the project during my engagement with it.

**A DIFFERENT VIEW: ARTISTS ADDRESS PORNOGRAPHY**  
Gus Fisher Gallery, 23 August – 12 October 2013  
This exhibition was curated by Linda Tyler (Gus Fisher), with Nicola Gavey and Virginia Braun. Following two meetings and email discussions of a Reference Group, suggested relevant artists were invited to respond to a brief designed to elicit a variety of responses to contemporary pornography and its concomitant impacts on society. Twenty New Zealand artists were invited to be part of the exhibition. The artists received a fee for their contributions. The exhibition was accompanied by a comprehensive public programme, and brought together “art that calls into question the gendered gaze of mainstream popular pornography” (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2013, p. 8).

<sup>2</sup> The subjects discussed are fields of research within their own right – whilst efforts have been made to identify the key elements of each, it is not possible to explore them in depth within the context of this paper. There is also room within this field to explore other topics; the role of art as decorative, and its relationship to the historical construction of women as decorative, as well as the gendered gaze, and representations of the nude, to name a few. However, these are not discussed, due to the limited scope of the scholarship.

<sup>3</sup> The dates of the show encompass the 120th anniversary of Suffrage Day in New Zealand.

**THE PORN PROJECT**  
8 – 18 August 2013

The Porn Project was a series of creative and activist responses to misogyny, sexism and racism, both within mainstream pornography and wider society at large, organised by Rachel Leibert and myself. Pornography in the Public Eye acted as catalyst for the formation of this campaign, and provided limited funding to assist with essential costs. However, The Porn Project was run autonomously. Artists, activists and associated groups involved with The Porn Project acted independently to create a ten-day festival on and around Auckland’s Karangahape Road – an area associated with alternative and creative cultures, and also with the sex industry.

[SEXUALPOLITICSNOW.ORG.NZ](http://SEXUALPOLITICSNOW.ORG.NZ)

The Pornography in the Public Eye project launched the website [sexualpoliticsnow.org](http://sexualpoliticsnow.org). The website provides a further point of public engagement; an easily accessible source of information relevant to gender politics and pornography. The website also hosts documentation of both A Different View and The Porn Project – allowing these projects to continue challenging audiences beyond their temporal scope.

The following short chapters provide some context to these projects, moving through the efficacy and paradox of art activism, feminist art and activism, and the intersection of art and porn, and concluding with a brief reflection on the project specifically.

<sup>4</sup> The Reference Panels included academics involved in the programme, artists, as well as the show’s curators.

<sup>5</sup> The artists selected also represent a mix of genders, ethnicities, sexualities, and ages.

## THE ART OF SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT: EFFICACY AND PARADOX

6

In curating an art exhibition where *'Artists Address Pornography'*, and facilitating development of performance-art-activism beyond the gallery threshold, it is evident that we believe socially engaged art has the potential to inspire social shifts. Art may be an effective tool to stimulate critical discourse, but it also has plenty of associated baggage in the form of millennia of art history, centuries of art criticism and decades of involvement in human rights movements, to be unpacked. For the purpose of contextualising *A Different View* and *The Porn Project*, a few of the major discourses and contributing fields will be briefly touched upon here.

Can art be an effective tool in the quest for social change? Certainly it is not a new premise. Visual imagery and performance have been utilised in constructing social change for centuries; one only need thumb through the pages of a survey of Western Art to see a long history of political and religious propaganda as well as many examples of art promoting counter culture. Pinpointing the exact origin of current socially engaged art practices is difficult, as they draw inspiration from a number of movements; from early 20th century Dadaism<sup>6</sup>, to the avant-garde Situationists<sup>7</sup> of the '60s; from seventies feminist art, to Relational Aesthetics<sup>8</sup> in the late 1990s, to name a few (Starowitz, 2013). As with the work of many of these movements, contemporary activist art often engages 'anti-art' tactics – utilising community participation, readymade options and embracing elements of chance – as well as positioning itself as part of, or one with culture, rather than removed from it. The past few years have seen a resurgence in socially engaged art practices, and 'activist art' (or art-activism) and there has been a revival of sorts in the art world, a general appeal to return to

socially committed work (Hertmans, 2011, p. 56). Some critics have even described it as a trend (Vanhaesebrouck, 2011, p.21); many artists and collectives are utilising art to further a cause or support a school of thought, both internationally and locally.

In the text *But is it Art?: The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Nina Felshin describes a hybrid practice, which sprung "from a union of political activism with the democratizing of aesthetic tendencies... in the late 1960s" as having "one foot in the art world and the other in the world of political activism and community organizing" (Felshin, 1995, pp. 9-10). Activist art is thus identified as predominantly process based and extra-institutional often taking the form of intervention, performance and events, or harnessing mainstream media conventions (posters, broadcasts, billboards, etc.) – with allowance for more traditional exhibition or installation as well (Felshin, 1995, pp. 9-10). In a 2013 context, one could also extend the definition to include social media campaigning and internet based works: YouTube, artist/activist websites, blogs etc. Felshin also describes the prevalence of preliminary research, collaborative practices, interdisciplinary interaction and the communication of a message as key elements in understanding an art-activist practice, with process underscored as being equally as important as output (1995, p. 11).

Utilising art as a vehicle to critique social norms can be contentious, however. Fine art is implicated in some of the subjects the *Pornography in the Public Eye* project seeks to critique; art has been accused of objectifying women under the guise of allegory or 'the female nude' for centuries<sup>9</sup>, and remains a male dominated industry, despite multiple attempts by

<sup>6</sup> The Dada movement encompassed subversive and revolutionary ideals which eventually merged into a set of "strategies and philosophies adopted by a loose international network of artists aiming to create new forms of visual art, performance, and poetry as well as alternative visions of the world"(MoMA, 2013). For Dada artists, the aesthetic of their work was generally considered secondary to the ideas it conveyed; as such they employed strategies of chance and harnessed readymade objects; in doing so, changing the definition of what could be called "art".

<sup>7</sup>Inspired by Dada, Situationist artists in the 1960s sought to critique advanced capitalism, as well as dissolve further the boundaries between art and everyday

culture.

<sup>8</sup> Relational Aesthetics were described by critic Nicolas Bourriaud, as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space." (Bourriaud, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> W. Eaton argues that "insofar as it makes male dominance and female subordination sexy, the female nude is one important source of this eroticization and in this way is a significant part of the complex mechanism that sustains sex inequality" (2012).

feminism to break into the male dominated industry and to critique it<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, art and activism can make for uneasy bedfellows, especially within the limitations of the art institution, which is entrenched in modern capitalism. As critic Suzi Gablik outlines, making socially engaged art may go against institutional Western art's cultural pedagogy:

In Western culture, artists aren't encouraged to be integral to the social, environmental or spiritual life of the community... Instead they learn to be competitive with their products in the marketplace. We live in a society in which all our institutions are defined and measured by this market ideology – none has escaped (Gablik, 2004, p. 59).

Despite these issues, art as a tool toward social change is a strategy harnessed widely, not only by artists, but by academics, politicians, Non-Government Organisations and corporations alike (Grindon, 2010). As with any social issue, the challenge for artists, academics and activists lies not only in overcoming dominant ideologies and propaganda funded by consumer industries with their own financial interests at heart, but in framing the rhetoric in such a way that it changes cultural behaviour. This is no mean feat, "in an era where subversiveness is a fashion trend," and art activism could be perceived as another "symptom of infinite bourgeois ennui"(Vanhaesebrouck, 2011, p. p.21), any art-activist practices must be highly considered to be effective. Successful activist art works must negotiate through a paradox; on the one hand, institutional constructs of 'high' art, as vague and transgressible as they are, generally shun the didacticism of activist practices, avoiding being labelled agitprop at all costs; one cannot be too obvious. On the other hand, contemporary art

can be overly self-referential, only communicating to an art-educated few<sup>11</sup>; one cannot be too oblique. Positioning an exhibition as both high art and communicative – finding a balance point between the 'art' and 'non-art audiences' is a *fine art*. Pun intended.

The Pornography in the Public Eye project sought to operate somewhere between activist art, as outlined by Felshin, and a socially engaged form of contemporary art. Admittedly, it is unlikely that art of A Different View would be considered 'activist', although some of the artists involved may also engage in activist practices. However, the grassroots level of The Porn Project could be more readily interpreted as activist art practice. It could also be said that the creation of these projects stemmed from a body of research which seeks to critique mainstream hetero-pornography, which could be interpreted as a form of scholar activism<sup>12</sup>, and the academics behind the scenes could be said to be socially engaged. The Pornography in the Public Eye project also drew inspiration from similar interdisciplinary projects in the United States; Violence Transformed, an "annual series of visual and performing arts events that celebrate the power of art, artists and art-making to confront, challenge and mediate violence" (2013); and the New View Campaign, a grassroots network which formed in 2000 to "challenge the distorted and oversimplified messages about sexuality that the pharmaceutical industry relies on to sell its new drugs" (2008). Members of the New View Campaign, many of whom are psychologists in similar fields to the scholars of the Pornography in the Public Eye project, ran a successful exhibition in 2009. Vulvagraphics, harnessed the activist power of art to highlight genital diversity and protest the growing

<sup>10</sup> The work of anonymous feminist artists group, the Guerrilla Girls, have exposed these statistics and challenged them for years, noting little change between women's gallery representation in the late 1980s and today.

<sup>11</sup> As artist Beverly Naidus notes: "Stereotypes about socially engaged art abound everywhere, but they are most prevalent in traditional art departments and art schools. The students in these programs rarely learn about socially engaged art, and if they do, they may be only presented with the most minimal understanding of it in the form of political posters, social realist murals, and various forms of "agit prop." There is also a deep, unspoken fear characterizing activist art as not really art. A possible source

for this view is the old modernist attitude that art is not supposed to communicate a message, bend to any agenda, or be didactic. The pejorative connotation of the word "didactic" is in itself an interesting issue to ponder. When and how did it become inappropriate or out of fashion for art to teach something? Who does that attitude serve?"(Naidus, 2007, p. 140).

<sup>12</sup> Scholar activism has been defined as "the production of knowledge and pedagogical practices through active engagements with, and in service of, progressive social movements" (Sudbury & Okazawa-Rey, 2009, p. 3).

8 trend of “unregulated and unmonitored genital cosmetic surgery” (2009). These cases provide further context for the art of Pornography in the Public Eye; each draws on the wealth of historical and contemporary precedents within feminist politics, which utilise art as a tool in the quest for social change.



Kelly McDowell, *External Constriction*, Performance as part of *Exhibitionists*, The Porn Project, 2013. Photo: Peter Jennings

## SOME BRIEF NOTES ON THE INTERSECTION OF FEMINISM(S) & ART (HERSTORY)

10 *“The relationship between activism and theory has always been a vital one for feminism. Without the space for reflection, analysis and development of strategy, activism would be random and counter-productive; without active intervention in patriarchal social and cultural structures, feminist thought would remain an academic, apolitical endeavour”* (Robinson, 2001, p. 49)

With the intention of countering the gendered gaze, racism and misogyny within contemporary hetero-porn, the art of the Pornography in the Public Eye project has strong connections to feminist art. Defining what constitutes ‘feminist art’ is complex. Feminism itself is not a singular thread, rather it comprises a multitude of discourses woven around a core belief that gender, class and ethnicity should not privilege or disadvantage anyone<sup>13</sup> and, like art, it may be subjectively defined, not to mention influenced by geographic, political and socio-historical conditions. Stereotypical views that all early 1970s feminist art “celebrated ‘central core’ imagery<sup>14</sup>” and that “the 1980s were concerned exclusively with strategies of appropriation”, do not reflect the wealth and diversity of feminist art practices during those times (Reckitt, 2012, p. 11). The glut of feminist artworks related to the explorations and politics of the Pornography in the Public Eye project has certainly made determining what to include in this short passage difficult, and as such, only a few quintessential<sup>15</sup> works have been touched upon.

As a starting point, I look to what is sometimes called the first wave of feminism(s), and an infamous action which engaged the public through popular art. In March 1914, radical

militant suffragette Mary Richardson was arrested and vilified for an attack on Diego Velázquez’s painting *Venus at her Mirror* (c.1651), as it hung in the National Gallery in London. Richardson systematically slashed the back of the reclining female nude several times, seriously damaging the painting. Whilst Richardson asserted that her attack on the picture was retribution for the arrest of another suffragette, it was also evident that she knew of the work and targeted it specifically<sup>16</sup> (Eaton, 2012, p. 278). The painting, newly acquired through public donations, was notorious; newspapers were grappling to “balance the frank sensuousness of the picture and its more transcendent qualities” (Fowler, 1994, p. 12). This was not an isolated attack. Other British suffragettes, who believed the “heaping up of art treasures” while the “desecration” of women’s bodies was still occurring in the country was “hateful, sinister, sickening” (Ibid. p. 15), also attacked prominent artworks in public collections in the months following. Their choices to attack works of public notoriety, often with subject matter which conformed to the “sexual politics of art and connoisseurship” (Ibid., p.124) of the time, was highly considered; their actions revealing their own muteness as a subject in a society which condoned sexual objectification of women, under the guise of ‘culture,’ whilst not permitting them any liberty in civic life. The strong reactions from the public seem testimony to the effectiveness of utilising art (whether in the destruction or creation of it) to stimulate public debate. However, it also provides a cautionary tale; the violent, radical nature of the acts alienated more of the public than they bought to the cause. Although the Suffragist movement would be sidelined by the outbreak of the First World War, they paved the ground for later feminist activism and art.

<sup>13</sup>This definition will not fit all feminists’ thinking.

<sup>14</sup>Central Core imagery refers to vaginal or vulva imagery employed in feminist artworks symbolic of women’s interconnected experiences through their “central core”. The term was used by artists such as Judy Chicago, and certainly was not without criticisms – limiting the idea of women to biological sex for example.

<sup>15</sup>There are notable works from the feminist canon that I have consciously left out, such as Judy Chicago’s 1979 *Dinner Party*. Works such as this are widely written about, so I have focussed on those which I feel most closely link with this project.

<sup>16</sup>In a 1952 interview, Richardson would remark that she “did not like the way men visitors to the gallery gaped at [the *Rokeby Venus*] all day”. Today, scholars identify the attacks as a “specifically feminist critique of the female nude” (Eaton, 2012, p. 278)

Fifty years later, the act of cutting was employed again, but in a radically different manner, when Artist Yoko Ono invited the audience to cut her clothing off, in “a prototype for feminist performance art” (Bryan-Wilson, 2003, p. 101). The 1964 event score for *Cut Piece*, read as follows:

“First version for single performer:  
 Performer sits on stage with a pair of scissors in front of him.  
 It is announced that members of the audience may come on stage—one at a time—to cut a small piece of the performer’s clothing to take with them.  
 Performer remains motionless throughout the piece.  
 Piece ends at the performer’s option.”(Concannon, 2008, p. 81)

When Ono performed *Cut Piece* herself, she assumed a traditional Japanese pose and sat passively unmoving, allowing audiences to remove her clothing. Although at the time neither Ono nor her critics framed *Cut Piece* as a feminist piece<sup>17</sup>, the work has since been extensively analysed through a feminist lens (Ibid. p. 82). By the 1990s, critics would claim that *Cut Piece* was “addressing serious issues – in this case voyeurism, sexual aggression, gender subordination, violation of a woman’s personal space, violence against women” (Tanner, 1994, p. 61); all key themes which the *Pornography in the Public Eye* project is exploring. So whilst the open score has facilitated many different iterations and subsequent interpretations, and the original intention may not have been self-consciously feminist, this work has certainly contributed to the understanding and creation of Feminist Art.

<sup>17</sup> Other performers have also followed the event score for *Cut Piece*; it is not essential for the performer to be a woman.

<sup>18</sup> Ono would later become notorious for the controversial phrase “Woman is the Nigger of the World” in the 1970s, cementing her place as a radical feminist.

<sup>19</sup> These named authors and texts are only a few amongst many.

Self-identified “feminist” art was born alongside the “Second Wave” Feminist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Seminal texts, such as Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, had laid the groundwork for the radical protests of second wave feminism, whilst liberal feminists the Western world over were inspired by Betty Friedan’s landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963)(Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006). Germaine Greer’s many publications were also influential<sup>19</sup>. The late 1960s was a period of widespread uprising and activism, which included anti-war protests, as well as the civil and queer rights movements. Feminist artist, Lynn Hershman Leeson, recalls it as a time where “art and politics fused and then transfused into the blocked cultural arteries of the time” (Leeson, 2011). Female artists began reacting against the dry intellectualism of minimalism, and battling for equal gallery representation. Feminist critique began, asserting that the art world, and indeed art itself “had institutionalized sexism, just as the patriarchal society-at-large had done”, (MOCA, 2010). Thus began a feminist art movement concerned with exploring women’s experience, subverting the myth of (male) artistic genius and mitigating the isolation of women artists. A variety of innovative art-praxis was established in counterpoint to existing systems – the personal became political! Art was utilised as a teaching tool, collaborative practices emerged, community/audience based participation works flourished (Aagerstoun & Auther, 2007, p. viii).

In the late 1960s, politically motivated art coincided with body-orientated practices; for feminist artists, the body, recognised as a site of both oppression and rebellion, “became an important site of making and exhibiting work” (Battista,

12 2013, p. 12), reclaiming the female body as a site for women as desiring subjects, rather than passive objects. Performances such as Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* (1975) challenged the archetypal ideal of the female figure in art, almost aggressively exposing the female body. In this work, Schneeman stood naked, save mud markings accentuating her curves, and read a feminist text from a scroll that she slowly extracted from her vagina. This type of work poses a question very relevant to the Pornography in the Public Eye project: can representations of the female body, however consciously and politically conceived, supersede their reception in a society conditioned to objectify and sexualise women? (Battista, 2013). A contemporary work *The Lady Garden* (2012) by New Zealand artist Virginia Kennard, seeks to explore this question; ironically through placing nude women in passive positions within architectural settings, and challenging the audience to 'desexualise them'. Now, as with the early feminist work, the question of whether one is playing into dominant hegemonic representations and furthering the objectification of women, or challenging, exposing and denying those structures, remains up for debate.

Polish artist Natalie LL's<sup>20</sup> work *Consumer Art*, (1972-75), is a further example of this grey area. In the work, a woman, blond hair perfectly curled, looks straight into the camera, playing suggestively with milk, sausages, popsicles and bananas. One can interpret an attempted element of role reversal: the woman is depicted here as sexually active, while the male is reduced to a series of inanimate phallic objects to be toyed with and consumed. Critics have asserted that the model's direct engagement with the viewer and overt performance of gender "mocks

the hyperbolic femininity, erotic submissiveness and pornographic tropes of advertising" (Lamm, 2008). Whether this is an effective trope when the woman, however ironically, maintains appropriate feminine appearance and expected levels of feigned enjoyment whilst performing these acts, is debatable. Regardless, whilst the technology betrays the work's age, the content still feels unnervingly relevant, forty years later.

The artwork Lynda Benglis printed in *Artforum* in 1974, *Untitled*, not only seems relevant to contemporary discourse on art and pornography, but is still making headlines. In the work, the slightly built artist appears naked, short hair slicked back, oiled skin revealing bikini tan lines, wearing cat-eye sunglasses and brazenly brandishing a realistically cast, double ended dildo which is inserted into her vagina (Poundstone, 2011). Benglis created this as an advert for her show, spending \$3000 to get the work into the magazine as a paid advertisement when it was rejected as part of the editorial content. The artwork was hugely controversial, with responses ranging from celebratory to downright dismissive; the ad "became a lightning rod for conflicting views of feminism, pornography, editorial (and critical) responsibility, art-world economics, reputation-building and artistic license" (Smith, 2009). Feminist proponents were divided; Arlene Raven and Beth Iskin decried the work as "inescapable self-promotion and self-prostitution" (Poundstone, 2011); whereas Lucy Lippard recognised it as Benglis "deliberately [taking] her image as a serious sculptor in vain" in order to mock gender role-play and a macho art institution, describing it as a "successful display of the various ways in which woman is used and therefore can use herself as a political sex object in the art world"

<sup>20</sup>Natalie Lach-Lachowicz

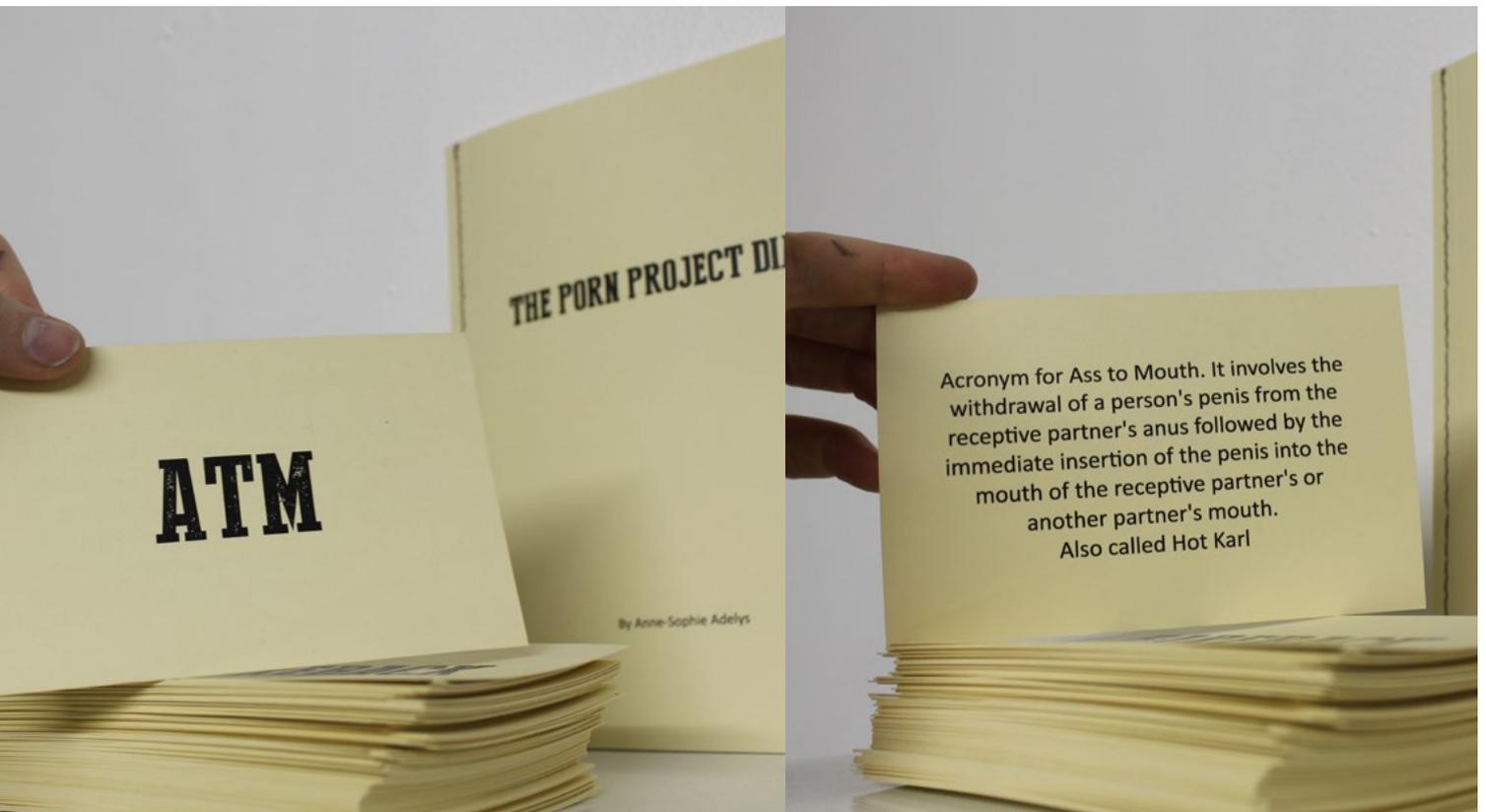
(Lippard, 1995, p. 92). This work remains shocking and a challenge to a male dominated art world and society, even after four decades. Arguably, the most “startling phallus” in the picture remains the metaphorical one Benglis creates in her flawless presentation: “the sense of empowerment, entitlement, aggressiveness and forthrightness so often misunderstood to be the province of men” (Smith, 2009). Benglis’ bold ownership of her body is a template which still provokes controversy within feminist discourse, however, its effectiveness cannot be underestimated; “no single work has gotten as much critical attention, laudatory or seething, as the Artforum spread” (Smith, 2009). Granted, the art world is not as easily shocked as perhaps it once was, but the value of shock tactics is certainly worth considering as part of an artistic arsenal toward social change.

Utilising artistic performance to combat social issues was also a key focus of artists Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, who worked together during the late 1970s. Their Los Angeles performance *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977) was a successful protest, memorial and public address. During the event, women participants addressed the audience, supported by others dressed in tall black costumes, carrying red shawls and banners of protest; the black for mourning for the victims of violence, and red for pain and anger. Designed to combat local media’s sensationalizing of rape-related murders in the city, which “exploited women’s fears and vulnerability for commercial gain, offering no access to support lines ... or other means of empowerment”, the performance involved local officials and other collaborators and effectively inspired a turnaround in media attitudes and representations (Reckitt, 2012, p. 126). The

costuming and performance aspects engage a diverse audience in the work and successfully create space for challenging public debate.

Further inspiration can be drawn from Lacy and Labowitz’s project *Ariadne: A Social Art Network* (1978-80); a coalition of artists, activists, media reporters and politicians against ‘violence against women’. Ariadne’s aim was to “provide a structure to nourish feminist art... become a power base to approach the media, address the community on women’s issues and apply for funding” (Keegan, 2007).

The past 150 years have seen a huge advancement in gender equality on a global scale; women are now equal citizens, at least on paper, in most countries. However, legislation has still not fully transitioned into cultural practice; “the “deep[er] structure” of women’s secondary status and oppression persists, whether in countries that top the UN gender equality index or those at the bottom. There is no country in the world where women enjoy equal status with men” (deHaan, 2010). It is an interesting time for feminism, and for feminist art, which is “either so over, or ... gathering momentum”, depending which critic you read (Withers, 2008, p. 457). A “Fourth Wave” has been declared (or at least rumoured), and in the art realm, the “first decade of the twenty-first century has been marked by a surge of interest in feminist art, its futures, and its histories” (Meagher, 2011, p. 99). The new generation of artists engaging with feminism(s) have a glut of historical precedence, as well as contemporary culture to respond to, with the internet providing a wealth of resources and a globally interconnected platform to shout from. They seem to be gaining more traction every day.



Anne-Sophie Adelys, *The Porn Project Diary and Flash Cards*; *Mi Casa* -The Porn Project, 2013. Photo: Amelia Hitchcock

## ART (AND) PORN

Humans have been creating sexually explicit imagery for millennia. From 35000 year old fertility figurines to depictions in the Karma Sutra, through classical sculptures and paintings (many found in the ruins of Pompeii) to the censored I Modi in Renaissance Europe; from erotic woodcuts from 17th Century Japan, to sculpted and painted nudes in the occidental tradition; the beaver shots of early photography through to the pin-ups and centrefolds in the 20th century; sexuality, sexual pleasure and intercourse have been visualised arguably as long as people have been creating art. And, as “sex is one of the great givens of human existence,” this is hardly surprising (Wallace, Kemp, & Bernstein, 2007, p. 14). However, the reception of such art is hugely influenced by the cultural and socio-historical conditions of the time and geographical location, with different cultures imposing different regulations on sex and its depiction. Most explicit images have, at one time or another, been subject to criticism and censorship, with repression constituting the “main thrust” in control and regulation (Wallace, et al., 2007, p. 114).

Attitudes toward sex and its depictions also shift over time. One generation’s objectionable material, stripped of its original social and locational contexts, may become another generation’s art, and vice versa. In the ruins of Pompeii, archaeologists discovered a wealth of Roman art, much of which depicted copulation. The majority of this explicit work, including a marble sculpture which graphically depicted the god Pan penetrating a goat, was kept under lock and key for years and required special permits to view it (Mattusch, 2005, p. 156). Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*<sup>21</sup>(1538) had a different kind of censorship; in 1880, Mark Twain asserted that the only place for Titian’s now-canonical

painting of a reclining nude where it would not be considered pornographic, was in an art gallery, as there, viewers’ behaviours would be moderated by the presence of others and the bounds of public decency (cited in Dennis, 2009, p. 15). Titian’s *Venus* gazes coyly at the viewer, her left hand draped suggestively across her pubis; it was this gesture which Twain and his contemporaries found so offensive. A later painting which follows the same tradition of reclining female nudes, *Olympia* (1863), by Eduoard Manet, was subject to heavy criticism in its own time. This work caused public outcry, not because the reclining figure could be interpreted as pleasuring herself, but because she was identifiable as a contemporary prostitute. This explicit link between art and sex-for-sale transgressed boundaries of what was deemed socially appropriate. Both *Venus* and *Olympia* have since been accepted into the art history canon of masterpieces of their respective eras and are predominantly shown without protest. However, the Pan statue, although now recognised for the merits of its sculptural technique, is usually tucked away in an age restricted section of the Naples museum, and provokes controversy when it is exhibited in public<sup>22</sup>. Whether this restriction is caused by the explicit nature of the act depicted, or whether contemporary society is unused to artistic depictions of aggressive masculine sexuality, is debatable. Recent historical precedence tends to be more readily accepting of depictions of female nudes over their male counterparts.

The predominance of naked women in art, whilst women artists were (and remain) underrepresented in the art world, was the catalyst for the formation of the anonymous feminist artists collective The Guerrilla Girls. As a collective, these women have

<sup>21</sup> This was originally a private work commissioned to decorate a marriage chest.

<sup>22</sup> Restricted access historically made viewing this work popular amongst those allowed access (educated white men) (Rodley, 1999). A March 2013 exhibition at the British Museum had a parental guidance recommendation, due to the Museum being unwilling to display the work in a separate section (Vout, 2013); perhaps indicating a shift in public perception.

been protesting the inequalities in the art world (and the world at large) since the late 1980s. One of their best known early works directly questions the value of female nudity in art. The 1989 poster, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met?* proclaimed: “Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Section are women, but 85% of the nudes are female”. The poster, which also depicted a classical nude holding a fan, with a furry gorilla mask (a Guerrilla Girl’s trademark) superimposed over her head, was rejected for public funding because the fan handle looked phallic – there was no problem raised with the nudity of the female (Lustig, 2002).

That a female may be depicted naked, but a marginally phallic object can cause offence, represents a double standard which seems common in art. In some ways, I feel art is rather an awkward vehicle for critique of the limited gender roles and misogyny of pornography – in my experience, the industry remains heavily dominated by male artists, supported by female administration. Female fine art graduates outnumber their male counterparts, but generally speaking, male artists are more widely shown and represented by dealer galleries. However, regardless of these limitations, and despite the potential for art to be misconstrued or censored, artists have continued to engage with sexually explicit subject matter. In recent years, sex and porn have been addressed from multiple angles, as subject of critique and as subject matter, through many forms of artistic practice.

In her 1976 series, *The Black File*, Croatian artist, Sanja Iveković, juxtaposed newspaper announcements describing missing daughters with soft-porn imagery of young girls clipped from magazine advertisements, drawing attention to the

complications of eroticized vulnerability. As critic Kimberly Lamm speculates, “perhaps patriarchal culture’s need to see girls as helpless dovetails with the insistent desire to see their beauty as their primary value: a combination leading young girls into dangerous voids” (2008).

British artist Cosey Fanni Tutti deliberately entered such a void by working as a model for pornographic magazines and film. Without discussing her own art project with directors, Tutti worked for two years to collate imagery and information which would form part of her 1976 show *Prostitution* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. The show encompassed pornographic images of Tutti – originally destined for wall display, but subsequently contained in a print rack due to censorship restrictions – as well as performance, various objects and discussion events focused on sex and prostitution. Tutti’s invitation to “women who work[ed] in the sex industry, artists and members of the public to enter into dialogue” (Reckitt, 2012, p. 193) is a similar model to one which the *Pornography in the Public Eye* seeks to implement through art.

Where Tutti entered the world of pornography as an artist, Annie Sprinkle entered the art world as a porn star. The self-proclaimed “post-porn modernist and a pro-porn optimist” had worked as a prostitute for many years, before entering the commercial porn world in the 1970s and assuming her famous pseudonym. By the eighties she was a lauded star and director; her film, *Deep inside Annie Sprinkle* was the second highest grossing porn film of 1981. However, Sprinkle would leave the industry soon after, when her attempts to advocate safer sex practices in the industry in the wake of the AIDS

crisis went unheeded. Annie Sprinkle's transition into the art world began in the late 1970s. Her *Golden Shower Ritual Kits* began attracting not only sexual fetishists but art collectors and artists. Annie Sprinkle began to emerge as a "politicized prostitute, conceptual artist hooker, and subversive thinker" (Garretson, 2003). Her performances and workshops began to reach an art audience, whose positive responses galvanised her into engaging with art more actively. Her *Public Cervix Announcement* performance (1990) is perhaps her best known art piece. During the performance, which had many iterations in different countries, Sprinkle invited the audience to view her cervix with a speculum and a flashlight. The show climaxed (pun intended) with a "sex magic masturbation ritual", where Sprinkle would invoke "the legend of the ancient sacred prostitute". This performance sparked many disputes about the classification of art/porn, and, like Mapplethorpe's work, contributed to the debates surrounding controversial art receiving public funding in the US.

Sprinkle often collaborates with her partner, Elizabeth Stephens in performance pieces which challenge public perceptions about sexuality and the division of public/private spheres. Their 2007 multimedia installation *Étant donnés*, functions as an undoing/doubling of Marcel Duchamp's famous installation of the same name. In Duchamp's original, the viewer is placed in the position of voyeur, looking through a peep hole in a door on a scene where a woman lies in nature, legs spread, her head obscured from view. Sprinkle and Stephens recreate the piece in video work, their two, full-figured bodies by a river in the place of Duchamp's lone, headless woman. The added element of their physical contact and

sexual pleasure undoes the objectification of Duchamp's woman to some degree, and increases it on another level – doubling the subjects of the voyeur's gaze (Dennis, 2009, p. 71). Calling into question the role of voyeurism in art, and depicting female pleasure, this work both subverts tradition by showing the subjects' physical pleasure, yet reinforces the idea of women as objects to be viewed in its presentation. It also serves to illustrate the importance of context; in a gallery situation the film depicting the two artists from this angle has the potential to become 'art' – elsewhere it could be considered pornographic. Precedence for this kind of tension at the boundary between art and porn has historical precedence in some of the art films of the 1960s such as Andy Warhol's *Blow Job*, (1969), Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, (1963), and Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1965)(Dennis, 2009, p. 142).

Not all artists engaging with porn incite this tension. Thomas Ruff's *Nudes*, consist of downloaded pornographic thumbnails from the internet, digitally altered and printed large scale. Whilst still recognisable as porn stills, Ruff's processes aestheticize the works, giving them a painterly quality. However, this formalistic treatment of the images merely allows viewers to "slum internet porn from within the austere confines of the gallery space"; reinforcing high art's status without challenging the audience's views on porn (Dennis, 2009, p. 139).

Further artists have successfully challenged perceptions, utilising the internet to create critical space on the subject of pornography. Marc Garrett set up a website *Censored Porn (no flesh guaranteed)* from 1997-2004. Like fellow artists

18 Charles Cohen, who downloaded porn stills and meticulously cut out the figures for them leaving white voids in the images, Garrett removes any naked flesh from the picture, replacing it instead with generic desktop wallpaper designs. Garrett's site was taken down in 2004, after an unprecedented number of keyword links similar to other porn sites crashed the server. The "activist play" successfully "managed to hijack a large section of the lusty internet audience to view something different" (Garrett cited in Dennis, 2009, p. 145).

Like Garrett's site, Kristina Sheryl Wong's site, *BigBadChineseMama.com* also attracted unwitting surfers in search of porn. However, Wong's spoof site was designed to parody Asian mail order bride sites, aggressively highlighting the racial and cultural stereotypes employed by these sites and ridiculing those seeking to utilise the service. Wong's Manifesto describes her desire "to catch the oppressor in the act of oppression and use my personal sense of humour as a political force" (Wong, 2008). Similarly, Prema Murth's Bindi Girl website, utilised an amalgamation of stereotypical racial and sexual expectations of exotic Indian porn websites and those featuring nude photographs of South Asian women with bindis placed over their breasts and genitals. These projects both "critique the Internet-based perpetuation of exoticized stereotypes of Asian women 'available' via global sex tourism and Internet pornography, thereby confronting the soft colonialism of deindustrialized nations, exported, consumer-based racism under globalization" (Dennis, 2009, p. 150); discourses which the Pornography in the Public Eye project also seeks to engage with.



Rachel Liebert installing Amie Wee's *Clown Porn Project*; *Mi Casa*, The Porn Project, 2013. Photo: Amelia Hitchcock

## REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OUTCOMES OF PORNOGRAPHY IN THE PUBLIC EYE

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On August 23rd, hundreds of visitors ventured through pink vinyl covered doors to peruse the art of *A Different View: Artists Address Pornography*. Video, painting, sculpture, performance and installation all came together in a colourful, and at times almost playful, exhibition. Much of the art engaged with sexuality and gender representation primarily, dealing with porn tangentially, and perhaps leaving the audience to make their own connections (occasionally prompted by wall texts).

From the perspective of a contributing artist, the predetermined curatorial approach and rigorous contextualisation of the *A Different View* show provided us (artists) with a degree of creative freedom from the burden of representing the complex set of issues concomitant to pornography. I believe this was apparent in the diversity of work, which seemed to show evidence of individual choice around the degree of engagement with the subject.

Whilst some revelled in the diversity and breadth of the exhibition, some reviewers decried the show for its perceived lack of critical bite. Whilst some writers appeared to have little knowledge of the curatorial premise for the show, judging it purely as a curated exhibition, others noted that perhaps the tone was inevitable due to its University affiliations (Hurrell in Carmichael, 2013). Granted, as a venue, the Gus Fisher Gallery lent its weight to the show, and perhaps increased viewers' expectations; as a University Gallery, on some levels it is expected to be a political space. However, the University affiliations also came with certain constraints; the multitude of stakeholders and funding bodies require both the upholding of standards, and preferably positive press. To negotiate these fields and ask artists to take bigger risks within this context would

certainly have been challenging. However, I believe the show did provoke discussions around porn, media, art and representation. The accompanying public programme seemed rigorous, and was both well attended and well received; so whilst the exhibition itself may not have packed the punch some were expecting, I believe it can still be said to have achieved its aims of stimulating public discussion.

*The Porn Project* - a series of activism/art activities which prefaced the *Different View* exhibition - also sparked audience engagement with a variety of issues associated with pornography. Designed to reach a wide audience and diverse creative communities, the project took art to the streets and surrounds of Karangahape Road – engaging with the neighbourhood's association with alternative, creative cultures, and the history of the sex industry in the area. In doing so, we attempted to mitigate the risk of losing impetus by preaching solely to the converted<sup>23</sup>. In contrast to the institutional structure of the exhibition, *The Porn Project* seemed to create opportunities for more direct public engagement, beyond the gallery setting. Utilising some of the conventions of 'activist art', the ten day festival encompassed multiple projects, with over 100 creative practitioners involved. Working collectively, performing in public places and using activist techniques, such as anonymous poster campaigns and interventions, the project operated in/out-side the institution, moving away from autonomous aesthetics and financial concerns to the beginnings of committed collective social engagement. The festival encompassed two artist-run exhibitions with interactive installations, a three-day exhibition by the New Zealand Prostitute's collective, public street performances, a breastfeeding-sip in, direct

<sup>23</sup> According to Edward Lucie-Smith, it is generally "taken for granted that artists should regularly profess radical views about society and its ills", and that these views are shared by the majority of the gallery visiting, politically liberal audience (Lucie-Smith, 2007, p. 85).

interventions in the urban environment, a spoken word evening, a performance art event and several public discussions/seminars. Whilst the project had some media coverage, I believe its success was in the sheer numbers engaged directly with the project; the combined total audience across the ten days was over 600, and the observable ripple effect has been huge. The creative collective Intentional Space, which formed in the process of designing The Porn Project, also maintains an active online forum, which continues to critically engage with porn, and a variety of feminist issues.

The art of *The Porn Project* was not without criticism however. A policy of radical inclusion meant that the exhibitions were a collection of disparate voices – harmonious at times, wildly off key at others. It also became clearly apparent that, although the audience and practitioners in 2013 New Zealand are ready to engage with porn, gender and sexuality, there is still a degree of immaturity and embarrassment associated with the conversation. One viewer described the content of the exhibition as “adolescent” – if not in quality but in content – which to me seemed to resonate with the current cultural climate around these discourses. Conversely, other respondents found the project both challenging and engaging, and called for more discussion of these issues

SexualPoliticsNow.org.nz launched in the same week as *A Different View*. Housing critically engaged content, further information on the creative projects and practitioners involved, and regular updates, the site seems to be positioning itself as a good resource platform into the future. The archive of the art outcomes of the projects allows for them to extend influence beyond their fleeting physical

presence; in the time since its launch, I have had several artists approach me with questions about the project after engaging with the site. It is also apparent that well-coordinated use of social media increases traffic to the site, and it seems the project has harnessed this quite well; a seminar (May 2014) advertised on Facebook, saw several international contacts involved in the original Porn Project get in contact to see if it was a related venture and if could they be involved.

*The Pornography in the Public Eye* project was designed to stimulate public discussion through multiple points of engagement. Overall, I believe the effective communication of intention, alongside the rigorous public programmes, in this case have kept art from becoming “a predictable form of entertainment-spectacle” (Lucie-Smith, 2007, pp. 85-86). Critics of art activism have noted that “there is no reason to expect that works of art will produce behavioural changes in their recipients” (Hans and Shulamith Krietler cited in Carey, 2005, p. 101) and, even if it did so, it is “almost impossible to trace [...] how [art] may feed through to political engagement or behaviour change” (Bunting, 2010). However, while art alone may not be enough to provoke cultural shift, in the same way that “information alone is not enough to inspire an effective response” (Dunaway, 2009, p. 10), through interdisciplinary engagement, art has the potential to “break silences and engage new voices in a creative and participatory civic dialogue” (Atlas & Korza, 2005, p. X). The *Pornography in the Public Eye*’s interdisciplinary approach – which fused art with critical psychology discourses, has seen the resulting projects develop potential to be “seriously considered outside the rather narrow world of art”, and I believe they have offered “visual jolts and

22 subtle nudges to conventional knowledge” (Lippard, 2007, p. 6).

In designing this collaboration, those involved stepped out of the comforts of their respective institutions and engaged with complex issues head on. The project stimulated critical public debate, and continues to challenge the purported normative values of a multi-billion dollar porn industry, which grosses “more than Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Ebay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix combined” (Keith, 2011) and is streaming into our lives at an ever increasing rate. Like the Violence Transformed founders, we share a “conviction that art and art-making are essential to the well-being and vibrancy of our communities” (2013). So, whilst art and porn seem uneasy bedfellows, I believe the creative outputs of the Pornography in the Public Eye Project were effective, and demonstrated an ongoing commitment by those involved to challenging and dismantling the cultural scaffoldings of social inequality.



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