Porno-Graphics and Porno-Tactics: Desire, Affect, and Representation in Pornography

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Published by Punctum Books

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Open Letter on Empowerment and Queer Porn

Kathryn Fischer

There is nothing inherently empowering about making porn or showing the naked female (or any gendered) body on stage. The empowering part I believe, is primarily based in our freedom to explore what we are actually interested in, asking ourselves about life, and what we love to do. This could include, but is not limited to, discovering that we are exhibitionists or artists and/or that we enjoy exploring our sexuality with lots of different kinds of people. The freedom to explore these things – without feeling pressure from speculations about our gender or sexual orientation and without feeling shame about what we are publicly “allowed” to do or express out loud as those genders and orientations – deflates the imagined magnitude of what it is to show our bodies’ sexuality in public.

If we are to speak of empowerment anyway – and to be honest I have a problem with the word because it recalls a top-down approach regarding teaching – I suggest we think of empowerment as personal and relative, and as a process. Who is anyone to say what is or is not empowering to any given person? What academic or researcher knows exactly what it means to be empowered when truly, speaking for myself, I am never fully empowered? It is an endless path that has no end. Empowerment must be a constant process that I (and only I) can understand for myself.

As an actress in queer porn and as a sexually explicit performer, I am certainly not arguing that an empowered woman has
to make porn, be a publicly sexual creature or enjoy queer sex. Within some privileged circles it’s been framed as fashionable to buy sex toys and learn how to use them, with the insinuation that a woman who doesn’t isn’t empowered. I disagree. For some this is empowerment and for others it is neither empowering nor disempowering, it is simply not relevant to their questions about life.

I think it’s important that we (as studiers, as studied, or both) back away from trying to sound smart (not to mention binary) about the topic of porn in general – is it or is it not empowering, is it or is it not feminist – and ask really basic questions of each other, like: So, tell me, how did you feel when you were having sex on camera? Was it fun? Was it sexy? How are your clients these days? How was your day at work?

Thankfully, I have a community of queers around me who are willing and interested in engaging with me on these questions, people who talk about what we’re creating these days on screen and how it feels. We’ve created a space where nuance is okay. It’s alright to say: Everything about that porn set was designed to be safe and fun, but I still felt like the film maker wasn’t fully prepared for what was going to happen and therefore I felt like I could have been better taken care of. It’s important for me to have a community that is going to listen to me talk like that without feeling like I have to defend my interest in continuing to make porn.

Nevertheless, what makes the kind of porn I like to make different? What makes it queer? Why does our environment feel so good? The queer feminist porn set is a safe, circumscribed environment where everything that’s consensual is okay. That’s just one reason why I enjoy making it. Like a sex party, everyone is there to have sex (or watch), but unlike a sex party, I not only have permission to have sex, I actually have a prearranged agreement that I’ll be taking part, always with the option to opt out. I don’t have to guess or wonder whether someone is interested in having sex with me or whether or not I’m correctly understanding eye contact. Sometimes I get to have sex with someone that wouldn’t ordinarily have sex with me or pick me out of a crowd (or vice versa). Sometimes in a party situation my identity gets interpreted on a quick, superficial level, whereas on a porn set I can assert or
even role-play any identity that I define. For example, I can play a dominant butch even when I feel more like a switch. Or I can have sex with a butch who off-set might be attracted to more of a femme than I actually am. The porn set is an exciting way to make contact with a stranger or an acquaintance, and when the set is comprised of a closed community of people that I trust, the entire process of designing the scene, creating the scene, and filming can become something of an artistic, sexual, and spiritual orgy.

In the summer of 2009 I was honored to be part of the Queer X Tour (documented by Emilie Jouvet in the film Too Much Pussy: Feminist Sluts in the Queer X Show) – a group of queer activists, performers, sex workers, and pornographers that traveled through Europe performing a queer variety show about sex, porn, and gender. Along the way we made porn with each other and new friends that we picked up. The scenes were sometimes well planned out beforehand and at other times rather impromptu. The participants in each scene were always chosen with every participant’s consent – a combination of deciding for ourselves who we were drawn to and letting the director (Emilie Jouvet) put together a combination that we could agree upon.

I personally like to be surprised; I find it fun and exciting to have sex with someone that I wouldn’t necessarily be drawn to at first. I learn a lot that way, too. We were allowed to submit our own personal fantasies as ideas and either create a scene out of our own fantasy or agree to take part in another person’s fantasy. For example, one person said, “I’ve always dreamed of a femme gang-bang of three women on a switch.” I’ve never personally had that fantasy and I don’t even identify as femme, but something drew me into the role-play of it, dressing and playing the role of high femme coming into the house of a switch and fucking her. While I did know the other girls playing femme (girls on tour with me that I loved and trusted), I didn’t know the person we’d be fucking beforehand and this is part of what drew me to the experience.

All of what I’ve described is part of what makes queer porn queer for me – the idea that choice, agency, consent, discovery, friendship, and love are present on the set. Also part of queer porn for me is the diversity of bodies, cultural, ethnic, and sexual ori-
entations as well as varying combinations of body parts and toys coming together to bring real pleasure to another person, who can but doesn’t have to express that pleasure through orgasm or a “cum shot.” For me, queer porn is not about which body parts are represented on screen. Just because two people are similarly sexed (which is at best an approximation anyway because of the spectrum of genitalia we have and represent) does not mean that they are similarly gendered, so every encounter between two persons is an encounter of people who are not exactly what I would call “homosexual.” Therefore I personally don’t define queer porn by the words “similarly sexed” at all.

As I’ve explored what it means to subvert archetypes through my many mediums – performance artist, dancer, and porn actress – for me the queerness of queer porn is not on the surface, i.e., in what the sex looks like. It has much more to do with the intention with which we make porn together. Our intention is the way that we approach the project which can include all of the following and more: creating a safer-sex environment in which we are free to explore without fearing to contract STIs or bacterial infections, where the food for the set is cooked with love and consciousness about where it came from, and where decisions about the scene itself as well as the day’s shooting plan are made in a non-hierarchical way. On a queer porn set, political themes and themes relevant to our community as queers are all welcome – a porn film, for example, can both be hot and explore the difficulties of watching a partner transition from female to male or the struggles of sharing a lover with another person. A queer porn set is a place where our intention to be inclusive and feminist is inherent in our approach. In the end, the intention will show its face on the screen and in the hotness of the sex. I have complete confidence that the audience will feel the intention in ways that we can’t entirely predict.

Like any project taken up by like-minded and well-intentioned persons, however, queer porn is not always as liberating as it could be. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop engaging with it or that I’m going to stop saying: it’s political and it is also fun.

As much as it’s important to take seriously both ourselves as feminists and our struggles as queers, it’s also really important that
we are allowed to take ourselves not so seriously. I like to have a joke and say, “Don’t worry, I’m not working in that evil exploitative mainstream porn industry – I only work with DIY queer productions that can’t afford to pay me anything.” That’s my kind of humor. And I mean it. It’s true that all the porn I’ve ever made has always been for free because I love to be part of a queer, feminist, low-budget, DIY porn movement. But seriously, I would like to quit my waitress job. I’d like to never work as a burlesque dancer for Jaegermeister ever again. It’s sometimes hard for others to understand what it really means not to have a financial safety net and the ways that work/sex/art/choice are intertwined in complicated ways.

Queer porn and the making of porn by self-proclaimed feminists will probably never go uncontested. But one thing it can’t help being is a documentation of a movement of queers who at least believe for themselves that they are doing the right thing, that they are having fun doing it, and that this is how they like to have sex. There is a lot of material just in that alone that will speak for generations about how today’s queer feminist community has sex and what kinds of themes they are dealing with in their sexual lives. I for one count myself lucky to be part of it.

This year I shared the experience of watching *Too Much Pussy* in a public screening in San Francisco with my mother, who is straight and could be called a second-wave, “anti-porn” feminist. Yet she stood by me. What an honor and what a true testament to that which is radical. Because at heart what is really queer, really revolutionary, and really powerful, is working at relationships with each other, receiving each other with love, understanding each other, trying to find out about each other, making assumptions for the best, and supporting each other on good and bad days.