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

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What is pornography for you? Do you consider your work pornographic, or how does your work relate to activist-oriented, feminist/queer porn productions (what is usually referred to as “post-porn”)?

Pornography is representing an explicit sexual act. However, it’s not my job to produce it, others do it very well, on a large scale and in a stylish way, like Shine Louise Houston or Courtney Trouble. Each artist has her own way of working and her own aesthetics. There are movements and currents of thought, which evolve in time and sometimes contradict each other. Personally, I don’t really like the term “post” (post-porn, post-feminism…), nor do I feel represented by the term “queer artist.”

I am a French visual artist who expresses herself through photography, contemporary video, and cinema. I am a militant feminist, lesbian, and queer. I take pictures of and film my female friends in moments of intimacy, during parties, and in everyday life. My models are often queer; they are writers, feminists, militants, DJs, femme, dykes, or butch lesbians, trans, etc. My first contact with the queer scene dates back to the beginning of the 2000s, where as a very young artist I was part of a collective of artists called Queer Factory, a collective of queer, lesbian, gay, bi, or trans authors and creators, adhering to the subversive value of creation in all its forms. But I do not make “queer art” nor “post-porn.” As any artist, what I say and show is born out of my mental
and physical experiments with exterior and interior, it is a representation of the world through the prism of my identity, and vice versa.

My sources of inspiration are literary, feminist, artistic, pornographic, punk, dyke, and self-fictional. My personal “creative energy” is built out of sisterhood, nostalgia, rebellion, the fear of death, solitude, love/passion, hunger, desire, politics, rage, complicity, and sex. I feel close to the work of the director, visual artist, and musician Sadie Benning and to her exploration of sexual identity, the use and subversion of pop-culture images, of which she said: “They are completely false and constructed to divert and oppress at the same time. They don’t make any sense for women [in general], and not only for lesbians. I decided to start shooting in part because I needed other images and I never wanted to wait for others to do it for me.” I was also very inspired by artists such as Orlan, Barbara Kruger, Gina Pane, Catherine Opie, Kiki Smith, Hannah Wilke, The Guerilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine… The works of writers and theoreticians such as Monique Wittig, Audre Lorde, Dorothy Allison, Virginie Despentes were equally important in my personal trajectory.

So why represent sex?

In my work sexuality is a space of thought and creativity. I have sometimes shown representations of desire and the sexual acts of people whose gender or sexuality is usually disparaged, made invisible, or silenced. The representation of sex, in art or cinema, is as important as other subjects. I don’t like there to be a hierarchy. I am particularly interested in the sex-positive feminist movement, or pro-sex feminism, which in the United States of the 1980s opened the way for the reappropriation of women’s bodies and sexuality, and of their representations.

I work against the sexism and puritanism that are omnipresent in our societies. In my photos and films, I like to interrogate contemporary taboos concerning the human body and to work on the way in which we perceive them. The aesthetics of my images differs from fashion magazine pictures or mainstream pornography. I
try to give voice (and vision) to those people who hold an alternative discourse. I have become convinced that sexuality is one of the strategic sites for the oppression of women (even if the oppression of women is far from being limited to sexuality). The biggest taboo is not sex, it’s the words (and images) of women and minorities on sex. It’s also speaking about violence, denouncing censorship, unveiling the mechanisms that make us [women] individuals with less liberties and rights.

The artists I film in the road-movie documentary Too Much Pussy, Feminist Sluts in the Queer X Show put forth ideas about sexuality and freedom that are very specific and are part of a sex-positive feminism. In Too Much Pussy the erotic scenes, in which one understands that the artists on the tour have sexual adventures, are part of the narrative structure of the film. I wanted to show sexuality in different ways: in its representation on the stage (the show), in its political aspect (the big discussions on the road, between each show), but also real sexuality, in intimate situations. These three axes are dealt with as part of the same prism, as different facets of the same question, that of sexual freedom.

If resistance and transgression are present, it is as a woman’s gaze on women’s discourses and bodies, a gaze that gives other women power and the capacity to speak, whereas mainstream cinema has generally accustomed us to a rather objectifying male gaze. This film is above all an ode to freedom, to creation, to travel, and to friendship. Freedom can be sexual, but it is also the freedom to love, as we like, whom we like. It is also the freedom not to have sex. That of not wanting to play the game of seduction. Beyond the question of sex and together with it, what I want to show is the joy, the freedom of being able to create together. If, after having seen the movie, one knows where the neck of the uterus is, how rage can transform itself into creativity, shame into pride, and the desire to be fancied into the pleasure of sharing, it’s a nice thing.

The political and anti-conformist representation of multiple non-conventional femininities becomes very visible and embraced. The sexually suggestive details of some of my pictures or film scenes are conceived in terms of codes, “signs” of lesbian and queer sexuality. The work of corporeal identity proper to each
model is valorized: the haircuts, the unusual postures, body modifications, boys’ jeans, vests, Converse shoes, blood-red lipstick, outrageous makeup, inside-out underwear, hairiness, exhibited sex toys, the provoking postures of bodies and gazes are as many codes to mark their [the models’] erotic territory.

I had already worked on the issue of sexuality and of pornography as a very specific system of representation at the time of my studies at the beaux arts and at the national school of photography. I used to shoot videos and pictures on the subversion of objects or acts. For example, in the video BlancX, you can see me while I am brushing my teeth… with a vibrator. This subverted and ridiculed the classical pornographic representation of fellatio through an ordinary act. It was funny (especially for girls) and at the same time very provocative for some (the director of an art gallery exclaimed: “Here’s another one who doesn’t swallow!”). Also when I was a student, I wanted to do my internship on a porn movie shoot. I had wanted for a long time to see how the representations, the images of straight sexuality were constructed live. On another level, being a lesbian, having discovered that all representations of lesbians were compared to pornography, even if they weren’t meant as such, this irritated me. Moreover, I realized that as lesbians we hardly ever have access to any images of sexuality that really represent us (images created by ourselves, for ourselves). Most of the time, porn movies represent a male fantasy applied to women. I don’t have anything against that, but it’s not at all representative.

When I saw for the first time lesbian porn made by women for women – I was 20, it was at Cineffable – it struck me deeply. At first, I was very shocked to finally see in these images what it could mean, what lesbian sexuality could be. We are so unfamiliar with it that it seemed just horrible. However, at the end of the night, even if everybody had hated it and declared themselves very shocked, not at all aroused, etc., in the end everybody went crazy and all the girls ended the night snogging each other and sleeping together. I told myself, there you go, we can say it’s horrible but actually in the end it sort of works, you see?
Overall, I seek neither to conform to mainstream pornography, nor to exaggerate the non-conforming traits of the bodies and sexualities that I present. The people in my circle whom I film or take pictures of do not necessarily conform to the horizon of erotic expectations, straight or mainstream, of those who only appreciate women’s sexual emancipation when it fits their libido, and only theirs. Rather, my models embody so many Liliths and Riot grrrls who refuse to submit to the patriarchal desire that produces the feminine sex as a weak sex.

How do the acts you represent emerge? As a director, do you leave your characters free to perform the sex scenes the way they like (you capture desire) or do you direct your characters in performing scenes you have imagined (you create desire)…? Can you describe the making of the sex scenes you have shot?

I leave my characters free to perform the sex scene. Actually, they don’t really perform as actors, most of the time they just have sex and I shoot them in a documentary style. For example, *Too Much Pussy* is a road-movie documentary, and *Much More Pussy* is a film in which I gathered together all the sex scenes that took place during the tour. In *Much More Pussy* sexualities and sexual fantasies are very diverse: sex on a piano, in a ruined building, in some room… We shift from a very sensual two-way scene to a really intense six-way group scene, a fisting scene, we can see very beautiful female ejaculations, fellatios on a dildo, anal practices between women, and above all some real orgasms!

The girls were ok with me filming their sexual identity during the tour, the principle being never to impose staged “sex scenes” on the actresses, but for the girls to choose themselves, freely, their sexual partners and their practices. At the beginning of the shooting, because of the frantic work rhythm of the tour, I thought that perhaps there would be no sex scenes in the film. But the exact opposite happened! The girls had a very intense sex life, among themselves or after casual encounters, and at times it was hard for me to keep pace. For example, I remember some funny moments when, exhausted, thinking I could finally pack up my cameras
and go to sleep, one or the other girl would come to find me so that I could film their progress... At the time of the editing of *Much More Pussy*, I was adamant not to censor any scene, since the principle of sex-positive feminism is also to respect others’ sexual desires, not to judge or hierarchize different practices, even if they are not to our taste or if we don’t understand them. Among consenting adults, the possibilities are multiple, and I have to say that I was often surprised to discover such diversity and creativity in the sexual adventures of each person. I learned a lot, both about different practices and about my own prejudices. In 2011 the use of sex toys, s/m practices, or bondage among girls are unfortunately still the object of debate for certain people ready to judge and moralize others’ practices.

*What dictates the choice of DIY (Do It Yourself) production?*

DIY is not a choice, it’s the sad reality: mainstream production companies are afraid to give money for such unconventional and subversive projects (something like a mixture of feminism, queer theory, and sexuality)!

Too *Much Pussy* was self-funded for the most part. It took us a year to gather enough money between us to be able to leave for the tour and make the film. I had to stop working for two years and dedicate myself entirely to the film. Like the majority of militant films that never obtain any public funding or big production budgets, this film was made under DIY conditions, without a shooting crew, sleeping in people’s places, etc. Over a year of work persevering through self-management and self-production. Around a hundred artists and friends took part (transporting and making the scenery and props, driving the van in the tour, making costumes, creating music, finding sponsors and people to accommodate the team in five different countries). We organized several benefit nights in Paris and Berlin. Two friends, who are alternative co-producers from Paris and Berlin, helped us with the renting of the van and the kit. Loads of new people we met every day supported the project day by day during the tour. It was the most exciting, but also the most exhausting cinematographic experience
of my whole life. Shooting without the traditional financial support is like making a “mutilated” but free film.

There is little consideration for that art which lives outside traditional circuits. We still live on the myth of Camille Claudel, Van Gogh… the damned artist, who lives in misery and does not enjoy any consecration until after her death. There is a well-rooted belief that alternative culture must be free. The majority of queer and female artists and directors are poor, precisely because they work without self-censorship, without producers, with little money or resources. The majority take jobs just to survive, or they are made redundant, and those who benefit from public or private money without having to worry about selling their art or paying their rent are rare. The production of a film is very expensive, and very often alternative artists cannot find producers to pay for everything.

The artists I spend time with help each other by working on each others’ projects. We set the “system D” [coping strategies – trans.] in motion. It’s a nice vibe but it’s exhausting sometimes!

How does your work answer the concerns and criticisms of porn voiced by abolitionist feminists?

The sexophobic arguments of abolitionists create a great feeling of malaise in women and lesbians. The patriarchal system gives some crumbs of power to abolitionist feminists, since it gives power to people who erode freedoms by blaming women, disparaging some and valorizing others. There is nothing more dangerous for women’s pleasure and freedom than a woman who passes moral judgment on another woman.

At the same time, family planning and abortion centers are closing down one after the other. Sexual education in schools boils down to being able to fit a condom on a banana after having been shown shocking videos of childbirth. They never mention pleasure. Abolitionist feminists play the game of the patriarchal system by imposing their puritanical morals on the rest of the women across the world. We can see their influence on social networks: before, you could still show bare breasts. Now, you cannot any longer. Even the image of a woman breastfeeding her child risks
being censored. A video where one can catch a glimpse of a breast on YouTube or of girls kissing that does not correspond to heterosexual clichés about sexy lesbians (like those girls who have too much of a butch air!) and bam!, it’s censored. The system of denouncement rules. For example, it is much more frequent for an LGBTQ image or video to be denounced than a sexist or racist image. LGBTQ artists, or those who work on the body, experience this pressure. Even world-celebrated paintings such as *The Origin of the World* by Courbet are censored!

All this becomes serious because little by little, insidiously, it changes our own vision of what is or is not shocking. Italy is a case in point, where an MP is trying to get gay kisses banned from TV before 10pm. It can go very far. In France, at the moment, this is true even of prostitution. Abolitionist feminists seek to promote a moralizing and illiberal bill, which has already proven dangerous for the security of women in other countries. Of course the criminal networks that exploit women and men against their will must be fought against. But it is not by making sexual labor illegal that one fights this kind of slavery. This law does nothing but make sexual labor more hidden, pushing it underground. Sex workers can’t any longer practice their profession where they wish, they have to hide, at the risk of being arrested by the police. Thus, prostitutes do not have access to healthcare any longer and put their health in danger. Sex workers also have to work isolated, far from cities and safe places, and they become much more vulnerable to rapes, aggressions, blackmail, exploitation. In the name of puritanism and legality, society always seeks to lock women into a moralizing prison.

*If the exploitation of sex in mainstream representations creates alienation and makes relationships between people more difficult, does feminist/queer porn provide an alternative for the creation of new subjectivities?*

Perhaps our fantasies reflect an alienating system, and a first step purports to establish a difference between fantasy, sexual games (between consenting adults) and our behavior in society, in the
family, in our daily relations. The difference must be established between the sexual game and reality, being conscious of power dynamics.

Feminist porn can also contribute a lot in terms of sexual education and of well-being for women. For example, I took part in a video, available on the Yagg website, concerning lesbian health. I also took part in the very first French campaign on health, sexuality and visibility for lesbians: “Comment ça va les filles? [How are you doing, girls?].” It’s a participatory campaign of information, videos, chats and blogs on lesbian health, sexuality and visibility, in partnership with INPES (the National Institute for Health, Prevention and Education). The idea was to diffuse a positive and joyful message to launch the campaign. For that, they asked me to make a video on the prevention of STDS and the use of condoms on sex toys among lesbians. People could get informed thanks to the videos and the articles made available online: they could ask their questions to health and sexuality experts (for example about STIs, gynecological issues, the sourcing of different products, well-being in general), but also react on the forums, and more...