



**FT**



**NEW**

**ULTRA  
BECOMING**



**Gay prophesy of the demonically social**

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FROZEN  
TEARS  
III

## PORN, PERFORMANCE AND OBJECTIFICATION: NEW FORMS OF DESIRE

Withdrawn following protests after only a few cinema screenings, Joe Public's 1995 video for the John Warr London Harley Davidson dealership cheerfully and ironically celebrates sexual objectification. A housewife is shown good-naturedly getting on with the job of prostitution so that her husband can buy his motorbike. Taking breaks from soliciting motorists, she speaks to camera about having to take on a second job: "One good thing though, the hours are flexible...but like he says, we need every penny we can get". While complementing late-Marxist accounts of commodification and sexuality, the post-feminist latitude assumed by this advertisement illuminates issues of sexual representation that have become prominent in British art from the last decade. This recent art jumps across two decades to renew continuity with some 60s and 70s feminist performance. Recent exhibitions and publications have drawn such pioneering performance out from under the shadow of 80s political work (such as Barbara Kruger's and Jenny Holzer's) which had limited possibilities for critique through their iconoclastic suspicion of images of the sexualized body.

In the Harley advertisement a relation is made between the commodities of bike and woman. The woman is being exchanged for the bike, and both are represented as typical commodities insofar as they solicit desire rather than satisfy a need. The copywriters make light of Marx's notion of commodities acquiring mystical values unrelated to their origins in labour. The bike certainly manifests irresistibility but in contrast the woman's allure is downplayed, and her ordinariness emphasized, so as to reduce the gap between her two assigned roles, housewife and prostitute. Ultimately the advertisement is selling the

Harley dealership through association with a lifestyle, the more fashionable for its nod at political incorrectness. Presupposing audiences informed enough not to take these things too seriously, here is the return with a vengeance of what the 80s repressed. What remains edgy and interesting about this advertisement is the way it makes the viewer's position insecure again. There's something here of the unsettling experience of seeing Kerby's, Ellen Cantor's, Hayley Newman's or Jemima Stehli's work where it reproblematises issues of sexuality that had seemed intelligible and resolved, showing in the process that they really never were completely straightened out. This remains the experience when reencountering 60s and 70s work, like Carolee Schneeman's or Hannah Wilke's, for example. In such cases the engagement with issues of gender is neither as oversimplified nor as easily resolved as it appeared to be with some 80s work. What sustains a problematic unease in the advertisement's caricature is that it is the woman who speaks, while the men are either static or unseen. In this fiction the woman is seen to be in control of her circumstances and in a sense the more responsible party (as she determines how she's going to make ends meet), while men, whether crawling or posing smugly next to their new motorbike, appear victims of irresponsible desires and limited horizons. Like work by some of the artists reviewed here, the advertisement is entertaining, knowing, ambivalently parodic and wreaks havoc with accepted signifiers of appropriateness. Much of the advertisement's refreshing mischief lies with its refusal to mimic pornography's and advertising's fiction that women derive pleasure from servicing men, while it simultaneously moves onto pornography's ground. This is a strategy shared by a number of these same artists.

In the 1977 essay *Women on the Market*, Luce Irigaray writes of the three roles a patriarchal society is prepared to assign to women – mother, virgin, prostitute – all of

which serve an economy of male needs and therefore impede women establishing relations amongst themselves or determining the form of their own entitlement to desire and pleasure. Through their normalization these roles are made to seem fundamentally feminine. Revising Marx's explanation of exchange value, Irigaray indicates how this false ascription of values gets disguised in order to allow the mirroring of male needs to appear "natural", as something intrinsic to women's natures. The advertisement plays right along these lines of course, since in its bald affirmation of Irigaray's roles lies both its shock and redemptive effects. To resist this assignment of pre-ordained types, Irigaray calls for a position entirely outside such roles – "Not by reproducing, by copying, the 'phallogocratic' models that have the force of law today, but by socializing in a different way the relation to nature, matter, the body, language, and desire...". Nevertheless, the art here, and in its own way the advertisement, propose something different – a kind of *detournement* from within the imposed roles so that desire and desirability are set adrift.

A correspondence between feminist critiques of pornography and contemporary art is suggested by texts like Linda Williams' *Hardcore*. Broadly tolerant of pornography, Williams nevertheless criticises the majority of it as propagandizing sexual pleasure oriented towards ends that serve men. Such goals as power, reproduction, love, orgasm (her categories) indicate a fixed and limited masculine economy. She does however, recognise alternatives within the economy of sexual relations: "But when sexual pleasure begins to cultivate...qualities of perversion; when it dispenses with strictly biological and social functions and becomes an end in itself; when it ceases to rely on release... or spending for fulfillment; when a desiring subject can take up one object and then another without investing absolute value in that object...when this subject sees its object more as exchange value in an endless play

of substitution than as use-value for possession – then we are in the realm of what must now be described as a more feminine economy of consumption...”. It would be worth keeping Williams’ optimistic account in mind as we consider whether the art here shifts what tends to prevail in the economy of sex.

Over the last ten years, given an increased habituation to pornography by the media and a celebratory popular interest in explicit sexual imagery, there’s been surprisingly little sexual content to contemporary British art, and still less use of pornography. 90s yBa art tended not to extend its celebration of vernacular imagery and language to an engagement with the increasingly salacious culture that launched television documentaries on pornography, prurient games and chat shows, sex soaps like *Queer as Folk*, men’s magazines such as *Loaded* or *Stuff*, female softcore titles like *For Women*, and the *Erotica* sex fairs with their newly-acquired permission in the late-90s to display hardcore material. This developing media bacchanal was part of a tendency towards more open enjoyment of pornographic material and easier access to its distribution. In this respect the most notable increase was amongst female consumers benefitting from the relative privacy of internet pornography and the availability of sex videos for women. High-street bookstores profited from this change, devoting shelf space to the fast-growing genre of women’s erotic literature, effectively a sub-category of romance fiction. Amongst the reasons for this decade-long increase in the consumption of pornography were the increased use of the internet, a post-feminist latitude for claims of entitlement to sexual pleasure, and a rediscovered interest in the significations of what were previously suppressed images of sex. These shifts go some way to realising Williams’ alternative criteria conducive to a utopia of women’s sexual consumption, though in the end her free-form desiring exchange is witnessed collapsing into a market frenzy.

In that period the forays by British artists into sexually-explicit material were infrequent one-off experiments, hardly amounting to a spree. Such examples would be Jake and Dinos Chapmans' 1995 *Bring Me the Head of Franco Toselli*, where two women use as a sex toy the extended prosthetic nose of a sculpture of that gallerist's head, or Sarah Lucas's early collages of sensationalist tabloid material like *Sod You Gits* or *Penis Nailed to a Board*. Yet any expectations that other British artists in that period might become pioneers in reworking the languages of pornography into startling reflections on sexuality and desire remained unfulfilled. Work of sexual content pinned its aesthetic and intellectual level close to that of the popular material it was colonizing. While more problematic material was evident at the time in America, it's only in the last six years or so that similarly challenging work has originated in Britain. Some examples of American art about sex are prescient in light of what occurs later in London. Ava Gerber's early-90s New York exhibitions included an installation of knickers signed by men with whom she had slept and a self-portrait showing her naked on all fours as she is being fucked from behind by an African-American man. Hanging from her mouth is a sign saying "Happy Birthday Daddy". It was in late-80s New York that Kathe Burkhart started writing autobiographical pornographic texts to be read in public and began her extensive series of Elizabeth Taylor paintings which combined sexual innuendo with sensuous materials. Initially a performance artist working on the Lower East Side in New York, Ann Magnuson formed the rock group Bongwater whose 1992 release, *The Power of Pussy*, was an inventive post-feminist inquiry into the pleasures of pornography. Its ribald and witty lyrics laid over a background of psychedelic noise shows a sophistication at manipulating sexual signifiers that remains unmatched.

Much of Magnuson's irreverent celebration of het-

erogeneous sexual experiences is further exacerbated by Cantor who will splice together hardcore pornography with feature film footage to subversive effect. After starring in her own pornographic videos, Cantor produced *Madame Bovary's Revenge (The Lovers)* where erotic sequences of Marilyn Chambers in *Behind the Green Door*, the first mainstream pornographic release, are intersected with scenes from Louis Malle's *Les Amants*. Wall drawings and sketchbooks of Cantor's extensively rescript the lives of characters from American children's culture by bringing to them the violence and latent sexuality of the Grimm Brothers' fairy tales. Micky Mouse, Bambi and Barbie extend their innocence and happy endings into narratives of hardcore sexual adventures as a kind of erotically realised utopia. Reminding us of Williams' writing and Magnuson's lyrics, Cantor has repeatedly redefined her central theme of what might constitute women's sexual pleasure by clashing paradigms of family transgression with extreme displays of love, constituted for her by a women's pornography. In this respect she has said that "The most interesting thing about most pornography is that it is badly made and mostly made by men. For an artist like myself it is a completely unexplored territory, a space where there is so much room for revision and improvement".

How else would a work incorporating pornography provide images for women and create new possibilities for their self-representation? Backing up once more to consider the strictures of some 80s art, if we're to believe that all representations of female sexuality reinforce male hegemony then what images of women might subvert such ends? Passages in the section titled *Plato's Hysteria*, towards the end of Irigaray's *Speculum*, imagine privileging the shadow world from which metaphysics and psychoanalysis have sought to extricate definitions of *truth*. By returning to that stigmatized world "deep down in dark caves where all is shadow and oblivion" women

might be able to form their own representations – “For if she were to shine, [in this shadow realm] then the light would no longer, simply, belong to sameness. The whole of the current economic system would have to be recalculated”. But Irigaray envisages a form of separation from the prevailing male economy of representations of women, and in the end her ideas may lend themselves more to the iconoclasm of 80’s feminist art and anti-porn rhetoric than they lend support to earlier performance or new video. Concerning the latter, contemporary uses of pornographic imagery by women bring a forbidden language into conflict with established representations rather than lay claim to a separate feminine aesthetic.

The critical force of such recent work is directed at both art and pornography. There are ways that the problematics of both are being exacerbated through their reuse. In late 90s New York, Amy Adler’s reappropriation of soft-porn teenage shots taken of her by a lesbian admirer substituted her photographed drawing for the exploitative original. A specific citation seems to concern Sarah Lucas’s 1998 sculpture *You Know What*, where a cigarette is inserted in the vagina of a set of legs and torso that straddle a table. This repeats a pornographic image that is reproduced without credit in Diana Russell’s vitriolic book *Against Pornography*. With such a relationship of images it’s a fair question whether Lucas’s position isn’t ultimately an inverted moral one. To the extent that Lucas appears to celebrate sexual innuendo she also reveals the repressed erotic interests behind British culture’s recourse to lascivious puns and metonyms.

More tentative in her references to pornography, Stehli’s citations are explicit in relation to fine art. In *Headless Orange no. 3*, from 2000, she photographs herself naked mimicking a pose from one of Francis Bacon’s paintings, and a year earlier in *After Helmut Newton’s ‘Here They Come’* she substitutes herself for one of the clothed and unclothed models in the sequence of origi-

nal photographs by that name. In *Strip* series 1–7, Stehli entitles London artworld men to photograph her as she removes her clothes. Like all her work, there is an interestingly decorous aspect to this piece as it revives earlier models of amateur pornography that might have circulated in the 60s, the period from which she selected the model for her first significant photograph, *Table 2* of 1997–98, where she substituted herself for the Allen Jones mannequin of his Pop Art furniture sculptures. Where Stehli is explicit about an ecstatic eroticism her engagement with art models becomes most productively complex. In *Black no. 2*, of 1998, she depicts herself prone in steep foreshortening, wearing dominatrix gear with her high-heeled spread-eagled legs emerging from darkness. Through erotic homage to Ad Reinhardt’s reductive paintings (that importantly for this context, Reinhardt insisted on detaching from all manner of reference) Stehli intends, in her own words, a deliberation on the intertwined realms of sadomasochistic sex and love. Such work brings what might be called a surplus content to the imagery of both fields, art and pornography, by synthesizing the two. This is making much of an obvious enough feature of problematic work, but stating this point helps to understand how the field of pornography is changed, or expanded, in such cases. Pornography’s role is to arouse sexually. This can only happen if the sex is explicitly visible. For economic reasons then pornography must have a reductive, lean structure leading to one objective – the arousal of the audience. Much of the art discussed here takes this lean structure and complicates it, bringing issues to pornography that deflect arousal without cancelling it altogether. The distinction from perspectives in the 80s is where pornography’s objectification is reviewed with care to draw out aspects that would normally obstruct the commercialisation of arousal. The insistence of these artists on using pornography, at times without much transformation, is to preserve the

complexity of the representation, to secure a realm of pleasure as a form of didacticism.

In his essay “Towards a Critique of Commodity Aesthetics”, Wolfgang Haug provides an insight into how pornography is so effective. Williams uses this same reference to explain the commodification of the so-called money-shot, or moment of ejaculation. As did Irigaray, Haug is developing Marx’s own analysis of commodities, particularly the claim that manufacturers try to induce a dependency in potential customers. Echoing Marx, Haug ascribes commodities with a seductiveness that he calls their “semblance value”, their promise of a usefulness or satisfaction beyond what they actually deliver. He explains the effects of commodities in this way: “In these images the unsatisfied pages of people’s natures are continuously turned open to them. The semblance offers itself as if it were announcing the satisfaction; it guesses people’s nature, reads the wishes in their eyes, and brings the wishes to light on the surface of the commodity”. It is the role of advertising and packaging, Haug maintains, to reinforce and refine this semblance-value. This resonates of psychoanalytic theory, particularly Lacan’s discussion of the formation of desire at the mirror stage, but it also reads as an adequate account of the effects of pornography. In a sense pornography depends for its success on its promise of sexual satisfaction while ultimately withholding it, reflecting, across its gamut, all imaginable desires which become represented in its images. To oversimplify, you could say that instead of a lasting satisfaction it only provokes a dependency on further pornographic representations.

This explanation only outlines the method of pornography’s commercial success and the reasons for its visual clarity. It’s the treatment of pornography by these artists that gives us better insight into the complexity of its sexual economy. In a series of videos from 2000–01, k r buxey recycles clips from hardcore pornography to

create montages of interminable climaxes whose crude excesses travesty their romantic musical accompaniment. In *Can Can Can* a variously-coiffured k r buxey acts out a fast-paced routine of typical poses, interspersing transparently faked expressions of pleasure with images of her face made up to suggest heavy bruising, while in *Mind Your Head*, the camera holds to the faces of women enduring showers of ejaculate. In 2002 k r buxey completed *Requiem* in which she reenacts Andy Warhol's 1964 *Blow Job* with herself as the subject and an off-camera male friend as the sexual partner. This video's intent at proposing ways that a woman's perspective on pleasure might be adequately represented continues the exploration of erotic experience addressed in *negrophilia – A ROMANCE*, from 2001, where her edgy monologue on the intimate boundaries of sexual attraction between her and a black boyfriend plays over closeups of their intertwining bodies.

In what way then might this recent work lead back to earlier women's performance? The photographs documenting Schneeman's private 1963 performance *Eye Body*, lock her own naked body into the surrounding studio constructions as if they are related materials. Schneeman intended this work to assert a sexualized and erotic body amongst the familiar attributes of an artist's work space. With Wilke's unclothed performance photographs of the 70s it was her body which became the site on which a discourse about eroticism was enacted, as she drew attention to the objectifying process whereby her body, or its type, was being treated by the media. There has been criticism that Wilke's actions pandered to that same prurient voyeurism she attacked, but from today's perspective her confrontational gaze out of the photograph seems a position allowing depth and power. Regarding the resistance to oppressive representations Wilke's work recognises the ambiguities that need to be sustained if the engagement with images of sex is to avoid

a total repression of women's (or anyone's) pleasure, as the anti-porn and Christian lobbies have urged. Without the possibility of replaying the images to see what meanings they yield there is neither the possibility of debate nor of challenging limiting commercial directives on what should constitute sex.

We see a contemporary reprise of these strategies in Stehli's photographs. Another recent engagement with these issues is evident in Newman's performances. Where in the mid-90s Newman has herself driven around Hamburg naked in an open-top limousine and, in a related performance, lies bare underneath an animal skin rug with her arse raised in provocative mime, she collides self-objectification with parodies of sexual freedom and gender stereotypes. In *Kiss Examination*, from 1998, Newman enacts an hour-long kiss with a male partner in front of Jake and Dinos Chapmans' circle of pornographic mannequins. Simultaneously writing down her physiological responses to the action Newman performs before an already sexually-charged work, throwing herself into the passionate embrace while trying to give a dispassionate account of her arousal.

In her 1995 essay *Objectification*, Martha Nussbaum, writing about literary pornography, applies seven definitions of objectification to a careful selection of texts to see what redeeming qualities they and their protagonists possess. D.H. Lawrence comes off well, the characters in Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* badly, though she is careful not to allow her conclusions to be taken as an explicit condemnation of gratuitous, non-literary pornography. These examples of objectification are transferable to other representations, and once we move into visual pornography her categories like "denial of autonomy, instrumentality, violability, and denial of subjectivity", are indispensable to much of the more extreme material, particularly the wilder edges of Japanese cinema. Yet provided these don't occur in the real world with-

out consensuality it should not matter about their presence in representations. It would be interesting to know what Nussbaum would make of Pasolini's *Saló*, his last film, completed before his murder in 1975. Here objectification is the exact point, and for its didacticism to be effective he offers no relief of any sort. No relief from redeeming characters (there aren't even any among the victims); no relief from culture in a broader sense since the perpetrators of violence surround themselves with Renaissance architecture, Futurist paintings and classical music; no relief from cinematography which only renders the events more vivid; no relief from yourself as audience, always aware of being framed as voyeur. Yet it remains one of the great anti-fascist and sexual critiques and a powerful model for performance. Many of its issues and devices remain unexplored, its implications for representation unrealized. This film proposes the redundancy of thresholds imposed on extreme sexual imagery since, like some of the artwork discussed here, the fact that Pasolini makes his representations problematically severe has helped sustain the film's complexity.

In much of the contemporary work discussed here, objectification is repeatedly the issue around which the representations revolve, including at the same time concerns of sexual identity, sexual attraction, desirability, subjectivity, and the role of eroticism in aesthetic response. In raising questions about these concerns a certain accountability and responsibility must be renounced as the artists objectify their own bodies to see how the representations change. This is what links such work to *Saló*'s relentlessness as well as to some 60s and 70s performance as it exposes the body to a dislocated eroticism.