

## **NO FISTING, NO SQUIRTING, NO COFFINS**

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Artists never want to use the word pornography to describe their work.. Porn makes people crazy. To make it (not to write about it, or appropriate it, or make work critical of it) is to lose credibility as a serious artist. It's not as though calling something pornography precludes all other meaning – its objective might be simple but its motives are complex. After all, cultural theorists have spent the past thirty years analyzing porn's centrality to the social structure. You would think that fact in itself would have given it the credentials needed to be taken seriously. Even though porn continues to be perceived as politically incorrect and dubiously legal, I find it odd that artists haven't embraced it for its utter liminality. Still, porn makes people crazy.

Art and pornography are two (theoretically) separate realms; art is intended to make you think whereas porn urges you to action. I suppose those aims could be reversed, but it seems more likely that porn would make you think long before art would make you horny. Even if the artist/photographer 'got off' creating what ever it is s/he creates as a work of art, both artists and audiences seem to be overly enthusiastic about denying art's pornographic (ie, masturbatory) potential.

I've always been amazed at how easily law enforcement can go straight to the pornographic or obscene interpretation that artists always seem to miss. Here's an example. In a 1990 article<sup>1</sup> about the Dennis Barrie/Robert Mapplethorpe exhibition trial in Cincinnati, Ellen Goodman, columnist for the Boston Globe recounts several "perfect trial moments":

Prosecutor Frank Prouty holds up two photographs, one of a man with a bullwhip in his rectum. He asks the art director who chose these images for the show: "Would you call these sexual acts?" She answers: "I would call them figure studies."

Prouty questions museum director Dennis Barrie: "This photograph of a man with his

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Goodman, "Art's Linguistic Battle," Boston Globe, October 7, 1990.

finger inserted in his penis, what is the artistic content of that? Barrie responds: "It's a striking photograph in terms of light and composition."

Talking about the seven photographs at issue in the trial Goodman says,

In one of them a man is urinating into another man's mouth. Show me somebody who can look at that photograph and think about the composition, the symmetry, the classical arc of the liquid and I'll show you someone with an advanced degree in fine arts.

The arrogance of aesthetic practice works very hard to vaccinate the intellectual and cultural elite from the infection of porn. Porn pushes lots of buttons. It's messy, insubordinate, disobedient, unruly - a sign of vulgarity, of low brow culture. But it has no pretensions; it is what it is.

What contemporary culture calls erotica, on the other hand, is completely disingenuous. It hides its motives in order to be the acceptable, the sanitized, sanctioned form of sexual imagery. Erotica shares the properties of both art and porn, but the idea of the erotic has been completely co-opted to the point of meaninglessness. It is so easily accommodated by the category of art in which sexual desire has to be arrested and transformed into an institutionally palatable form. The distinction between erotica and pornography reinforces a hierarchy that even expresses itself in the sound of the two words.

Bataille's erotic is infinitely more complicated. His paradoxical philosophy removes all sweetness from the erotic equation. He aligns eroticism with taboo, violation, and death, all of which are a transgression of the sacred, the sacred being whatever is subject to prohibition.<sup>2</sup> It seems that Bataille is speaking more of the disruptive potential of what American culture calls pornography. In any case, he seriously analyzes it for its psychological and cultural *raison d'être*. Porn is after all, a form of cultural production – both produced by and produced as culture.

Still, pornography is seen as non-creative in its urgent goal of sexual arousal. It makes most people feel they're looking at something they shouldn't be, either because it's such a private (or perverse) act or because they don't want to be caught looking. The brilliance of Jeff Koons' "Made in Heaven" series of paintings and sculpture of he and Cicciolina (Ilona Staller) engaged in various sexually explicit acts, was that because he was a famous artist, he was able to move hard core porn into the museum where the private act became so public that everyone was caught looking.

But did Koons' 9x12 foot digital "painting" of him graphically performing cunnilingus on Staller, the Italian porn star, in a stylized landscape ironically titled *Manet* (remember *Luncheon on the Grass?*), really become art just because it was in a museum? It probably doesn't matter since it only caused a stir in the art world, but I'd like to coax away this suspiciously flimsy line that separates art from porn.

During his campaign for president, George Bush vowed to "vigorously" enforce federal anti-pornography laws. Fearing they would be targeted under stricter obscenity laws, the large porn companies with guidance from First Amendment lawyer and porn industry attorney Paul Cambria, developed a list of potentially obscene acts. The guidelines, reported in *Adult Video News*, were made public in January, 2001. It was uncertain if the list applied to box cover images only or the sex depicted in the tapes. However, it's quite clear that what has since become known as the "Cambria List" was an indication that the adult industry was preparing for an attack.

#### BOX-COVER GUIDELINES/MOVIE PRODUCTION GUIDELINES\*

Do not include any of the following:

No shots with appearance of pain or degradation

No facials (bodyshots are OK if shot is not nasty)

No bukkake

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<sup>2</sup> Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and Taboo*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1969.

No spitting or saliva mouth to mouth  
No food used as sex object  
No peeing unless in a natural setting, e.g., field, roadside  
No coffins  
No blindfolds  
No wax dripping  
No two dicks in/near one mouth  
No shot of stretching pussy  
No fisting  
No squirting  
No bondage-type toys or gear unless very light  
No girls sharing same dildo (in mouth or pussy)  
Toys are OK if shot is not nasty  
No hands from 2 different people fingering same girl  
No male/male penetration  
No transsexuals  
No bi-sex  
No degrading dialogue, e.g., "Suck this cock, bitch" while slapping her face with a penis  
No menstruation topics  
No incest topics  
No forced sex, rape themes, etc.  
No black men-white women themes

Several things should be noted. This is not an official list of obscenities (hence the vernacular language). Images of children and bestiality are not on the list because they are already illegal or considered obscene, as is bondage and SM play with penetrative sex. The list is also surprisingly homophobic, queer-phobic and racist. Since the porn industry itself is non-discriminating in regard to body types, racial combinations, sexual object choices and gender expression (unlike American culture), I assume the list presupposes what the current administration would find offensive. In fact, depicting these activities is not against the law, but may be considered obscene by the attorney

general, or according to the notorious and capricious “community standards” criteria established by the 1973 case *Miller v. California*.<sup>3</sup> Legally speaking, all obscenity is illegal, but porn is not necessarily obscene.

The point is, over the past twenty years, I’ve seen at least 75 percent of what’s on the Cambria list in art – in performance, film, video, photography, painting, sculpture, and writing. So, at what point does something become pornographic? Is it pornographic because of the words used, the parts of the body seen, the acts performed, or what it makes you feel between your legs? Or is it between your ears? If it’s porn, can it still be art? Or more important, if it’s art, can it ever be porn? If something makes you contemplative rather than horny, is it really porn? Can art be a sexual turn-on? At what point does something become art?

The word pornography first appeared in print in English in 1850 and in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1857, although the contemporary conception of pornography developed toward the close of the eighteenth century. It emerged at the end of the Enlightenment from a long history throughout early modern Europe during which sexually vulgar and explicit imagery was used as a form of political satire and criticism put into service against the church, the state, and the monarchy. This form of political speech was restricted not because it was sexually obscene, but because it was politically subversive and considered seditious.

Pornography continues to have a similar use and effect, although it seems ludicrous to suggest anything within the realm of contemporary art making to be subversive or

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<sup>3</sup> The current legal definition of obscenity is found in the 1973 case of *Miller v. California*. According to the *Miller* case, material is obscene only if all three of the following conditions are met:

1. The average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests.
2. The work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state (or federal) law, and
3. The work taken as a whole, lacks serious, artistic, political or scientific value.

transgressive. But if one considers the culture wars of the past fifteen years, sexually explicit imagery and porn still has the ability to cause a significant disturbance both inside and outside the arts. And that's the beauty of it. It raises questions that destabilize our understanding of ourselves and are impossible to answer definitively.

Consider this second list of images:

The image is the lower torso of a woman from just below mid-breast to mid thigh. Her legs are spread and the view is looking straight into her pubic area. Is this pornographic?

Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du monde*; painting, 1866

In a sex shop in San Francisco, prominently displayed on the cover of an oversized book is a little girl about four years old, naked with elbows akimbo and hands mid torso framing her chest, looking provocatively at the viewer. Is this pornographic?

Sally Mann, *Virginia at 4*, 1989, *Aperture*, #121, fall 1990, *The Body in Question*.

An image of a woman's buttocks being spread by a man's hands. Her anus is visible. She's straddling the man's torso; his penis is erect and is penetrating her vagina. The shot is a closeup focused on her ass, his dick and the penetration. Is this pornographic?

Jeff Koons, *Ilona's Asshole*, oil inks on canvas, 1991

A woman is on stage naked. After taunting the audience with explicit language, she bends over with her ass to the audience and inserts an object into it. Is this pornographic?

Karen Finley, *Yams up Your Granny's Ass*; performance, 1986

One of the most interesting pieces I've seen that reveals the specious distinction between art and porn is "The Impossibility of Having Sex with 500 Men in a Month. I Am an Oriental Whore," by Isaac Leung, an artist based in the United States and Hong Kong. As the title suggests, for one month Leung attempted to have sex with as many men as possible on the Internet using a web cam. The final count was only 161, but that's still an average of 5.4 men per day, and he says there was one day he did 20 guys. From the encounter with each man, he saved screen captures of their one-handed chats, and presented hundreds of the explicit photos in an installation that also included pie charts for age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sexual position preferred,

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as well as the transcripts of their chat sessions, and a personal journal he kept to record his daily response to the project. Leung fucked men from forty-two cities and sixteen countries, all of whom were led to believe he was an eighteen year old Japanese boy.

As a Chinese man, Leung's Internet identity as Japanese and his use of the politically and culturally offensive "Oriental whore" problematizes race, gender, gay promiscuity, and safe sex. He used the lure of what he calls his "Oriental features" to seduce web cam partners, capturing still images and video clips of them while they were masturbating and without their knowledge or consent. Of course this brings up both ethical and legal questions about privacy, responsibility, and whether in fact, the Internet is a public domain. It was for the lack of answers to these very questions that he was not allowed to present his installation as it was intended to be seen for his BFA exhibition at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Rather than de-installing the piece, he covered the entrance to his installation space with paper so that all that was visible was a large lighted sign with the full title.

The project obviously addressed much more than having virtual sex. You even have to ask: What actually constituted sex? The recorded sexual dialogue? Mutual masturbation? Orgasm? Ejaculation? In a statement that appears in a web site reincarnation and documentation of the piece (<http://5sps.com/orientalwhore.html>), he says:

The project documents the collective experience of orgasm in the virtual space. It pushes the limit of exhibitionistic behavior in the telepresence culture. It questions whether Internet sex is virtual or real, whether Internet space is private or non-private... It creates a discourse of sexual politics in the context of post-colonial and interracial sexual relationships by showing my "oriental" identity through my web camera."

Leung plays with that dubious line between art and porn, normalcy and deviance. In an art context, the work is presented for contemplation of the issues of intimacy, Asian male stereotypes, virtual sex, voyeurism, exhibitionism, privacy rights, and the phenomenological experience of doing such a thing. Taken out of an art context the

images look like an obsessive collection of amateur porn and his process might be considered self indulgently perverse if not pathological.

But isn't that the case with all work that enters this dangerous territory? I admit context is everything, but context isn't alchemy. It doesn't turn lead into gold. If we can stop thinking that the most extreme and truly offensive porn represents the whole genre, using the word pornography might not be so abhorrent. No one refuses to use the word painting because of those teary-eyed clowns on velvet or sofa sized landscapes being sold at incredible warehouse discounts. I don't want to be let off the hook just because I'm an artist. I make porn. Sometimes it's art, sometimes it's not. But it never isn't what it is.