

Aesthetic Cleansing:
Sex, Kitsch, Censorship, and the Recuperation of Pornography

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As a preface, you need to know that all the black and white images you will see are by San Francisco photographer Michael Rosen. The images aren't meant to illustrate, except sometimes obliquely, what I'll be talking about. I use them because they slide ambiguously between modes of representation which have become problematized in cultural and artistic discourse. They question, I suspect, without intending to do so, the distinctions made between high and low, between art and kitsch, between anthropological document and snapshot, between portrait and pornography. They are uneasy signifiers. But is it precisely the dissonance of the images which create their effect for me.

This talk is going to meander, but not without direction. There are many things to say, perhaps too many things to try to force into an hour. But these issues are complex, interrelated, and I believe essential to understanding the predicament we face as artists and members of this culture. I'm going to begin with the NEA controversy and move into an analysis of the fear I believe has caused it.

Cultural violence resulting in death, Wall Street prostitution, and female sexual pleasure - recent additions to the ever growing hit-list of subjects inappropriate for federal funding. Under the convenient cover of being the final arbiters of "quality," the National Council on the Arts succumbed to conservative threats to cut NEA funding by flagging three peer-panel approved photography applicants for the 1994 funding period and revoking their grants. I was one of those people. It is now nearly 15 months since we were notified of the NCA decision to overturn the NEA peer panel. During those months, the Council has overridden other decisions to fund group exhibitions including one to the Renaissance Society of the University of Chicago for a show of the work of Lyle Ashton Harris, Catherine Opie, among others, as well as a performance by Urban Bush Women.

The pattern that has been emerging since the Mapplethorpe controversy in 1989 is quite apparent - issues of aggressive sexuality and gender which may or may not collide with religious themes are not to be funded by taxpayer's money. And if a previous controversy has brought infamy to a particular name, that name will not be funded by taxpayer's money, no matter what the content of the work. I'm speaking of course, of Andres Serrano.

In October of 1994, I made a formal request to be allowed to speak to the National Council on the Arts during one of their quarterly sessions and was denied that request by Jane Alexander. I went to

Washington anyway and distributed a statement to the NCA and the press. I'd like to read that statement because it still holds significance in regard to the other issues I'll address today.

In 1965, the year Congress created the NEA, it declared: "It is the intent of the committee that in the administration of this act there be given the fullest attention to freedom of artistic and humanistic expression. One of the artists' and humanists' great values to society is the mirror of self expression which they can raise so that society can become aware of its short comings as well as its strengths."

Great efforts have always been made to interpret the Constitution accurately and in the spirit in which it was written. It is curious that the wisdom inherent in the original NEA guidelines, similar to that of the Constitution, have been forgotten or ignored. There is great irony in this original Congressional imperative for the National Endowment for the Arts. In the past 5 years, artists have replaced communism as the primary threat to American culture and values. No longer seen as a philosophically valued resource, artists have been demonized for doing exactly what the NEA was established to support. In holding up the mirror in which American society can see itself reflected, artists have become the messengers who are blamed for the content of the message.

A month before his assassination in 1963, John Kennedy spoke of the artist's role in society at the dedication of the Robert Frost Library. In his speech Kennedy's said: "The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable." ... "When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses for art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstones our judgment. The artist however faithful to his personal vision of reality becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state." Kennedy also said, "If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes them aware that our nation falls short of its highest potential. I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist. If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him." The great paradox in Kennedy's speech was and still is that artists who are supported by government also need protection from government.

Even more ironic is the following quote from one of the most conservative presidents of our time, Ronald Reagan: "Artists stretch the limits of understanding. They express ideas that are sometimes

unpopular. In an atmosphere of liberty, artists and patrons are free to think the unthinkable and create the audacious... Where there's liberty, art succeeds. In societies that are not free, art dies."

Over the past 5 years, the NEA has tried to justify itself to the kind of bigots who have always been the opponents of the creative imagination. The political right has undermined the confidence of American culture in its artists as it misunderstands, misrepresents, and monitors artistic production. The uninformed and radically conservative voice of the far right has become the standard by which art is being judged. To combat its conservative opponents, the NEA strategy has changed from detecting obscenity to disputing quality and artistic merit, a seemingly more tolerable but more difficult measure to contest.

Quality is a historically specific notion which is constantly changing. Pretentious standards of quality and excellence have been used to keep the canon pure and free from contamination by women, people of color, and sexual minorities. The fact that the NCA is comprised of members, very few of whom have connections to contemporary art, particularly photography, video/film, or performance, makes upholding this dubious norm extremely problematic. Because of this, the individual members of the Council can base their judgments only on personal taste or political expediency, not on any informed sense of currency within any of the numerous disciplines they are asked to judge. The issue is how artistic quality/excellence is to be determined and by whom. But moreover, while the debate appears to surface over questions of artistic excellence, the ideological stakes are not as readily apparent. What needs to be discussed are the issues in the work. The arguments about artistic excellence are deflecting attention from the real matter of disturbing content.

Artists whose work addresses critical social issues may affront or make us uneasy but this is imperative when combating complacency, social injustice, repression, control and censorship of American culture. In the past, grants given to difficult, challenging art that had the potential to offend or shock, were an acknowledgment that provocative art was essential to the vitality of American art as a whole. If the arts are harnessed to political agendas art will only be allowed to reflect those political agendas.

As one of the artists whose work was rejected by the National Council on the Arts, I would like to say that the most recent cuts to the NEA budget and the subsequent reorganization of the Endowment's granting structure is a thinly veiled attempt at eliminating the most potentially political and controversial programs, and the most experimental and challenging work by artists rarely seen in mainstream and traditionally established art venues. In an attempt to forestall right wing criticism, the Congress and NEA have become complicit in this conservative agenda to control cultural production

and thought. This is not an issue of censorship per se. As many have noted, no one is telling artists they can't make work. It is rather a matter of regulating access and dialogue about difficult social matters. It is a reflection of a cowardly Congress and a subservient government agency, both of which find it easier to hide behind platitudes to some disingenuous American ideal rather than defend the rights to which both the Constitution and the original NEA mandate aspire. After all, "If artists have freedom of expression soon every American will want it."

I spent two days in Washington at the NCA meeting, met and spoke to seven Council members, and did interviews with several newspapers. David Mendoza, director of the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression who had been in contact daily since the announcement in early August, was a constant companion and source of information and support throughout the two days of meetings. The NCFE retained a group of pro bono attorneys for our legal defense, but unlike the original NEA Four who had won their case on the grounds that the decision to revoke their grants was based on political considerations not artistic merit, our law suit, after six months of gathering transcripts and documents was dropped due to a fail-safe measure instituted by Congress in 1990 to guarantee there would not be a repeat of the NEA Four case. This measure gave the NCA final adjudication on all grants, superseding even Jane Alexander, and as I mentioned in my statement, the grants were officially rejected because the work was allegedly lacking in "artistic merit."

The banishing of controversial and difficult work for it's lack of artistic merit, makes one question what, if anything, will be funded in the future. This shift from the original mandate of the NEA signals an even greater narrowing of the parameters of the kind of knowledge which is acceptable for general dissemination to the public. The ideological implications of this rapidly escalating problem is simply and eloquently addressed by Milan Kundera in his book, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, in which he analyzes "totalitarian kitsch." Kundera begins with an analysis of a four letter word: S-H-I-T. The fact that until recently this word appeared in print, and still often does, as S--- is an indication of its entangled relationship with morality and defilement taboos. As we all know, it's one of the words banned on the airwaves. And yet to deny shit is to deny life and life process. As Kundera says, it's either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don't lock yourself in the bathroom) or we are created in an unacceptable manner.

The aesthetic ideal, then, is a culture in which shit is denied and everyone pretends it doesn't exist, in either the literal or the metaphoric sense. Whether its the dark substance which we and the rest of the animal world eliminate from our bodies, or social/cultural substances this society determines must be symbolically eliminated, American mass culture and the majority of its legislative representatives have very deliberately worked to either repress or eliminate all forms of shit from

public consciousness. This sanitized aesthetic ideal is kitsch. Kitsch is defined as something created to appeal to popular or indiscriminating taste. Kitsch is the absolute denial of shit - it excludes everything which is essentially unacceptable in human existence and renders it mute. Kitsch is the ideological construct which underlies traditional North American culture. Its the homogenization of difference, it's the lowest common denominator, it's the marginalization of everything which can't be controlled.

For Kundera, the model for totalitarian kitsch is the May Day ceremony; for the United States, it could be the christmas holidays, the 4th of July festivities, or military celebrations like the return of the troops from Desert Storm. The visual equivalent would be pictures of sunsets over any local or national monument, images of children frolicking in fields of daisies, or Debbie Boone singing "You light up my life." In its more sophisticated and artistic form, it is the current Monet exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago. In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of sentimentality, patriotism, and the mediocre reigns supreme.

To quote Kundera: "When I say "totalitarian" what I mean is everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: every display of individualism (because a deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood); every doubt (because anyone who starts doubting details will end by doubting life itself); all irony (because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken seriously). ...Kitsch is a folding screen set up to curtain off death." "..It follows then that the true opponent of kitsch is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the screen and gives us a look at what lies behind it." Over the past 7 years, the work that has been so controversial has done just that - it has asked questions. It has sliced through the screen of the sentimental clichés of patriotism, religion, traditional family values, and compulsory heterosexual sexuality, to reveal rich and diverse counter narratives - those which reveal life styles and beliefs usually on the fringes of sanctioned cultural correctness.

It's interesting to note that one of the bills sponsored by Jesse Helms would have banned the NEA from awarding grants to any work that would depict "sexual or excretory activities or organs in an offensive way." Helms was quoted as saying that much of the work supported by the NEA "turns the stomach of any normal person." In a debate on the Senate floor, Helms appeared waving a brown envelope which held a magazine produced with the help of NEA funding. He slipped it out of its wrapping momentarily to display the cover - an image of female genitalia subtitled "Read My Lips" - that he termed an example of "indecent, rottenness, homosexuality, and bestiality" funded by citizen's tax dollars. (My mind runs wild with speculation about how an image of female genitals might

be an example of bestiality for Helms.) "Make sure that the ladies who work here and the young people, particularly the young pages, are not exposed to it," he warned.

As Gayle Rubin has observed, "for over a century, no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children." Helms, the paternalistic guardian, believes the simple exposure of sexual organs is a danger and an obscenity, that the body itself is something to be hidden. But the desperate effort to protect childhood innocence is exactly what destroys it. It doesn't take much to send the message to a child that something is wrong with the curiosity and pleasure she or he finds in the body.

Young children are totally sentient beings. They have no conditioning as to the quality or the reference of the touch. All they know is how it feels: does it give me pleasure, does it not - that highly charged sensitivity - every single inch of the body as site of hedonistic delight, all those potential places for fetishistic gratification to locate itself. It is this primal, pre-linguistic knowledge of the sensuality of the body that is so powerful and so extraordinarily pleasant, and it is that pleasantness, that pleasure that has been restricted through social conditioning. It is no wonder those sites of fetish formation are placed and replaced in different ways throughout our lives. Desire is like memory, it takes up residence in inconvenient places.

We are born with certain predispositions and potentials, and society immediately demands that we deny many of them. In fact we spend the first half of our lives suppressing, repressing and damaging ourselves trying to control our innate urges so we can fit more easily into narrowly defined roles. There is a vague sense of this throughout our lives, a yearning for something lost. We pay a high price to maintain civility. Yet it is that state prior to socialization which locates pleasure in pure bodily sensation, that condition to which we continually attempt to regain access - **this** is what concerns me here: that place of pleasure, and the transcendence of mundane reality.

Though the vehicle to transcendence varies enormously, it is a road well traveled by those seeking spiritual as well as corporeal ecstasy. Consider this list: the masochism of Christ and the christian worship of it, religious flagellation, the fasting of medieval nuns, Pentecostal rituals, the alterations of the body by bodybuilders, athletics induced endorphin and adrenaline highs, Baptist church services, combat, drug and alcohol use, anorectic fasting or purging, eating, meditation, s/m and all marginalized sexual practices, body modification such as piercing, tattooing, scarification, and cutting, the hormonal changes of transsexuality and transsexual surgeries.

For many, these actions are an unconscious response to corporeal and psychic needs; for others, they are a rebellion against cultural moderation. Historians and the medical establishment have pathologized some of these behaviors as world-denying and self-hating responses to social ills. Instead I suggest we reframe them as being an effort as Carolyn Bynum asserts, to "plumb and to realize all the possibilities of the flesh." In her book, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, Bynum describes some of the religious practices of medieval nuns such as beating, driving nails through the palms of the hands, self-induced paralysis, and wrenching bodies into bizarre pantomimes of the moment of crucifixion, as not being depressing or horrifying but revered and glorious. As she writes, "They were not rebelling against or torturing their flesh out of guilt over its capabilities so much as using the possibilities of its full sensual and effective range to soar ever closer to god." (Remember that phrase: "closer to god.")

There is an extremely tenuous distinction between sexual and spiritual ecstasy, and it's important to move beyond interpreting practices of corporeal or psychic modification as bodily punishment, mutilation, or simple desire for control. To consider voluntary pain or deprivation as pathological, ignoring the body's pleasurable reactions to these stimuli is to disregard or deny the transcendent aspects of culturally "deviant" practices, as well as the carnal manifestations of religious experience. In other words, those involved in sadomasochistic practices are just as likely to be experiencing spiritual exaltation as nuns and priests are likely to be experiencing deliciously orgasmic sensations. One need only turn to the writings of Saint Theresa for confirmation.

This of course is to ask for a radical departure from the medical, and in some cases, juridical assessments of certain marginalized behaviors, and to collapse the distinctions between "normal" and "deviant" so they can occupy the same territory. Finding common ground is imperative, and we must consider the body, any body, whether that of a fundamentalist christian, a transsexual, a conservative heterosexual, a celibate catholic nun, or an s/m leather dyke, as a repository of sensation. An acknowledgment of this commonality, despite individual or group methodologies, may at least be a point from which we can begin to comprehend how, on a profoundly basic level, most humans search for something in their lives which exceeds everyday consciousness.

How do individuals determine for themselves how to attain that state of altered or heightened awareness when they have choices as far ranging as working out for an endorphin rush, smoking crack, engaging in bondage and discipline games, watching television, or meditating? Some of it is unconscious and rooted in those arenas of pleasure established in childhood. Often the choice is made through of a lack of knowledge of what might be possible - do we know what our bodies are indeed capable of? Do we know how to find information or a community about ideas and practices?

It doesn't take much once the right stimulus is presented to trigger memory and fantasy. It can happen at any time during our lives, which is, I believe, what makes this mechanism so powerful and so volatile. Ignorance keeps people inactive and this is precisely what the conservative agenda is about - keeping people ignorant and uninformed about their potential and the possibilities in the world around them. It's happening not only through censorship of the arts, but through cutbacks in domestic spending for healthcare and education.

I'm obviously concerned about which practices are sanctioned and which become perverse by social standards. For the purpose of expediency and to contextualize all practices as being located in a greater realm of what I've been calling transcendence, I'm going to call the actions, the vehicles to transcendent states of consciousness, "rituals."

Rituals are meaningful acts, symbolic actions. Like dreams or art, they are bridges between two worlds, between the sacred and profane, between something in daily life and something transcendental. The ritual is living if it conducts you from one level of consciousness to another. A dead ritual is one in which the practitioner goes through the motions but a change in consciousness does not result. Dead ritual takes you back, living ritual beacons you forward.

All cultures to some degree offer ritualized assistance in reaching transcendence. Unfortunately, what is offered in this culture is limited in its scope and not effective for everyone. To the extent that societies offer rituals, those rituals will be used to reinforce the status quo or at least not threaten it. The social structure supports countless dead rituals for the same reason. Kitsch is ritual which is no longer living. Kitsch orients people to the past, a narrativized past, a fantasy past, or an idealized past. And the past is safe because it doesn't threaten to change the present. The contemporary rituals I've been referring to, which on an individual level are aimed at the experience of transcendence, are dangerous on a cultural level because they lead toward a change in consciousness both for the practitioner and those who might be intrigued by the action.

When I talk about these "dangerous" contemporary rituals I'm specifically referring to any practice which is not culturally accepted including s/m, dominance and submission, gender transgression and transsexuality, body alteration and play, and any other queer sexuality, all of which are implicated in the censorship of the arts, and, more broadly, the censorship or suppression of ideas about the body. The irrational aversion to these practices develops from ignorance of them and is rooted unconsciously, I believe, in fear of the abject and of the individual's own psychic excess.

The abject - the jettisoned object; that which disturbs identity, system and order; the oozing body; the decaying body; that which is radically excluded, intoxicatingly vile; the untouchable, defilement, what is thrust aside in order to live.

Psychic excess - fantasy, fetish, the homosexual doppelganger, the perpetual threat of disruption, that which is systematically denied by what we struggle to believe is the volitional self, the id out of control, desire out of control, the return of the repressed, the despised Other dwelling within as alter ego.

Abjection is the manifestation of a physical response to repulsion, whereas psychic excess is repulsion's location in the unconscious mind.

Abjection takes place on a physical plane as the body's response to what is repulsive; psychic excess on a mental plane.

The abject is externally threatening; psychic excess, an internal threat.

Abjection and psychic excess both terrorize the ego.

The anthropologist would say there is nothing loathsome in itself. What becomes repulsive in a specific society is that which disobeys rules of order peculiar to the symbolic system of the culture. So although abjection is a universal phenomenon, the terms of the abject are symptomatic of subjective social structures. It is a ludicrous conceit of those who enact rules of order to believe that if excess of any kind is circumscribed, it will somehow be prevented.

Julia Kristeva has written, "The symbolic "exclusory prohibition" that constitutes collective existence does not seem to have sufficient strength to dam up the abject or demoniacal potential of the feminine." ...the danger of filth, represents for the subject, the risk to which the very symbolic order is exposed... But from where and from what does the threat issue? From nothing else but ... the frailty of the symbolic order itself."

The symbolic order, like the binary system of gender which belongs to it, is the result of a constant repetition of itself "in order to establish the illusion of its own uniformity and identity," to both quote and paraphrase Judith Butler. It is a structure permanently at risk because it requires being instituted again and again. For this very reason, it constantly runs the risk of being de-instituted at every turn. This is a fragile system because it is inflexible, and it is inflexible because it's built on fear. If it was a stable system, there would not be such a constant battle to protect and defend it. But the symbolic

order and the binaries of gender will never be stable because they excludes so much of what is profoundly human.

I'd like to show you a music video which I think embodies these concepts in a visual, and for me, a very visceral way. This is **"Closer" by Nine Inch Nails**.

+++SHOW VIDEO+++

The first time I heard this song I was stunned. When I saw the video, I felt I had witnessed a profound analysis of the corporeal body. I saw very clearly why the conservative right, religious fundamentalists, and parents especially since the 50s have feared music, images, and words about sex - because they do indeed stimulate, arouse, and take us to another place, a place that's not where we live our daily lives. And I was able with this video to step back far enough from my rational thoughts, at least while I was watching it for the first few times, to understand that there is a sensory space at the threshold of language, a space of pleasure and danger, a space in which the body surrenders to desire, to something they don't teach you about in school - this place has a great deal to do with the abject and psychic excess. When we're there, we want to stay as long as possible. When we come back, we want to return as often as we can to that realm of transcendence, of otherness.

This video is densely layered and its images are multiply significant. Here's my take on it:

The opening scene - a beating heart, the first sound we ever hear, the primal rhythm. It's industrialized, electrified, mechanized, pumping steam instead of blood. The heart is nailed to the back of a stylized contemporary chair in about the place it would be if a person were sitting there. The disembodied heart, western culture's metaphorical seat of human emotion, passion, corporeality. The setting is an old dusty laboratory, a physiology lab now overrun by images of death and decay, the science and symbols of past beliefs which still haunt the present, populated by a cadre of aging white men in suits.

(physiology: the branch of biology dealing with the functions and activities of living organisms and their parts, including all physical and chemical processes.)

A young man opens his mouth to a breast-shaped microphone into which he sings:

You let me violate you: we see bugs crawling over what could be read as feminine vessels.

You let me desecrate you: cut to a mass of burning candles suggesting a ritual.

You let me penetrate you: something out of focus and unreadable.

You let me complicate you: A young bald woman, looks into the camera, rotating two eggs on the index and small finger of her right hand.

Interspersed throughout the whole video are other stereotypically "feminine" symbols, such as a split conch shell, hatching eggs, a young girl, two women back to back with their hair braided together and their arms extended.

Help me, I broke apart my insides

Help me, I've got no soul to tell

Help me, the only thing that works for me

Help me get away from myself

This stanza begins with a shot of a bathroom or perhaps a restroom. We see the singer again in protective eye gear through which we are unable to see his eyes. The scene cuts to a bald headed man behind a barrier with a round hole, slightly smaller than his head. I flash on three images: a priest in a confessional, a man selling tickets to a peep show, and a guy on the receiving side of a stall in a men's room. But as he sings, the last line: **Help me get away from myself**, we see a bug, the same as was crawling over the glass vessels, trying to free itself from the loose ground in which it has become stuck.

He sings:

I want to fuck you like an animal

I want to feel you from the inside

I want to fuck you like an animal

My whole existence is flawed

You get me closer to God

Closer to god. This line gave me chills when I first heard it, when I realized how connected on a purely physical level, both spiritual and carnal ecstasy can be. As Bynum says, "...using the possibilities of the full and effective range [of the flesh] to soar ever closer to god." God as an abstraction, a metaphor for transcendence, an excuse, particularly in a religious context, to experience the body.

When he says **I want to fuck you like an animal, I want to feel you from the inside**, he appears again in the goggles. The scene shifts quickly between a hanging beef carcass, a laboratory monkey, the bald man behind the large hole and the monkey who is circled in darkness.

Although it is somewhat ambiguous in this first chorus, who exactly he wants to fuck like an animal, the younger bald man's physical similarity to the corporate group could suggest a homosexual union with a father substitute, which begins to confirm my earlier interpretation of this man as a cross between a priest in a confessional and someone looking for sex in a men's john. As he sings: **My whole existence is flawed**, there is a quick cut to a decrepit toilet before we see him suspended and rotating, singing: **You get me closer to God**. There is a heightened sense of the abject in this segment between the dead flesh and the tortured animal flesh, the disdainful man and the dirty toilet, all in the context of animalistic passion which moves him to the spiritual plane.

With images of the suited men in their hermetic room winding through the next visual section, he stands in front of the carcass and addresses them directly when he sings:

You can have my isolation

You can have the hate that it brings

You can have my absence of faith

You can have my everything

A rejection of the kind of masculinity represented by these men who paternalistically and voyeuristically watch everything with no movement and no reaction. He's willing to give everything up for the passionate animalistic ecstatic communion he desires with everything they are not. In the context of the whole tape, the synergy is with whatever might be other, the feminine, the masked woman, the abject, and certainly excess.

To a shot of the woman in the mask, he says:

Help me, you tear down my reason

Help me, its your sex I can smell

Help me, you make me perfect

Help me become somebody else

There is no doubt that the feminine and women hold enormous power in the mind's of men. He says, "you make me perfect," indicating that it's not the woman who is completed by a man, but a man who is made perfect by merging with the feminine. So whether it's the physical union with her sex which he smells, or the more abstract symbiotic relationship he seeks with femininity, he is interested in becoming "somebody else," some other.

This time when he sings:

I want to fuck you like an animal

I want to feel you from the inside

I want to fuck you like an animal

My whole existence is flawed

You get me closer to God

he's blindfolded with his hands bound over his head. Even though he's saying "I want to fuck you like an animal," there is no way he can do this. He's the one whose going to be fucked. He's the one in the submissive position. What gets him closer to god is his surrender to desire.

In an instrumental sequence which immediately follows, each of the characters except the old men, rotate on a platform: the women who are bound by their hair, the little girl, the bald man, the woman holding a ram's skull, another squatting man with a bare chest and suspenders, and a black man holding a large, flaccid, but very phallic animal tongue: a veritable parade of otherness which he joins. His choice of the "perverse" and refusal of the normalcy and tradition of the fathers is a transgressive act, not without consequences and pain.

In the final segment, he speaks the last stanza inaudibly but sensually into the breast mic as the pig head with apple spins and he appears in parallel with a red ball-gag in his own mouth. A hand in latex removes the apple from the pig's mouth and the scene turns into a Witkinesque still life with large bug and human head. Change is always a death of some sort.

He says,

Through every forest, above the trees

Within my stomach, scraped off my knees

I drink the honey inside your hive

And in the last line AS he says:

You're the reason I stay alive, the scene returns to the still life, and the eyes of the decapitated head open wide. During the last instrumental riff, the singer withstands the force of gravity. His face distorts and he gives in to something beyond his control, as the film literally melts. This dissolution of self, another metaphorical death, a return to the dust the black man blows off his hat in a flash of light, seems to signal a final transformation. In the very last scene, the singer floats high in the room, as if an angel, to play the final notes we hear on a keyboard.

I used this video because it's hot, it's sexy. it's smart, and it's extremely rich in metaphor and symbolism. It turns me on every time I watch it because I can either give in and enjoy it or sit

endlessly and analyze it. Either way, I can't get it out of my head, and if I didn't want it there, I would be disturbed by the fact that it was there pushing all my psychic buttons. I do believe this is what drives the fear, particularly around those things we might find pleasurable - that we won't be able to remove them from our memories.

Fear begets prohibition. The fear of pleasure is the fear of finding pleasure in excess or in the abject. Freud tells us that "dirtiness of any kind seems to us incompatible with civilization," and that "we extend our demand for cleanliness to the human body." He also says that with taboos, "the prohibition mostly concerns matters that are capable of enjoyment," and that includes the unclean.

What is the fear?

That if we see it we will never be the same again,
that if we indulge in it we will become corrupt,
that if we can't get enough of it we'll die.

America is duplicitously sex-obsessed and sex-phobic, a rather clear indication that a good amount of repression is at work. The sexual charge generated by this psychic mechanism is evidenced in the stories of Jimmy Swaggert, Jim Bakker, numerous politicians, and perhaps even more numerous catholic priests who have exposed their own hypocrisy by indulging in the very things they denounce. But I would hesitate to condemn their behavior or to call it pathological. It seems normal and even predictable that the body, at some point, must relinquish control of its desires. So I wonder what fantasies and fetishes haunt Jesse Helms, Patrick Buchanan, or Dana Rohrabacher who speak about art they'd like to see eliminated in metaphors of chaos, defilement, and engulfment.

This culture's inability to role around in any kind of muck is astonishing. The collective super ego is massively resistant. Something other than political expediency is being served by these declarations about sexual filth. By making such pronouncements, politicians and religious advocates are establishing some sense of comfort that it's outside themselves. They might actually think something is repulsive, but it's most likely a projection of that repulsion in themselves. Anyone who has to emphasize and keep calling it up, needs to validate the belief that it doesn't reside in them, but is in fact somewhere out there.

American culture obviously recognizes the power of desire, and tries to channel it along other paths. In taking desire and directing it toward commodity fetishism and consumption, it forms the body in socially manipulated ways. In doing this, we are removed farther from desire. There are very few places in a social context where one can feel the intensity of desire individually and intimately as you

can through pornography. The repression that's happening on the right is an attempt to annihilate this desire. They see very clearly how passion is manifested through cultural excess, and they're doing their best to kill the desire for it. If we allow that to happen, we can only blame ourselves for not resisting the assault on our sentient existence.

The fear is not only of excess, but of change. Change is always at the consequence of that which preceded it, an irrevocable loss. So if this country becomes more aware of its sexual needs, it is at the cost of what exists now, some elusive and patriarchally defined notion of family and morality. Change is a threat, it signals death: in this case, the death of American ideals such as submissive women and dominant men, of heterosexual normativity, of sexual and intellectual fear. This is the Oedipal scenario - the son must kill the father, and replace the existing set of values with new ones. Today there is a minor variation on this theme - the black sheep of the family, the uncivil offspring hidden in the basement is loose and terrorizing the father. The marginalized are threatening to undo the system, the barricades are not holding.

So finally I approach what the conservative right has been most obsessed with in their attempts to censor and cleanse the arts: pornography. But porn is only an easily understood catch-word. The battle is over dangerous ideas. In any case, the disruptive power of the genre, attacked by liberals and conservatives alike embodies all cultural fears - fear of the abject, of desire, of defilement, of the feminine. The NEA battle is only symptomatic of the much larger problem American society has in not being able to come to terms with the body and its excesses.

Pornography pushes the limits.

It engages sexual, sentient reality.

In a political sense, it's a mirror and a window.

Porn is a site of resistance to cultural restrictions on pleasure.

It's about being aroused and feeling something in your body.

It's about what we fetishize, what we need to get off.

Pornography is about fantasy not reality.

I'm not trying to idealize an industry that obviously has its problems, but to privilege the genre as being insubordinate, disobedient, unruly, insurgent, and anarchistic. It's a place where anything is possible, where every body type is acceptable, where intercourse may not even play a role in sex, where as Sally Tisdale says, "the binary system breaks down utterly on the rocks of human desire."

I'm going to show you something

something you can't imagine now
something you'll never forget
something you'll want to tell your grandchildren
it'll make a man out of you
you'll thank me for it
you'll say oh baby I never knew it could be so good
you'll say oh baby do me again
I knew you'd like it they all do
at first they say no then they can't get enough of it
can't bend over far enough
can't spread their cheeks wide enough
can't have it fast enough
can't get it in deep enough
can't get filled up enough
oooh yeah that sweet little secret

The penetration of the male body, and by "logical" cultural extension, the feminization of the male body, has been the locus of enormous male hysteria. *Where* but in the realm of pornography, can we see this irrational gender dysphoria counteracted? Everyone has at least two holes, anyone can be penetrated, anyone can penetrate.

ooohh baby baby
let me count the ways
let me show you the way to heaven
let me do it to you let it go
give it up give it to me I want you
I want you right now I want you bad
spread your legs spread your cheeks
open wide yeah you can do it
back up let me get inside you
let me put it in deep come on ride it
my cock is hard and ready
let me into that hole
that's it yeah baby yeah
let me show you how good it can be
let me teach you new tricks

let me show you the other side of the moon

Neither desire, fantasy, nor fetish are politically correct. They never have been and most likely, never will be. "Perversions exists only when there are rules about acceptable erotic attachments," says Sally Tisdale. Let me read a bit more from her book, *Talk Dirty to Me*:

" When we are aroused, the ego wrestles the super ego to the ground, and while they're fighting, the mute and mindless id runs the show. Hormones, genetics, pheromones, who cares? I just want *that* - or this. I want it so much I can barely think of anything else. I want it here, now, anyway I can." ..."Feeling horny is like being pregnant with desire, restless, swollen. Predatory, as though I were hunting. I begin to act unseemly, I get reckless, attentive to every person with whom I have the most casual contact." ..."Desire can be a pure frenzy of neurotransmitters, like acid in the drinking water, voodoo, hypnosis, a curse." ..."That we can just control our sexual selves is one of those maddening pronouncements with which Americans are raised, a pronouncement often delivered with smarmy self-righteousness."

The most important aspect of pornography is surrender. In admitting physical desire, we admit our humanity. And yet I think most people believe talk about sex and certainly pornography should not be the content of public discourse. In an interview about her book, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, Nan Goldin said, "I think people keep the wrong things private." I agree. The things that can only be spoken in private are the very things that need to be spoken in public because they are the things used to take away our humanity and control us.

I call my current work pornographic for a reason. When I do, it becomes an unstable signifier. What does it mean for a woman of 48, a professor of art, a teacher of theory, a feminist, to write like this, to speak like this, to think these thoughts, to move out of her assigned role? I like playing with the vulgar, with the low class, low brow, vernacular language of traditional porn. It's where I come from, it's what first aroused me. Until she died, my mother routinely told me I was vulgar. Ten years ago, at the age of 62, she committed suicide. She perceived herself as being powerless and increasingly invisible. She didn't have access to certain kinds of knowledge - she was working class, uneducated, and unaware of her options. I'm not. My refusal in my work to be the good girl my mother struggled all her life to be, is my refusal to die as she did. I believe the culture which now surrounds us is incapable of expressing the complexities of our lives, our sexualities, our gender orientations, our desires and pleasures. Why do I do it and what does it mean? I'll respond to that question with a quote from bell hooks:

"I locate my answer in the realm of oppositional political struggle. Such diverse pleasures can be experienced, enjoyed even, because one transgresses, moves "out of one's place." For many of us that movement requires pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination. Initially, then, it is a defiant political gesture."

We should be suspicious of distinctions which elevate erotica over porn as well as create an incomensurability between art and pornography. There's no truth, no falsehood, there are only different ways of knowing. Everything is a language game. We can't rely on objectivity to understand reality, even less, fantasy and desire. The greatest source of human pain and difficulty is trying to force everything into a single ideological construct. Most religious leaders and politicians exclude the totality of human experience. We have to broaden our epistemologies to constantly take in new things - to include rather than exclude.

***my hand moves to your sweaty dick
it's already stiff with thinking
I put my face in your snatch and breathe in
the smell asphyxiates me hormones and musk
my tongue laps up the moisture under your balls
it's been accumulating all day
you anticipate my next move
but I seldom do what you expect
you like that you like that you're never quite sure
never sure what's next
never sure which hole will be filled with what
all you know is that you like being filled
being filled with me letting me occupy your body
letting me find a place to nest
a place to stuff a place to gouge
a place to gorge myself***