

Pornography occupies a precarious position in American culture as both a subject of serious academic study and as the single most vilified form of image making. Most people believe talk about sex and especially pornography should not be the content of public discourse, and certainly not of higher education. It has never been a socially acceptable form of visual pleasure even though its widespread use attests to its infiltration into the American psyche. Despite pornography being a hot topic among academics and the most debated feminist issue of the past three decades, we are still in a battle over dangerous ideas and it is unsafe territory we tread once we leave the relatively accepting environment of either the art or queer communities.

Over the past 22 years, cultural agencies have had to justify themselves to the kind of bigots who have always been 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 new standard by which art is judged. Attacks from religious and ultra conservative organizations have had a chilling effect on the arts. This is precisely the reason this class is so important and this school is so courageous in providing a forum in which problematic issues of sexual representation can be openly explored and discussed.

Pornography presents a problem for the artist. If its defining aspect is that it's meant to arouse, have we failed if the viewer is not moved to action? If something makes us contemplative rather than horny, is it really porn? At what point does an image become pornographic? Is something 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 importantly: If it's art, can it ever be porn?

The work in this screening is a philosophical inquiry into an order of experience within the sexual realm that makes evident the precarious border that has separated art and pornography, art and non-art, the beautiful and the grotesque, intellectual contemplation and action, self and other. Pornography actually makes it possible to think about sexual equality in ways that challenge traditional sex/gender binaries. Looking at it theoretically, it is also a place where the complex dramas of class, power, and pleasure are played out. In an academic environment it conflates two opposing realms: the intellect and the erogenous zones (above the neck, below the belt) - high art and low culture.

Pornography is vulgar, messy, equivocal. A suspicion of deviance is always associated with both the makers and its viewers. The disruptive power of pornography, attacked by liberals and conservatives alike, embodies all cultural fears, and a look at what is unthinkable in American society uncovers some very deep anxieties. Pornography does this better than any other social form of expression. No subject is taboo, nothing is sacred. This class is involved in recuperating pornography, playing with its social mark of disgrace, and moving it discursively from the private to the public realm.

Judith Halberstam has said, "Desire has a terrifying precision." Neither desire, fantasy, nor fetish are politically correct. They never have been and most likely, never will be. But there's a necessity to explore the disorderly and slippery spaces of desire and pleasure, to jump into that big dark hole, face or fist first, into something as profoundly intellectual as it is physical and visceral. These are spaces of radical resistance - the spaces in and around the body.

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