

A View from the Ivory Tower

Barbara DeGenevieve @ 2012

I am an artist who since the late 1970s, has been making work about sex. The work has often been called pornographic simply because I was photographing naked men. I photographed men because I was a feminist and well aware that the inequities in representation between female and male bodies were still enormous. Even if you count every penis that appeared in Greek, Roman, and medieval art (and there were many), the total would only be a fraction of the number of female nudes, and the full frontal male has been absolutely scarce in modern and contemporary art. I was determined to correct that imbalance. It amazes me how difficult that has been and how many times my work has been vandalized, censored, denied funding or exhibitions, and even when shown, moved from public view by being banished to a back room. When the work is shown, there are always signs posted alerting viewers that they will be encountering images that may be offensive, disturbing, inappropriate for children, or just the simple 'Warning: This exhibition contains nudity.' This is what happens when art is confused with pornography.

What has been so problematic, and surprisingly still is for many art venues, are the naked men that have populated much of my work since graduate school. It's a dick thing. Even in the second decade of the 21st century, that pesky, protruding, uncontrollable external organ is still not ready for general public viewing. The fact that catching a glimpse of one in a film continues to evoke a moment of surprise (or giddy anticipation from the hype that precedes the film's release), attests to the rarity of the occurrence. It is not surprising that this happens since the naked penis will usually guarantee an NC-17 rating.

With that bit of personal and art history, I will also admit to being an academic, a full professor with tenure. I will not deny this is a privileged position, and (at the risk of sounding like a lame politician running for office), as a working class kid of uneducated Polish parents who grew up in a coal mining town in northeastern Pennsylvania, was brought up catholic, and was the first to go to college out of my immediate family and extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins, it still amazes me that I got here at all. At least it gives me a perspective on the issues of class that underlie academic arguments about pornography.

Academia is an unusual place. Once you prove yourself and tenure is granted by an institution, you are, in essence, awarded a job for life. You can be fired for cause or released from a contract if the school is in financial exigency, but other than that, the job security that comes with tenure is yours until you retire or die. The system definitely has its problems, but without the protection tenure provides, few in the scholarly community would be inclined to research, write, or make art about the inconvenient, embarrassing, sure-to-disturb, and even dangerous ideas that are essential to the production of knowledge and new ways of thinking. This academic freedom is central to the mission

of the academy. "The intent of tenure" (as someone has eloquently written in Wikipedia, the most unscholarly of quotable texts), "is to allow original ideas to be more likely to arise, by giving scholars the intellectual autonomy to investigate the problems and solutions about which they are most passionate, and to report their honest conclusions." If anyone is going to challenge something you've done or said in your classroom, tenure is a protection from the vagaries of politics, religion, or a donor with an ax to grind. These are exactly the reasons tenure was established and why it remains a peer review process.

Tenure is undoubtedly why I have been able to stay in academia for so many years, because I've had parents, students, other faculty, a dean, people in HR, various other administrators, and two presidents seriously question my pedagogical methods. I'm still standing because I never do anything I can't defend ethically, philosophically, or didactically, and did I mention, I have tenure? It is of course tenure and my right to academic freedom that have saved me, especially after multiple incidents.

Porn makes people crazy. I can attest to that from first hand experience. To write about it, appropriate it, or make work critical of it is fine. To make it, or to make something that leads a viewer to question whether it is or is not porn, is to lose credibility as a serious artist. It's not as though calling something pornographic precludes other meaning. After all, cultural theorists have spent the past thirty plus years analyzing porn's significant role in the social structure. You would think that fact in itself would have given it the credentials it needed to be taken seriously by academics as a visual genre with some merit. However, when sex is the subject, the medium used is usually the determining factor in whether a contemporary audience will see the work as pornography or art. There are a number of artists who have made high profile art world reputations through the use of obvious references to the bodies of women in porn.¹ But they are painters and sculptors who transform and stylize their figures, and though they might refer to porn or use its tropes of stereotyped femininity, it is the paint itself that mediates the images, allowing the audience to relax and be assured they are enjoying Art with a capital A. There is no such mediation with a photograph or video image that depicts naked bodies and sexual acts.

In American culture, pornography is the imaginary standard to which all images of the nude body are compared. I say imaginary because neither feminists nor the Supreme Court have been able to create an unambiguous and stable definition that can be applied when visual or literary material is called into question. The unclear distinctions between art, pornography, and obscenity run headlong into the only safe harbor artists have ever had – the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling as to the distinction between art and obscenity, and how that determination is made. When a work is named as being obscene or pornographic, artists fall into a special category that presumes the benefit of the

¹ Jeff Koons, Lisa Yuskavage, John Currin

doubt, that is, that what they produce is “art” and may in fact not be obscene, based on the protections found in the First Amendment.² However, the Supreme Court's ruling also states that local community standards will be applied in the decision-making process. Thus, citizens anywhere in the U.S. who may know nothing about art can determine what is obscene, and therefore illegal. To be clear, pornography is legal, obscenity is not. For an artist to not be guilty of obscenity, even when she has produced what many would consider pornographic work, she need only prove that her work is “art” and implicitly that she is an “artist”. The troubling aspect is that “art” will be defined by the judges in the case.

The academic art world is similarly inclined toward illogical judgments about sexual imagery - porn is the framing device through which representations of the body and its variable genders and sexualities are determined to be offensive or not, and worthy of the name ‘art’ or not. There are few greater intellectual insults than to dismiss an image as simply pornographic. Artists resent it. It’s the easiest slur. It immediately stigmatizes, marginalizes and devalues its object.

What I find so fascinating and what has kept me interested for so long in the issues surrounding sexuality and pornography is that it never ceases to be an issue; it never stops being a problem.

Not being one who shies away from trouble, in early 2001 I decided to start a porn site with a friend. After all, if my art was considered porn (although it can hardly be pornographic in any real sense), I might as well make porn. We named our business *ssspreload.com*, “the prime porn site for hot femmes, studly butches, and lots of gender fuck.” I was the content provider and my friend was the web master. During the 3 years we operated *ssspreload.com*, I shot approximately 150 videos. Between 2001 and 2004, we had neither the technical ability nor the bandwidth to show video, so the approximately 15,000 images we posted were video stills from the footage I shot. The quality was lower than if I was shooting photographs but I had no interest in scenes that looked like they were staged for the camera. I wanted action to be continuous, wanted the viewer to be more of a voyeur, and I wanted eventually to be able to edit the videos so they could be seen as video, not just stills.

As our tag line suggested, it was a queer site populated by femme women, butch women, male identified women, and transmen. In an essay called the *The Hot Bods of Queer Porn*, originally delivered as a presentation about *ssspreload.com* at the 2005 *Art and Politics of Netporn* Conference in Amsterdam, I wrote about how different from mainstream porn the queer bodies and motivations

² Pornography is the only form of expression that is not guaranteed protection under the First Amendment. The rights afforded by the First Amendment were never intended to protect sexual expression of any kind. Support for freedom of speech regarding sexual matters is historically non-existent.

were for everyone I shot over the 3 years the website was in existence. This was a group of educated, aware, queer-identified, gender-variant people who were proud of their bodies and were not afraid to put them on display.

As someone convinced by the anti-porn rhetoric of second wave feminism while in grad school, it took some time to banish the proselytizing from my psyche and begin to enjoy the politically incorrect desires that always got in the way of being a good feminist, and that I now shared with a like-minded group who happened to be one and sometimes two generations younger than I was. Even though more than 15 years had passed since I had seen the errors of second wave moralizing, I was constantly amazed as I shot for sssspread, how much had changed. Give me a time-line. "When exactly did it become OK for two queer women to perform double penetrative sex on a third? For the phallus to be fetishized? To have butch dyke strap on a dildo and have a female partner perform fellatio? To hyper-sexualize femmes and call it queer? Or to have a male born person identifying as a pre-op female transsexual strap on a dildo and fuck a butch dyke identifying as a trannie boy in his pussy? Or to have a transman who used to be a butch dyke get fucked in the ass by a gay man?"³ It all just felt so right. There were politics and personal agency in operation that allowed these young queer actors to claim their own pleasures. They embraced the need to objectify and be objectified, to fetishize and be fetishized, to play the willing victim as well as the victimizer. This opens up a mine field that is difficult to traverse, but it is a more intellectually provocative and honest terrain from which to understand who we are as complex sexual beings.

That being said, I was still struck by how similar the narrative scenarios were to hetero-normative porn. I asked myself, "Are we hardwired? Do we lack imagination? Or are the enculturated sexual narratives so omnipotent and ingrained despite sexual or gender orientation that all of our sexual pleasures default along typically gendered axes of power? I should say that when I was shooting, I rarely suggested a narrative; instead the actors decided what they wanted to do which led to a wide variety of scenes. The similarity to mainstream porn scenarios was something very unexpected. It seems we all understand the common narratives of culturally enforced gender roles and are consciously or unconsciously affected by them, no matter how or with whom they are played out. I shot examples of this that ranged from the typical blow job and vaginal penetration with a strap-on dildo, to a heavy BDSM scene in a dungeon between a transman and a femme woman who called him Daddy, an abduction in a car and rape, a burglary and rape in a dirty basement, to a scene where the daddy (a butch dyke) gives his two 'children' a bath, reads them a story, and the kids then entice him to play the game that 'mommy doesn't know about.' This was fascinating to me because gender and queer theorists have tended, at least tacitly, to elevate queer sexuality and porn to a higher moral ground simply because it's not heterosexual (e.g. some variation of the following:

³ Barbara DeGenevieve, "The Hot Bods of Queer Porn," *C'LICKMe: A NetPorn Studies Reader*, edited by Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, Matteo Pasquinelli, 2007, pp. 233-237.

vaginal or anal penetration of the woman by a man, the woman administering blow jobs for the man, after which the man's pleasure is evidenced by ejaculation somewhere on the woman's body). For the most part, I agree that queer porn should be elevated, especially if I was making a comparison between the entirety of the enormous commercial porn industry and the significantly smaller and much younger genre of queer porn that does indeed have political motivations beyond making money. However, making distinctions between queer and straight porn would be much too easy when in fact all porn is made for one reason – to get the viewer off. And even the most standard heterosexual porn can be queered if one considers the actors as empty place-holders for the roles they play rather than the genders they inhabit...

And does it really matter that the sexual fantasies performed by queer actors suggest the tropes of mainstream porn? This mimicry seems to intentionally deconstruct the hetero version and is much more radical and challenging, given the great complexity of identities, bodies, and subject positions. Queer porn is an inquiry into larger cultural questions about human desire and its relationship to gender presentation, power, pain, dominance, and submission. Queer and trans bodies enact limitless versions and every nuance in between femininity, masculinity, androgyny that completely destabilize fixed gender identities in mainstream porn.

At the same time I was working on ssspread.com, I was asked to teach a class euphemistically called *Body Language*, a class that had been offered only once before as a porn "production" class. I was excited about doing it since it would give me an opportunity to expand my research, work with a group of really engaged upper level students, and have a focused opportunity to think theoretically and practically about what it meant for artists to make porn. Apparently I was told to keep the production aspect of the class 'under the radar, something I don't remember ever hearing.

It was a dream class – 11 students, grads and undergrads, all of whom identified as queer. There were 4 lesbians, 2 gay men, 3 transmen, 1 bisexual woman, and 1 cisgendered woman. Everyone was there for the same reason – an interest in sexuality and the politics of porn – and unlike any other studio class, everyone knew in this class they wouldn't have to defend their work to a group unfamiliar with queerness or unwilling to talk about sex. All 11 were on the same page, ready to hit the ground running, with no time lost trying to educate the naïve and uninformed. The class was unusually cohesive in their wonderfully idealistic ambition to create socially responsible and innovative work in a genre that seems contradictory to those goals.

To make a very long and complicated story as concise as possible, here's a brief summary of what happened.

The class decided to form a group they called the *Porn-Shot Collective* after reading an article in the

NY Times about four undergrads at Yale who had made a film called *The StaXXX* that takes place in a rarely used section of a Yale library known to all as a make-out location. As you might guess, the film was typical frat-boy wish fulfillment; the only thing distinguishing it from thousands of others was that it was made by Yale students. The four men involved in the project remained anonymous and incognito in all their interviews and press photographs. This fear of being recognized as a maker, actor, or consumer reinforces stereotypes that keep pornography 'in a plain brown wrapper' and contradicted the philosophy of the students in my class who were invested in the visibility of a pan-sexual cast, crew, and audience who were unafraid of revealing their identities. *Porn-Shot Collective* was going to give Yale a run for their money.

To do that, we would have to put on a benefit to raise money to pay models, have a craft service to feed the crew and participants, and do post production on the final project. The students organized everything. The two floor queer bar we were able to use for the evening was converted into an upbeat quasi-dungeon with stations where dominatrices administered various forms of punishment to business types and tanned hardbodies, women and men gave lap dances, the kissing booth was active all night, and a Porn Shot member who is a transman, dressed as a priest and took confessions in a private booth. *Porn-Shot Collective* pulled off an event that netted just over \$2200.

The idea was for the video to be an "audition tape." We would only have to shoot once and not do rehearsals or call-backs. It was important that all actors be amateurs, regular people who were somehow attracted to doing porn. Ads were placed on Craig's list and there was a committee that screened everyone who responded. Ten scenes were identified, and we were ready to go.

Trouble started when we got publicity from the local free newspaper for the benefit. One of the students had a friend who was a reporter, and when she showed up, I explicitly told her that the school could not be named. She agreed, but of course as with the Yale video, the school connection was the story. The day the article came out, I was summoned for a meeting in the president's office where there was a long conference table filled with people, most of whom I knew. There was one empty seat at the head of the table and I jokingly said, "This must be the hot seat." One of the lawyers glared at me and said, "Yes, and a very hot seat it is." As the blood drained from my head, I heard bits of the article being read. The first paragraph shocked even me.

Attention all perverts: have you been aching for the chance to lick dirty boots, whip a slave, receive an enthusiastic rim job, make out with a father figure, wield a knife in bed, urinate on a stranger, choke a partner, or get gang-banged from behind? Porn Shot, a group of 11 art students-turned-pornographers, is holding auditions for their debut project, which they hope will be a nationally distributed video featuring the best takes. Aspiring actors will be judged on "creativity and skill," but needn't worry about being forced to do

something they wouldn't be proud to show the grandkids--everyone will be asked to fill out a release form describing his or her boundaries in detail.⁴

The gist of the meeting was this: the story had come out in the middle of a \$50 million capital campaign and I was being held responsible for any damage or financial losses to the school. Oh, and by the way, it was also parent's weekend. There you have it – the two constituencies a school should never offend or make angry - donors and parents.

Unfortunately for me, misinformation in the article led school officials to believe the auditions were taking place at the school that weekend. Although no specific location was mentioned, they had somehow imagined groups of leather men (no doubt shirtless with chaps and naked asses) wandering the campus, banging on doors, asking everyone where the porn auditions were being held. As I suspected, the weekend came and went without incident or complaint.

A bit shell-shocked but undaunted, I organized a screening of student work from the class that included a trailer for the video now named, *Pornshot*. In order for the show to go on, I had to produce all the model releases, and the lawyers screened everything to make sure there were no illegal acts performed and no one underage appeared in any of the pieces. Security was stationed at the doors and IDs were checked to make sure everyone was 18. After the screening, the students ascended the stage for a panel discussion. Each read a brief but very considered statement about porn and why they were interested in it. Then took questions from the audience.

Once students begin to theorize pornography, they never look at it with the same eyes. The readings and discussions in the class encompassed topics such as the representations of race and the infinite variations of gender, the dynamics of power, and the way class inflects the reception of pornography both in and outside the academy. The class created a safe environment for these issues and more to be discussed with candor in a non-judgmental manner. Pornography actually makes it possible to think about sex in ways that challenge traditional sex/gender binaries, and it is in this very arena that pornography can be a useful form not only as a source of pleasure but as a site of disruption.

For as much academic writing about feminist and queer porn as there has been, the Ivory Tower remains pornophobic. Nonetheless, I suspect there are very few people who haven't been turned on by a sexual image, whether they want to call it porn or not, and whether they wanted to be turned on or not. The autonomic nervous system functions primarily below the level of consciousness and the body's response to various stimuli is involuntary. That might be a pleasurable experience if one is alone, but not so much in a classroom or more public space. I have no doubt this is a concern for

⁴ I am deliberately withholding the reporter's name as well as the name of the paper and date of the article.

academics that will never be acknowledged.

As part of a larger group of image makers, artists who work with pornography (or any sexual imagery for that matter) face much more critical scrutiny than is given to any other form of visual production. Making pornography, which many would not consider political, becomes a highly contested and politicized gesture. Pornography occupies a precarious position in American culture as both a subject of sanctioned 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 a college education. But art school, if not academia in general, is an environment that must promise a free exchange of ideas, even ideas that outside its doors might seem untenable or inappropriate subject matter for an educational institution.

I've always thought there should be a sign above the entrance to art schools that says "Warning – Inside these doors you will encounter difficult ideas and many naked bodies, neither of which is life threatening."