

Response to "Group Efforts: Porno for Tyros"

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Last week an article by Liz Armstrong appeared which described a class at the School of the Art Institute called Body Language. The purpose of the class is to critically and historically analyze pornography. Unlike other classes in art schools and universities across the country which do the same, this class is also a studio class in which students actually make pornography. It is this aspect that makes the class unique – a point to which I will return. A group called The Porn-Shot Collective, developed out of this class.

I have asked for an opportunity to address certain perceptions created by the article, the most important of which was the implication of an open audition at the school on April 28th and 29th. This was not true – there was no open audition. Although auditions had been scheduled for last weekend, all participants had been screened, interviewed, and specific times had already been arranged.

Now you may be wondering why this information is so important as to warrant another 750 words of Reader space. The answer is that public perception of an institution such as the School of the Art Institute is crucial to its survival and growth, and the idea that there might be a bunch of "perverts" (the activities of which the first paragraph describes in graphic detail) invading its buildings is very bad PR and not an image the class cares to project. Let me elaborate.

The word "pervert" has at least two connotations. To a community who embraces some of the more extreme sexual behaviors, "pervert" is a badge of honor that has been recuperated from its negative connotations. To perhaps everyone outside this libertine realm, the word suggests a sexual pathology. It is this latter definition that has become so contentious.

Pornography occupies a precarious position in American culture as both a subject of 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 education. Pornography has never been an accepted form of visual pleasure even though its widespread use attests to its integration into and infiltration of the American psyche.

Back to PR. The School of the Art Institute is an environment that promotes a free exchange of ideas, even ideas that outside its doors might seem untenable or inappropriate subject matter for an educational institution. These ideas are the fabric of 21st century life and being unaware or afraid of their power would do a disservice to our students. This is an issue of academic freedom and one SAIC is committed to upholding. Because of this, I can teach a class like "Body Language" without fear of censorship or reprisal.

The Porn-Shot Collective was formed after reading an article in the NY Times about four undergrads at Yale who are planning a film called The StaXXX that takes place in a rarely used section of a Yale library known as a make-out location. The four men involved in the project remain anonymous and incognito in all their interviews and press photographs. This fear of being recognized as either a maker or consumer reinforces stereotypes that keep pornography "in a plain brown wrapper" and contradicts the philosophy on which the class is based. Porn-Shot, however, is invested in the visibility of a pan-sexual cast, crew, and audience who are unafraid of revealing their identities.

Sex is extremely political and the realm of sexuality has always been a contested territory. Pornography actually makes it possible to think about sexual equality 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.

What ultimately makes all of this so problematic is that SAIC and the Museum have a public image to uphold. The language in the first paragraph of the article and the implication that there were open auditions somewhere on the campus reflect a false

impression of what the class is and what the project is about. This would not be such a troublesome matter if institutions were totally independent of all outside funding. Institutions fear for their lives. All it takes is one complaint to set off a chain reaction. In a climate such as this, those of us involved at an institutional level have to be vigilant about how the press interprets what we are doing.