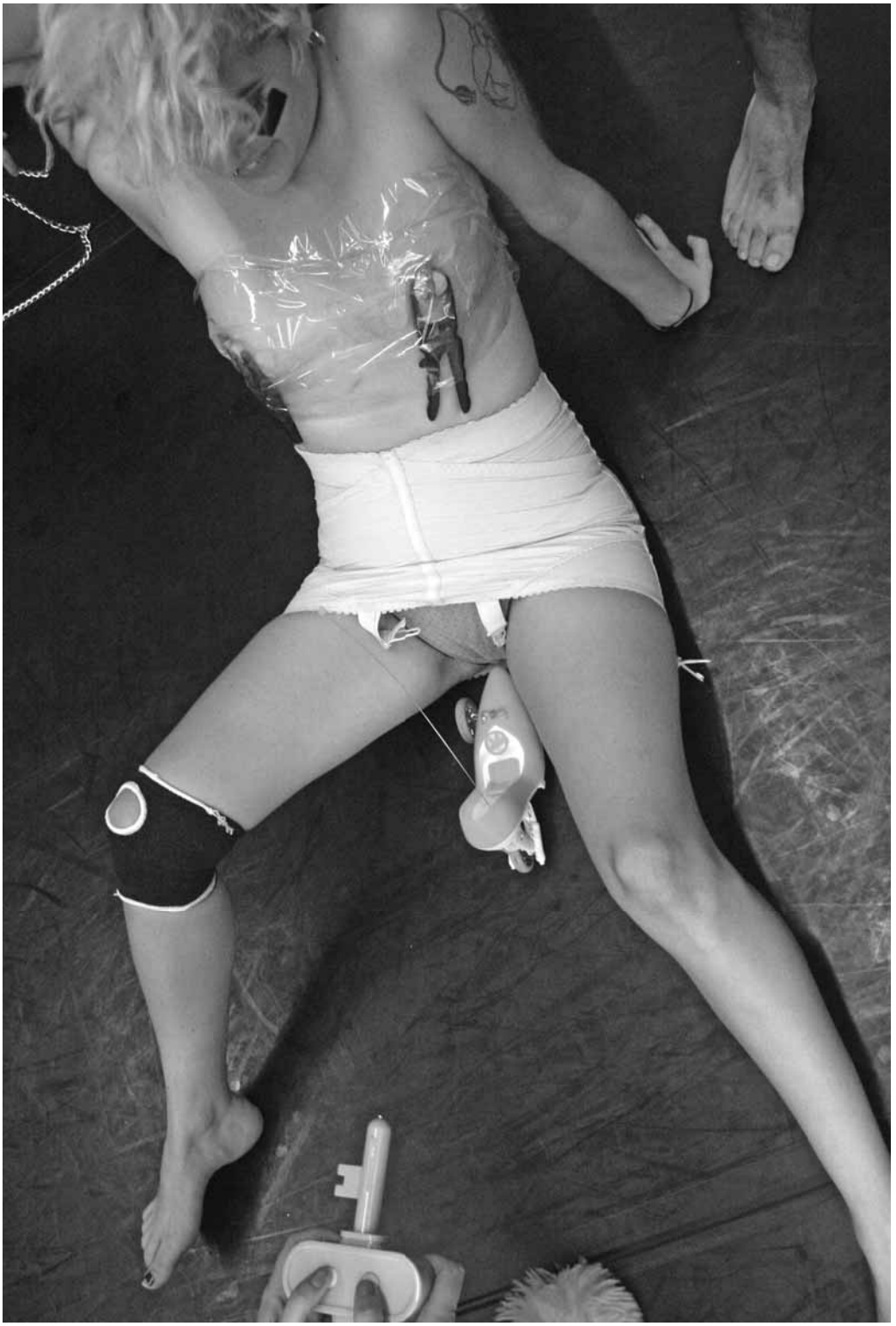
MUSEUM, URBAN DETRITUS AND PORNOGRAPHY

BEATRIZ PRECIADO



↑ PostOp workshop. *Feminismopornopunk* seminar, Arteleku 2008.

The art market wants porn, but it doesn't want porn when it comes from feminism. Everything needs to be kept in its place. The art world likes the odd splash of recycled pornographic codes, provided they are kept well away from their function of social critique, existing more as mere aesthetic residues. The Barbican likes Jeff Koons, and testicles (even hairy ones) are art provided they are drawn properly by solemn gentlemen. Paris Hilton's nudity as sculpted by Daniel Edwards singularly transcends the sordid world of pornography, and a little bit of meat always helps highlight the YBAs' transgression. Let's not demand too much from Western art historiography; it's already had quite enough to cope with in recent years what with having to acclimatise itself to the critical interferences of different sexual, racial and cultural minorities. We've had Warhol, Mapplethorpe and Journiac (three men, incidentally, who knew how to draw testicles). We need to be epistemologically cautious and ethically patient if we're not to waste all our effort.

But while we're being cautious and patient, a new historiography of art is being built in which porn, prostitution and feminism aren't part of the same story. Segregated into different rooms, contexts and concepts, good girls and good lookers aren't allowed make history together. Since the turn of the century, the industrial-museum complex has gone to great lengths to resurrect a number of artists from the 1970s and 80s who had previously gone relatively unnoticed (inter alia Judith Chicago, Martha Rosler, Adrian Piper, Valie Export, Rebecca Horn, Hanna Wilke, Nancy Spero, and Marina Abramovic) labelling them as «feminists» and assigning them an aesthetical and critical mission that goes no further than what art expects of the second sex. Feminist artists are asked to publicly expound on difference, body, skin, maternity, domestic work, gender violence, the everyday, pain, precarious living conditions, love, family, bulimia and anorexia, immigration, ablation, breast cancer, intimacy... and all the aspects of sex and sexuality that we recognise as being culturally more feminine. Not on pornography, though — apart from being crude and repetitive, pornography is a man's thing.

As a result, the performance and audiovisual works of Annie Sprinkle and Elisabeth Stephens, COYOTE, Veronica Vera, Monika Treut, Linda Montano, Karen Finley, Maria Beatty, Emilie Jouvet, PostOp, GoFist, María Llopis, Shu Lea Cheang, Diana Junyet Pornoterrorista[1] et al still cannot find frameworks of intelligibility from which to make themselves visible. This art, which does not match the criteria of feminism but is nonetheless made by women (if M and F are still considered identity markers), seems to fall into a historiographic vacuum, demanding new categories (post-pornography, porn-feminist video and performance art) from which to gain public visibility.

Here I could sketch a post-pornographic history of art, proposing notions of subject, looking, representation and pleasure to build an alternative narrative to the one offered by the progressive-identity historiography with its new entries, feminism and gay art. But before all else I want to reconsider the terms of the pornographic debate and its relations, such as art history, bio-political strategies of body control and the production of pleasure through sight-intensifying apparatuses. In this text I will try to show why pornography is a form of cultural production that is of concern to museums and why critical historiography should include pornography in any analysis of the cultural modes through which the limits of the socially visible are constructed and with them the normal and pathological sexual pleasures and subjectivities. This genealogy will help explain why, since the 1970s, pornography has become a crucial space of analysis, critique and reappropriation for the micro-politics of gender, sex, race and sexuality.

Porn Studies: Pornography as a cultural discourse

The issue of pornography often sparks circular discourses and false diatribes in which precisely the arguments that could turn the debate around have been excluded in advance, by way of an implicit definition of what pornography really is. We are witnessing a pornographic saturation (in the representation, and means of consumption and distribution of the image), yet this saturation has met with a complete opacity of discourse. Pornography is not yet considered to be a worthy subject for either cinematographic or philosophical study. Coupled with the academic scorn poured on pornography —seen as mere *cultural detritus*– there is the strength of what we might term *the hypothesis of the imbecilic masturbator* whereby pornography is seen as the zero sum of representation, a closed and repetitive code whose only function is and should be that of acritical masturbation – with criticism viewed as

an obstacle to masturbatory success. In any case, we are told, pornography does not merit hermeneutics. But perhaps the time has come for a general political ecology of culture concerned with re-assessing the production, definition and recycling of its cultural detritus, and in engaging in a possible revolution of sexual objects and imbecilic masturbators, who could become the subversive producers and critical users of pornography.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the anti-pornography writings of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon[2], which defined porn as sexist, patriarchal language that led to violence against the female body («porn is the theory, rape is the practice») eclipsed the arguments of so-called «sex- positive» or «pro-sex» feminism[3] which saw the dissident representation of sexuality as an opportunity for the empowerment of women and sexual minorities. While pro-sex feminism alerted us to the dangers of handing power for the representation of sexuality over to an equally patriarchal, sexist and homophobic state, anti-pornography feminism, backed as it was by conservative, religious and *pro-life* movements, advocated state censorship of porn as the only way of protecting women from pornographic violence. And so, pornographic language was once more banished to a cultural suburb, a ghetto that resisted criticism, standing outside the area of conflict and confrontation so central to democracy.

From the late 1980s on, however, in a partial escape from the dead-end of the feminist debate, a group of historians and theoreticians from the fields of literature and cinema —including William Kendrick, Richard Dyer[4], Linda Williams[5] and Thomas Waugh began to extend their investigations to the relationship between body, gaze and pleasure to cover pornographic representation. Most of these analyses of pornography have been based on the constructivist hypothesis contained in Foucault's *History of Sexuality* which argues that modern sexuality and its pleasures are the result not of repression of an original desire so much as specific configurations of power-knowledge: modernity shifts the traditional *ars erotica* whereby pleasure arises from experience and self-inspection to a *scientia sexualis*, a set of scientific techniques (visual, legal, medical, etc.) destined to produce what Foucault calls «the truth of sex». This stresses the complicity between the pornographic techniques of representation and normalisation of the body and the medical and legal devices, the complexity and historical development of the pornographic narrative, and the political construction of looking and of pornographic pleasure and its relationship with the disciplines of management of the urban space. Here for the first time, a critical context emerged, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century was to lead to the emergence of «Porn Studies»[6], allowing for a historical, cultural, cinematographic and political analysis of pornography.

Positioning myself in this precarious critical space offered by porn studies, I will start with a genealogical exploration that will enable us to locate and understand the emergence of pornography in the West as part of the appearance of a wider (capitalist, global and mediatised) regime of production of subjectivity through technical management of the image[7]. The idea is to explore what we might term the *bio-politics of pornographic representation*. We shall ask: How does pornography emerge as a discourse and a knowledge of the body? What is the relationship between pornography and the production of subjectivity? Or in other words, how does pornography work within the political mechanisms of normalisation of the body and the gaze in the modern city? This investigation, addressed only tentatively and very briefly here, will allow us to get some idea of the importance of the new post-pornographic micro-politics.

The museum invented porn

In *The Secret Museum* (1987), historian Walter Kendrick[8] examined the different discourses in which the notion of pornography emerged in the modern age from a genealogical and linguistic position. Kendrick's conclusions provide us with new coordinates for the debate. The notion of pornography emerged in modern European vernacular languages between 1755 and 1857 as part of a museum rhetoric, arising directly out of the controversy caused by the discovery of the ruins of Pompeii and a series of images, frescos, mosaics and sculptures depicting bodily practices, with the consequent debate as to whether these could be displayed publicly.

Archaeological digs beneath Mount Vesuvius had revealed pictures and sculptures of intertwined naked animal and human bodies and oversized penises. Contrary to the initial impression, these images were not restricted to brothels and nuptial chambers, but were found throughout the city. The ruins, reviving repressed elements, revealed another model for the knowledge and organisation of bodies and pleasures in the pre-modern city and brutally highlighted a visual topology of sexuality that was radically different from that which dominated European culture in the eighteenth century.

It called for a whole new taxonomy that would distinguish between objects that were accessible to view and those which could only be seen under state supervision. The public authorities (the government of Charles III of Bourbon) decided to confine certain images, sculptures and objects to a «secret collection» in the Bourbon Museum of Naples, also known as the Secret Museum. Construction of the Secret Museum involved physically building a wall, creating a closed space and regulating the gaze through devices of surveillance and supervision. By royal decree, only upper-class men —no women, children or members of the lower orders— were allowed into the area. The Secret Museum therefore operated a political segregation of the gaze based on gender, class and age. The wall of the museum was a material representation of the hierarchy of gender, age and social class, building political-visual differences through architecture and its regulation of the gaze.

It was in this museum context that the German art historian C. O. Müller first used the word «pornography», (from the Greek root *porno-grafei*: painting of prostitutes, writings on the life of prostitutes) to refer to the contents of the Secret Museum[9]. The 1864 edition of Webster's Dictionary defined «pornography» as «licentious paintings employed to decorate the walls of rooms sacred to bacchanalian orgies, examples of which exist in Pompeii».

For Kendrick, the Secret Museum and the regulation of this space is a founding moment and *topos* of what pornography was to signify in the visual, sexual and urban rationality of the modern age in the West. In this rhetoric and in the one to which I shall refer below, pornography emerges as a technique for managing the public space and more particularly for controlling the gaze, for keeping the excited or excitable body under control in the public space. In other words, the notion of pornography that art history invents is above all a strategy for tracing the limits of the visible and the public. The Secret Museum also invented the new categories of «childhood», «womanhood» and «lower orders». In contrast, the upper-class male body emerges as a new politico-visual (we might even say politico-orgasmic) hegemony: the body that has access to sexual excitement in public, as opposed to those bodies whose gaze must be protected and whose pleasure must be controlled.

Pornography and urban detritus

Throughout the nineteenth century, the notion of pornography that had been introduced by art history was to develop into the rhetoric of hygienism that grew up with the modern metropolis. Around 1840-50, European dictionaries began to define pornography as: «description of prostitutes or of prostitution, as a matter of public hygiene». The term was used to describe the hygiene measures taken by urban planners, police forces and health authorities to manage sexual activity in the public space, regulating the sale of sexual services and «the presence of lone women», but also «detritus, dead animals and other carrion'» in the streets of Paris and London. The term «pornographer», for example, was used of Restiff de la Brettonne when he wrote about the management of prostitution and proposed the construction of state brothels to clean up the city of Paris[10]. Also classed as «pornographic» were the medical/administrative treatises of Jean Parent Duchâtelet[11], Michael Ryan and William Acton on hygiene in the cities of Paris and London which also dealt with sewers, urinals, pipes, paving and drains, prostitutes and vagrants.

Where the Secret Museum and its jealous supervision of pornography were intended to prevent women and children from accessing objects that might excite the viewer, as a hygienic category pornography was above all concerned with regulating women's sexuality in the public space, and managing the sexual services provided by women outside the institutional structures of marriage and the family. Within the rhetoric of hygienism, pornography is a technique for supervising and domesticating the political body (or the body politic) and forms part of what Foucault calls the device of sexuality that characterised nineteenth-century technologies of power. Pornography is the public arm of a broad bio-political device of control and privatisation of female sexuality in the modern city.

Taking these two contexts of emergence, the Secret Museum and the modern city, we could redefine pornography as a policy of space and visibility which generates precise segmentations of public and private spaces. This is a question of walls and of holes-in-the-wall; of windows, curtains and doors (open or closed); of spaces that are accessible or inaccessible to public view; of facades and interiors; of how to cover over the uncovered and how to reveal that which is hidden; of separating clean women from dirty ones; edible animals from carrion, useful items from refuse, the heterosexual bed from the street and its perversions.

History of the techno-eye

The third semantic field in which this notion operates came with the appearance of photography and cinema as technical apparatuses for intensifying sight, and more particularly with the appearance of the first so-called *stag films*, *blue movies* and *smokers* —later classified as porn movies. These were short, silent black and white films, often lasting exactly one reel (between 3 and 10 minutes), which showed naked bodies, physical contact, genital activity, vaginal penetration: in other words, the things that —in the precise territorialisation of the body that dominates the modern era— would be classed as sexual activity. But more importantly from the point of view of the aesthetics of production and reception is the fact that these were films made by men, and intended for the sole consumption and pleasure of (mostly straight) men[12], often in brothels or men's clubs.

Pornography operated as a virtual, external and mobile masturbatory prosthesis of subjectivisation, which was characterised —at least from its origins to the 1970s— by the fact that it was confined to male use. Once again, the visual techniques of production of sexual pleasure were segregated by gender, age and social class. The images considered to be pornographic are not

those which are intrinsically and naturally masculine. Instead, culturally and historically, women have been kept away from audiovisual masturbatory techniques —this distancing is comparable to the exclusion of women from the Secret Museum, from the street and the sex trade, and the result was that until the mid twentieth century, the public space was constructed as a white male space. The restriction of the sphere of reception of pornography in terms of gender led to an interesting paradox: the creation of a homoerotic context of reception[13]. Projection of pornographic images in a space from which women are excluded inevitably tends to sexualise relations between straight men.

The invention of the photograph as image-movement formed part of a series of techniques that produced a distinction between the normal and the pathological. It is impossible to disassociate the history of early pornographic performances from the history of medical «freak» photographs, photos of deformed and crippled bodies and colonial photography. It is important to remember that the invention of photography and cinema marked a key point in the transition and formation of modern sexual/political rationality. This was the moment when sexual identities such as heterosexual, homosexual, hysterical, fetishist and sadomasochist were invented as visual and depictable typologies. If medical representation sought to make the body confess, through the image, the truth of sex, pornography sought to make pleasure (and its pathologies) visible. In this context, Linda Williams sees pornography as a technique of involuntary confession: the production of a knowledge of the subject, telling the sexual truth about the subject.

In cinematographic terms, the pornographic image belongs to the set of images that depict the body in motion. The visual pleasure proceeds from what film theoreticians call a synaesthetic translation, in other words a transferral from the sense of touch to the sense of sight. Moreover, pornography belongs to the class of moving pictures that cause an involuntary reaction in the viewer's body. This is what Linda Williams calls a «body image», an image that moves the body and its feelings: in the case of pornography, the image turns back on the spectator's body, causing involuntary effects which he or she cannot control. We might say that the characteristic feature of pornography (as of other genres such as comedy and horror) is that the visual intentionality is not so much projective, as introjective, not directive so much as reactive. In other words, in pornography the body is vulnerable to the image. This feature complicates Dworkin or Mackinon's one-way interpretation (partly in line with the hypotheses Laura Mulvey makes in her analysis of film representation in her classic *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*): if Mackinnon and Dworkin consider patriarchal and male power as a factor in structuring the visual semiotic of pornography which turns the female body into an object of visual pleasure, they fail to explain the paradoxical position of the male spectator who chooses to allow himself be dominated by the pornographic image[14].

Post-pornography will be no more than a name used to describe different strategies of critique and intervention in representation arising out of the reaction of feminist, homosexual and queer revolutions to these three pornographic regimes (the museum, the urban and the cinematographic) and to the modern sexual/political techniques of controlling the body and producing pleasure, of dividing private and public spaces and accessing the visibility they deploy. Jean Genet, Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger, Veronica Vera, Annie Sprinkle... the notion of post-pornography suggests an epistemological and political break, another way of knowing and producing pleasure through looking, but also a new definition of the public space and new ways of inhabiting the city.

1 See the characterisation of some such artists as «angry women» in *Research. Angry Women*. Edited by Andrea June and V. Vale, San Francisco, 1991.

2 See the seminal works in this debate, Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Plume, New York, 1979 and Catherine Mackinnon, *Only Words*, Harvard University, Cambridge, 1993.

3 To borrow a phrase coined by Ellen Willis in «Lust Horizons. Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?», in *No More Nice Girls. Counter-Cultural Essays*, Wesleyan University Press, New England, 1992.

4 Richard Dyer, «Gay Male Porn: Coming to Terms», Jump Cut 30: 27-29.

5 See Linda Williams's classic *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1989.

6 See *Porn Studies* edited by Linda Williams, Duke University Press, Durham, 2004.

7 The aim is to take pornography as an object of philosophical research (addressing the relations between reality, representation and production of subjectivity) and queer theory (from a perspective that embraces the strategies of resistance to normalisation of sexual, gender and body minorities).

8 Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum, Pornography in Modern Culture*, California University Press, Berkeley, 1987.

9 See C.O. Müller, *Ancient Art and Its Remains. A Manual of Archaeology of Art*, London, 1850.

10 Nicolas E. Restiff de la Brettonne, *Le Pornographe*, Paris, 1769.

11 The figure of Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet is a classic example of the overlap between pornography, prostitution and public hygiene: Parent-Duchâlet, who wrote an important treatise on prostitution, was a doctor and in charge of Paris's public drainage system. Parent-Duchâtelet, *De La Prostitution Dans La Ville De Paris, Considérée Sous Le Rapport De L'hygiène Publique, De La Morale Et De L'administration*, Paris, 1836.

12 On early twentieth century homosexuality and pornography see the historical study by Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film from the Beginnings to Stonewall*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996.

13 See Thomas Waugh, «Homosociality in the Classical American Stag Film: Off-Screen, On-Screen», in *Porn Studies,* Op.Cit., p. 127-141.

14 On the contrary, it is possible that the political control of pornographic representation arose precisely out of a desire to reduce the spectator's margin of vulnerability to the image.