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# Female Sexuality & Women Artists since 1970

LISA TICKNER

The recent work of a number of women artists has taken as its starting point the human body. This paper is concerned to pursue some of the implications that arise from this; to suggest some categories for the material; and to investigate its significance in the light of Linda Nochlin's observation that

The growing power of woman in the politics of both sex and art is bound to revolutionize the realm of erotic representation.<sup>1</sup>

It does not appear to me possible, at this moment, to discuss the work of women in this field *without* sketching an outline of the many pressures and contradictions bearing upon it. These need to be discussed, firstly in relation to the tradition of Western erotic art and the nude (man the maker and spectator, woman the passive object of desire);<sup>2</sup> and secondly in relation to the last phase of the feminist movement, beginning in the 1960s, with which women's body art has been largely co-incident.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to divide the western tradition of erotic imagery, if not into two exclusive categories, at least into two polarities which might loosely be labelled the 'fantasist' and the 'realist'. In discussing the superior merits of Rops over Rowlandson Huysmans also, by implication, defined the difference.

It must be admitted, however desirable she may be, Rowlandson's woman is altogether animal, without any interesting complications of the senses. In short he has given us a fornicating machine, a substantial sanitary beast, rather than the terrible she-faun of Lust.<sup>4</sup>

The expression of erotic fantasy is characteristic of Romanticism and Decadence, but it is not to be exclusively identified with them. The images are frequently of woman alone (thereby isolating her into a more effective symbol); woman dominant over man or submissive to him; or woman masturbating or engaged in lesbian love-play. The images are usually in some way fragmented, distorted, or otherwise fetishized, and the range runs

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from the spied-on innocent (Susannah and the Elders, Diana and Actaeon), to the sexually conscious Fatal Woman who, as Circe, Medusa, Delilah, Judith or Salomé is perhaps the typical embodiment of the *genre*. Huysmans' 'interesting complications of the senses' have operated in different ways and on different levels in the work of artists like Fuseli, Burne-Jones, Moreau, Klimt, Munch, Beardsley, Lindner and Allen Jones, but the associations are generally those of violence, fear and death.

It is not difficult to see both the sadistic and the masochistic elements in this imagery as projections of male fantasies and fears, compounded by guilt or an exaggerated awe, and, in Freudian terms, these can be recognized as dependent on displaced castration anxieties and a repressed homosexuality. This aspect of the tradition emphasizes above all the *mystery* of woman (appropriately, in so far as she is the receptacle for those psychic forces and contradictions the artist does not understand): an enigma to be approached with fascination or with fear.<sup>5</sup>

The 'realist' aspect of the tradition, on the other hand, appears to pay more attention to Woman as sexual partner. Romano's 'Aretino' prints, Rowlandson, Picasso, much pornography and otherwise 'underground' imagery depicting copulating couples seems to accommodate woman as an equal and even active partner in mutual sexual enjoyment.

Such *apparent* openness about female sexuality should not, however, be mistaken for its direct expression. Such an image is also produced by a male artist for a masculine audience, and here too, as Berger had indicated, 'the spectator-owner will in fantasy oust the other man, or else identify with him'.<sup>7</sup> In coitus, the male is Everyman. Not so the woman, whose chastity has been prescribed by a patriarchal and Christian society, and who is at one and the same time the embodiment of virtue and the instigator and repository of sin. Erotic art is centred upon the depiction of Eve rather than Mary – the courtesan and not the wife – and this is emotionally the case even when the painting is nominally concerned with Venus, Diana, or the toilets of Bathsheba and Susannah. The wife and mother is erotic only in the context of an implied rape of domestic virtue (such as provides the *frisson* to all those Victorian caucasians in the barbarian slave markets).

Once we have questioned the *nature* of the woman who is a sexual partner, we can see that the 'realist' tradition, too, is often concerned in a subtler way with fantasy: with the dream of the unthreatening and sexually available woman. Female lust is insatiable and provocative, only in so far as that is arousing to masculine desire, and often only as a prelude to her submission before the phallus. Huysmans' 'fornicating machine, a substantial sanitary beast' is here no more attractive, or to women recognizable, a stereotype than the 'terrible she-faun of Lust'.

The conventions of the erotic tradition range from the plausible to the absurd, from the flattering to the misogynist, and so, in a sense, inevitably cancel each other out. Surveying the images of women in Surrealist art, Xavier Gauthier concluded that she was both a symbol of purity and transgression, one and multiple, the embodiment of repose and movement, victim and executioner, the nourisher and the destroyer of man, his protector and his protégée, his mother and his child, sky and earth, vice and virtue, hope and despair, death and Satan.<sup>8</sup> What can we possibly deduce from this fact that she

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can be everything, but the knowledge that she is nothing? She seems everywhere present in art, but she is in fact absent. She is not the expression of female experience, she is a mediating sign for the male.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK

It is clear that women's sexual roles and expectations have changed dramatically in the last 70 years, and that Freud, Kinsey and Masters and Johnson have all marked stages in the re-evaluation of female sexuality.<sup>9</sup> The greater social freedom for women which we have witnessed in the last 20 years or so is often attributed to the 'permissive society', which has been in fact as much effect as cause, and as much a curse as a blessing. It has sanctioned the increasingly public exploitation of female sexuality, especially in the areas of advertising and 'soft' pornography. Women's bodies are used to sell to men *and* women, who are thereby encouraged to collude in their own reification, and to identify with the characteristics of exhibitionism and narcissism. Through advertising and newspaper photographs the glamorized nude becomes accepted by both sexes as part of the natural language of the media.

It is now widely assumed that in the wake of these changes, women will find a cultural voice to express their own sexuality, and that in doing so they will add without modification to the existing tradition of erotic art and literature, thereby rendering it 'complete'. The fallacy here exists in the implication that there is a definitely defined male sexuality that can simply find expression and an already existent female sexuality that simply lacks it. Women's social and sexual relations have been located within patriarchal culture, and their identities have been moulded in accordance with the roles and images which that ideology has sanctioned. It will be necessary to differentiate between true and alienated desire. For the moment we should not be surprised to find that the much vaunted collections of women's erotic fantasies are hauntingly familiar, and inclined to reflect traditional images of sexual relations between men and women. The most famous female erotic novel is, after all, the *Histoire d' 'O'*, Pauline Réage's account of masochism and submission, which ends with the heroine's masked entry to a ball, naked, and on a leash slipped around a ring through her genitals. Similarly, Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* sets out to reveal 'a whole new realm of sexual experience', and yet the majority of the fantasies belong under the headings of exhibitionism, rape, masochism and domination, and lesbianism. We have, as Mary Ellmann wrote, accommodated our alienation; we are saddled with men's view of us and cannot find our true selves – in art, in literature or often in life.

Those who have no country have no language. Women have no imagery available – no accepted public language to hand – with which to express their particular viewpoint.<sup>10</sup>

and so the problem is firstly to manufacture one out of the materials to hand, and secondly to decide on what is to be said.

Women artists *do* live in a culture still dominated by patriarchal values, but within this their experience of life – and eroticism – is differentiated from that of men. The double standard has distinguished their sexual roles on both the psychic and the social levels.

There *could* be no role-reversed equivalent to Degas' and Lautrec's brothel scenes, no 'keyhole' art recording the intimate and perhaps homosexual moments of the off-duty *male* prostitutes. It is at this moment impossible to imagine a woman artist in the situation of Picasso's late prints: 89–90 years old, recalling with affection and nostalgia both creative and coital moments from her youth. And what of the male muse, doubling as cook, housekeeper and emotional support system? What would be the iconography of Man where women made the imagery, what parallels or alternatives to the virgins and venuses, mothers and whores, *femmes fatales*, vampires and Lolitas with which we are familiar? Nor is there any parallel to the masculine preoccupation with the pubescent girl, which runs from Lewis Carroll to Balthus, Bellmer and Ovenden. Fantasies of seduction by older females are almost always written by men, where they are to be interpreted as thinly veiled allusions to the incestuous desire for the mother. Voyeurism, and even more fetishism, which have both provided the impetus for large quantities of erotic art and literature, are both rare amongst women.<sup>11</sup> The question is how, against this inherited framework, women are to construct new meanings which can also be understood.

Women's body art is currently to a large extent reactive, basically against the glamorous reification of the Old Master/Playboy tradition, but also against the anti-academic convention in so far as that, too, continued to see the female body as a special category of motif.

Living *in* a female body is different from looking *at* it, as a man. Even the Venus of Urbino menstruated, as women know and men forget. Breasts, the womb, ovarian secretions, menstruation, pregnancy and labour, as de Beauvoir has reminded us, are for the benefit of others and not ourselves.<sup>12</sup> Woman is the natural prey of the species in a way which man is not, and these experiences are perhaps closer to their re-expression in the work of Martha Wilson and Judy Clark, than to an eighteenth-century nude.

Given, as it were, this double alienation: the body as occupied territory in both culture and nature, women artists have only two consistent courses of action. One is to ignore the whole area as too muddled or dangerous for the production of clear statements; the other is to take the heritage and work with it – attack it, reverse it, expose and *use* it for their own purposes. The colonized territory must be reclaimed from masculine fantasy, the 'lost' aspects of female body experience authenticated and reintegrated in opposition to its more familiar and seductive artistic role as raw material for the men.

Paradoxically then, the most significant area of women and erotic art today is that of the *de*-eroticizing, the *de*-colonizing of the female body; the challenging of its taboos; and the celebration of its rhythms and pains, of fertility and childbirth. Narcissism and passivity must be replaced by an active and authentic sexuality, and we must cease to accommodate, in Ellmann's terms, the 'canopied bed' of our alienation:<sup>13</sup>

I have divided the work into the following categories, which are not of course mutually

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exclusive. Each could be substantiated by a quantity of material, but I have had to be highly selective in my examples.

1. the male as motif
2. 'vaginal iconology'
3. transformations and processes
4. parody.

### I. THE MALE AS MOTIF

There was until the twentieth century no tradition, because no opportunity, for women to paint the male nude. The Surrealist artist Léonor Fini has done so, in ways that begin to prefigure more recent attempts, but her iconography remains largely dependent on that of the fatal sphinx-woman, and her power over the unconscious male. She is 'in favour of a world where there is little or no sex distinction',<sup>14</sup> but her view of woman is ultimately reactionary, since the femininity which she celebrates is an archetypal image of the Romantic movement: she accepts the definition of woman as 'other' and elevates it, without questioning the meaning of the sign.

Although she paints women and group portraits as well, Sylvia Sleigh is best known for her pictures of nude men, many of which invert famous examples of the female nude – such as Botticelli's *Venus and Mars (October)*; Ingres' *Turkish Bath*; and Velazquez' *Rokeby Venus (Philip Golub Reclining)*. The traditional references provide a degree of continuity with the past, but at the same time they provide a witty and ultimately subversive reminder of the extent to which the values of that tradition are non-transferable, and of the modifications that she has chosen to make. One key distinction is that she combines the portrait genre with the nude, and her sitters are therefore highly individualized male friends rather than anonymous women.

*Philip Golub Reclining* (plate 44) depicts a dreamy adolescent boy in a typically 'feminine' recumbent pose on a satiny draped sofa. Behind him is the mirror in which the artist is reflected: a small but briskly energetic figure of indeterminate age, in contrast to his relaxed and expressionless, youthful passivity. Similarly, the *Double Image: Paul Rosano* (plate 45) accommodates the 'violence' that Berger suggests results from the substitution of a male, for a female nude. The male/female clues are ambiguous, and the resulting sensuality of the body is therefore partly androgynous – graceful but with plenty of 'virile' body-hair; delicate features and a mass of carefully arranged hair but well developed genitals – in fact the back pose with its concentration on the configuration of bone and muscle and the potential energy in their tension is itself a contrast to the more languid passivity of the front.

Women generally like Sleigh's paintings, finding them both sensual and affectionate and appreciating their solution to the 'problem of gentling the male without destroying his – at least potential – potency'.<sup>15</sup> Male reaction has been less favourable, and *Double Image* brought in hundreds of complaints when exhibited in 1975. 'Woman gets even by painting nude men'<sup>16</sup> ran a headline on another occasion; and yet Sleigh's paintings are

ut I have had to be

chiefly remarkable for *transcending* such crude reversals, and since the subject is so uniquely 'present' in his portrait, the body, though celebrated, is not objectified.

Colette Whiten is a young Canadian artist who also uses men as part of her subject matter, but in a less traditional figurative fashion. She makes casts of men, but in a process which entails the construction of elaborate machines to hold them in place, the assistance of helpers at the casting itself which is almost a 'performance' (certainly a rite), and the eliciting of 'testimonies' from the subjects<sup>17</sup> (plates 46 and 47). Since the process demands an enforced passivity, and since the men have to be depilated and vaselined for it, and since once locked in the stocks they are dependent on female ministrations for sympathy, water and cigarettes, the overtones of erotic domination are extremely strong, and startlingly explicit. At the same time Whiten denies any conscious 'feminist revenge', the men are usually her friends and unpaid volunteers to the painful eroticism of the process.

Perhaps what these unlikely images of Sleight's and Whiten's have in common is best summed up by the phrase which Joan Semmel used to describe her own paintings, 'sensuality with the power factor eliminated'<sup>18</sup> (or perhaps in Whiten's case, reversed). The same thing is true of Betty Dodson's copulating couples – the significance lies in giving back the woman her sexuality, her potency and her desires – and in freeing those from the power relations of a patriarchal society.

Judith Bernstein's interest in phallic imagery grows out of a preoccupation, first with calligraphy, and then with graffiti, which she pursued into the men's lavatories of the Yale Graduate art school. Her current work consists of huge and hairy charcoal drawings of punningly phallic, mechanical screws – monumental in scale but sensuous in touch (plate 48). What she seems to intend is the celebration but also the reappropriation for *women* of a heroic image, and its re-sensualizing for their pleasure. They are metaphors for women ready to acknowledge the masculine elements in themselves, and who are 'ready to admit things hidden for a long time – that they have the same drive, the same aggressions, the same feelings as men'.<sup>19</sup> This would seem to suggest an echo of Freud's concept of the libido as 'masculine' in men *or* women; and its reclamation – incorporating the masculine into our female creativity in the way in which male artists have popularly drawn on their 'feminine' sensibilities.

## 2. 'VAGINAL ICONOLOGY'

Greer: 'Women's sexual organs are shrouded in mystery. . . . When little girls begin to ask questions their mothers provide them, if they are lucky, with crude diagrams of the sexual apparatus, in which the organs of pleasure feature much less prominently than the intricacies of tubes and ovaries. . . . The little girl is not encouraged to explore her own genitals or to identify the tissues of which they are composed, or to understand the mechanism of lubrication and erection. The very idea is distasteful.'<sup>20</sup>

The acceptance and re-integration of the female genitals into art has thus been a

political, rather than a directly erotic gesture. Like the associated violation of the menstrual taboo, it celebrates the mark of our 'otherness' and replaces the connotations of inferiority with those of pride. It is a category that promotes self knowledge (like the self-examination health groups by which it has probably been influenced), and as Barbara Rose has pointed out it refutes at least rhetorically both the Freudian concept of penis envy and the notion of women as 'The Dangerous Sex'.<sup>21</sup>

Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro have suggested an *unconscious* use of the 'centralized void' in female imagery, and have drawn on the work of O'Keefe, Hepworth and Bontecou amongst others in support of their case.<sup>22</sup> This has caused considerable controversy, and it is not altogether clear whether Chicago was insisting on such imagery as biologically innate (though often disguised to accommodate itself to the demands of masculine culture), or politically appropriate as a way of asserting femaleness in an area where it has conventionally been denied. East coast feminists reacted strongly to the idea of womb-centred imagery as just the old style biological determinism in a new guise.

But the point in either case is not only to 'express' femaleness in some nebulous fashion, but to redefine it, and this is where familiar symbols can be useful in the construction of new meanings, particularly where they are used in association with less familiar attributes. In *Let it all Hang Out* for example, Chicago aimed to express the ability to be feminine and powerful simultaneously;<sup>23</sup> but the problem here is to maintain the challenge, and not just rework an existing set of associations (plates 49 and 50).

Shelley Lowell's *Rediscovery* (plate 51), an apple with a vagina as its core, is a powerful image which celebrates a subject that is still largely taboo, and suggests through its title the feminist connotations of exploration, understanding and re-integration so important to Chicago. At the same time it evokes the old connections between women and delicious passive consumables, between female sexuality and the theme of temptation and sin, and arouses a very similar set of responses to those provoked by a Sam Haskins photograph of an apple/breast. It may have *intended* a reference to such visual puns but the irony is double-edged, because the clichés are not challenged but indulged.

Betty Dodson is an erotic artist who has developed a positively missionary attitude towards masturbation as 'a meditation on self-love',<sup>24</sup> seeing it as the 'sexual base' from which women can achieve sexual and hence political liberation. Deciding that there was no contemporary aesthetic for the female genitals, she decided to help create one, and at the 1973 N.O.W. Sexuality Conference in New York she presented a series of slides firstly of her earlier work; secondly of anatomical diagrams from medical and educational sources, frequently as ugly as they were incorrect; and finally pictures of the individual in her own body workshops, their genitalia affectionately categorized as 'Baroque', 'Danish Modern', 'Gothic', 'Classical', 'Valentine'<sup>25</sup> (plate 52). A thousand women many of whom had never seen their own vaginas, let alone anybody else's, gave her a standing ovation.

Susanne Santoro, an American living in Rome, has been similarly moved to comment on, and rectify the absence of female genitals in masculine culture:

When I saw how this subject had been treated in the past, I realized that even in diverse historical representations it had been omitted, smoothed down, and in the end, idealized.<sup>26</sup>

Santoro's intention in her book *Towards New Expression* is to find a way of 'understanding the structure of the female genitals' (when she had taken a cast of her own in 1970 she had been amazed by the very precise construction and form), and to produce 'an invitation for the sexual self-expression that has been denied to women till now, and . . . not . . . to attribute specific qualities to one sex or the other'<sup>27</sup> (plate 53).

The Arts Council withdrew this book from their 1976 exhibition of 'Artist's Books' (for which they had originally requested five copies), 'on the grounds that obscenity might be alleged'.<sup>28</sup> They *did*, however, include Allen Jones' *Projects*, thereby inadvertently endorsing the views of Laura Mulvey<sup>29</sup> and Suzanne Santoro, that whilst the image of woman as fetishized object, repository for male sexual fantasies and fears, is 'acceptable' in our society, the image of the vulva itself which the fetish seeks to displace, is 'obscene'.

Only in western culture, however, can the point be made and the image reinstated in this way. Nowhere has the vagina been depicted in *more* graphic detail than in the Vaginal Albums of the Japanese Ukiyo-e tradition. Many of these belong to the genre of the 'courtesan-critique' – guides to the famous courtesans of the day giving details of their beauties and faults, their location and price, and sometimes complementing a facial portrait with a genital one (plate 54). If the vagina has been anaesthetized or omitted as part of the de-sexualizing of women and the fetishization of their image, then an emphasis on genital imagery as a parallel to women's reclamation of their sexual identity is fine. The implications are fairly clear. But if vaginal imagery, however beautiful, exists in this way within a male-dominated society – in association with the courtesan critique which identifies the woman with her genitals in a relationship of bought possession – that is another matter, and the symbol is not open to 'reclamation' as in the West.

### 3. TRANSFORMATIONS AND PROCESSES

Women are arguably closer to bodily processes and transformations than men: their physical cycles are more insistent, and they are used to treating their bodies as raw material for manipulation and display. Women are never acceptable as they *are*, as de Beauvoir has suggested they are either the raw material for their own cosmetic transformations, in which nature is present but fetchingly 'culturized', or for the artist's.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, and at a deeper level, they (we) are somehow inherently disgusting, and have to be deoderized, depilated, polished and painted into the delicacy appropriate to our sex.

Investigating the make-up process is a way of re-investigating one's identity. Cosmetics pieces were fairly common in the early 1970s, and one of the first was *Lea's Room*, inspired by the bedroom in Colette's *Chéri* as 'the boundary of female life', which was part of the Cal. Arts Womanhouse programme. A woman dressed in pink silk and

antique lace sat at a mirrored dressing table in an opulent, satiny and perfumed room, repeatedly putting on make-up, wiping it off in discontent, making up again. . . .<sup>31</sup> (plate 55).

The English artist Sue Madden, in planning a 'cleansing ritual' took as her texts Berger's comment on women as both the surveyor and the surveyed, and Robin Morgan's reference to 'Each sister wearing masks of revlon, clairol, playtex, to survive.' She intended to film 'removing rituals', plucking eyebrows, shaving armpits and legs, applying face packs and astringents – which she sees as activities 'which wipe away women's identity' – and by thus working through them to bring together the surveyor and the surveyed within herself.<sup>32</sup>

These examples, eccentric as they may at first seem, question the cost and the meaning of woman as sexual object in the world, in the same way as Sleigh's more artistically conventional paintings of male nudes foreground the issue of woman as object in art. They attempt the investigation of an identity which is assumed to be separate from, and hidden by, external appearance: Adrian Piper speaks of an 'awareness of the boundaries of my personality', and Antin of 'moving out to, into, up to, and down to the frontiers of myself'.

Women who work directly *on* their bodies, not just to emphasize the transforming process but to make of that material 'art', are concerned with both issues – i.e. woman as object in life *and* art – at the same time; and also with a conflation of the roles of the artist, the model and the work (plate 56). Take for example Eleanor Antin's *Carving: a Traditional Sculpture*, which consisted of 144 photographs of her naked body, front, back and both profiles, documenting a weight loss of 10 pounds over 36 days.

This piece was actually done when the Whitney Museum asked me to tell them what I intended to have for one of the Annuals . . . since I figured the Whitney was academically oriented, I decided to make an academic sculpture. I got out a book on Greek sculpture, which is the most academic of all. (How could they refuse a Greek sculpture?) This piece was done in the method of the Greek sculptors . . . carving around and around the figure and whole layers would come off at a time until finally the aesthetic ideal had been reached.<sup>34</sup>

The other transformations are those of bodily processes, including ageing and decay (e.g. Athena Tacha's ongoing catalogue of the effects of time on her body);<sup>35</sup> and of a calculated disgust that is cultivated in defiance, and as an exorcism of the prescribed female role.

Betty Dodson feels that women will not live easily in their bodies until they have learnt not to suppress its less 'feminine' physical processes. It would be difficult to find a fuller expression of that, or a more extreme/satirical rejection of all veneer and polish than the *Catalysis* series of performances by Adrian Piper. In *Catalysis I* for example she 'saturated a set of clothing in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk, and cod-liver oil for a week, then wore them on the D train during evening rush hour, then while browsing in the Marboro bookstore on Saturday night'; and in *Catalysis V* replayed tape-recorded belches at full volume while researching in the Donnell Library.<sup>36</sup>

Menstruation has been so concealed as to *invite* the violation of the taboo<sup>37</sup> ('The blood jet is poetry / There is no stopping it' as Plath wrote) – partly for the sake of public recognition and re-assessment; partly as an emblem of celebrated femineity, the embracing of our inferiority; partly as the hinted at resurrection of ancient matriarchal powers;<sup>38</sup> and partly in reaction against what Ellmann has called 'the insistent blandness of modern femininity'.

Menstruation images have been even rarer in art than in literature: in that form they can scarcely be discreetly alluded to, or veiled in metaphor. Judy Chicago's notorious *Red Flag* photo-lithograph (plate 57), a self portrait from the waist down showing the removal of a bloody Tampax, was made deliberately 'to introduce a new level of permission for women artists' and 'to validate female subject matter by using a "high art" process'.<sup>40</sup> (Cf. also the *Menstruation Bathroom* in *Womanhouse*, which set out to explore the dichotomy between the secrecy, the discomfort and the mess, on the one hand, and its gauzy packaged denial on the other.)

Gina Pane is a rare example of a woman body-artist who actually damages her own body. She talks a lot about 'reaching' people in an anaesthetized society, and she is prepared to suffer to do that, although she insists that she does not enjoy pain and is really an optimist (plate 58). In a performance in May 1972 she had been cutting her back with a razor blade whilst turned away from the audience, when

suddenly I turned to face my public and approached the razor blade to my face. The tension was explosive and broke when I cut my face on either cheek. They yelled 'no, no, not the face, no!' . . . The face is taboo, it's the core of human aesthetics, the only place which retains a narcissistic power.<sup>41</sup>

Except perhaps in the specific instance of what Barbara Rose first termed 'vaginal iconology',<sup>42</sup> it is impossible for women to assert their identity directly through their appearance. They already *have* a reputation for narcissism. Since women are not *expected* to be disgusting, the violation of certain established taboos, like that on public reference to menstruation, symbolizes a disrespect for the social order, and a rejection of the normal patterns of domination and submission which are enshrined within it. Vulgarity can be a means of enhancing dignity 'when the obscenities are merely signals conveying a message which is not obscene'.<sup>43</sup>

#### 4. PARODY: SELF AS OBJECT

The following quotation from John Berger has already been mentioned by several of the artists discussed, and it is central to a consideration of the subject/object contradictions which face women working with the female body. This seems the moment to quote it in full:

A woman must continually watch herself. . . . From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyed and the surveyor within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.<sup>44</sup>

Carolee Schneemann is an artist who has used her own body in her work, and appeared nude in performances of her own, Oldenburg's and others since the early 1960s. Personal, sexual and artistic freedom are mingled in 'a determination to incorporate the nude body in all my work' – i.e. performance, film, paintings and collages.

In some sense I made a gift of my body to other women: *giving our bodies back to ourselves*. The haunting images of the Cretan bull dancers – joyful, free, bare-breasted, skilled women leaping precisely from danger to ascendancy, guided my imagination . . .<sup>45</sup>

a timely reminder that in rejecting men's view of us, we cannot afford to lose also an authentic joy in the very *real* pleasures of the body, particularly if by some such exorcism we can heal within ourselves the split between the surveyor and the surveyed.

Hannah Wilke's *Starification Object Series* includes a performance in which she provides the audience with bubble gum to chew, and then flirtatiously takes it back, forming it into tiny vaginal-like loops and sticking them in patterns over her naked torso. In the 1974 video *Gestures* she manipulates her flesh and features and converts her mouth into a vaginal metaphor by exposing its inner labial structure.<sup>46</sup> For Lil Picard's *Life Sculpture* she enacted the roles of sex kitten and Venus, and ended her own *Soup and Tart* performance in a crucifixion gesture which, like the vagina/mouth metaphor, Penny Slinger has also used.

Lynda Benglis is an established artist who has for some time divided her work between abstract, if sensual, poured-foam sculpture and more directly autobiographical and auto-erotic video pieces. In 1974 she deliberately parodied the still-bohemian image of the West Coast sculptor in four consecutive published photographs which appeared as exhibition notices and/or advertisements. The last, and most controversial, was a full page colour advertisement in *Artforum*<sup>47</sup> showing an aggressively sexual image of a greased nude body with just a pair of sunglasses and a huge latex dildo as accessories (plate 59). Benglis apparently intended it as a 'media statement . . . to end all statements, the ultimate mockery of the pinup and the macho'<sup>48</sup> (and the dildo image is a bizarre blend of the two). Reactions were mixed. A group of the editors condemned the advertisement as 'an object of extreme vulgarity . . . brutalizing ourselves and . . . our readers'<sup>49</sup> thereby playing into her hands by proving, according to the critic Lucy Lippard, 'that there are still some things women may not do. . .'<sup>50</sup>

At the same time those who claim an art form out of being 'intentionally' exploited like Cosey Fanni Tutti of the COUM group, or supplement their activities with the odd nude pose in *Knave* (Penny Slinger), shift the meaning of the work, however serious its original or possible intentions, from parody to titillation.

The depiction of women *by* women (sometimes themselves) in this quasi-sexist manner as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion. The more attractive the women, the higher the risk, since the more closely they approach conventional stereotypes in the first place.<sup>51</sup>

It is difficult to see what the most useful conclusions might be, especially when we are so

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clearly in the *middle* of a process of change (and one which could yet be reversed). There are, however, a number of points to be made.

The female image in all its variations is the mythical consequence of women's exclusion from the *making* of art. It is arguable that, despite her ubiquitous presence, woman as such is largely absent from art. We are dealing with the sign 'woman', emptied of its original content and refilled with masculine anxieties and desires. Nowhere is this more evident than in the area of eroticism, and women see themselves reflected in culture as through a glass darkly.<sup>52</sup>

Yet paradoxically the tool for objectifying their experience *is* culture, *is* the process which already distorts it and which is not itself value-free.

The only solution is to grasp and reconstruct it, through the exposure and contradiction of the meanings it conveys. We cannot pull out of thin air a new and utopian art – or a new and utopian sexuality: both must be arrived at through struggle with the situation in which we find ourselves. Art does not just make ideology explicit but can be used, at a particular historical juncture, to rework it. There seems to me every reason to believe that feminism, and ultimately the overthrow of patriarchal values, will transform art in just as dramatic a fashion as the bourgeois revolutions.

In one way, women do not need to be 'sexually' liberated in order to produce erotic art, they need to be liberated into the art-making process itself – many of the reasons why they have not produced an erotic imagery being the same as those which have prevented them from making art at all. Desirable as the free expression of human sexuality may be, it is not *per se* a precondition for the making of art, or we might have had precious little of it; but the making of art *is* a precondition for the expression of even a confused or repressed sexuality such as Moreau's or Beardsley's. Both these questions have arisen simultaneously for women because broadly speaking they only entered art in large numbers at the same time as they sought to redefine their sexual relations, and for much the same reasons. They are able to express their sexuality only at the point of changing it, and it is from a restructuring of their sexual situation (bearing in mind that this is quite a different thing from generalized 'permissiveness'), that we may expect that revolution in the realm of erotic representation of which Linda Nochlin has spoken.

The process, here as elsewhere, is perhaps best seen as a dialectical one. The thesis is represented by the erotic art of a male-dominated culture, and the antithesis by women's current response to that – an attack on the patterns of dominance and submission within it, a rejection or parody of the standards by which women are judged sexually desirable, a repossession for our own use of the 'colonized' and alienated female body, and tentative steps towards the expression of a sensual appreciation of the male. The synthesis is yet to come, and apart from the fact that one obviously hopes for a truly androgynous human culture, and the kind of authentic erotic expression that would be its corollary; to discuss it at this stage would clearly be premature.

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## NOTES

This is a slightly modified version of my paper for the 'Erotic Arts' section of the 1977 A.A.H. Conference. I should like to thank Iain Bruce and Mike Dawney for their encouragement, and for a critical reading of earlier drafts.

- 1 Linda Nochlin, 'Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art' in *Woman as Sex Object, Studies in Erotic Art 1730-1970*, Ed. Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin. Allen Lane, 1973, p. 15.
- 2 Basically, I am arguing from the premises of writers like John Berger and Linda Nochlin: that in the European nude, ownership is primary and the sexuality of the subject is not her own but that of the owner/spectator; and that the very term 'erotic' implies 'erotic-for-men', even (especially!) where the subject is lesbianism or female masturbation, in reflection of social and hence cultural relations between the sexes. See for example Berger *et al.*, *Ways of Seeing*, B.B.C. and Penguin Books Ltd, 1972, and Nochlin, *op. cit.*
- 3 Two aspects of this are particularly relevant here. Firstly a renewed interest in, and valuation of, female sexuality, with concomitant attempts to experience it as 'authentically' as possible; and secondly the emergence of a women artists' movement, emphasizing and encouraging the use of specifically female experience, especially the domestic and sexual, conventionally considered too trivial or inappropriate as creative material. It is perhaps worth emphasizing that these two aspects are linked not only in the feminist theory from which they derive, but also in the practice of many women making erotic art (for example in the expressive and therapeutic activities of Betty Dodson); and that such work is therefore at least as political as it is sensual in effect, and usually quite intentionally so.  
Useful information on the genesis of the American women artists' movement is contained in Jacqueline Skiles and Janet McDevitt (Eds), *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution*, revised 2nd ed., KNOW Inc., Pittsburgh, 1973. See also Lawrence Alloway, 'Women's Art in the '70s', *Art in America* May/June 1976, pp. 64 ff.
- 4 Huysmans, 'L'Œuvre Erotique de Felicien Rops', *La Plume* no. 172, 15 June 1896, pp. 390-1.
- 5 Cf. Fellini's remark that women are 'the darkest part of ourselves, the undeveloped part, the true mystery within'. Quoted in Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., New York, 1968, p. 22 (where she suggests that there is something 'digestive, even bilious, about this remark . . .').
- 6 I regret not having space to do more than mention in passing Carol Duncan's stimulating essay on 'Virility and Domination in Early 20th century Vanguard Painting', *Artforum*, December 1973, pp. 30-9. She suggests that the painting of the decade before World War I 'was obsessed with such confrontation between female nudity and the sexual-artistic will of the male artist'. Meanwhile the (female) nude remained the primal aesthetic 'object', partly out of habit and long tradition, and partly because it had become such a useful basic theme by which to practise a formal language or to authenticate a new and major statement. It permitted the display of dazzling variations precisely *because it was* otherwise such a conservative motif. Not wanting to invent his abstract shapes subjectively De Kooning used instead the substructure of a woman's body: 'I thought I might as well stick to the idea that it's got two eyes, a nose, a mouth and a neck'. (From an interview with David Sylvester, 30 December 1960, quoted in Thomas B. Hess, 'Pin Up and Icon' from *Woman as Sex Object*, Eds. Hess and Nochlin, Allen Lane, 1973, pp. 228-9.)
- 7 John Berger *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 8 Xavière Gauthier, *Surréalisme et Sexualité*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1971, p. 194.
- 9 At the same time that it has been deemed necessary to protect women from exposure to erotic material, they have paradoxically been assumed indifferent to it. Kinsey

concluded (*Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female*, Saunders 1953) that very few women had produced what might be called erotic figure drawing; that few were interested in graffiti at all, let alone explicitly sexual graffiti in the male vernacular tradition; that very little erotic literature had actually been written by them, although a large proportion purports to be; that they do not often use sexual material for masturbatory stimulation; and that female fetishism was extremely rare. He was, however, puzzled by curious inconsistencies – for example, women claimed to find erotic films *more* stimulating than men did – and these may well have been due to the breaking down of established taboos. More recent experiments have suggested that his results reflected in part what women felt they were *expected* to experience, and also what they were prepared to reveal to interviewers. *The Report of the U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (Bantam, 1970, p. 28) concluded that

Recent research casts doubt on the common belief that women are vastly less aroused by erotic stimuli than are men. The supposed lack of female response may well be due to social and cultural inhibitions against reporting such arousal and to the fact that erotic material is generally oriented to a male audience.

One might also point out that there is no visual equivalent for the sub-tradition of explicit female eroticism in the Blues; e.g. Bessie Smith's 'I'm wild about that thing', 'You've Got to Give Me Some', and 'Empty Bed Blues'.

10 Linda Nochlin, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

11 Since in strictly Freudian terms the male, fearing castration, sets up a fetish that will substitute for the 'missing' phallus of the woman it is not surprising that, being already 'castrated' fetishism among women is extremely rare. However, although schematically we would therefore *not* expect to find it in quite the same way, it does seem possible that – perhaps through male identification – some women might at unconscious levels hallucinate the phallus and embody it in a fetish. It remains unlikely that a woman artist would produce any real equivalent to the

fetishistic imagery of Allen Jones, except for purely political purposes. Nancy Grossman has perhaps come the nearest; see Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1975, pp. 327–46, for a useful interview.

12 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin, 1972, p. 64.

13 Mary Ellmann, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

14 Leonor Fini, quoted in Constantin Jelenski, *Leonor Fini*, La Guilde du Livre et Clairefontaine, Lausanne, 1968, p. 15.

15 Linda Nochlin, 'Some Women Realists. Painters of the Figure', *Arts Magazine*, May 1974, p. 32.

16 *Feminist Art Journal*, Spring 1975, p. 36, and headline from an unidentified Washington newspaper cutting, in the collection of Ms Sleight (1974).

17 John Noel Chandler, 'Colette Whiten: her working and work', *Artscanada*, Spring 1972, pp. 42 ff. and Connie Hitzeroth, 'Colette Whiten', *Artscanada*, May 1973, pp. 45–9.

18 Joan Semmel, quoted in Dorothy Seiberling, 'The Female View of Erotica', *New York Magazine*, February 1974, p. 55.

19 Cindy Nemser, 'Four Artists of Sensuality', *Arts Magazine*, March 1975, pp. 73–5, and also *Feminist Art Journal*, Spring 1975, p. 49 – brief notes by Rose Hartman, referring to the Philadelphia Civic Center's refusal to show Bernstein's work in the Focus exhibition. The director John Pierron excluded and dismissed her work as 'simply a penis without redeeming social value'.

20 Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, Paladin, 1971, p. 39.

21 Barbara Rose, 'Vaginal Iconology', *New York Magazine*, February 1974, p. 59. Perhaps by implication this category also rejects the idea that phallic energy is required for the culturally creative act – as expressed in Mailer's assertion that 'a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls', and the claim variously attributed to Van Gogh, Gauguin or Renoir: 'I paint with my prick'.

I have kept Rose's rather loose and general application of 'vagina'; the proper distinction between internal vagina

- and external vulva is increasingly blurred in non-medical writings.
- 22 See Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, 'Female Imagery', *Womanspace Journal*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (Summer 1973), pp. 11-14; and Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1975, pp. 142-4.
- 23 Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, pp. 181-2:
- I had never seen those two attributes wedded together in an image. I felt ashamed - like there was something wrong with being feminine and powerful simultaneously. Yet I felt relieved to have finally expressed my power. I could never have shown it comfortably if it were not for the growing support of the female art community.
- 24 Betty Dodson, *Liberating Masturbation, a Meditation on Self Love*, Bodysex Designs, New York, 1974.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-7.
- 26 Suzanne Santoro, *Per Una Espressione Nuova/Towards New Expression*, Rivolta Femminile, Rome, 1974. (Italian and English text), un-numbered pages.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Robin Campbell quoted by Roszika Parker in 'Censored', *Spare Rib*, January 1977, no. 54, p. 44.
- 29 See Laura Mulvey, 'You don't know what is happening do you, Mr Jones?', *Spare Rib*, February 1973, no. 8, pp. 13-16.
- 30 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 190 f.
- 31 Lucy Lippard, *From the Center. Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc., New York, 1976, p. 129; and Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, p. 162.
- 32 Rosie Parker, 'Housework', *Spare Rib*, no. 26, p. 38.
- 33 Quoted in Lippard, *op. cit.*, p. 105. One might add to her examples of 'expanding identity', Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* - an 8-hour performance work with film and video presented at the Berkeley Art Museum in April 1974, and subsequently self-published as a book, 1975.
- 34 Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists*, p. 281.
- 35 Lucy Lippard, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
- 36 Adrian Piper, quoted in Lippard, *op. cit.*, p. 167.
- 37 The aspects of shame and pollution survive in a rich variety of menstrual euphemism (those used by women tend to be coy, those used by men tend to be sexual and derogatory); in varying degrees of commitment to the traditional taboos on swimming, bathing and intercourse; and in the advertisements for sanitary aids which perpetuate the embarrassment in order to reassure women that their products will minimize the humiliation. It is interesting to note that amongst a wealth of public sexual imagery, advertisements for sanitary protection are prohibited by the I.B.A., in part because of the public outcry that greeted a discreet experiment several years ago. The only exceptions are a few pilot advertisements on selected radio stations, carefully vetted for 'tastefulness' and subject to timing restrictions. A similar American ban was lifted towards the end of 1972.
- 38 E.g. Mary Beth Edelson's *Blood Mysteries*, which invited the direct participation of women in the sharing and reworking of menstrual experience. The figure of a powerfully built nude woman with a circle around her abdomen and flowing hair around her head, was drawn on the wall above a real wooden box with four compartments: *Menstruation Stories*, *Blood Power Stories*, *Menopause Stories*, and *Birth Stories*.
- 39 Mary Ellmann, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
- 40 Judy Chicago, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-7.
- 41 Gina Pane, interviewed by Effie Stephano, *Art and Artists*, April 1973, p. 23. See also Lucy Lippard 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art', *Art in America*, May/June 1976, pp. 73-81. Reprinted in *From the Center*, *op. cit.*
- 42 Barbara Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
- 43 Shirley Ardener, *Perceiving Women*, Malaby Press, 1975, p. 47.
- 44 John Berger *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
- 45 Carolee Schneemann, *Cézanne she was a great painter*, *The Second Book*, January, 1975. Tresspuss Press, p. 24; 'unbroken words to women - sexuality creativity language art istory [sic].'
- 46 Lucy Lippard, *op. cit.*, p. 135. See also

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Cindy Nemser, 'Four Artists of  
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- 47 *Artforum*, November 1974, p. 5.  
 48 Lynda Benglis quoted in Lucy Lippard,  
*op. cit.*, p. 105.  
 49 *Ibid.*, p. 104.  
 50 *Ibid.*, p. 127.  
 51 There are still very few ways in which a  
 woman is as *unequivocally* appreciated  
 as she is for her physical and sexual

beauty - or can earn as much as the  
 £60,000 for an advertisement of Farrah  
 Fawcett-Majors. There is very little  
 self-parody to be found in that.  
 52 Simone de Beauvoir:

Representation of the world, like the  
 world itself, is the work of men; they  
 describe it from their own point of  
 view, which they confuse with  
 absolute truth.