

Abstract

At the launch of the twenty-first century, the online pornographic photographs of Natacha Merritt, a young American woman (twenty-three years old at the time), were categorised as art in two publications by art publisher Taschen, precipitating a critical acceptance of her work as such. This particular foray of pornography into an art context was briefly contested by one art critic (Mey, 2007), however, this relatively rare example of misclassification warrants further investigation in order to better understand the role played by what had, by the late twentieth century, become a pervasive postfeminist culture.

Drawing on feminist media studies writing (Diane Negra, 2009; Angela McRobbie, 2007; Melanie Walters, 2007), that analyses postfeminist modes of 'self exploration,' and feminist art criticism (Lucy Lippard, 1976; Whitney Chadwick, 2013; Amelia Jones, 2010) on the ambiguities of feminist body art, this paper argues that Merritt's 'adult-oriented' online digital photographs are more persuasively situated within the increasingly prevalent online genres of the intimate blog and amateur porn. Acknowledging the risk of 'collusion' inherent in feminist artworks that focus on the objectified female body, this paper concludes that a compelling critique of a post-feminist (pornified) culture resides in the reactivation of a politics of female sexual pleasure.

Keywords

Post-feminism

Pornography

Feminist art

Intimate blogs

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Title: **Posing as Art: The Ambiguities of Feminist Body Art and the Misclassification of Natacha Merritt's Pornographic Photographs**

Introduction

This paper discusses the online pornographic and fetish output of American photographer Natacha Merritt, who was just twenty-three years old when she came to prominence at the turn of the twenty-first century. Remarkably, her recognition was the direct result of her photographs being temporarily categorised as works of art. There has been little critical commentary on Merritt's photographs, and even less on their status as art, but the positioning of her work as such seems to constitute a relatively rare example of misclassification that this paper aims to elucidate. Here I argue that Merritt's 'adult-oriented' online digital photographs of herself and others, which claim to portray authentic sexual encounters in Merritt's real life, are in fact more persuasively situated within the increasingly prevalent online genres of the intimate blog and the variously described gonzo/amateur/user-generated porn. This instance of misclassification establishes a useful starting point for examining broader issues around the complex relationships between feminist and post-feminist culture in online media contexts as well as for exploring the ambiguities inherent in much feminist art since the 1960s that focuses on the objectified female body.

Merritt's creative output to date consists of two photo books, a set-design collaboration with theatre company Cirque du Soleil, the co-founding of LA fetish nightclub Permission and the development of sensual games for Virtual Reality system Oculus Rift, the journey of which is documented in a blog-like section titled 'VR Diaries' on her website.¹ While some of her other work is mentioned here, this paper is mainly concerned with Merritt's first photo book, Digital Diaries (2000), which claims to document the young woman's sexual history. The book comprises a series of photographs of Merritt in anonymous hotel rooms with her various male and female sexual partners; images range from erotic nudes of attractive young women in fetish clothing such as skimpy see-through lingerie, blindfolds and rubber bondage gear to explicit depictions of sex acts such as vaginal penetration and the many examples included of women

¹ www.natacha-merritt.com

performing oral sex on male partners. Significantly, the depiction of sex acts is reserved solely for heterosexual sex. Most of the figures depicted are cropped in some way and/or framed at obscure angles so that we seldom see complete bodies. In addition the lighting is often dim, producing a grainy appearance and some images are purposefully slightly out of focus, all of which results in what might be read as an ‘artful’ aesthetic. To provide a diary-like structure to the book, each of its eight chapters is introduced by a short piece of writing that reads like a series of notes that comment on Merritt’s feelings in relation to working with particular models or with her boyfriend being present on a shoot or to books she’s been reading that influence her work. An example of text from these sections is: “The way I feel, the way I look, are a reaction to him” (52). The book opens with an introductory essay ‘Natacha Downloads’ by Eric Kroll, the book’s editor, and one by Merritt titled ‘Kroll Lessons,’ each of which provides an account of how the two met and how their meeting led to the idea for the book.

Digital Diaries was released in 2000 ostensibly as an art book by publisher Taschen, who, in addition to Art Books and a number of other genres, publishes a category of glossy erotic books which it names ‘Sexy Books.’ The book has sold over 300,000 copies to date. In terms of its marketing, Digital Diaries seems to sit between its Art and Sexy Books categories. However, it is worth noting that online bookseller Amazon’s ‘Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought’ section informs us that those who purchased Merritt’s book were shopping for erotic and fetish books and not for art books.²

The only critical commentaries to date on Merritt’s photographs are provided by film and media studies scholar Brian McNair (2002) and fine art scholar Kerstin Mey (2007), each of whom include short sections on Merritt’s work as part of a broader discussion in their respective writings on the proliferation of representations of sex in contemporary culture.³ Interestingly, they present antithetical positions on her work’s status as art and, by implication, on her status as artist, which mirrors the polarity of wider debates on the issue of the hyper-sexualisation of women in contemporary culture.

² Examples of other books purchased include Eric Kroll. 1994. Eric Kroll’s Fetish Girls. Köln: Taschen; Diane Hanson and Eric Kroll. Eds. 2013. The New Erotic Photography. Köln: Taschen; and Richard Prince. Ed. 2011. Richard Kern. Action. Köln: Taschen. Accessed July 7 2015. Amazon.co.uk

³ There are also a small number of promotional reviews and articles in publications as diverse as *Playboy* and *The Guardian*, details of which are included on Merritt’s website’s Press section (2015b)

Mey deals with Merritt quite swiftly in her book Art and Obscenity, persuasively arguing for her work's repositioning as pornography by focusing on the formal qualities of the work and aligning those with the standard features of porn imagery. In particular, she claims, that by reducing the fragmented female body to its sexual organs through the use of close-ups and by endorsing a particular type of young female body, shaved of all pubic hair, Merritt's photographs employ standard porn rhetoric effecting a voyeuristic, objectifying gaze, rather than being a vehicle for the photographer's self-exploration, as Merritt claims (120).

While I arrive at the same position as Mey, my investigation concerns itself with trying to better understand how this instance of misclassification happened in the first place and, in so doing, to move beyond a formal analysis of the work, to investigate its framing as art in a wider context by engaging some aspects of the debates around the mainstreaming of pornography within post-feminist culture or what is often referred to as 'pornified culture.' Analysis of this case of 'mistaken identity' serves two purposes: it provides an opportunity to elucidate and reflect on broader issues around the relationship of art to feminism and postfeminism within a contemporary media context where Internet Art is developing in parallel with the established and still dominant gallery context and it generates a reconsideration of the politics of pleasure in contemporary feminist practices that centre on the female body. Of course, there are also numerous feminist works of art that effectively contest the misogyny of pornography, of which I will give examples later in the paper.

I. The Case for Merritt as Artist: Invoking Porn Studies' 'Choice Debate'

Writing about her photographs in a chapter titled 'Bad Girls: Sexual Transgression as Feminist Strategy' in his book Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire, McNair states:

“These combined the techniques of self-objectification and sexual confession to produce images which blurred the art/porn distinction in a manner now routine among female artists, but in an even more provocative manner.” (202)

We can see from this comment that McNair endorses Merritt’s status as artist and, further, positions her within a lineage of women’s art practices most usually categorised as feminist. What, we might ask, is he basing his endorsement on? Here, McNair appears to defer to the judgment of Eric Kroll, an American fetish photographer and editor of Merritt’s Digital Diaries. In his introduction to the book, Kroll argues that the two qualities of Merritt’s work that distinguish it from porn are that it is ‘artful’ and the product of ‘self-expression’ (2000, 9). The first image she shows him is of her performing oral sex on her boyfriend, which he describes, without elaboration, as “an artful image of a blow-job. It wasn’t pornography” (7). In addition to his attempt to write Merritt into feminist art history, McNair also builds upon Kroll’s emphasis on her work as ‘self-exploration,’ by invoking the familiar choice debate of porn studies when he claims that what is most significant about her photographs is:

“[T]he fact that they are all the product of the considered reflection of a *woman’s* gaze – that of the empowered artist herself, who reserves control over what is shown and how, and exercises her power to represent her sexuality in the manner that *she* chooses.” (203)

McNair’s description of Merritt’s practice as an empowered product of her own gaze proves spurious when set against Kroll’s introduction and narrative framing of the photographs, which for instance foregrounds youth as part of her appeal: “It’s her inexperience that is so alluring. Freshness. Fresh sin” (7). Kroll also claims to have directed her work by giving her hints about what shots she needed and where to look for models: “I think you need a close-up of someone’s face while she or he is coming.’ Off she’d go” (8). Rather tellingly, he admits that Merritt did not permit him ‘on set’: “She thinks I’ll control the shoot, or she’ll be nervous if I’m there” (15). Furthermore, Kroll’s attempt to categorise her photographs as art is at odds with the language he uses to describe particular images, which is distinctly pornographic:

“There is a self-portrait of Natacha on many levels [...] Shot from below, the first level is of her shaven pussy, then immediately above are her two tits, and above that, directly centred with her pussy lips is her face, mouth slightly open. Her pussy is bigger than her head. Is she saying that she is a pussy with tits and a head attached?” (13)

It is difficult to locate Merritt’s agency, empowerment and choice in this particular editorial framing of her ‘work.’ In her influential essay ‘Sexism Reloaded, or it’s Time to get Angry Again!’ Rosalind Gill describes the prevalence of a new female figure “whose power is no longer derived from a supposed innocence or virtue, but from her bodily capital, sexual skills, and appropriately ‘made over’ sexual subjectivity” (2011, 65). Gill and Laura Harvey elsewhere have named this figure “the sexual entrepreneur” (2013, 52) while Angela McRobbie refers to her as “the phallic girl” (2009, 83), a figure epitomised by the glamour model of soft porn whose impression of equality is predicated on the fine balancing act of adopting masculinity whilst retaining her attractiveness to men:

“Luminosity falls upon the girl who adopts the habits of masculinity including heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having causal sex, flashing her breasts in public, getting arrested by the police, consumption of pornography, enjoyment of lap dancing clubs and so on, but without relinquishing her own desirability to men.” (83-84)

Contemporary culture’s accentuation of the young woman’s bodily capital as the site of her power is an effect of what Diane Negra incisively refers to as “the post-feminist susceptibility to confusion between empowerment and role restriction” (2009, 100). Kroll and McNair’s narratives champion this ‘sexual entrepreneur,’ this ‘phallic girl,’ who exploits her bodily capital for profit, always careful to emphasise her choice in doing so and the freedoms that such a choice represents.

In their respective studies on post-feminist culture and discourse, McRobbie and Negra have convincingly theorised what they perceive as an over-emphasis on the ‘choice’ of women to participate in their own objectification. McRobbie describes a process whereby women engage in a “withholding of critique” (McRobbie, 18) while Negra observes women’s collusion in misogyny, which she argues is disguised as agency (Negra, 10). McRobbie describes the way that neo-liberalism has effectively harnessed the language of individualism and independence to undo feminism and to replace it with what she terms “faux-feminism” (1), while Negra notes that post-feminist culture has successfully revived various sexist feminine stereotypes such as ‘bitch’ and ‘slut’ with the remarkable addition of women using these terms to describe themselves and others “in a display of their political and rhetorical ‘freedom’” (10). In stark contrast to McNair’s position then, McRobbie and Negra place the phallic woman, epitomised by Merritt, squarely in opposition with feminism, as summed up here by McRobbie: “Under this pretence of equality, which is promoted by consumer culture, such female phallicism is in fact a provocation to feminism, a triumphant gesture on the part of resurgent patriarchy.” (85)

Perhaps more persuasive than McNair’s positioning of Merritt as feminist artist (or indeed as artist) is her appearance in another Taschen publication, Women Artists in the 20th and 21st Century (2001), edited by art curator, critic and publisher Uta Grosenick. The book provides a survey of significant women artists of the twentieth and early twenty-first century and includes such undisputed luminaries as Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Cindy Sherman (b.1954). However, the entry on Merritt written by art critic Frank Frangenberg once again focuses directly on distancing her photographs from porn, claiming that “her treatment of even the most intimate sexual details does not call pornography to mind” (348). Considering that her photos include hard-core imagery such as a woman inserting lube into her anus with a syringe, a close-up shot of heterosexual penetrative sex and a close-up of a penis urinating onto an erect nipple, it seems absurd to state that pornography does not enter the viewer’s frame of reference when looking at Merritt’s work and, in fact, continued efforts to separate the two suggests quite the opposite. Frangenberg’s attempt to disassociate Merritt’s work from porn is later undercut by the claim that: “After a virtual visit with her, you have the feeling of knowing her better than your own girlfriend” (353).

Merritt was included in the first edition of this book only, and not in the two subsequent editions (2003; 2005). This fact in itself is not evidence of the editor's change of heart regarding Merritt's significance as a woman artist or even her status as an artist in the first place, as quite a few artists were removed in later editions due to a scaling down of the publication. However, unlike all of the other artists included in these editions, Merritt remains virtually unknown and largely unacknowledged within art contexts and by art communities (including other artists, gallerists, critics, curators, archivists, scholars and both private and public collectors); she has never had gallery representation for instance, which would be one indicator of her position as a significant professional artist, nor has her work featured in any museum or gallery shows. Apart from McNair and Mey, both of whom take Taschen's designation of Merritt as artist as their starting point, there has been no serious or substantial art critical attention paid to her work.

Merritt's second book of photographs Sexual Selection, published in 2012 with small art book publisher Bongoût, could be said to have received a degree of art establishment endorsement in the form of a very brief foreword by artist Richard Prince. Like Digital Diaries, this second book includes a collection of photographs that span erotica, fetish and pornography in their content, this time juxtaposing them with close-ups of the reproductive organs of plants and insects in what Merritt calls "a comparative artistic study of sex in the human, plant and insect worlds" (2015a). The analogies produced by these combinations are often formal, occasionally associative but are on the whole rather clunky, bordering on comic when involving photos of bondage scenarios. Prince says little about the work, mainly fixing on one hard-core photo that has grabbed his attention and describing the pleasure of anticipation that it provides for him.

"Girl holding man's cock. Half her face outside the picture. She looks like she's wearing some kind of 'flowered' dress. Her hand is tight around the shaft of the cock. The head of the cock is almost obscured by uncircumcised skin. The cock is half hard. It will be a while before there's cum on her dress. (All over the flowers). She makes him wait. First she has to water her plant and feed the cat. He doesn't mind. And neither do I. We both understand." (Prince, 2012, 5)

Even here then, Prince's well-known penchant for erotica dominates as he writes from his position as a consumer of fetish material, making no attempt to situate her work within an art context. As further evidence of her lack of art credentials, Merritt is notably absent from twentieth-century high-profile survey shows such as WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution at Museum of Contemporary Art, LA in 2007 and Seduced: Art and Sex From Antiquity to Now at London's Barbican Gallery, Oct 2007 - Jan 2008, each of which deals with categories of art within which McNair positions her practice. The most striking similarity across these various attempts to position Merritt's output as art – by Kroll, McNair, Frangenberg and Prince – is the use of celebratory language to do so and an attendant lack of criticality in their writing, which mirrors the lack of criticality in Merritt's work.

II. The Ambiguities of Feminist Body Art and 'Bad Girl' Art

Attempts to situate Merritt's photographs as art draw on a history of women artists who have used the female body (their own and those of others) to subvert dominant cultural narratives of woman as object/muse and man as subject/author and to challenge the boundaries between low (feminine) and high (masculine) culture. Much of this work is rooted in performance and performative self-imaging as exemplified by 1970s feminist body art made by artists such as Judy Chicago (b.1939), Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) and Carolee Schneemann (b.1939) as well as by the irreverent and subversive appropriations of art historical and popular cultural imagery produced by the 'bad girl'⁴ feminist artists of the 1990s such as Janine Antoni (b.1964), Nan Goldin (b 1953) and Sarah Lucas (b.1962). However, feminist artists uses of the objectified female body have been far from uncontentious, splitting critical opinion on the efficacy of such strategies. Some artists, like Mary Kelly (b.1941), chose to represent the female body indirectly in order to avoid contributing to the objectification of women. Others, such as Wilke chose to reclaim the

⁴ The term or category of 'bad girl' art emerged from three major survey shows in the mid-1990s: Bad Girls, co-curated by Kate Bush and Emma Dexter at London's ICA in 1993 and two linked bi-coastal American survey shows in 1994, Bad Girls curated by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum and Bad Girls West curated by Marcia Tanner at UCLA's Wight Gallery. Unifying the work included in these three shows was the use of humour as a subversive tool, for instance through visual punning or one-liners.

female body through using it as a site for various parodic and satirical gestures. Art critic Lucy Lippard sums up this paradox as follows:

“Men can use beautiful sexy women as neutral objects or surfaces, but when women use their own faces and bodies they are accused of narcissism ... Because women are considered sex objects, it is taken for granted that any woman who presents her nude body in public is doing so because she thinks she is beautiful” (1995, 102)

In the fifth edition of her influential study Women, Art and Society, Whitney Chadwick notes an early twenty-first century tendency for art practices that “seemed to oscillate between opposition and complicity in their relationship to mass culture” (2012, 471). In line with much analysis on post-feminism produced by feminist media studies over the past decade, Chadwick, proposes that the work of women artists of the early part of this century “may appear more firmly rooted in the ideology of libertarian individualism than in feminism’s liberationist politics” (469). Amelia Jones also critiques what she sees as a cynical tendency in art by women since the late twentieth century to objectify the female body in order to sell work: “Sex sells, no matter how ‘critical’ the artist purports to be in exposing and wielding the female body to view” (2010, 16). This market friendly ‘sexy’ art closes the gap between the object of critique (in relation to this discussion that would be the pornographic image) and the critique itself (the artwork). She uses the example of American artist Liz Cohen (b.1973) and, in particular, her photographic series titled BODYWORK (2002-2007) to illustrate her thesis. In this series, Cohen --- a conventionally attractive young woman --- plays the part of a bikini model, posing in the setting on a mechanic’s body shop, the collision of feminine and masculine signs and codes supposedly providing the raw material for a feminist critique of gendered power relations. Jones notes the complex conceptual underpinning of the work --- as well as its defence by other critics as feminist --- which included Cohen’s laborious physical transformation of her body into that of a bikini model and her equally laborious acquisition of mechanic’s skills. However Jones deems the work ultimately unsuccessful because these complexities, she claims, are lost to the viewer and any critical intentions by the artist are superseded by the familiarity of the woman presented --- and

thereby endorsed --- as fetish object. This one example illustrates the diverse claims and responses made by artists and critics in relation to art by women that harnesses the objectified female body in some way and therefore indicates the complexities of navigating this subject. Clearly, the close resemblance between artwork and the sexist culture it invokes raises questions around artists' apparent collusion in postfeminist articulations of sexism, questions echoed by Lippard when she asks: "[W]hen a woman artist satirizes pornography but uses the same grim image, is it still pornography? Is the split beaver just as prurient in a satirical context as it is in its original guise?" (Lippard, 2001, 114)

Critics have long been sceptical of appropriation art's capacity for critique. Initially excited by its various challenges to modernism and consumer culture, critics soon became ambivalent because of its reproduction of the very systems and values it set out to critique. Yet there are some critics who, rather than view the artwork's complicity with the appropriated object as risky, accept it as an essential feature of a parodic or satirical practice. In an influential essay on the allegorical impulse of postmodern art written in 1980, Craig Owens insists that the deconstructive text must build its critique from the very material it appraises (1985, 235). Writing almost a decade later, in a point that echoes Owens', Linda Hutcheon advocates appropriation as a parodic practice, but acknowledges its ambivalence by referring to it as a "complicitous critique" (106, 151). Like these others, Lippard emphasises the importance of critical distance coupled with intimacy (or familiarity) in a relationship that she describes as "collage as dialectic" (115). For some critics then these deconstructive and parodic practices are necessarily Janus-faced.

Across the body of appropriative practices by women artists that engage with pornography, strategies and objectives are broad, ranging from those that ostensibly make pornographic work in order to reattribute its presumed authorship and audience from male to female to those that hold the pornographic image at a greater distance in order to produce a more obvious critique. Examples of the first extreme include Cosey Fanni Tutti (b.1951) and Annie Sprinkle (b.1954), both of whom worked in the sex industry --- Cosey Fanni Tutti as a model for porn magazines and Sprinkle as a prostitute and porn star --- as well as being artists; the photographic, film and performance artworks of both artists making explicit reference to their history as sex

workers. While the reattribution of authorship and audience --- from male to female --- is evident in both of these artists' bodies of works, the position of their work as feminist art remains precarious, not because the artworks too closely resemble pornography, as per Jones' critique of Cohen's BODYSHOP series, but because they have been (in different contexts and at different times) both pornography and art.

Of those who hold the pornographic image at a greater distance, one interesting example is the Egyptian artist Ghada Amer (b.1963)⁵ whose best-known works are her stitched canvases depicting clichéd porn poses. From a distance the works resemble abstract expressionist paintings, the iconic modernist works of canonised male artists, while up close we can see they are illustrative drawings comprised of delicate embroidery using a variety of coloured thread. Thematically, her work orchestrates collisions between various dichotomies such as masculinity/femininity, east/west and high art/craft. Most frequently in Amer's oeuvre, the enduring emphasis on the traditional craft of needlework/embroidery as women's work in the East is pitched against the reduction of women's bodies to objects of consumption in hard-core porn in the West (representing two very different, but equally undervalued, forms of women's labour), producing what Ann Russo refers to as "eroticized inequality" (1998, 9). Formally, Amer's use of the broken line of stitching together with the frenetic repetition of the woman's body in clichéd porn poses --- open, available, enticing --- paradoxically renders her unreachable and distant. The interruption of the line and the visual 'noise' produced by the overlaid imagery causes the body to disappear. We can't quite hold onto the image and only a studied intimate relationship with the work will reveal its individual bodies, but even then their delicate and incomplete rendering frustrates the pleasures associated with porn consumption.

Moving beyond a disruption of the male gaze and its attendant pleasures, some of the most compelling feminist artworks critically engaging with pornography are those that focus on women's sexual pleasures, thereby challenging the assumption, prevalent since the 1970s feminist 'sex wars,' that critiquing porn somehow equates to being anti-sex. These critiques are concerned with challenging dominant conceptions of the female body as docile or servile object by reframing representations of sex from a

⁵ Other examples of artists who choose to use paint and other media to frustrate access to the pornographic image are Marlene Dumas (b.1953), Lisa Yuskavage (b.1962) and Wangechi Mutu (b.1972), to name a few.

woman's perspective and authorship. An early example is Schneeman's film Fuses (1965), a 16mm silent film that she made over a period of three years, depicting her and her then lover, composer James Tenny, having sex in their home in what Jones declares "one of the finest films ever made about embodiment, her epochal hetero-erotic autobiographical flesh-poem" (146). Put simply, Fuses attempts to represent the intimacy of lovemaking. This intimacy is created through the 'realness' of the relationship of the lovers and the setting (even the couple's cat appears occasionally) and by Schneeman's decision to mediate the image through the use of various experimental techniques --- such as collage, painting, staining, burning and even baking the film --- to produce a densely layered image which was then also subject to frenetic editing that interrupted and obscured the scenes depicted. The lyricism that results conjures up of a sense of the often feverish and messy feeling of sex where even time is elided, as distinct from the depiction of sex offered by pornography that is predicated on providing clear visual access to the image of sex act/s, from start to finish. Significantly, Fuses also diverged from pornography by depicting heterosexual sex where the male and female partners were equal participants. Disappointed with the lack of female-focused and authored films that centred on the female body and following a frustrating loss of control of her own body when she worked as a model for leading experimental filmmakers Peter Gidal and Stan Brakhage, Schneeman describes how Fuses allowed her "to wrest [her] body out of a conventionalizing history." (Schneeman, 28)

A more recent example of this focus on female pleasure is provided by British artist K.R. Buxey's video work Requiem (2002), which parodies Warhol's Blow Job (1964), but in place of DeVeren Bookwalter's face as he receives fellatio from an off-screen lover, we see a close-up of Buxey's face as she receives oral sex. In homage to Warhol's film, the video is projected in slow motion, though in place of Warhol's silence Buxey chooses the sombre and calming tones of Fauré's Requiem (his Catholic mass for the dead) for the sound-track and replacing Bookwalter's understated performance is Buxey's rapturous orgasm, her mouth wide open as though screaming with pleasure, her head tossing from side to side in complete abandon. The choice of music confers a reverence on the image of a woman's sexual ecstasy, where it would usually be trivialised, as well as producing a good example of Lippard's 'collage as dialectic' where Catholic beliefs and values around women's chastened sexuality, as exemplified by the

figure of the Virgin Mary, forcefully collide with the image of a woman immersed in sexual pleasure. By focusing exclusively on the woman's pleasure, Buxey's video critically engages with art history, with porn and even with classical filmic representations of women. It provides us with an example of a female artist's performative use of her body without reproducing the objectification that she is critiquing. Here, the depiction of the sex act focuses on the pleasurable expressions on the woman's/artist's face not on her objectified naked body and in that sense she is not addressing a male spectator or his pleasure, but confronting him/us with her own unbridled pleasures.⁶

While some feminist artists' engagements with porn may appear ambivalent at first glance, more often than not we can discern various distancing strategies that mediate the referenced image or style in both material and conceptual ways, inflecting the artwork with parodic intention that is altogether missing from the straightforward fetish photographs produced by Merritt. In the end, the abiding characteristic of all feminist art is its politics.

III. The Self as Project: a 'Second Shift' of Women's Undervalued Labour in the Internet Age

As with many other aspects of culture, the digital revolution has affected art production, exhibition and consumption and much art today is exhibited online as an alternative to the physical space of the gallery, museum, and other 'off-site' venues. The Internet has also given rise to the aptly titled Internet Art which, to define it broadly, is art that relies on the Internet to exist and so isn't generally work that would or could be exhibited in the physical gallery space. Looking at early iterations of Merritt's first website, digitalgirly.com, which preceded her book as the key dissemination site of her 'photographic diary,' we can see that her work could at one point have been said to rely on the Internet to exist.⁷ Originally, Merritt's website operated as a members site, where visitors could view a few 'taster' erotic images for free, but were required to join to access more hard-core material. Rather than situating Merritt's early (late 1990s/early twenty-first century) work as Internet Art, when we start to consider its relationship to and use of the

⁶ Although it is beyond the scope of this discussion to fully explore this point here, as with Warhol's film, Buxey's sexual partner remains off-screen which has the effect of moving beyond a heteronormative paradigm to invite queer looking pleasures.

⁷ Content on Merritt's digitalgirly.com website has changed significantly over the years and it currently acts as a promotional site for her second book, Sexual Selection.

Internet, it bears a much closer resemblance to intimate blogs such as Brooke Magnanti's Belle de Jour: Diary of a London Call Girl (2003-2004) or amateur porn sites, such as that available on youramateurporn.com, albeit with a far more sophisticated use of the medium of photography (taking framing, resolution, colour and various other formal elements into consideration each time). Merritt's written entries in Digital Diaries describe sexual encounters with both named and unnamed sexual partners. In narratives typical of porn, they sometimes describe rough sex that she didn't want but which was forced upon her and which in the end she took pleasure from:

“I totally didn't want him. Thin pants, much needed a back rub. Before I had the chance to object, he jammed his cock into me through the pants. Made me wince; I loved it.

I never lifted my head up, or even thought his name, just felt his thrusts; no foreplay needed. Within moments I was selfishly coming. I must have yelled. My lips were torn, at the entrance I had a bruise.

Each time I think of it makes me want him.” (85)

Feona Atwood, writing about the intimate blog, states: “[T]he popularity of journal blogs with women can also be linked to the longstanding identification of diaries and other autobiographical forms of writing as women's genres” (2009, 6). Intimate blogs are here positioned by Atwood as part of a continuum of autobiographical feminine practices, rooted in self-exploration. However, Linda Nicholson warns against any simplistic assumption that blogging and tweeting etc. constitute the present-day version of diary writing in that, “while private life has become more public, many still employ criteria distinguishing what should and should not be made available for general view” (2013, 31). After all, privacy and secrecy were and for many still are defining characteristics of diary writing.

Rather, the kind of publicly shared persona characteristic of the intimate blog is better understood as an example of what Negra and Yvonne Tasker, writing together in the introduction of their book Interrogating Post-feminism, describe as the “self as project,” a principal characteristic of post-feminism (2007, 21). The public representation of the ‘self as project,’ now ubiquitous on social media (indeed it has fuelled the rise of social media), on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs and personal websites, has much in common with the confessional mode, which feminist scholar Melanie Waters refers to as “pornography’s favoured discursive mode” (2007, 261), and which also closely resembles the major discursive strategies of both feminist art since the 1970s and post-feminist media texts such as TV shows Sex and the City (HBO, 1998-2004) and Secret Diary of a Call Girl (2007-2011) since the 1990s. These resemblances of address and mode across cultural texts, much of which are consumed by women, coalesce in the public revelation of intimate information.

While feminist artists may not be divulging titillating secrets about themselves in the same way as the intimate blogger, they are nonetheless exhibiting personal information or imagery, the sort of which is usually withheld from public display. Writing in 1976 about women’s body art, which had become a high profile genre in the 1970s, Lippard describes the ways that women artists were “mustering the courage to deal publicly with intimate and specifically female experience” (1976, 123). Women’s body art was, and in many respects remains, a contested category of practice partly because it was so quickly co-opted by the mainstream, elevating those who made it into ‘art stars’ while continuing to marginalise the majority of art made by women. Women’s art in the 1970s became visible in high profile magazines and exhibitions providing it limited itself to body art and, most significantly, providing the artist’s body conformed to prevailing standards of beauty. Schneeman, Wilke (1940-1993) and Lynda Benglis (1941) are three prominent early examples of American women artists who became elevated to art star status for their respective uses of their own attractive bodies to make art or statements about art (as in Benglis’ controversial November 1974 adverts for Artforum). Four decades later, post-feminism’s ‘phallic girl,’ is subject to the same double standard as second wave feminist body artists, which dictates that success is

conditional on the display of bodily capital, only now, rather than ‘mustering the courage’ to publicly share personal, intimate experience, young women are expected to confidently flaunt it.

Elizabeth Wissinger describes the investment of time, money and other resources in managing one’s social media personae as ‘glamour labour’ (2015). This kind of labour centres on the creation and maintenance of youthful attractiveness through time-consuming personal grooming, dieting and exercise, the laborious honing of a repertoire of flattering ‘selfie’ poses and the use of various ‘face tuning’ apps. Glamour labour becomes the latest in a long line of trivialised work, such as domestic and affective labour, carried out exclusively by women and most often located in the private spaces of the home. Similar to Laurie Oulette and Julie Wilson’s observations about women’s investment in ‘self improvement’ media cultures and online entrepreneurialism constituting a “second shift” (2011) of familial labour, the glamour labour expected of young women is driven by the neo-liberal imperative to strategically manage one’s own capital in an insatiable search for something bigger and better. Significantly, these feminine forms of labour are unpaid, because while women are encouraged to participate as ‘active citizens’ in a neo-liberal society, their contributions (their labour) must remain in the domain of the ‘non-professional,’ focused exclusively on the family, as this is the ‘natural’ order of things.

A younger generation of women artists is beginning to draw attention to social media as a new site of bodily oppression for women. Amalia Ullman’s performance Excellences and Perfections (2014) provides an interesting recent example of art that engages with the pressures on young women generated by social media culture. Over a period of five months Ullman staged a performance work where she set up fake Instagram and Facebook accounts and proceeded to post intimate details of her daily life, from photos of what she ate for lunch to her journey through breast enlargement surgery. Her photos showcase her model physique and look like replicas of ones taken by the Kardashian sisters, such as an over-the-shoulder selfie in a mirror, wearing black lace underwear, her pert rounded bottom taking centre stage. Of course, the performance only became evident when it was exposed as such by the artist and by its subsequent presentation as art in gallery contexts such as in the 2016 group show Performing for the Camera at Tate Modern. Beyond

satirising social media feminine stereotypes, Ullman's intention was to critique femininity as laborious construct, claiming that "the joke was admitting how much work goes into being a woman" (Sooke), however by becoming the perfect simulacrum one could argue that she succeeded only in augmenting the importance of self-objectification to young women's social value. In a point that undermines her intentions and returns us again to the problematic ambivalences of much body art and bad girl art as outlined by Jones, she also acknowledges that her work's success is at least in part attributable to how many 'likes' photos of half-naked girls get (Sooke). Just like Wilke and Schneeman, Ullman has been embraced by the artworld and media alike, and has fast become an in-demand art star leading us to question how much has really changed in forty years of feminist art that sets out to challenge the objectification of women and their undervalued labour.

Rather ironically Merritt's whole enterprise with Digital Diaries and the website it evolved from is predicated on the erasure of her own labour. Her photos are presented as a private activity made public; authentic, spontaneous encounters that are documented in an obsessive way that has become commonplace in contemporary 'selfie' culture but that also maintains the voyeuristic fantasy embedded in pornographic pleasures. By contrast, feminist art has frequently used a confessional strategy to make visible the overlooked and devalued aspects of a woman's labour e.g. domestic labour, childcare and care for the elderly as well as the various inequities of women's professional labour. By erasing her own labour Merritt propagates various myths around the natural role of women that a phallogocentric society profits from. Indeed, the erasure of labour is a condition of the intimate blogger's claim to authenticity. The diary format that many intimate blogs and memoirs adopt becomes a guarantor of 'authenticity,' which as a value has huge appeal for the porn consumer. While Merritt's photographic output in Digital Diaries might be couched, for some such as Kroll and McNair, in terms of neo-liberal empowerment and post-feminist rhetoric of individual agency and sexual freedom, of women's sexual pleasure as defined by women, and of women's authorship, its content is clearly pornographic and it dovetails perfectly with the demand for authenticity fed by amateur and user-generated porn sites. Attwood continues the emphasis on authenticity in relation to women's sex blogs claiming that they "become an outlet for expressing truths about their sexuality which

they have been unable to share with their friends and lovers” (6). In this conceptualisation, the online relationship with a public audience is a prerequisite for the writer’s expression of an authentic ‘truthful’ self, painting intimate blogs as sincere forms of self-expression rather than the commercial enterprises that they are.

Merritt’s diary entries in Digital Diaries, together with the interview that accompanies the book, reveal that the documentation, publication and selling of her work motivates her every sexual encounter. Contrary to the semblance of authenticity, of offering insight into Merritt’s private sexual life, effected by the collection of images (images as diary entries), Merritt’s photographs are in fact the key product in a highly successful business, complete with legal contracts for operating that business at maximum profitability to the photographer. Any notion of spontaneity and unpredictability that might be implied by the narrative of the beautiful young woman whose life is powered by sexual encounters with friends and strangers is thwarted by the very considered approach Merritt takes to the production of her ‘visual diary’: “It makes sense to me to ask all my lovers to sign a model release before we have sex, because the camera must come to bed with me” (21).

In repositioning Merritt’s output within the categories of pornography, erotica and fetish, it is not my intention to deny her accomplishments within those fields. Clearly Merritt is an astute businesswoman who, in addition to releasing two books of photographs, has capitalised on various creative opportunities within erotica, porn and fetish markets, such as her 2003-2004 multimedia projection work for adult-rated show ‘Zumanity’ with Canadian circus theatre group Cirque du Soleil and the co-founding of exclusive fetish club, Sanctum (2013-), in downtown LA, as well as her new ventures in offering Virtual Reality sensual gaming experiences and live interactive fetish experiences. In addition she was a pioneer of the ‘selfie’ and Digital Diaries was the first book publication of digital photographs. She is the quintessential post-feminist ‘sexual entrepreneur,’ who has fully exploited her physical attractiveness to her personal advantage to develop a substantial portfolio of activities, which she promotes on her website (2015b). However, if her successes can be described as empowering, it is predominantly due to her decision to bracket her work by

her sexual attractiveness and consequently it can only ever be a proscribed and limited kind of empowerment. Additionally, her successes are contingent upon her (the phallic girl's) collusion in the exploitation of women by contributing to the downplaying or erasure of women's labour in new media contexts (in porn and on social media) as a continuation of women's devaluation as a provider of domestic and affective labour.

Conclusion

When I first encountered Merritt's photographs in Women Artists of the 20th and 21st Century, they seemed emblematic of a wider crisis in feminism and feminist art at the turn of the twenty-first century. Early (1990s-2000s) confusion about post-feminism's relationship to feminism spanned from Tania Modleski's 1991 suspicion of it as heralding the end of feminism to Ann Brooks' 1997 attempt to recuperate the term for feminism to a return to viewing it as anti-feminism as exemplified by Ariel Levy in 2006. Such confusion facilitated the misrecognition of certain post-feminist texts as feminist, however this has largely dissipated as we have come to a better understanding of the continuing vitality, pertinence and work of feminism. Recent feminist scholarship on post-feminism and its operations, particularly that coming from feminist media studies, provides us with the scope to understand this critical blip --- this misrecognition of porn as art --- as an effect of post-feminism and its proliferation in contemporary culture, especially in relation to the ways that the internet was (quite incorrectly as we know now) conceived as a liberating, democratising space of particular use to women.

A younger generation of women are benefitting from the continuation of feminist work (political, social, cultural and academic) and the ways that it has illuminated some of the more troubling aspects of post-feminist culture. Chadwick's discussion of the legacy of feminist art in the second decade of the twenty-first century outlines the diverse range of practices evident in art by women today, but points out that the female body nonetheless remains a "site of political and social action" (513) for many women artists.

Despite Jones' reservations about some 'collusive' uses of the female body, for her "the body was and remains a key site for articulating feminist agency in relation to preexisting imagistic codes conventionally relegating the female body to the status of object or fetish" (2010, 25). In a point that echoes aspects of Lippard's discussion of 1970s body art, Jennifer Chan, one of the two curators of the 2015 online art exhibition Body Anxiety⁸, states:

"Self-sexualization in a way that appeases men might give women the chance to profit in a sexist world --- to have a seat at the master's table --- but it doesn't fight sexual stereotypes that women run up against everyday." (2015)

Chan's statement invokes post-feminism's 'phallic girl' once again and suggests that, perhaps surprisingly, perhaps somewhat disappointingly, Lippard's commentary on 1970s body art continues to have resonance today. Lippard acknowledged a woman's right to use her own image as she will, but warned of the "subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult" (125). Lippard's observation can be seen as a cautionary note to feminist artists, not to risk undermining their political objectives by too closely imitating the values and cultures they seek to interrogate. Almost forty years later, the subtle abyss that Lippard describes still pertains but now also navigates women's (post-feminist) uses of their bodies that are not aimed at exposing the insult, but actively collude in it. Some recent art that purports to be feminist continues to perpetuate the problem identified by Jones in too closely imitating the object of critique and thereby pandering to the market demand for 'sexy art', as with Ullman's social media performance work. However, some of today's feminist artists would seem to have taken heed of the lessons to be learned from feminist art history, and instead present effective challenges to the erasure of both women's labour and sexual pleasure, as exemplified for instance by Amer's stitched canvasses and Buxey's Requiem. Increasingly, feminist art critics are expressing a jadedness with discussions of 'the phallogentric gaze' and 'the objectification of the female body' and are keen to celebrate

⁸ Body Anxiety is a group show by twenty-one media savvy young artists, the vast majority of whom are women, who use a variety of performative strategies to examine self-representation online. The exhibition presents a range of critical works that harness various techniques of appropriation to challenge the enduring objectification of women and the insistence on heteronormativity in mainstream culture.

what appear to be new forms of feminism, as proposed by Ullman's Excellences and Perfections for instance. However, because the complexities and ambiguities outlined here persist, it is important for critics to stay attuned to the politics of feminist art, and to how effectively those politics might or might not be conveyed by individual artworks and bodies of work. While critics like Jones provide a useful steer in doing just that, I suggest that with so many younger artists engaging with new media, a productive critical framework for discussing contemporary forms of body art is generated by the intersection of art criticism and media studies as I hope to have illustrated here. Failing to pay attention to the nuanced ways that works of art either critique or collude with the objectification of the female body risks resulting in the sort of misclassification that this paper takes as its starting point. The pervasiveness of postfeminist culture threatens to obscure the distinction between pornography and art, however --- as I have argued here --- there is much at stake for feminists in retaining that distinction.

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