

PORN PORN PORN

Armin Boehm, Birgit Brenner, Martin Eder, Amelie Grözinger, Philip Grözinger, Julia Holzberger, Lou Hoyer, Alex Lebus, Stu Mead, Andreas Mühe, Hanna Putz and Ulrike Theusner

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Alex Lebus, Lip Service, 2015, inkjet-print, 114 x 104 cm

'The essence of man as given in sexuality - which is his origin and beginning - poses a problem for him that has no other outcome than wild turmoil. This turmoil is given in the "little death." How can I fully live the "little death" if not as a foretaste of the final death?' George's Bataille: 'The Tears of Eros'

'Cinema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you what you desire - it tells you how to desire.'

Slavoj Žižek: 'The Pervert's Guide to Cinema'

Porn, Porn, Porn brings together: Armin Boehm, Birgit Brenner, Martin Eder, Amelie Grözinger, Philipp Grözinger, Julia Holzberger, Lou Hoyer, Alex Lebus, Stu Mead, Andreas Mühe, Hanna Putz and Ulrike Theusner.

Diverse in medium, and scale, from photography, drawing, painting, sound and collage, the exhibited works share a commonality: the mediation of pornography as inspiration and subject for the artist.



Andreas Mühe, *Das Studio*, 2007, pigment print on silver rag paper, 110 x 140 cm

The genesis of the exhibition was the result of a playful conversation last summer, between some of the artists in the show and the directors of EIGEN + ART Lab. It was decided it would be provocative and fun to play up to the stereotype of summer nights in Berlin, and to put on a 'corny, porny show'. As the exhibition evolved, however, it became clear that pornography is increasingly a pertinent subject for discussion. This world-wide phenomenon has made an enormous impact on society, accelerated through the development of the Internet. The distribution of pornography is now widely considered to have effected change in sexual practice across society at large, and to have impacted considerably on contemporary relationships.

The distinction between erotic art and pornography has long been debated. Until relatively recently, the consensus in high art circles has been that the erotic cannot and should not be sullied by an association with pornography: the two must remain distinct. Back in 2001, the curator Jean Jacques-Lebel, rebuffed accusations that his Picasso exhibition: 'Picasso Erotique', contained pornographic material: "It has nothing to do with pornography," said Lebel. "Picasso's asking the question, what is this thing called Eros, and how does it link us to painting? That's what Picasso's erotic art is really about."

Fourteen years on - as western society becomes increasingly liberal and the art world more used to pornographic material being used as a source for subject matter - art and pornography are incrementally merging. This though is not without its critics. Several prominent artists and writers including Nancy Spero have protested strongly that pornography promotes an ideology of objectification which is not only anti-progressive, but potentially harmful, most notably, to young women.



Ulrike Theusner, Porndolls 4, 2015, ink on paper, 25 x 25 cm

This said, it should be noted that a relatively new genre of 'female-friendly' porn has arisen in the industry in an effort to combat the charge of female objectification. If pornography itself has the potential to move beyond being seen as symbolic of the degradation of women, surely sex as a subject matter for art does not deserve to be automatically relegated to a 'danger' area, at risk of censorship and viewed with suspicion for being potentially harmful or corrupting? Indeed Hans Maes makes this case in his essay: 'Who Says Pornography Can't Be Art?' He argues: 'Sexual experiences involve the deepest corners of ourselves and are among the most intense, powerful, emotional, and profound experiences we have. If pornography, which offers the most direct representation of, and access to, such experiences, can in principle be lifted into the realm of art...then I think we have every reason to encourage artists to attempt just that, to make intense, powerful, and profound works of pornographic art and rescue this much-maligned genre from the clutches of the seedy porn-barons.'

His argument would seem to be born out by Georges Bataille who, in his book 'The Tears of Eros' claims that the Marquis de Sade: 'Endured this life only by imagining the intolerable...eroticism is in a sense an outlet, an infamous outlet for horror.' Bataille goes on to make a point of great significance. He talks about: 'opening consciousness to the representation of what man really is...Although Sade can be read with ease today, it has not changed the number of crimes - even sadistic crimes - but it fully opens human nature to as consciousness of itself.' For Bataille, eroticism was not something to be afraid of, rather he hoped that by opening up consciousness of the self and embracing eroticism, the hedonistic pursuit of the accumulation of wealth, which Bataille believed 'leads to over production, whose only possible outcome is war', might be avoided. In this case then, eroticism could be seen as a force for good, even redemptive. We are reminded of Botticelli's deliciously sensual painting of Venus and Mars. Here the god of war is depicted exhausted after lovemaking, and thus rendered incapable of war thanks to the charms of Venus.

This though, is a very rosy reading, and even Bataille acknowledges that 'no one can imagine a world where burning passion would definitively cease to trouble us.' Indeed there is a darker side to our scopophilia and our relationship to celluloid visions. According to the philosopher and psychoanalyst, Slavoj Žižek, even 'ordinary' cinema is 'the ultimate pervert art'. Why? Because it tells us how to desire. This begs the question of whether we indeed know what it is we think we want until we see or experience something. If someone else - or something else - introduces a new possibility or experience to us, there begins a relationship akin to that of master and student. The problematic part is that though we receive instruction, through direction, by watching, it is one-sided.

We have no means to reply and therefore to fully engage; at best we are reactive and disconnected from anything beyond a purely sensorial experience. This might be why in: 'The Muse is Exhausted', Marlene Dumas writes: 'Too many bodies and not enough soul. She's got the porno blues.'

Though this may well be the case, the complicated question of desire and our relationship to what we see on the big and small screen and over the Internet, remains. We are addicted to our love of looking, and insatiably, endlessly curious, and while there is an ever-increasing source to feed and instruct our desires, our appetite is surely unlikely to diminish.

Text by Jane Neal