The Dynamics of Desire: 
Sexuality and Gender in Pornography and Performance

Jill Dolan

One focus of contemporary feminist criticism is on the relationship between the system of representation and issues of gender and sexuality. Feminist critics argue that the nature of representation is altered by the gender of performers and spectators, as well as by their sexual preference. Both gender and sexuality bring the dynamic of desire into play, informing the narrative's structure, the production's "look," and the relationship between spectator and spectacle.¹

The role sexuality plays in performance and in the visual representation of women as sexual subjects or objects is an issue intensely debated within the feminist critical community. This issue has prompted the creation of two opposing positions on the function of pornography within the culture. These positions are represented by lesbians who support the cultural production of sexual fantasies—for some groups, often in the form of lesbian sadomasochistic rituals and pornography—and anti-pornography feminists who argue for legislation against pornographic images of women, contending that pornography effuses sexual violence against women in the society-at-large.² There is a third, complex position that may encompass stances against censorship on the one hand, and yet not subscribe to s/m practices on the

¹See Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) for work on the relationship of desire to narrative structure. De Lauretis writes, "Woman is then the very ground of representation, both object and support of a desire which, intimately bound up with power and creativity, is the moving force of culture and history" (p. 13). See E. Ann Kaplan, Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera (New York: Methuen, 1983), particularly her chapter "Is the Gaze Male?" 23–35, for an analysis of the genderized aspects of the cinematic "look" that has useful correlations to performance. See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen, 16:3 (1975), 6–18 for one of the first psychoanalytical analyses of women's position in representation.

²See the Sex Issue, Heresies #12 3:4 (1981) for short articles expounding both views; Pat Califia, "Feminism and Sadomasochism," Heresies #12, 30–35, for the manifesto of the most vocal proponent of lesbian s/m sexuality; Coming to Power, Samois Collective, eds. (revised ed., Boston: Alyson Publica-
other. But for the purposes of this article, that position will remain on the margins, since it does not focus so much on notions about representation as on those of civil rights.

This article will briefly review the opposing positions in the pornography debate, applying their principles to various forms of performance and the visual representation of women's sexuality. From performance art and erotica, through lesbian performance and lesbian pornography, a range of materials will illustrate the influence of both traditional and feminist theories of gender and sexuality on the representation of women within the culture.

Lack of Illusions: The Anti-Pornography Debate and Cultural Feminist Performance

The model anti-pornography law drafted by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon defines pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words. . . ." The law goes on to enumerate the various conditions under which the representation of women is considered pornographic, focusing on sexual objectification as the primary determining factor. In an accompanying statement, Dworkin clarifies the issue of subordination in terms of an imbalance of power:

Subordination is a social-political dynamic consisting of several parts. The first is that there is a hierarchy. There's somebody on the top and somebody on the bottom. . . . The second . . . is objectification. The third . . . is submission . . . the fourth is violence.4

For Dworkin, the insertion of power into social-political and sexual situations automatically establishes a hierarchy that leads to violence against women. Feminists who embrace this position as an argument against pornography are often allied theoretically and politically with the movement called "cultural feminism." Cultural feminists tend to valorize what they see as innate, biologically based differences between men and women. Women as the "life source," for example, and men as destructive warmongers are distinctions commonly drawn by cultural feminists. Since the feminist anti-porn campaign is based on an analysis that sees male sexuality as inherently aggressive and violent, the cultural feminist stance is sympathetic to the anti-pornography position.5

---

4Quoted in Mary Kay Blakely, "Is One Woman's Sexuality Another Woman's Pornography?" Ms. Magazine, April 1985, 46.

Because male sexuality is problematic within the stereotyped, polarized version of the sex/gender system that distinguishes this analysis, much cultural feminist performance art attempts to evade the issue of sexuality and desire by privileging spirituality. If power adheres in sexuality, and cultural feminists assume power leads to violence against women, it becomes politically and artistically necessary to attempt to disengage representation from desire. This de-sexualizing is particularly important to heterosexual cultural feminist performance artists, who view the disarming of desire as one of the first steps toward the "feminization" of the male. In cultural feminist performance art, then, the body is idealized as a spiritual vessel, and sexuality is reduced to reproductivity, often symbolized by women's contextualization in nature.

Performance artists like Leslie Labowitz and Hannah Wilke maintain this personal, spiritual, biologic approach to politics and representations of the body. Opting not to examine differences among women based on race, class, and sexual preference through political analysis, they propose unifying, essential female connections that will unite all people in spiritual peace. In Sproutime (1980), for example, Labowitz invites spectators into a greenhouse setting, where she is "nude and softly lit," watering her sprouts. Performance art historian Moira Roth, who condones the retreat into nature and spirituality, says,

Certainly she is expressing not only her own need, but one increasingly shared by others, both men and women, for psychic and spiritual nourishment in such a painful moment in history.6

Feeding the spirit, however, disregards the pervasiveness of external gender codes and markings that operate on the body's communication of meaning.

Wilke also privileges women's biological, natural capabilities over an examination of the cultural construction of gender differences in her performance art. Like most cultural feminists, Wilke universalizes her image of women's bodies, ignoring the specificity of the historical moment with statements like "Women are the same everywhere in the world."7 Her claim that women are "biologically superior. I can have a baby, you can't" indicates her prescriptions for the ideal expression and fulfillment of womanhood. Wilke believes that in order

To be the artist as well as the model for her own ideas, whether sexually positive or negative, she [the artist] must also resist the coercion of a fascist feminism, which devolves on traditional politics and hierarchies in feminist guise rather than self-realization with respect to the physical superiority of women as the life source.8

While Wilke's assertions sound like a mystical, spiritual charge, at base, this touted superiority of women translates merely into procreation. Implied in this

---

8Wilke interview, quoted from the catalogue of the exhibition American Women Artists at the Sao Paulo Museum, July 1980, 10.
analysis is the maintenance of traditional family structures and gender roles. No attempt is made to deconstruct the biologic view of women. There is no critique of the cultural construction of sexuality or gender implied in Wilke’s manifesto.

Moira Roth and Lucy Lippard trace the origins of this tradition in feminist performance art to the practice of consciousness-raising, the predominant cultural form of the early women’s movement. The autobiographical nature of feminist performance work in the 1970s was in line with a politic based on sharing personal experience, and on searching for commonalities among women. Since women share basic biology, the nude female body became the literal and metaphorical site in performance art for women’s unification.

The prevalence of nudity in the work reflected the movement’s concern with attitudes toward women’s bodies. Nudity in performance also paralleled the impetus in women’s fiction and poetry to articulate women’s newly-heard voices by evincing what was considered a symbolic reclamation of women’s subjectivity through the body. The body/art concept also stemmed from the cultural feminist impulse to expose women’s innate differences from men, and to signify a departure from the more violent tradition of male performance art that preceded the feminist movement.

Female nudity continues to be a frequent image in cultural feminist performance art. Many performers insist that the female body, stripped to its “essential femininity,” communicates an essential meaning recognizable by all women. They see the nude female body as somehow outside the system of representation that objectifies women, free of the culture’s imposed constructs and constrictions. Yet it is Lippard points out that performers like Wilke and Carolee Schneeman, who frequently performed nude, had beautiful bodies that implicitly legitimized their exposure in the performance space according to the dominant culture’s standards. Although they purportedly displayed their bodies to signify unity among women, in the genderized terms of the performance space their bodies became accountable to male-defined standards for acceptable display.

Another performance artist, Rachel Rosenthal, exposed her body in Bonsoir, Dr. Schon! (1980) only to point out its flaws, which she could not reconcile with her more complimentary attributes. Rosenthal says she was embarrassed to the point of fainting by performing nude, yet she submitted to a self-devised, humiliating session in which her “‘bad points’ are demonstrated to the audience by female assistants and marked with red tape, rubber bats, spiders and snakes.”

Wilke, Labowitz, and other artists attempt to use nudity in performance to create female subjectivity, but they are caught in the gender-polarized terms and objectifying strictures of the performance apparatus. Rather than stripping the performer of her socially-constructed gender role, her nudity relegates her to subservient status as


“woman.” From a materialist feminist perspective, the female body is not reducible to a sign free of connotation. Women always bear the mark and meaning of their sex, that inscribes them within a cultural hierarchy.\textsuperscript{11}

Cultural feminist performance artists such as Labowitz and Wilke avoid sexual referents that would force a confrontation with desire and sexuality by grounding their work in nature and the body, which is displayed and reified as the site of gender difference. These performance artists attempt to evade the power hierarchy that cultural feminists find explicit in representations of women by separating images of the female nude from sexual desire.

Sexuality, however, is a tangible currency in the representational exchange. While it is crucial not to conflate sexuality with gender, expressions of sexuality further illustrate the operations of gender codes and constructs in the representation of the female body. Heterosexuality, or male/female coupling, is as culturally imperative as masculine/feminine gender.\textsuperscript{12} Sexual role-playing, then, has implications for gender play; the way people perform their sexuality influences how they “wear” their gender. If desire is the subtext of narrative, sexuality and gender are equally motivating forces behind representation.

Just as the sex/gender system is a cultural construction mandated to serve socio-political ends, desire is also constructed out of cultural contexts. As Gayle Rubin notes, referring to Foucault, “Desires are not preexisting biological entities, but rather, . . . they are constituted in the course of historically specific social practices.”\textsuperscript{13} Desire and sexuality, as cultural constructs, also influence gender formation. Rubin adds,

Gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has had gender-specific manifestations. But although sex and gender are related, they are not the same thing, and they form the basis of two distinct arenas of social practice.\textsuperscript{14}

Visual representations of women illustrate the overlaps and distinctions between sexuality and gender, and chart the operation of desire in relaying meanings between images and viewers. The magazine \textit{Eidos}, for example, bills itself as “erotic entertainment for women.”\textsuperscript{15} In other words, it focuses on the relationship between gender and sexual desires by aiming its erotic content at heterosexual women readers, not men. It reverses the traditional gender roles the pornography industry reinforces by portraying men as sexual objects and women as the viewers.

\textit{Eidos}'s editors are clearly aware of the problems inherent in representation, and attempt to address the sexual objectification of women in pornography by reversals that would objectify the male for women's visual pleasure. Women are depicted in

\textsuperscript{11}For theoretical work on this position, see Monique Wittig's writings in \textit{Feminist Issues}, particularly “The Category of Sex,” Fall 1981.
\textsuperscript{14}Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 308.
\textsuperscript{15}Eidos 1:4 (Spring 1985).
nature, and the images of naked men are meant to feminize men by placing them in parallel positions. In a manner similar to cultural feminist performance art, *Eidos* implies that stripping people to their nude bodies will also strip away the layered cultural constructions of both sexuality and gender. Women's sexuality is portrayed as gentle, emotional, and non-aggressive. The images of men propose that immersed in nature and spirituality, men can be taught to give up their aggressive, violent sexuality and become feminized as artistic nudes.

The magazine assumes the same purist, vaguely self-righteous pose that characterizes cultural feminist performance art. Sexuality and desire are disarmed, their power dynamics purportedly erased by the inscription of both male and female gender into a natural, dispassionate, spiritual space. There is no fantasy implied in the magazine’s scenarios, and few interactions are represented. The images are cerebral, rather than erotic, more a comment on the editors’ careful avoidance of what the culture considers pornographic than the production of a different kind of sexual excitement. The images do not really work as a new pornography.

Erotica such as *Eidos* tries to generate politically correct sexual images by portraying the body as a spiritual vessel and by simply reversing male gender positioning. In contrast, performance artist Karen Finley works to disrupt traditional pornography by obstructing the exchange of meaning between image and spectator, and by locating the body as the source of excrement and detritus.

Finley became a controversial performer on the downtown Manhattan art scene in 1986. She has worked as a hustler in strip joints in Chicago and San Francisco, and now perverts the stripper’s position in her performances. Rather than offering her body as a sadistically inaccessible commodity, an idea for male spectators to consume in a masochistic exchange, Finley offers herself as already consumed. She appears as refuse from an exchange of sexual power that is completely self-contained. What remains of the body and sexuality has already been digested, processed, and regurgitated as splintered, violent images and incoherent words, to be meaningfully reassembled only by spectators with stomachs strong enough for such consumption.

In her foulmouthed (and often physically foul) performances, Finley subverts traditional gender expectations by presenting what writer Cindy Carr calls “a frightening and rare presence – an unsocialized woman.” Although Finley bases her work

"While Karen Finley had been performing her unique brand of performance art on the European performance scene for quite some time, Village Voice writer Cindy Carr began to call special attention to Finley's pending New York appearances in Spring 1986. Carr’s beat is the off-beat, as it were. Since her tastes run toward feminist, lesbian, and other gender-bending performers, she was clearly intrigued by Finley, and featured her upcoming downtown performances in a kind of hot-tips preview section. Several weeks after Finley began to present (very) late-night performances at venues such as The Kitchen, the Voice ran Carr’s cover story “Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts: The Taboo Art of Karen Finley” (24 June 1986). Carr’s style for the Finley story is somewhat incendiary, although no more so than other, even more sensational cover stories the Voice has run on topics such as gay male back-room sex clubs like the defunct Mineshaft. Finley, however, is a heterosexual woman, and the fact that the paper featured her performance perversions on its cover prompted an outpouring of angry response from readers and other Voice writers that filled the paper’s letters pages and opinion columns for several weeks.

in the body, her content is not the biologically ordained capabilities idealized in cultural feminist performance art. She focuses on the circulation of sexual power assumed by a woman who will not be socialized as sexually submissive according to her assigned gender role. Much of Finley’s uncontrolled, stream-of-consciousness verbiage spews from shifting personae marked only by gender. Carr describes Finley’s narrative technique:

Finley often appropriates the male point of view and male desire in her language. Or some woman character starts fucking whoever up the ass, magically acquiring the power of men. Her work returns again and again to oral or anal sex, usually associating them with power.18

By changing gender roles in her performance, assuming nameless personae who describe random sexual encounters with partners across a gender spectrum, Finley’s sexuality seems autoerotic. Because she appropriates the male perspective while maintaining the female gender, all sexuality appears to be about power, and about the body’s capacity for expressing its base urges and desires.

Finley does not characterize her work as pornography, but Carr qualifies her relationship to it:

Whatever might spew from the wound in the psyche Finley describes is the language of pornography. But she renders the pornography impotent. In this id-speak, shitting, vomiting, and fucking are all equal. Desire attaches to disgust.19

Finley performs in gender-mixed clubs, but thwarts heterosexual male spectator’s desire by basing her narratives in grotesque perversion. In performances called “I Like to Smell the Gas Passed from Your Ass,” “I’m an Ass Man,” and “Yams Up My Granny’s Ass” – in which Finley dumps a can of yams over her naked buttocks and lets it drip into her boots – she subverts pornography’s representation of desire with images that confound mainstream sexuality by shifting the typical balance of power.20 Her aggressive denial of the power dynamics of legitimate sexuality – that is, heterosexuality, in which men are powerful and women are passive – angers male spectators, who often throw lit cigarettes at her.

Finley refuses to participate in the rules of representation by objectifying herself. In performance, objectification implies an active male spectator who is invited to identify with the narrative’s hero in his search for the fulfillment of his desire.21 Finley does not offer herself as a passive object. She forces men to be passive in the face of her rage, and she desecrates herself as the object of their desire, thereby mocking their sexuality. Her refusal to play the game leaves the male spectator

19 Ibid.
20 In a performance in Cologne in 1981, Finley and her husband Brian Routh (one of the Kipper Kids) performed as Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun. “Kipper goosestepped and saluted, naked from the waist down. Finley wore a corset and garter belt, and because she had diarrhea, periodically took a dump on one side of the stage. On one of the nights, Kipper sang a Johnny Mathis hit, then went to the bowl where Finley had been relieving herself and lapped up the shit” (Carr, 19). As Carr notes, this is clearly not mainstream sexuality.
nowhere to place himself in relation to her performance. He can no longer maintain
the position of the sexual subject who views the performer as a sexual object.

Finley’s work revises the power balance in traditional pornography, by representing
her body as subordinate to her own will. She changes the axis of the power
exchange by claiming sexual power for herself. Cultural feminists assume sexual
power forms a hierarchy that leads to violence against the women who cling to its
lowest rungs, but such a hierarchy develops only when there are sexual subjects and
objects available to rank and trade. Finley has taken her body off this representa-
tional commodities market by refusing to appear as a consumable object.

Karen Finley breaks from cultural feminist performance art traditions that evade
issues of sexuality and power. She clearly is not speaking for global feminism, nor
growing sprouts in a gesture toward world peace, but she is still publicly performing
issues that are ultimately personal. She describes her art as the expression of per-
sonal pain and rage, of emotions she cannot resolve intellectually. She performs in a
trance, unrehearsed. Analysis seems to be missing from her primordial ooze. Al-
though sexuality and gender are shattered and meaningless in her narratives, what
remains is a quivering mass of unnameable, ruptured flesh—the human waste of
sexuality, gender, and performance. The shock value in Finley’s work foregrounds
cultural constructions in a negative, brutal way that eventually forces spectators to
look away.

Like the Mephistophelian scientist in David Cronenberg’s remake of The Fly
(1986), Finley can only transport herself to lower and lower, more debased forms of
life. Because she is mired in the corporeality of her own flesh as it has been abused in
the system of representation, she never takes flight into sexual and gender fantasies
of liberation.

Finley’s omission of liberative fantasies allies itself with the position of the anti-
porn feminists. Alice Echols, in her critique of their analysis, writes that anti-porn
feminists have gone as far as legislating against imagination in the form of fantasy
which

they claim is dangerous because it entails the substitution of an illusion for the ‘social-
sexual reality’ of another person. In rejecting as so much ‘male-identified mind-body
dualism’ the belief that fantasy is the repository of our ambivalent and conflicual feel-
ings, cultural feminists have developed a highly mechanistic, behaviorist analysis that
conflates fantasy with reality and pornography with violence. 22

Taken to extremes, arguments like this could insist on the complete abolition of
representation as fantasies that substitute illusion for reality.

Liberative Fantasies:
Lesbian Performance and Sexuality

The structure of desire, by necessity, differs across sexual preference. Porno-
graphic narratives or any kind of performance for sexual partners of the same sex

22Alice Echols, “The Taming of the Id,” in Pleasure and Danger, 58.
construct a different relationship between performers and spectators on the basis of
gender roles. In lesbian performance, the representation of desire is often startling
because of this difference. Lesbian sexuality is given voice and imaged in theatre,
where heterosexual male desire has historically reigned in the form of the male gaze.

In the lesbian context, playing with fantasies of sexual and gender roles offers the
potential for changing gender-coded structures of power. Power is not inherently
male; a woman who assumes a dominant role is only male-like if the culture con-
siders power as a solely male attribute. When a lesbian performer assumes sexual
power in the lesbian performance space, the reassignment of meaning becomes
subversive.

Creating a stage motivated by different kinds of desire allows experimentation
with style, roles, costume, gender, and power, and offers alternative cultural mean-
ings. Lesbian performance, in its particular East Village Manhattan variety, fore-
grounds the subversion of the dominant culture’s gender-polarized images of sexual
power in the context of lesbian desire. Lesbian performers, writers, and directors
parody dominant cultural images of gender to deconstruct gender-specific conduct
and codes.

Lesbian performances in Manhattan’s East Village is housed primarily at the
WOW Cafe, which now occupies a floor in a nearly-abandoned warehouse building
on East 4th Street, across from LaMama. When the Cafe began in 1982, it offered a
place for mostly lesbian women to meet, to drink coffee or buy beer from an
impromptu kitchen, and to be entertained by informal performances. For a time,
lesbian performers based at WOW also performed at other East Village performance
clubs, which made for a theatre experience not unlike a progressive dinner for their
audiences.23 On any given weekend night, spectators could see an 8 P.M. show at
WOW and travel en masse to the 11 P.M. show at Club Chandalier or 8BC. There,
farther into the bowels of ABCland, spectators could watch WOW performers work
in a different space, for an audience somewhat more mixed across gender roles and
sexual preferences.

Performances at WOW are now offered at 8 P.M. and 11 P.M., drawing their
audiences by word of mouth from the established East Village lesbian community. In
a sense, as Lois Weaver, one of the WOW founders, recently remarked, it is a
“community built around a theatre.” Or, as WOW member Alina Troyano coun-
tered, it is “theatre of necessity.” Troyano originally came to WOW “looking for
girls.”24 The Cafe’s social setting is as important as the entertainment it offers.

23The Spring 1985 issue of The Drama Review T105 (29:1) is devoted to East Village performance. Each
of the clubs prominent in the neighborhood in Fall 1984, just before most of them were closed, is profiled
in detail. An article called “30 November 1984” documents different performances happening on the same
evening at clubs within walking distance of each other. WOW performers are profiled in several of the
performances described. See also Alisa Solomon’s article on the history of the WOW Cafe in the same
issue.
24Weaver and Troyano made these remarks on a panel about East Village performance held during the
Women’s Program (of the former American Theatre Association) pre-convention on August 16, 1986, at
New York University. Writer/performer Holly Hughes, who is also a core WOW member, joked that East
Village art happened because the places people live in are so small they are forced to create social and
artistic outlets simply to have somewhere else to go.
Expanding the boundaries of gender roles is a given both in the performances and the WOW space, in which the spectators, as well as the performers, wear costumes that push at the constructs of gender-specific codes. Since the spectators at WOW are mostly women and mostly lesbian, the performers’ manipulation of traditional sexual and gender roles is mirrored in the audience. Often, women known in the community to be more “masculine” in manner and style will arrive to see performances dressed in “feminine” costumes—or vice versa. This blurring is mirrored in performance, where the spectator, part of the fun is frequently seeing someone she knows assume her opposite “butch” or “femme” role on stage. To be “femme” is an option for lesbians that falls at one end of a more fluid gender role continuum that offers “butch” as an option at the other end. Exaggerating the trappings of traditional feminine and masculine gender roles in performance highlights their unnaturalness as cultural constructions.

This attention to gender costuming is key to Chit Chat With Carmelita (1984), an on-going lesbian performance structured as a talk show. Hostess Carmelita Tropicana (Alina Troyano) is a lesbian performer dressed in female drag, as are many of her invited guests. These performers foreground the gender role of women in heterosexual society and within the lesbian community by exaggerating the gestures and costuming of the feminine woman as “femme.” The concern with costuming in the construction of character and personae in Chit Chat is important and elaborate, as if to acknowledge that people’s carefully constructed “looks” have much to do with the way they are gender coded. The gender-specific costumes, however, assume new meanings through the performers’ sexual and gender role-play.

In Chit Chat, Carmelita appears in a long, red, flowered evening gown, wearing a feather boa and heavy makeup. Carmelita is a Carmen Miranda “send-up,” a persona with a thick Cuban accent constructed by a performer whose actual ethnicity is also Cuban. Thus, Troyano parodies both her ethnic and her gender role. The “femme” costume on Carmelita Tropicana is a comment on both itself and the performer. Carmelita appropriates the exaggerated feminine apparel for lesbian theatre. The audience shrieks approval at her appearance and, with catcalls and applause, participates in the parody of sexual meanings.

At another point in the piece, Carmelita appears dressed in a tuxedo as the Spanish-speaking pop singer Julio Iglesia to sing love songs about women. This double lesbian drag show foregrounds the notion of gender as drag.28 Carmelita’s impersonation of Iglesia also appropriates the popular romantic music tradition—another bastion of strict gender role education—to express lesbian sexuality.

The structure of the piece parodies typical talk show formats. Carmelita sings several off-key melodies, including a flourishing rendition of Debbie Boone’s “You Light Up My Life”; offers a Cuban/Japanese cooking lesson in which she hacks up a chicken with a meat cleaver; and interviews various guests. Tammy Whynot, Lois Weaver’s character from the Split Britches Company’s production Upwardly Mobile Home, appears as one of the guests. Whynot is also a “send-up” of the femme role.

Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of Split Britches Company. Photo: Eva Weiss.
Weaver wears her dyed, platinum-blonde hair bouffant-style, paints her face with heavy but tasteful makeup, and decorates herself with rhinestone jewelry and satin dresses. The effect is meant as commentary, but although Weaver and Troyano undermine gender, race, and class stereotyping, their impersonations are affectionate and empathetic. This lesbian drag is quite distinct from the often stinging cruelty and implicit belittlement of gay male drag performers' impersonations of women.

In an improvised exchange, Carmelita interviews Tammy Whynot about her new book, and Weaver reads a poem called "When Mama was Away" that satirizes the working mother's dilemma. Weaver arrives at Club Chandelier already in character, and maintains the Tammy Whynot persona throughout the evening as she mingles with the audience. Other Chit Chat guests are lesbians from the community with whom most of the audience are personally acquainted. Many performance artists attend, playing their trademark performance personae. This "intertextuality" helps to create the representation's shared meanings.

The people who really understand the articulated and implied nuances of Chit Chat, however, are lesbians. Sexuality is rampant in the piece, from Carmelita's feminine flirting, to director Holly Hughes's Super-8 "dykeumentary" of lesbian couples being knocked down by ocean waves on Provincetown beaches, to a segment called "Tattle Tale," in which several "famous" lesbian couples are interviewed a la The Newlywed Game about their sex lives. Lesbian desire is also an undercurrent that heightens the exchange, acknowledged implicitly between spectators and performers.

Lesbian desire is always assumed in WOW Cafe performances. Lesbianism automatically becomes the axis of categorization, so that when lesbian content is infused into a popular cultural format, the form and its conventions are foregrounded, not the lesbianism. Despite the director's intentions, in a film like Donna Dietch's Desert Hearts (1986), it is the lesbianism of the two main characters that is shocking, given the viewing expectations of a general audience. Since lesbianism is assumed in WOW performances, the genderized conventions of popular forms become startling instead.

The WOW Cafe performers always assume lesbianism as a fluid base from which to fantasize and explore changing gender roles. For example, lesbianism as a neutral category, apart from a polarized gender continuum, appears in Heart of the Scorpion (1984), a parody of Harlequin Romances written, directed, and performed by Alice Forrester. In the typical melodramatic, unrequited love format, Annabelle, selflessly working as a governess for a young girl, is snubbed by her would-be lover, Ran. In the performance, both Annabelle and Ran are played by Forrester. Since there is no attempt to play the vocal range or body language of the male character, the couple is represented as lesbian. As reviewer Kate Davy notes,

Making all of the couples women not only parodies the Harlequin Romance formula, but heterosexual relationships as well, in so far as they are grounded in polarities of sexual difference. . . . Although, clearly, the production is devised primarily for entertainment, the intent to undermine the social and sexual values of the romance genre is evident.
Sexuality is often directly represented in lesbian performance, both as content and as style. In *Heart of the Scorpion*, the foregrounding of romance in the parody privileges lesbian sexuality, since it subverts traditional expectations of the genre. In *An Evening of Disgusting Songs and Puky Images* (1985), a co-production by Spiderwoman Theatre and Split Britches, sexuality is integral to the production's content and style. The narrative in this production, as in many Spiderwoman texts, is non-linear and incoherent, but Split Britches performers Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver conduct a subtextual seduction that clearly represents lesbian sexuality.

Even though *Puky Images* was presented at Theatre for the New City—a bit out of the WOW context but part of the East Village neighborhood—most audience members know Shaw as the more butch and Weaver as the more femme in one of the community's most visible lesbian relationships.²⁷ In *Disgusting Songs and Puky Images*, however, Shaw and Weaver shift back and forth on a continuum between butch and femme roles. The other performers wear Spiderwoman's trademark bright colors and eclectic Native American fabrics and feathers. Shaw and Weaver wear dark pants, leather vests with no shirts, and sometimes bowler hats, evoking a kind of! Chicago-style, steamy Bob Fosse look. Through most of the performance, they dance around each other, but the sexual tension between them permeates the stage regardless of other events. They seduce each other by trading charged sexual power in which desire is the only shared meaning.²⁸

Although much of her work as a director and performer could be called semi-autobiographical, Weaver says she sees performance as a chance for people to put their fantasies on stage. Split Britches’ performances usually create eccentric characters that grow from the performers’ desire to perform the less visible parts of themselves. In *Upwardly Mobile Home* (1985), for example, Weaver plays the bleached-blonde Tammy Whynot, a would-be country western singer, reflecting her own geographic and cultural origins; Shaw plays a lesbian mother, a role she plays at home, but which is distanced in performance by the addition of an Eastern European accent; and Deborah Margolin, the third troupe member, plays the aggressive, hard-sell manager of their performing act, playing off her own Jewish ethnicity. The trio is living in poverty in a van parked below the Brooklyn Bridge, and since they are performers, the narrative is set in a theatrical context.

Split Britches’ productions are known for their often eclectic combinations of fastidious attention to realistic detail with bizarre flights of surrealistic fancy. In their

---


²⁸Shaw, who is quite tall, tends to wear shiny, 1950s style suits, narrow ties, and black shoes with white socks. Weaver, whose hair is dyed platinum blonde *a la* Tammy Whynot, wears makeup, jewelry, and generally more feminine clothes. Seeing the couple, and other WOW performers, on the street, it is never quite clear whether they are heading to the theatre for a performance or simply going out to eat.

²⁹Shaw and Weaver met each other working with Spiderwoman Theatre, and soon left the group to form Split Britches. *Disgusting Songs and Puky Images* at Theatre for the New City in 1985 was a revival piece, and marked the first time the two groups had worked together since the split. History has it that Shaw and Weaver left Spiderwoman because of sexuality-based conflicts. It is ironic, then, that the performance of lesbian desire was so prominent in the production the women chose to revive.
signature piece, *Split Britches* (1983), the stultifying daily routine of three rural women is captured by repetitive dialogue and long pauses, then suddenly interrupted by bursts of energy and narrative color. The same structure is used in *Upwardly Mobile Home*, in which the basic, simple plot is disrupted by surreal, imaginative monologues that break the fourth-wall and linear narrative conventions the play establishes. For instance, without dropping her Eastern European character, Shaw directly addresses the spectators, asking them if their seats are comfortable, and if they are getting what they paid for. She makes the audience aware that it is separate from her fantasy, disrupting the normal theatre convention that requires suspension of disbelief.

This willingness on the part of lesbian playwrights and performers to locate their work in theatre conventions, rather than in the illusionless documentation of most cultural feminist performance art, allows for the use of fantasy to imagine different
realities. Gender roles, for example, are reimagined along an expanded continuum. Sexuality and desire, as opposed to being banished as problematic taboos, are continually present as subtext in these performances. The presence of lesbian desire, in fact, helps to refashion the manner in which gender and sexual roles are played in both performance and reality. Basing their work in the conventions of theatre also allows these performers to comment on and manipulate the traditional gender-coded performance apparatus.

Lesbian performances at WOW generally take themselves much less seriously than most cultural feminist performances. Self-parody in terms of gender, race, and class provides a starting point for redefining all demarcations of gender, race, and class. In one of Upwardly Mobile Home's more absurdist moments, Margolin engineers the trio's audition for a Jewish agent. Wearing a Supreme's-style dress that encloses them in an elasticized embrace, Shaw, Weaver, and Margolin sing "I Like to be in America" from West Side Story in Yiddish. Only Margolin is at all comfortable with the translation, but the fact that Shaw and Weaver stumble over the lyrics and the accent foregrounds the parody. The dress alludes to the construction of Black female performers as cultural commodities, while the translation into Yiddish comments ironically on the idealism of all immigrant aspirants to the American dream. By drawing from a grab-bag of personae mixed across gender, race, and class, and performing them without attempting to layer impersonations on top of their already specific characterizations, the Split Britches performers redirect spectators' attitudes.

In lesbian performance, performers' bodies are not displayed nude, but in the costumes of their cultural constructs, which the performances subvert through pointed comedy. The performances at the WOW Cafe have been criticized in some circles for the prevalence of butch/femme role-playing in the work, which is seen as politically incorrect. Nonetheless, as lesbian performance makes clear, playing with sexual roles and fantasy does not reinforce gender roles, but points out the contradictions in and limits to the traditional construction of polarized gender choices.

Reassigning Gendered Meanings:
The Case of Lesbian Pornography

Pornography is the most direct, available representation of sexuality in this culture, and in a sense, exemplifies the construction of shared meanings between images and viewers. Mass market heterosexual pornography, for example, can be seen as a basic paradigm of male desire driving representations of women. Therefore, alternative pornography, such as women's erotica or lesbian pornography, can illustrate how desire can be differently represented.

From a cultural feminist point of view, pornographic imagery is woman-hating regardless of whose desire it represents. Lesbians, for instance, get "bad press" in the pornography debate, for reasons that revolve around both sexuality and gender. In the late 1970s, a group of lesbians called Samois advertised its preference for sadomasochistic practice. The small, San Francisco-based group's crusade to increase the visibility of s/m as an option for the expression of lesbian sexuality prompted heated debate in feminist circles, most notably at a 1982 Barnard Conference on
sexuality.29 Because s/m lesbians traffic in power roles, which are assumed to be gender marked, anti-porn feminists assume their sexuality is male or male-identified. This assumption conflates sexuality with gender.

Power is inherent in sexual and gender role play, since the gender system is polarized along a continuum on which men are seen as the dominant extreme and women as the passive, submissive other. As Alice Echols cautions, “We should acknowledge the possibility that power inheres in sexuality rather than assume that power simply withers away in egalitarian relationships.”30 All sexuality has a quotient of power. Sadomasochism takes power to extremes, or simply makes textual what is subtextual in many sexual relationships. Both as a paradigm of the culture's construction of gender, and as a sexual choice, s/m can be seen as a literalization of the power status inherent in the dichotomized male/female roles. First amendment issues aside, perhaps lesbian s/m offers an opportunity to explore the nature of power and sexuality apart from strict gender dichotomies.

The Barnard debacle and the resulting lengthy, angry dialogues in the feminist press prompted the publication of lesbian pornographic magazines that spell out in images and words some lesbians' alternatives to politically-correct feminist sexuality. In a visual space meant at least theoretically to be free of male subordination and objectification of women, these magazines offer representations of one kind of sexuality based in lesbian desire. By imaging and performing fantasies in which power becomes a neutral quality available to women, their editors suggest that the nature of sexuality and gender can be explored and perhaps fundamentally changed.

As in lesbian performance, lesbian pornography evinces a willingness to experiment with sexual and gender roles. The lesbian porn magazine On Our Backs, for instance, is billed as “Entertainment for the Adventurous Lesbian;”29 which places sexuality in the context of fantasy, imagination, and experimentation. On the cover of the Spring 1985 issue, two women are photographed against a white wall, wearing outrageous, punk-style outfits—leopard-design, skin-tight fitting pants, leather jackets, studded belts and bracelets, and high heels. One of the women has a tiny dildo attached to her belt. The image introduces On Our Backs’ iconography, which is aggressive, but irreverent.

Lesbian pornography presents sexual fantasies constructed through costumes and locations, many of which echo scenarios in traditional male pornography. There is some direct appropriation of male forms in lesbian pornography, but they acquire new meanings when they are used to communicate desire for readers of a different gender and sexual orientation. An On Our Backs photo spread called “Rock 'n' Roll

---

31Susie Bright, ed., On Our Backs 1:4 (Spring 1985). All other references will appear in the text. On Our Backs’ name satirizes Off Our Backs, one of the oldest cultural feminist newspapers in the country. Based in Washington D.C., the monthly paper covers national and international conferences, news, and events. It reported on the Barnard conference in depth, and was the first feminist newspaper to offer a forum for discussing the pornography debate.
Ramona," for example, resembles a similar spread in the June 1985 issue of *Hustler*, which is called "Slash: A Different Drummer." 32

The *Hustler* scenario sets Slash in a performance context. She is alone on stage with a drum set, which she never plays. She uses the drum sticks merely to point to her vagina, substituting for the missing (but implied) phallus. Slash's costume borrows the iconography of prostitution, and contextualizes her within s/m imagery. She wears a studded collar around her neck, studded leather bracelets on both wrists, and a leather corset with thin shoulder straps, the bodice of which underlines her erect nipples. The corset is attached to two garters that hold up black, fishnet stockings, worn with high-heeled silver sandals.

Throughout the scenario, thick cigar smoke appears to be drifting into the frame from an off-stage source, implying that male spectators are watching the performance in a cabaret setting. The performative nature of the spread associates it with strip-tease, in that Slash is constructed as the elusive object of male desire. In one of the photographs, Slash smokes a cigarette with one hand, holding her drum sticks in the other. The iconography is almost butch; her look is a kind of dare.

Stripper Seth Weene, in an article written for the *Sex Issue* of the feminist journal *Heresies*, analyzes strip-tease with descriptions analogous to *Hustler's* contextualization of Slash:

I suddenly realized that what was at issue between us performers [strippers] and the audience was power. The men came, some of them, to suffer; their attitude was 'She is making me horny, but I'll never have her.' To them, the show was exquisite frustration, the sexy woman on stage, a tormentor. The other group of men came to pull imaginary strings; they saw themselves as masters. . . . In other words, some of the men fantasized themselves as passive, others as dominant. 33

Power is clearly at issue in the strip-tease context of Slash's performance in *Hustler*. Although she is objectified, she is inaccessible and to some degree sadistically in control of the implied interaction.

In *On Our Backs*' featured photo spread "Rock 'n' Roll Ramona" (p. 22), much of the iconography used in *Hustler* is recontextualized for lesbian readers. The spread begins with photographs of Ramona in a performance context. Her costume echoes Slash's—she wears a dark corset that highlights her erect nipples, a garter belt, high heels, stockings, black gloves, and a studded leather wrist band.

The text beside the photographs informs the reader that Ramona performs at Baybrick's [a lesbian bar in San Francisco] Burlesque for Women dance show. Ramona is clearly a real person, playing out the performance scenario, unlike Slash, who is obviously a model/construct. Ramona makes her living by stripping for lesbians. In contrast to the wordless spread in *Hustler*, Ramona's interview with "Fanny Fatale" accompanies her photos.

33Seph Weene, "Venus," *Heresies* #12, 36.
While Slash is inaccessible and sadistic, the On Our Backs interview text describes Ramona's sexual exploits with women who come to see her show. The interview is focused on her sexuality in the context of her life as a performer, and highlights an interest in butch/femme sexual role-play. Ramona reports,

I get these beautiful feminine women after me, and they say, 'Ramona, I don't know about you. You're not feminine and you're not masculine. You're like a mountain — that's why I want to climb you!' (p. 26)

Ramona invites a blurring of gender distinctions that influences lesbian sexuality. "I don't know about you" is sexually exciting in the lesbian performance and social context.

S/m sex often uses role-playing and constructed scenarios, both to explore the implications of blurred sexual and gender roles such as Ramona's "mountain," and to act out strict gender extremes. Anti-porn feminists abhor the element of fantasy in s/m, and disapprove of role-playing in the context of sexuality. Robin Ruth Linden, in her introduction to a collection of essays called Against Sadomasochism, writes that "Sadomasochistic roles and practices attempt to replicate the phenomenology of oppression through role-playing." She writes that s/m attempts an

eroticization of power and powerlessness . . . achieved through enacting fantasies involving variations on polarized roles . . . Ritualized 'scenes' are arranged around specific activities in which sexual partners have a mutual interest. . . ."

Linden's cultural feminist critique fails to consider the positive ramifications of role appropriation and experimentation. The lesbian s/m pornographic costumes and scenes in On Our Backs are actually genderless. They have been assigned connotations by the contexts in which the culture has inserted them. Inserting them in different contexts disrupts their traditional meanings.

Toward a New Articulation of Gender and Sexuality

Under the dictates of the anti-pornography debate, desire has come to be seen as a male trap that automatically objectifies and oppresses women. To investigate sexual and gender roles in representation, however, where desire is an influencing factor, it is important to acknowledge that desire is not necessarily a fixed, male-owned commodity, but can be exchanged, with a much different meaning, between women. When the locus of desire changes, the demonstration of sexuality and gender roles also changes.

The political differences that separate feminists around the pornography debate translate into aesthetic differences between cultural feminist and lesbian performance art. Anti-pornography activists and cultural feminists are caught in a restrictive, literal interpretation of desire as male that limits their ability to see the potentials of representation. By avoiding the representation of sexuality and desire for

---

35Linden, Against Sadomasochism, 2.
the safety of nature and spirituality, thereby limiting women to the capabilities of
biology outlines, cultural feminist performance artists prescribe a world chiseled in
unchangeable gender differences, in which passion is expressed as a gentle, affection-
ate embrace.

Yet ironically, these artists cannot escape the infections of representation. They
contradict their aims when they locate so much of their work in the nude female
body, yet insist that men (and women) blind themselves to desire and sexuality.
With techniques that are essentially documentary, since they fear illusions, cultural
feminist performance art fails to take flight into the liberative fantasies that lesbian
performance imagines.

Determined not to be objectified by the illusions that have perpetuated women's
oppression under representation, and determined to disinfect themselves from the
harm done by the representation of male fantasies in both performance and pornog-
raphy, cultural feminists situate most of their work in real settings, real time, and
real bodies. Detached from any concrete consideration of male sexuality, since it is
not at all important to their work, lesbian performers are willing to experiment with
male forms, including fantasy. Lesbian artists sift through popular culture, conven-
tional theatre forms, and even pornography, to see what they hold that might be
salvaged for use.

As lesbian performance and lesbian pornography clarify, albeit in different ways,
it is unnecessary to abandon everything once considered male-like for a world of
nature and spirituality considered penultimately female-like. Power, sexuality, and
desire have historical connotations assigned by the dominant culture for reasons of
social, economic, and cultural expediency that have restricted women's abilities to
express themselves and their sexuality within this culture. But power, sexuality, and
desire can be recuperated from the strictly male domain, and can assume distinctly
different meanings placed in different sexual and gender contexts.

Putting imagination and fantasy back into play allows for a limitless revisioning
of a reality that has been hampered by strict gender and sexual roles. Flying on
lesbian desire in the free-fall space of lesbian theatre allows a rearticulation of
gender and sexuality in the meaningful exchange between spectator and performer.