BOUNDARY ISSUES

DISTANCE AND DISTINCTION IN LUTZ BACHER'S *SEX WITH STRANGERS*

Susanne Huber

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ABSTRACT

The fields of production and reception of a genre widely regarded as illegitimate are translated into a series of viewing experiences in Lutz Bacher's *Sex with Strangers*. The photographs not only disrupt existing patterns of perception and their emotional or intellectual effects, but are also likely to provoke a somatic sensation. By triggering shame, desire, and intimacy as experienced under changing concepts of sexuality and morality, the series stages a choreography of proximity and distance, as this article will argue. Through Bacher's various strategies of reproduction, these sequences of affective dislocation point to the boundaries of socio-political territories implicit in the discourses of pornography, sexuality, and art in the 1980s.

KEYWORDS

Pornography; Sex wars; Reproduction; Aesthetic judgment; Appropriation art.

Perhaps it is more than a curious twist of fate that Lutz Bacher's series *Sex with Strangers* coincided with the publication of the infamous 1986 "Meese-Report", a government-commissioned survey that sought to prove a direct connection between pornography and sexual violence [Fig. 1, Fig. 2 and Fig. 3].[1] Bacher's nine large-scale black and white photographs show – in different variations – reproductions of their respective master copy, that is images of oral sex acts as they appeared in a pulp porn sociological book, which was sold under the counter in gas stations here and there in the Bay Area, as well as in sex shops and adult stores. It is not the temporal proximity, however, that renders this connection noteworthy in our context. Pornography, the subject of both events, marks an instance where a perceptive distance – conceived as emotional as well as physical integrity – is highly at stake. In what follows I wish to argue that this distance is a means for maintaining normatively approved hierarchies in social, sexual, and even artistic frameworks governing what is legitimate and what is not. Bacher's photo series does not illustrate or reproduce these structures, though. Instead, the overt display of a pornographic situation asks us to reassess a judgment that is based on moral rather than aesthetic reasoning; in turn we are confronted with how tightly these modes of reasoning are intertwined and are a prolific ground for cultural distinction in terms of social class and identity.

I. Sensitive Matter

So far, there is no record as to how the series was received when it was first presented to the public in a group show of the "Hotel Project" in Oakland, California, in 1986, funded by Pro Arts, a nonprofit art institution, initially funded through the federal "Comprehensive Employment and Training Act",[2] and the San Francisco State University Art Department.[3] A few years later it was part of "Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women", a group show at David Zwirner Gallery in New York in 1993 [Fig. 4]. The show, conceived by the artist and curator Ellen Cantor, did not cause the uproar that would have to be expected some five, ten, or fifteen years earlier anywhere in the United States.[4] Despite

1
I would like to thank Heather Trawick for her helpful comments during my research. The article is inspired by a chapter on Lutz Bacher in my recent book *Vom Konsum des Begehrens. Appropriation Art, Sex Wars und ein postmoderner Bilderstreit*, Berlin 2022. In the following I will focus on slightly different aspects of the works.

2
http://www.proartscommons.org/about (27.01.2023).

3
I am grateful to Peter Currie, one of the trustees of the artist's estate, for this crucial information.

4
Still, the cultural climate was anything but relaxed. The third instalment of Robert Mapplethorpe's traveling retrospective *The Perfect Moment* at Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC

[Fig. 1]
Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, 1986, nine black and white photographs, ca. 183 × 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

[Fig. 2]
Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, 1986, nine black and white photographs, ca. 183 × 101.6 cm. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

[Fig. 3]
Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, 1986, nine black and white photographs, ca. 183 × 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

Bacher being located in California's Bay Area, a historically liberal area on the West Coast, the war on pornography, labeled as the "Feminist Sex Wars", had affected the entire country. Moreover, it raged far beyond the confines of feminist discourse, too. One could assume that publicly presenting a series of larger-than-life photographs showing explicit scenes of heterosexual fellatio would have been considered inappropriate in most contexts during that time. Especially as the focal point of those images results in exposed genitals, they very likely would have qualified as obscene. And while pornography generally was not subject to prohibition, the matter of "obscenity" was: However vaguely defined in the Supreme Court's famous 1973 verdict on the trial of Miller v. California,[5] *Sex with Strangers* certainly would have conflicted with those "general standards of decency".[6]

One potentially earlier, albeit undated installation of the series is documented in Bacher's mock catalogue raisonné "Snow", published on the occasion of the 2013 survey exhibition at Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland, highlighting the artist's work starting in the 1970s [Fig. 5]. The image shows eight of the nine photographs hung next to each other, roughly on the same level and only loosely attached to the wall. Unframed, the prints bulge off as if deliberately defying any impression of a fine art environment, subtly reminding the viewer of the picture's original context. Indeed, Bacher made little effort to conceal their origin, even deliberately revealed their source: the series' title *Sex with Strangers* repeats the title of a short-lived porn pulp book series that circulated in the Bay Area; herein she found the motifs she later would cut off from their original environment, then, first through Xerox copy and afterwards photography, she enlarged them to their oversized dimensions.

Although the excessive reproduction resulted in blurred outlines of the photographs, their subject is perfectly discernable: each image shows an iteration of fellatio, with different participants and from varying perspectives, featuring close-ups that equally frame the main areas of this sexual activity. In formulaic compositions the viewer finds one or multiple female protagonists orally stimulating an erect penis: the male part literally is represented through a thus declared genital, whereas we can clearly discern various expressions of supposed devotion on the faces of the female performers. With their eyes mostly closed or a lowered gaze, the protagonists appear to be deeply absorbed. At no point is there an indication of

had been canceled after massive political pressure only three years earlier, in 1989, and the so-called Culture Wars were officially announced by James Davison Hunter's study *Culture Wars. The Struggle to Define America*, New York 1991.

5
The 1973 definition is still valid today – the event of obscenity is given as: "a) whether the average person, applying contemporary community standards would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable law; and c) whether the work, taken as whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value." See the digital file of Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973) (27.01.2023).

6
Barbara Hoffman, Censorship II, in: *Art Journal* 50/4, 1991, 14–15, here 14.

[Fig. 4]
Installation view, Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women, David Zwirner, 43 Greene Street, New York, May 1–June 12, 1993. Courtesy David Zwirner.

[Fig. 5]
Installation view, Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, date and venue unknown. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

their awareness of a potential observation either through a camera or an unseen audience.

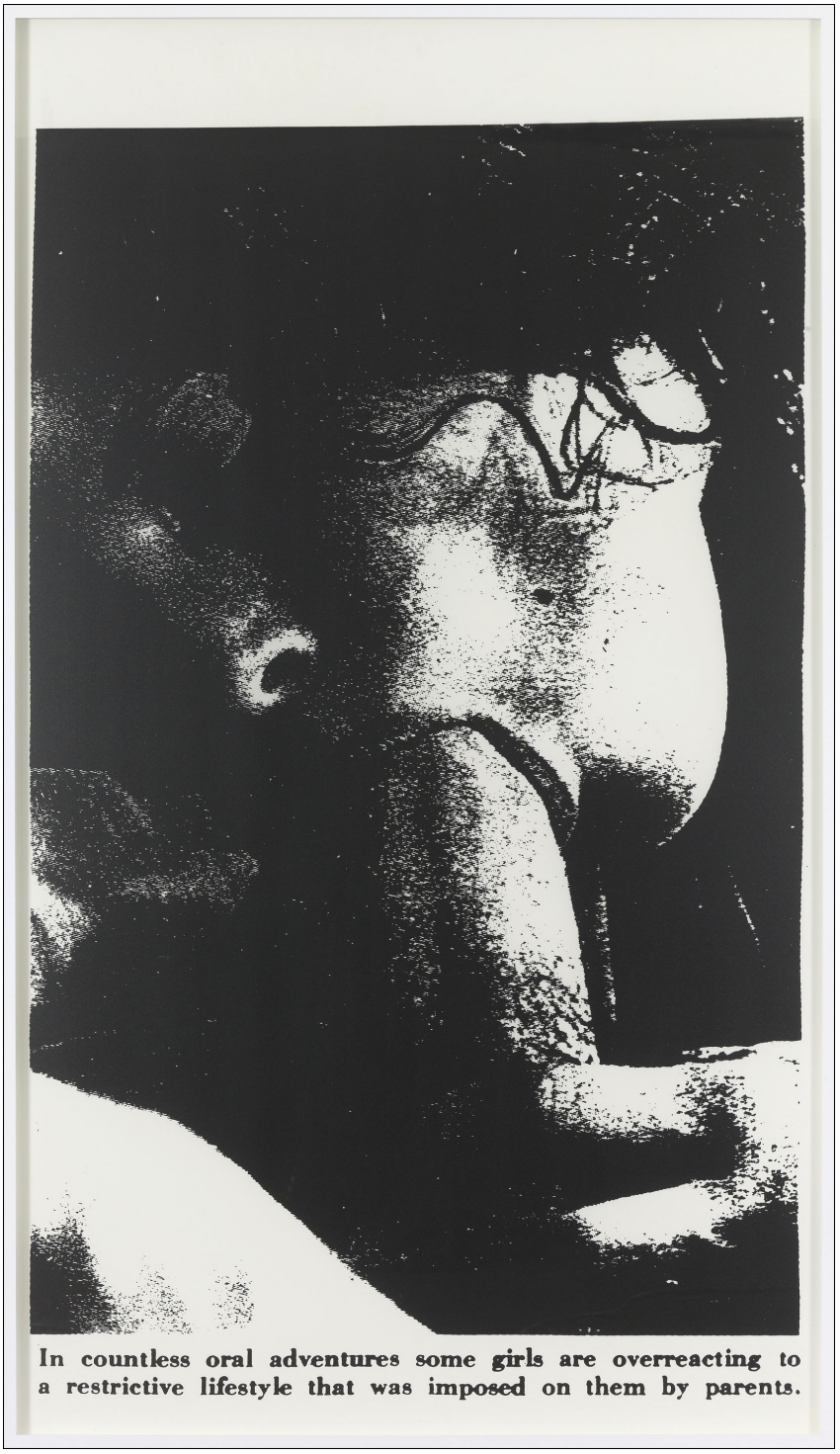
Still, an observation is implicit. The camera's angles and frames evidently focus on the key elements of the event: groins and faces. This narrative condensation corresponds to a profound reduction of the visual information through over-reproduction: while the images exert an excess in terms of physical dimensions, their "quality" conversely lacks considerably. Those once alluring images literally have become shadows of themselves. Blurry features and almost completely blackened areas flatten the images into template-like, cut and dry figurations, at the same time generating a somewhat dramatic appeal. High contrast silhouettes, so typical to black and white xerography, turn the abstract quality of the tableaus to almost Warholesque levels. As we find the single dots of the original analogue raster graphics print just as exposed as they are wiped out, the markers of mass media make their impression.

Such details become evident only through closer inspection. From a distance, the figurative shapes prevail, and so outweigh the relatively tiny captions attached to the bottom of the images. In those one- and two-liners we are presented with an alleged matter of fact, explanatory style. In the tone of conservative sex-ed teaching materials, the captions conceal the scenes as, for instance, convivial gatherings or declare an alleged disturbed behavior by the female protagonists as mental disorder:[7]

> In countless oral adventures some girls are overreacting to a restrictive lifestyle that was imposed on them by parents.
>
> Lily's damaged sense of self propelled her into oral acts with many strangers as a symbolic form of self destruction.
>
> Some authorities feel that females would be the aggressors in human society in the absence of artificial restrictions. [Fig. 6, Fig. 7 and Fig. 8]

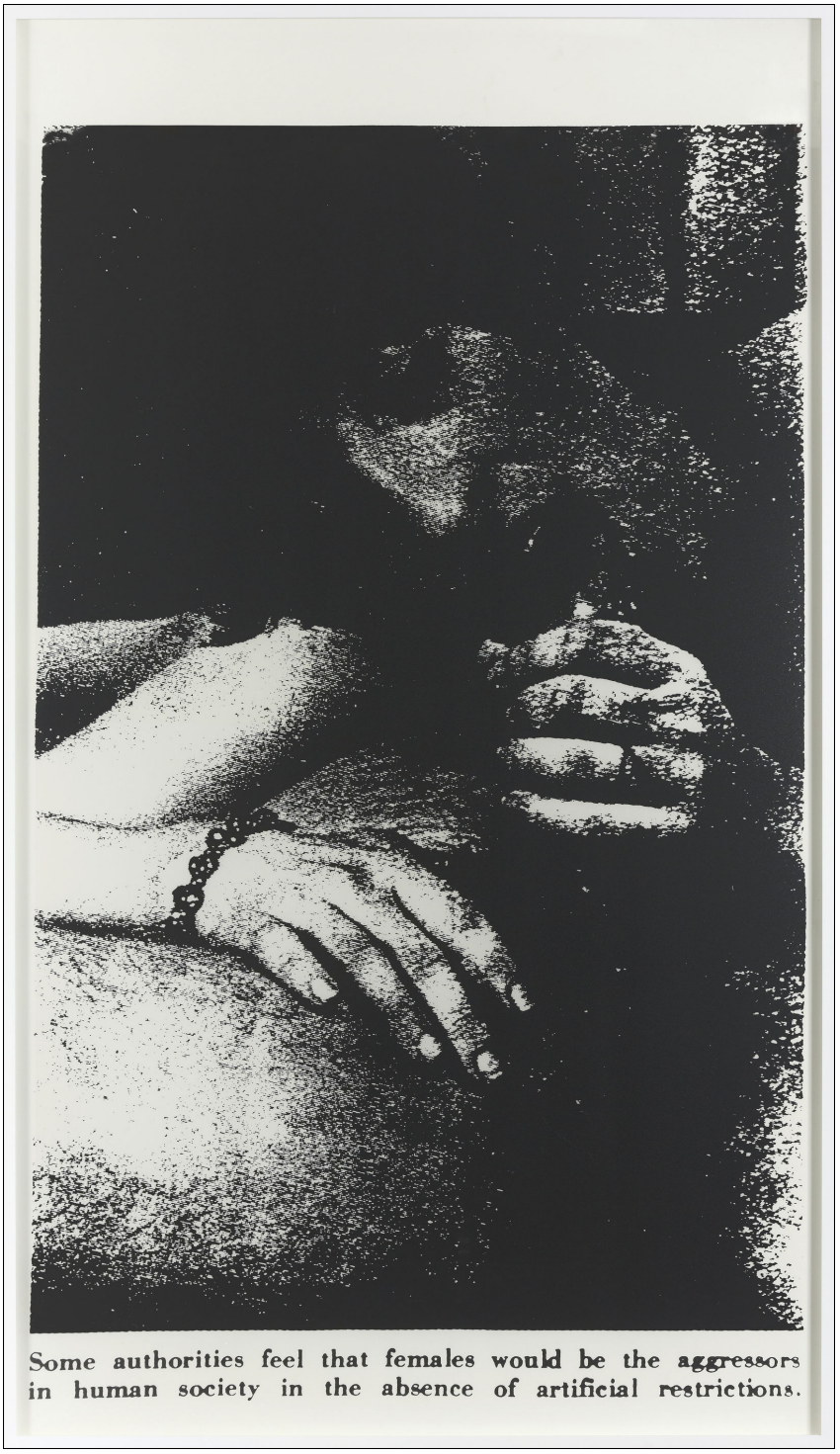
Notwithstanding the visually repetitive subject, on a linguistic level, the captions offer a great variety of bizarre interpretations. Still, they rarely fail to refer to the oral service depicted. Their main purpose appears to be to deny the female protagonists any sexual pleasure whatsoever – even though or maybe because the images themselves could not prove that point. The captions inform their readers that the women in those scenes are to be regarded as objects only: objects of observation, analysis, or male lust. Through the

7
This 'camouflage' is not exceptional; a subgenre of soft porn, it performs a kind of role play for its readers. The assumably inappropriate situation even enhances the erotic appeal rather than killing it. For a more detailed discussion of this seeming paradox, see Jörg Metelmann, Das Erregungsdispositiv. Lust nach Foucault, in: id. (ed.), *Porno-Pop II. Im Erregungsdispositiv*, Würzburg 2010, 137–156; Paul-Philipp Hanske, Zwischen Pornografie und Prüderie. Anmerkungen zu einer nur scheinbar widersprüchlichen Konstellation der Gegenwart, in: Metelmann, Porno-Pop, 211–215.



[Fig. 6]
Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, 1986, nine black and white photographs, ca. 183 × 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

[Fig. 7]
Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, 1986, nine black and white photographs, ca. 183 × 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.



[Fig. 8]
Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, 1986, nine black and white photographs, ca. 183 × 101.6 cm.
Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

rational authority of language, the captions are not only ensuring the hierarchical order in the depicted narrative but the mastery of an anticipated consumer of the original photo story, too.

This anticipated audience is not very likely to be the same audience of Bacher's artworks – overlaps cannot be precluded, of course. Nevertheless, her audience, an art audience, is equally involved in the content as it has learned to pay particular attention to the form. As the transfer from an article of secretive daily use to an art object significantly changes its mode of reception, art viewers who are used to close inspection, thorough examination, and intellectual immersion might be held at a distance by the magnified succession of dicks, cum, and allegedly perverted girls; they might even feel repelled being exposed to visuals that are silently condoned in private but quite naturally declared inappropriate in public domains. To read the captions, the viewers of the artworks are forced to get closer and even drawn to bow down in front of the abject-turned-valued depictions of sexual conduct.

It seems not bold to assume that viewers back then were prone to that kind of response: to feel provoked, offended, or disgusted. But they were equally likely to be somewhat affected physically, even aroused by those images. *Sex with Strangers* mobilized – and continues to mobilize – two contradictory reactions: attraction and repulsion, the former just as inadvertently experienced as the latter is culturally achieved.[8]

II. Sexual Politics

Western societies do not stand out with a considerable tradition of erotic art. Depictions of sexual activities, Michel Foucault argued, instead flourished under the auspices of a *scientia sexualis*, simultaneously inspiring a profound tradition of censorship.[9] Pornography as an "integral part of sexuality"[10] is usually deemed inappropriate in bourgeois contexts, excessively condemned, and prosecuted.[11] However, the cultural abjection does not prevent onlookers from potentially feeling stimulated, even aroused. According to Gertrud Koch, quite the contrary is the case: the social inadequacy is rather

[8] Susan Sontag, The Pornographic Imagination, in: ead., *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York 1978, 205–233, here 228. This negation in Foucauldian terms only indicates their position in a system of political and economic power. See Michel Foucault, *Der Wille zum Wissen*, Frankfurt a. M. 1983, 19–20.

[9] Foucault, Wille zum Wissen, 61.

[10] Getrud Koch, Netzhautsex – Sehen als Akt, in: Georg Stanizek and Wilhelm Voßkamp (eds.), *Schnittstelle. Medien und Kulturwissenschaften*, Cologne 2001, 101–110, here 109.

[11] To Foucault the level of prosecution indicates the actual level of perversion in nineteenth-century bourgeois societies. Foucault, Wille zum Wissen, 51.

notorious to enhance the thrill.[12] This ambiguity might be specific to the pornographic genre, and Bacher made use of what Susan Sontag called pornography's "small crude vocabulary of feeling, all relating to the prospects of action: feeling one would like to act (lust); feeling one would not like to act (shame, fear, aversion)".[13]

Still, the artist chose to showcase a rather tame genre of pornography. In a social hierarchy of perversions that gradually descends from the ideal of reproductive lovemaking to queer sado-masochistic role-play,[14] there was much room if provocation had been Bacher's prime intention. The fellatio we are exposed to instead performs a heterosexual version of sexuality with genitals at least partly covered (if being sucked counts as covering). In this way, we might recognize the more subtle mechanisms of how a gendered hierarchy of sexual desire is established, and, as I will argue later on, how this hierarchy continues in terms of social class, in fact being essentially connected to it.

From this perspective the captions will not sound curious or absurd anymore. Within a misogynist and androcentric socio-cultural environment they make perfect sense. Through the captions any emancipatory momentum of the visual impression – e.g., the women enjoying the event – is thwarted for good reason: They maintain the sexual order of Western societies that equals the social order. Yet in 1981 the theorist and author Adrienne Rich described this culture in terms of a "compulsory heterosexuality".[15] As female sexuality was considered merely reproductive, Rich explains, libidinal sovereignty for women was hardly conceivable. To acknowledge sexual pleasure (outside of reproductive purposes) by the female protagonists as legitimate, and not as perverted or the result of a pathologic mental disorder, would appear as a threat to this exact order. The point Rich and other feminists were trying to make was that patriarchy and heteronormativity are essentially connected.

The captions bear witness to the sexual morals of the time; indeed, they invert what Walter Benjamin once claimed for the politically engaged photo-editor – to add captions in the service of a revolutionary use value.[16] This schism between text and image, however, was likely never intended to trick censorship authorities.

12
Gertrud Koch, Schattenreich der Körper. Zum pornografischen Kino, in: Karola Gramman et al. (eds.), *Lust und Elend. Das erotische Kino*, Munich 1981, 16–39, 134–137, here 18–19.

13
Sontag, Pornographic Imagination, 228.

14
Gayle Rubin, Thinking Sex. Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality, in: Carol Vance (ed.), *Pleasure and Danger. Exploring Female Sexuality*, London 1992, 267–319, here 279–284.

15
Adrienne Rich, Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence, in: *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5/4, Women: Sex and Sexuality, Summer 1980, 631–660.

16
Walter Benjamin, Der Autor als Produzent. Ansprache im Institut zum Studium des Fascismus in Paris am 27. April 1934, in: id., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 683–701, here 693.

In fact, it appears as if it rather aimed at confirming claims of male hegemony to its own audience and morally justifies itself at the same time.

Sex with Strangers is part of a larger body of work with similar trajectories: Bacher frequently pursued subjects orbiting around sexual obsession, perversion, and desire; and she frequently found her material in the trivial remnants of media and mass culture. Especially during the 1970s and 1980s, recurrent themes included implicit and explicit performances reaffirming sexual and gender identity, social techniques of physical and mental regulation, as well as (im)possible subject positions that embodied certain power structures and body politics. Pornography herein is equally a source as, for instance, tabloid media (*Jokes*, 1985–1988; *Jackie and Me*, 1989), TV broadcasting of a rape trial (*My Penis*, 1992), gynecological intervention (*Huge Uterus*, 1989; *Menstrual Extraction Kit*, 1991) as well as administrative actions around child abuse (*Big Boy*, 1992; *Who Did This to You?*, 1992). Liz Kotz summarized Bacher's work as "obsessively exploring these sites of misogyny", adding with regards to *Sex with Strangers* that "all culture is a site of misogyny (porn [...] has no special status)".[17]

Perhaps not a special status, yet certainly an area with extremely heightened emotional tension. In choosing porn as the subject matter of her art practice, the artist addressed an issue that could not have been more controversial during the 1980s, as Lynne Segal emphasized: "Coupled with shifts in feminist sexual politics and theory, pornography became the feminist issue of the 1980s."[18] Moreover, it was not only an issue for feminists but their opponents as well. While the display of sex acts and nudity was subject to discussions since the end of the 1960s, a growing popularity of erotic art sparked broader controversies, too.[19]

The political climate at the beginning of the 1980s had shifted significantly. Not only had the discussions become more heated, with the election of the former actor Ronald Reagan as the President of the United States the conflicts increasingly shifted to professional and institutional settings. While earlier pornography was criticized primarily by marginalized feminist groups condemning its customary misogyny, now we see government authorities and administration take up the subject matter on behalf of Reagan's conservative policies. So-called radical feminists as well as ultra conservative

17
Liz Kotz, Complicity. Women Artists Investigating Masculinity, in: Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (eds.), *Dirty Looks. Women, Pornography, Power*, London 1993, 101–123, here 112.

18
Lynne Segal, Only the Literal. The Contradictions of Anti-Pornography, in: Pamela Church Gibson (ed.), *More Dirty Looks. Gender, Pornography and Power*, London 2003 [1998], 59–70, here 61.

19
Rachel Middleman, Anita Steckel's Feminist Montage. Merging Politics, Art, and Life, in: *Woman's Art Journal* 34/1, 2013, 21–29, here 26.

politicians and religious zealots of a "moral majority"[20] suddenly formed a bizarre alliance. Their coalition was based on shared enemies rather than on shared beliefs about gender equality. Albeit a tenuous affiliation, it did not diminish their determination.

III. Strange Bedfellows

Pornography as a subject offered an outlet for social tensions with enormous political and emotional poignancy. The debates were divided by two camps – "Anti-Porn" and "Pro Sex"[21] – and while the feminist movement never had been homogenous, it now was split into irreconcilable fronts across all previous factions.[22] During the 1982 annual Barnard Conference "The Scholar and the Feminist" with the theme "Towards a Politics of Sexuality" a scandal marked the official outbreak of the so-called sex wars. After the organizers decided to exclude anti-porn campaigning groups, their members in turn handed out leaflets in front of the venue, protesting and trying to agitate visitors against the event. In those leaflets, Elizabeth Wilson reports, the organizers "were accused of having invited speakers who supported forms of 'patriarchal' and 'anti-feminist' sexuality such as sado-masochism and paedophilia. No woman was mentioned by name, but it was clear who was being attacked."[23]

While the atmosphere was already tense during the preparations of the event, it was now accompanied by open fights throughout.[24] There was not much controversy about sexist and misogynist stereotypes in popular mainstream porn. The question, as Gayle Rubin explained, was rather about what political power can be attributed to the field of sexuality: was it either an essentially repressive tool in the service of patriarchy, or an inherently emancipatory practice opposing it? Answers to that question were

20
"The Moral Majority was a fundamentalist Christian organization founded by televangelist Jerry Falwell in 1979. The Moral Majority was established to preserve 'traditional' American values and to combat increasing acceptance of social movements and culture changes. The organization became a major political influence in its opposition to gay rights, abortion, feminism, and other liberal movements during the 1980s. In 1989, Falwell disbanded the organization, declaring that it had achieved its goals." Gilder-Lehrman Institute of American History, cit. from: Anthony Hatcher, *Religion and Media in America*, London 2018, xxxv.

21
Ann Ferguson Philipson, Carole S. Vance, and Ann Barr Snitow (eds.), Forum. The Feminist Sexuality Debates, in: *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 10/1, 1984, 102–135.

22
Rich, Compulsory Heterosexuality, 272. See also: Carol S. Vance, More Danger, Pleasure. A Decade of the Barnard Sexuality Conference, in: Vance, Pleasure, xvi–xxxix, here xxii; Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars. Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, London/New York 1995.

23
Elizabeth Wilson, The Context of 'Between Pleasure and Danger'. The Barnard Conference on Sexuality, in: *Feminist Review* 13, 1983, 35–41, here 36.

24
Ibid., 37–38.

dependent on the references of reasoning, and they were irreducible. Essentially it was a matter of determining legitimate and illegitimate sexual practices or if that discrimination was productive at all.[25]

When Attorney General Edwin Meese published his report commissioned by the Reagan administration, asserting that pornography indeed was an existential threat to society, it was applauded by both their disciples and radical feminists like Catherine McKinnon and *Women Against Pornography* (WAP), with Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin as their most popular members. The findings claimed to prove – with an inconsistent and biased scientific methodology as the activist Pat Califia highlighted – that current porn had become more violent and would therefore lead to increased violence against women.[26] To protect women, pornography needed to be banished. Due to Meese's assessments, the line now was redrawn. Restrictions were extended to content that might qualify as "non-obscene" but found guilty of being "offensive". It appeared as if any portrayal of sexuality had become a target of censorship. Surprisingly, this was not exactly the case. The actual enforcement was highly dependent on media and channels of distribution. Most of all it was visual media that was at risk.

Rubin in retrospect identified the explosive nature of the report in its power to provide a lawful foundation for conservatives as the Republican and Christian right parties to expand restrictive censorship policies. As a result, Rubin concluded, it was possible to consolidate reproductive heterosexuality as norm and ideal, whereas all deviations from that could be banned.[27] The Meese-Report institutionalized a massive cultural backlash against initiatives for sexual liberation of the previous decade. In this light, *Sex with Strangers* becomes significant as a nuanced comment on these discussions.

IV. The Power of Porn

From a perspective of media studies, Koch reminds us that one of the reasons why pornography must appear so threatening to its critics lies in its special ability to undermine common standards of representation. In this early study, the film scholar explored the impact of the genre to Western audiences through a history of its

25
Rubin, Thinking Sex, 280–281.

26
Califia revealed the survey's inconsistencies in a rigorous examination. According to them, critical accounts by experts were not considered, also the methodological standards were not scientifically justified. The survey was set up to present prefabricated and unambiguous results, Califia claimed. Pat Califia, The Obscene, Disgusting, and Vile Meese Commission Report, in: id., *Public Sex. The Culture of Radical Sex*, San Francisco 2000, 42–54, here 47. The article was first published in 1986 in *The Advocate*.

27
Gayle Rubin, Afterword to "Thinking Sex. Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality", in: ead., *Deviations. A Gayle Rubin Reader*, Durham, NC/London 2011 [1993], 182–189.

usage, that is, early, public screenings at a cinema.[28] Koch later described how pornography always involves a self-referential quality, thus strictly evading a non-pornographic representation. A representation of sexuality, according to Koch, is always sexual in itself, and a somatic response is part of its genuine purpose. She refers to Susan Sontag's observation that even a parody of pornography will essentially be pornographic. As Koch explains, this is why "cultural critics and naysayers crying for regulations have a reason to do so, as pornography in the media indeed has physical consequences: It does not only show sexuality but is a part of it."[29]

In one of her rare interviews, Bacher too refers to that peculiar quality of *Sex with Strangers*: "The work, no matter what reading someone may give the images, is an extreme form of sexual representation."[30] Extreme in that it continuously exceeds the boundaries of conventional ideas of representation, also known as the paradigm of "representationalism", that Karen Barad described as:

> the belief in the ontological distinctions between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities: representations and entities to represent.[31]

With porn the problem of representation as described by Barad is added a third party. Pornography as a genre, and therefore *Sex with Strangers* as a pornographic artwork, displays an extreme, but exemplary instance of how we are physically involved in the process of seeing. This double nature of seeing something and at the same time being corporeally involved reminds us, as Koch notes, of this very thin line that separates us from the world of objects, even though we are inevitably part of it.[32] By immediately revoking the idea of an ultimate "line" that may or may not be crossed, Koch's observation rather suggests a spatial organization of this triangle. The challenge here is differentiation.

Considering the particular composition of the images, *Sex with Strangers* even underlines Koch's argument. It might not be mere

28
Koch, Schattenreich.

29
Koch, Netzhautsex, 109 (my translation).

30
Carol S. Vance, Photography, Pornography and Sexual Politics, in: *Aperture* 121, The Body in Question, 1990, 52–65, here 60.

31
Karen Barad, Posthumanist Performativity. Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, in: *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28/3, Gender and Science. New Issues, 2003, 801–831, here 804.

32
Koch, Netzhautsex, 110.

coincidence that the artist chose a motif that provides an ideal opportunity for identification to its male audiences. As the camera captured the oral service's recipient only by his pubic area, viewers are invited to adopt his position, if only imaginary: one can easily relate to the images by connecting a somatic response with the depicted center of genital arousal. This transfer, however, is not exclusive to male spectators. Quite the contrary, Kotz reminds us, this identificatory process is open to all audiences and not just those who identify as male. According to Kotz, being viscerally affected by porn is not dependent on identification with, or attribution to a certain gender and/or sexuality. *Sex with Strangers* thus evokes a whole range of potentially instable impressions in its audiences.

V. A Class Struggle of Sexuality

How then would viewers of the artwork have reacted towards an object that was highly charged on a socio-political and discursive level and at the same time powerfully incited a visceral response? Due to the lack of historical reviews or witnesses' reports, an answer to this question must remain speculation. What we can and should consider nevertheless is a network of customary habits and socio-cultural positions that *Sex with Strangers* evokes. We *can* assume that a certain audience back then was sensitive to the subject matter, and we have reason to believe that potential irritations not only involved conflicting ideas about sexuality. It encompassed a division in socio-economical hierarchies as well. By placing the socially lowest image production into a high art context, *Sex with Strangers* does not simply bank on a potential shock effect of the images. It reminds us of the class implications that sexual morals and the art world shared back then and potentially continue to share.

Technically, the sex wars' moral outrage of a mostly (but not alone) bourgeois middle and upper class was directed at an industry whose members traditionally were neither highly regarded, nor were they generously rewarded for their work financially. Existing social hierarchies thus were confirmed and reinforced according to Segal:

> [T]hose who are socially powerful have not always exploited the relatively powerless (in all ways, including sexual), but projected the troubling, 'dirty' aspects of sex onto them. This is why it is not only women's bodies, but black and working class bodies, which are mythically invested with sexuality in dominant Western discourse and iconography.[33]

Despite the porn industry's massive expansion during the 1980s due to the widespread technology of home video, the earnings were not

[33] Segal, Only the Literal, 58–59.

– as usually – equally distributed among its producers.[34] Porn had become a "multibillion-dollar industry"[35] and succeeded in establishing a certain star cult. This, however, did not change anything about the social reputation it entailed.[36]

Sex with Strangers on a formal level reenacts the social differential typical to the sex wars. The artist transfers material deemed inferior, literally vulgar (in a sense of "for common folk") into an art context that is traditionally receptive to social distinction and elitism.[37] Not only did the photo series clearly challenge sexual morals and standards of decency back then (and to some audiences today, too). Time and again, and clearly in this series, Bacher's artworks challenge the unwritten laws of an environment where the cultivation and refinement of taste justify social superiority.

"'[T]aste' [is] the code word for the class variety of consumption",[38] as art historian Susan Steward described the downwards directed dynamics of cultural distinction in her study on bibliophile practices at the transition from arts and crafts to mass production.[39] Steward affirmed Pierre Bourdieu's sociological observations as presented in his book *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated to English in 1984. Bourdieu outlined the mechanisms of cultural taste making as an instrument for establishing and confirming social hierarchies. Those social hierarchies, according to Bourdieu, are connected to economic hierarchies. An ability of aesthetic judgment – the *right* judgment – in his theory serves as a major lever for cultural discrimination: "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make [...]."[40]

Pornography, as Rubin argued in her presentation at the ill-fated Barnard Conference, was exploited in the service of ideological warfare. The sex wars stage a highly significant scene for social hierarchies and discrimination that are based on sexual identities

34
Paul Willemen, For a Pornoscape, in: Church Gibson, More Dirty Looks, 9–27, here 16–18. The case of Linda Lovelace, main actor of the notorious movie *Deep Throat* (1972), marks a prime example. Anonymous (*The Guardian* staff), Blow for Freedom, 28 April 2002 (27.01.2023).

35
Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, Minneapolis 1986, 43.

36
Drucilla Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain. Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment*, New York/London 1995, 95.

37
Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London/New York 1996.

38
Susan Steward, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore 1984, 35.

39
Ibid., 34–37.

40
Bourdieu, Distinction, 6.

and practices.[41] Pornography, Rubin emphasized further, is not the reason but the battlefield in a class struggle of sexuality. "Modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value."[42] Rubin did not use the term class struggle in a metaphorical way, and she underlines the fact, that "sexual value" was directly related to a material value system. Whatever deviates from the normative ideal would be labeled "obscene". Consequently, those individuals would be expelled to the marginal territories – medially, spatially, and culturally – as much as they would be criminalized and sanctioned.[43] Because the fiction of heteronormativity is deeply rooted in bourgeois communities, even the most trivial mainstream pornography can appear as a threat to the imperative of reproductive sexuality.[44]

What was at stake for the opponents of the sex wars was located at the heart of the cultural elites, as Eleanor Heartney described: "[P]ornography [...] challenges sacred cows like the nuclear family, monogamy, heterosexuality and the tie between sex and reproduction."[45]

Still, not only this existential threat renders pornography so critical to bourgeois culture, Segal argued instead. Referring to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, she claimed the condemnation of porn essential for mainstream society:

> [T]he bourgeois subject, continuously defined and redefined itself through the exclusion of what is marked out as low – as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating [...]. The pornographic is what high culture wants to banish and abject, it is thus necessarily about excess and extremity.[46]

Stallybras and White did go further in their conclusion, though. To them such aggressions reveal an inherent weakness, as they explained in their 1986 treatise *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*: "[T]hat very act of exclusion", as Segal's quote continues in the original paragraph by Stallybrass and White, "was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and

41
Rubin's groundbreaking treatise "Thinking Sex" is based on their presentation at the Barnard Conference.

42
Rubin, Thinking Sex, 279.

43
Ibid., 279–284.

44
Peter Gorsen, *Sexualästhetik. Zur bürgerlichen Rezeption von Obszönität und Pornographie*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1972, here 14–15 and 92–93.

45
Eleanor Heartney, In Defense of Pornography. A Necessary Transgression, in: *New Art Examiner* 20, 1988, 20–23, here 21.

46
Segal, Only the Literal, 50.

disgust. But disgust always bears the imprint of desire."[47] Porn during the 1980s apparently served as a complex framework to define social bonds or borders.

VI. Consumer Society

Sex with Strangers addressed this topic of social classes by introducing an allegedly inferior and inappropriate subject to a high art environment, triggering a literal clash of cultures in the gallery space.[48] It remains to be discussed if that kind of conflict would still be acute today and for whom, and it seems unlikely that this was Bacher's main interest in the series.

Still, there is another feature that might lead viewers to a materialist reading of the photo series. In the most literal way, the motif of fellatio invokes an event of consumption: gaping mouths, licking, sucking, devouring their object of desire, the women virtually gorging the penis to which their attention is drawn. To someone not familiar with the sexual practice the scenes must appear like cannibalistic acts. The pleasure now would certainly be the female protagonist's; furthermore, the myth of oedipal castration anxiety seems cruelly – or ironically – confirmed. The manner of this consumption indicates far beyond simple ingestion. Viewers witness the protagonists' utter incorporation of their prey.

This, admittedly unusual, reading of the work might not be too far-fetched. The subject of consumption provided one of the most prominent topoi to cultural discourse during the 1980s.[49] Consumption, by complementing the former guiding principle of production, provided another leitmotif to postmodern theory as it was conceived by Fredric Jameson, Francois Lyotard, or the abovementioned Bourdieu;[50] Jean Baudrillard had diagnosed the condition of a "Consumer Society" in 1970 already.[51]

While the leading scholars of postmodern theory focused on the consumption of commodities more generally, the connection to sexual behavior has been drawn as well. Since the early 1970s, Peter Gorsen, an Austrian art historian, for instance, explored how current modes of consumption have condensed in sexual and economic

47
Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, NY 1986, 191.

48
Way more radical than artists in Dada and Pop Art movements, where everyday objects were integrated into artworks, postmodern artists transcended the boundaries of an aesthetic difference between the artwork and 'commercial' or mass-media objects.

49
For an in-depth study, see Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, London/Los Angeles 2007.

50
Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism and Consumer Society, in: Hal Foster, *The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays in Post-Modern Culture*, New York 1992 [1983], 111–125.

51
Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures*, London 1999.

habits. Gorsen found that "during industrial capitalism, a distorted and illusional structure of needs specific to the pornographer has become an essential part of consumerist structures of needs".[52] A decade later, film scholar B Ruby Rich connected her analysis of the social phenomenon with a practical call for action:

> To use women to sell products, to use pornography to sell genital arousal, there has to be an economic system that makes the use profitable. Porn is just one product in the big social supermarket. Without an analysis of consumer culture, our understanding of pornography is pathetically limited, bogged down in the undifferentiated swamp of morality and womanly purity.[53]

Although not in the service of an overt feminist agenda, the aim of Gorsen's study on "the bourgeois reception of obscenity and pornography" was anticipatory of Rich's claim.[54] To him, high-frequency consumerism offered a way to understand the connection between the respective aesthetics of sexuality and commodity culture. Based on this assumption, he developed a materialist analysis of so-called obscene or pornographic artistic strategies as part of a more general critique of hegemony. His anti-bourgeois approach aimed at art as well as aesthetics.[55] Fellatio-as-consumption, according to his theory, would flag a fatal instance of hedonism that suspends the bourgeois imperative of modesty and decency on an existential level. In one chapter of his "Sexualästhetik", Gorsen indeed talks about cannibalistic transgressions, yet performed by male artists only. While his account deploys quite conventional gender dynamics, Bacher's photographs refuse to support an androcentric narrative. If we stick to what we see instead of what we have learned to 'read', we find the female protagonists awarded agency, while the male participants appear reduced to a mere genital.

Obviously, this observation will not cause an immediate reversal of a masculinist pleasure principle. Our image is still tied to its degrading caption, and a mainstream society will still consider such images inappropriate. Now here, I argue, the aesthetic distance of the reproduction to its original comes into play and calls for a break: technically a copy, *Sex with Strangers* conflicts with the rationale of traditional art and would inevitably fail to evoke bourgeois vir-

52
Gorsen, Sexualästhetik, 90 (my translation).

53
B Ruby Rich, Antiporn. Soft Issue, Hard World (*Not a Love Story*) (1982–83), in: ead., *Chick Flicks. Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement*, Durham, NC/London, 1998, 261–273, here 270.

54
The title of Gorsen's book translates to "Aesthetic of Sexuality. On the Bourgeois Reception of Obscenity and Pornography".

55
Gorsen, Sexualästhetik, 143.

tue just as the captions hardly permit a feminist appropriation of the matter. Subversion, it appears, is not achieved through simple reversal. Bacher refuses to explicitly 'reveal' any underlying message of the source material. What the artistic strategy highlights instead are the aesthetic conventions of artistic production during that time – that is, the conditions of artistic articulation itself. Bacher's 'reproduction' of the pornographic matter indeed evokes – or mocks? – one of the most popular artistic strategies during the 1980s. By appropriating the tools of appropriation, she manages to add a third layer to the sex/money situation operative in *Sex with Strangers*: the layer of normative art discourse.

VII. Damaged Goods on the Shelves of the Art Market

Commercial imagery and the diverse aesthetics of mass culture were notoriously idiosyncratic to artistic projects today subsumed under the label "Appropriation Art". First introduced by a so-called Pictures Generation with considerable success within the art market, appropriation subsequently was put into service of a new strand of commodity critique.[56] The use of everyday goods and representations taken from mass media often pointed at an all-encompassing consumerism and life's subjection to a commercial regime. Even though such transgressions of "high" and "low" were of course common in Western art since modern avantgardes, in 1987 curator Carol Squiers diagnosed a "total interpenetration and interdependence of the spheres 'high' and 'low' photography, including advertising, news and fashion imagery, both as subject and as form".[57]

In retrospect, artist Rachel Harrison identified a conflict not always convincingly resolved by appropriating artists: "They made work that was political, but its forms mirrored the economy of the times."[58] A skyrocketing art market only underlines Harrison's assessment. "Commodity critique", according to its critics, enabled a detached audience to affirm the shortcomings of capitalism without any risk or personal commitment. Ultimately it was agreed upon the commodity-status of the artwork; a condition that can only be celebrated ironically, as Eleanor Heartney commented on some cynical instances of artistic commodity critique.[59]

Sex with Strangers might use a similar aesthetic strategy based on repetition, reproduction, and deflation. But clearly it does not attempt to release the tension of its source equally entangled within the forces of late capitalism. Bacher appropriates appropriation, and

[56] Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodernism. Movements in Modern Art*, London 2001, 42–56.

[57] Carol Squiers, The Monopoly of Appearances, in: *Flash Art* 132, 1987, 98–100, here 98.

[58] Rachel Harrison, '80s Again, in: *Artforum* 41/7, 2003, 246.

[59] Heartney, Postmodernism, 42.

to a male-centered leftist art discourse and Marxist intelligentsia she introduces a subject that was persistently ignored. Still, we do not simply find porn highlighted as a commodity in a barely post-Fordist society. *Sex with Strangers* addresses a corresponding feature between the unique commodities of sex and art that Jennifer Doyle in her analysis of Andy Warhol's "Forged Image: Centerfold by Andy Warhol" describes as "[t]he homology between pornography and art – [...] something that is not supposed to have a market (but clearly does)".[60] This conflict, Doyle convincingly argues, is at the core of aesthetic judgment and provides an essential criteria to disqualify art that threatens bourgeois moral concepts: "[T]he practice of mixing things that are supposed to be kept separate (sex and money) emerges as the negative ground against which critics might assert the autonomy of art, the independence of aesthetic value from the economic, the political, or the sexual."[61]

Whether intended or not, *Sex with Strangers* might provide a comment on the artistic practice of Bacher's contemporaries by mobilizing these exact entanglements. Artistic commodity critique fails, if one's own position is neglected in a system that is an economic system as well. Bacher does not simply appropriate an ordinary commodity – "mags which can be easily identified as commodities"[62] – as Johanna Drucker explained, but one that is – just like art – illegitimate from the start: the value of art cannot be quantified, but clearly it has a price. This makes a complacent critique of capitalism uncomfortable, and such contradictions are not easily resolved. *Sex with Strangers* therefore does not participate in the cool and distant, ironic aesthetics of appropriation art and commodity critique. Explicit-to-unsettling, and still potentially alluring images draw viewers into complicity. One's own moral superiority becomes fragile and so does an alleged superiority of discourse. Pornography's somatic capability makes the series hijack a seemingly independent reception of art.

Sex, money, art – those vehicles of social communication in Bacher's photo series are condensed to a happy threesome, one might say. Arguing that the connection between the formal design and these three fields of interaction can be identified in the event of repetition/reproduction, I now hope to come full circle to where I started, suggesting that *Sex with Strangers* performs a complex choreography of closeness and distance, not as a matter of space but in terms of socio-political territories.

60
Jennifer Doyle, Tricks of the Trade. Pop Art and the Rhetoric of Prostitution, in: ead., *Sex Objects. Art and the Dialectics of Desire*, Minneapolis 2006, 45–70, here 70.

61
Ibid., 53. Juliane Rebentisch positioned a similar conflict at the heart of modern aesthetic theory by Theodor W. Adorno. See ead., Die Liebe zur Kunst und deren Verkennung. Adornos Modernismus, in: *Texte zur Kunst* 52, 2003, 78–85.

62
Johanna Drucker, The Pornographic Response, in: Lutz Bacher (ed.), *Theory/Flesh*, Berkeley, CA 1986, 19–20, here 19.

VIII. Repetition and Difference

As we have seen, the gesture of repetition/reproduction is implicit on every level of the artwork: first, on the level of category by representing an article from mass media only comprehensible as a multiple as opposed to the originality of the artwork; second, by the accumulation of the same scene over and over in similar, but different iterations of nine individual but equivalent images; and third, by staging non-reproductive sexual acts during a cultural drift (or backlash, as Susan Faludi interpreted it) where normative ideas of procreative sexuality were heavily defended.[63] Finally, the operating principle of pornography itself can be described as a repetitive variation of the ever-same: hardly innovative but "mechanical and compulsively repeating"[64] events, as Koch described pornography's "cinematographic commodity flow".[65] At the core of the pornographic repertoire since its professionalization and industrialization lies the transition of individuals into shadows that move according to a prescribed pattern.[66]

Sex with Strangers reproduces, serializes, and increases the repetition. None of these repetitions is a duplicate. Every repetition modifies its objects, it steadily creates a distance from its reference by inserting a deviation: tonal gradation is flattened by Xerox copy, photography scales up the format just as it reduces the resolution. The appearance of the "original" images is significantly modified but unified to a template of fellatio, it shows straight sex gone pervy, suddenly inadequate. Bacher's repetitions do not stop at the satisfactory "quotational marks", that Abigail Solomon-Godeau identified as the characteristic operation of appropriation, "asserting both its textuality and its conventionality".[67] Bacher instead highlights a materiality of both the artwork and the viewer. Cool irony does not provide an easy escape – neither to the artist, nor to us. Equally, we are 'in the image' through neither an intellectual or empathetic

63
Susan Faludi, *Backlash. The Undeclared War against Women*, New York 1991. Her study in turn received substantial criticism for not considering different sets of discrimination based on race, class, and sexuality. Another instance of repetition can be identified in the repetitive logic of normative gender construction that, according to Judith Butler, itself works as imitating an imaginary reference through performative repetition. Judith Butler, Imitation and Gender Insubordination, in: Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside/Out. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, New York 1992, 13–31, here 23.

64
Koch, Schattenreich, 37 (my translation). Philosopher Slavoj Žižek more recently made a similar observation in his book *Körperlose Organe. Bausteine für eine Begegnung zwischen Deleuze und Lacan*, Frankfurt a. M. 2005, here 236.

65
Koch, Schattenreich, 16 (my translation).

66
Ibid., 35.

67
Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Sexual Difference. Both Sides of the Camera, in: *Sexual Difference. Both Sides of the Camera* (exh. cat. New York, Wallach Art Gallery), ed. by Wallach Art Gallery, New York 1988, 21.

investment, nor a Kantian "interesseloses Wohlgefallen" (disinterested pleasure), but as corporeally and viscerally affective lumps of human substance.

Pornography offers a perfect opportunity to examine our own involvement, as Johanna Drucker elaborated in the 1986 edition of the newspaper-styled magazine "Theory & Flesh", edited by Bacher herself:

> [O]bscenity, like any aesthetic value, operates through the beholder. Pornography is undoubtedly a response, rather than a form, but a generatable which depends upon, relies upon, the manipulable machine of viewer/artifact, spectator/symbolic, which has its territorial zones demarcated within a cultural configuration which sustains the taboos, which so effectively manipulate the construction of individual desire. The most intimate level of response is precisely the one which demonstrates the extreme lack of individual control over the very processes which elaborate and articulate the "self" in its irrefutably social context. The urge towards a pornography is real, the place it occupies in the social realm demonstrates the effectiveness of the underwritten rules of order which display themselves through our action, words, and responses.[68]

Sex with Strangers transposes the shared antinomies of a dominant sexual culture and a culture of consumption – excessive and moralizing, regulatory and emancipatory at the same time – into a complex work structure where neither supporters nor the enemies of pornography would have found their position backed up.

It might well be open for discussion whether the images would spark considerable controversy today. A 2014 presentation at Galerie Buchholz in Cologne to my knowledge did not cause public disturbance. Morals have changed in Europe just as much as in the United States, and so have the habits of consumption – of sex, art, and other commodities. Neatly framed and perfectly staged in the white cube of a gallery, the distance of the artwork to its original reference might have been increased even more, supporting a dispassionate viewing of the sex scenes [Fig. 9]. The war zones appear to have shifted, indeed. Still, a "pornographic response" is not eliminated. We might find ourselves reassessing a response that we did neither ask for, nor necessarily enjoy. Are we corrupted by the image then, or simply exposed?

Susanne Huber works as a researcher in art history / art theory with a focus on feminist, queer, and postcolonial theories and topics. She obtained her PhD at Freie Universität Berlin with a study on

68
Drucker, Pornographic Response, 19.

[Fig. 9]
Exhibition view, Lutz Bacher, Sex with Strangers, Galerie Buchholz, Cologne, April/May 2014. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne/New York.

Lutz Bacher, Sarah Charlesworth, and Barbara Bloom ("Vom Konsum des Begehrens. Appropriation Art, Sex Wars und ein postmoderner Bilderstreit", published by De Gruyter in 2022) as part of the research project "Aesthetics of Desire. Counter-Hegemonic Visualizations of Bodies, Sexuality, and Gender", funded by the German Research Association. Discussing together art theory, a particular political debate, and a postmodern discourse on consumption she explored how appropriation in this context refers to normative concepts of difference, attributions of value, and formal conflicts of repetition. After teaching in Berlin, Halle, and Zurich, she currently holds a position at the University of Bremen.