

Venus Envy

A generation of feminist artists, censured for their sexual explicitness, are being recognised in a new section at Frieze London. Curator Alison Gingeras tells all to Rachel Middleman

Rachel Middleman: This special section of Frieze London that you've curated, *Sex Work*, highlights women artists who have delved into explicit sexual imagery. What first sparked your interest in this theme?

Alison Gingeras: In 2010, I was commissioned to write an essay about Jeff Koons's infamous 'Made in Heaven' series. I decided to write about his work by locating the lineage of women artists who were making sex-positive art and performance in the 1960s and '70s. This 'matriarchy' directly

enabled Koons's work: but, to my knowledge, this was never explicitly recognised. I argued in the essay that Koons's critical reputation and mainstream notoriety can really be traced to the moment that he married Ilona Staller aka La Cicciolina – the Hungarian porn star and Italian anarchist politician, who I would argue co-authored 'Made in Heaven'. I entitled my essay 'Born Through Porn: How Jeff Koons became Jeff Koons'.

This essay was a back door into the fringes of feminist art history and feminist discourses for me, and very



RM: How do you think this 'sex positive' work is relevant again to today's audiences?

AG: My generation took for granted the achievements of feminism – our ambivalence took for granted the hard-fought battles won for women's rights and freedom of sexual speech. In working on this project, I began to realize how many women of our generation – myself included! – had demonstrated an internalised misogyny towards women artists and did not recognise the role they played in this corner of the revolutions of the '60s and '70s, and in giving rise to the 'sex positivity' that dominates a lot of pop culture today.

This chapter of art history informs our understanding of 'sex positivity' and the debates around it today. Likewise, the very expression 'sex work' is an inherently politicized idiom. As an umbrella term, it stakes a pro-sex position that legitimizes the trade of prostitution and other sexual transactions – a divisive subject for contemporary society and a new wave of feminists.

Take pornography in the age of its internet ubiquity. Can it be empowering for a certain kind of 'sex positive' woman, or is the form inherently exploitive? TV shows such as Lena Dunham's *Girls* have reignited old debates about sex positivity because of the female protagonists' unregretful assertion of their sexual autonomy, and even

libertine explorations. On the opposite side of the spectrum, old patriarchal symbols like the Pirelli Calendar have, just this year, revised their objectifying paradigm of having overtly sexualized models as their pin-up girls in favour of showcasing women of a diversity of age, race, and sexualities, fully clothed, and selected less for their physical charms than their array of impressive professional achievements.

The artists in *Sex Work* have been instrumental in making the case for erotic representation, sexual empowerment, and the usefulness of pornography to disturb normative attitudes towards gender roles. While often considered as straying from the feminist flock, today they provide essential performative, discursive and iconographic precedents for a host of art practices and pop cultural phenomena that explore audacious, sex-positive terrain.

Alison Gingeras is a writer and curator based in New York, USA and Warsaw, Poland

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Sex Work: Feminist Art & Radical Politics, curated by Alison Gingeras, is on view at Frieze London every day of the fair. For a full list of presentations, see p.124, and for more information, go to frieze.com



This page
Mary Beth Edelson, *Hounds of Hell*,
from the series 'Woman Rising', 1973
Oil and marker on silver gelatin print, 25 x 20 cm
Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

Opposite page
Penny Slinger, *Rosegasm*, 1970-1977
Photo collage, 34 x 51 cm. Courtesy: the artist
and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo
© Penny Slinger

*'This chapter of art history informs
our understanding of the
"sex positivity" debate today'*



Opposite page
Natalia LL, from the series
'Consumer Photography', 1974
Photographs, dimensions variable
Courtesy: the artist and lokal_30, Warsaw

This page
Birgit Jürgenssen, *Untitled* from
the series *Totentanz mit Mädchen*
(*'Death Dance with Maiden'*), 1979–80
14 photographs, each 39 × 25 cm
Courtesy: the Estate of Birgit Jürgenssen
and Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna

Tanning. While she was exhibiting and performing in circles that included prominent feminist artists such as Schneemann, Slinger followed a more independent path; ultimately taking a decade's hiatus from exhibiting in 1979 to pursue the spiritual side of her work (stock of her *Mountain Ecstasy* artist book had been burned by British Customs in 1978.)

Judith Bernstein is a figure who was very active in radical feminist circles in the US – such as the all women collective gallery A.I.R. that was founded in 1972, as well as the Fight Censorship Group. Marilyn Minter hails from a younger generation but she continues the legacy of this generation of American artists: as her profile has risen in recent years, Minter has been a generous, unifying figure who has brought awareness to the work of younger artists, as well as a much belated recognition to an older generation that preceded her.

RM: You position these works as feminist, while they often contain sexually explicit imagery that viewers might associate with pornography. How can we understand this work as feminist and not exploitive?

AG: Pornography was and still is a divisive subject in feminist circles. For some

artists, there is a red line between erotic imagery made by women that is outside the patriarchal power structures and mainstream porn, which is unredeemable. For others, the mere act of appropriating pornographic materials by a woman is enough of an act of critique – this position sums up the stance of Betty Tompkins. On the other hand, for an artist like Bernstein, graphic depictions of the phallus are used as means to denounce socio-political events or question power structures – beginning with the imperialist war in Vietnam and the pervasive sexism of western society. Bertlmann began a category of works that she called 'Pornography' in the early 1970s to 'address the war of sexes with its "victims and perpetrators."'



by creating her artist book *The Story of Bern* (1970) which will be included in this section of Frieze London.

But censorship also built solidarity amongst some of these women. The Fight Censorship Group that was founded in New York in 1973 by artist Anita Steckel brought together diverse artists, including Bernstein, to contest censorship.

RM: Speaking of solidarity: when most of these artists began exhibiting their work in the 1970s, the women's art movement was in full swing. What was the relationship between these artists and the feminist art circles in New York, London, Vienna and elsewhere?

AG: There was quite a bit overlap, but each artist engaged with or negotiated the movement in their own way. In 1975, Valie Export curated the show 'MAGNA FEMINISMUS: Kunst und Kreativität' at Galerie Nächst St. Stephan in Vienna which included her peers Renate Bertlmann and Birgit Jürgenssen – both included in the section at the

fair – so they were definitely moving in the same crowd. Bertlmann especially was very politically active and was involved in the editorial committee for feminist journals such as AUF (Aktion Unabhängiger Frauen/Action of Independent Women) and later formed a women artist group called IntAkt (International Action Group of Women Artists).

From the early '60s, Natalia LL was working in communist Poland but was very aware of other radical women artists: she was the co-founder of the artist-run PERMAFO Gallery in Wrocław, which regularly invited international artists to exhibit in Poland, and from 1975, she engaged in numerous feminist art exhibitions and symposia outside of Poland. She traveled to New York in 1977 where she met many of her feminist peers such as Carolee Schneemann: her American adventure was documented in artist Karol Radziszewski's documentary *America is Not Ready For This*.

Penny Slinger began her career in the late '60s UK milieu that included her mentors Max Ernst and Dorothea



Dorothy Iannone, *Look At Me*, 1970-71
 Collage and acrylic on canvas, 150 x 90cm
 Image: © Jochen Littkemann, Berlin
 Courtesy: the artist and Air de Paris, Paris



Previous page
 Renate Bertlmann, *Kaktus*, 1999
 Plastic cactus, dildo and perspex (80 x 25 x 25cm)
 Courtesy: the artist and Richard Saltoun, London

This page, top to bottom
 Betty Tompkins in Ellensburg, Washington, 1973
 Image: Betty Tompkins. Courtesy: the artist, P.P.O.W.,
 New York, Gavlak Gallery LA and Galerie Rodolphe
 Janssen, Brussels

Judith Bernstein in New York, 1975
 Courtesy: the artist



generative. In 2016 I curated an exhibition called 'Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics' at Dallas Contemporary. I began looking closely at which women artists had fallen outside of the canon of feminist art. I became invested in searching for those artists who were left out of major surveys of feminist art: gold standards like 'WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution' (2007). Richard Meyer's essay in that catalogue, 'Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s' touched off my own forays into artists' sex positivity.

RM: Why do you think the artists you've chosen escaped recognition for so long? Has censorship had an impact on their careers?

AG: The debilitating effects of censorship has certainly played a major role. Many of the artists in this section – as well as their peers who are not included – made work that was doubly bound by their challenge to obscenity laws, as well as by the protests of the anti-pornography contingent of the feminist movements of the '70s.

To take one example: Betty Tompkins, an American artist, began her career in relative isolation in the late '60s. Her use of found pornographic photographs as the basis of her large-scale paintings put her at odds with mainstream feminist artists in New York; additionally, censorship of her work in France and Japan in 1973 dealt a major blow to her exhibiting career. Tompkins took a three-decade-long hiatus from exhibiting, but continued to make work and teach: it wasn't until the early 2000s that she came out of obscurity and began exhibiting again. Similarly, Judith Bernstein and Penny Slinger had to take major, multiple decades long hiatuses from exhibiting because of the fallout from censorship of their work.

Dorothy Iannone played a direct role in the legal challenges to obscenity laws and censorship in the US. She was arrested

by American customs officials in 1961 when entering the country with contraband Henry Miller books and eventually won her legal case. This case was part of the snowball of obscenity rulings that resulted in a seismic shift in attitudes towards explicit sexual depiction, and the gradual loosening of censorship. But Iannone's own work was censored in 1969 at the Kunsthalle Bern during the exhibition 'Freunde' when the institution insisted she cover up any representation of genitalia. In addition to the protestation of several artists in the show and the resignation of the curator Harald Szeemann, Iannone responded to this act of censorship