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On Hactivist Pornography and Networked Porn

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Hactivism is a term derived from the union of two concepts: hacking and activism. Hacking is a creative practice; an irreverent and playful way of using computers which might also address an ethical and cooperative modality of relating to knowledge; activism indicates individual or collective action for achieving social goals and developing political battles. Not only does hactivism address a certain use of technology, but it might also be seen as an attitude in which exchange, sharing, freedom of information and experimentation are central elements.

If we for example consider the hacker and activist backgrounds of the Italian and Spanish underground culture of the past thirty years, the 'hactivist' attitude is very often connected with the radical-punk idea of self-management, DIY and independent production. Many of the hacker and activist utopias spread in 1980s and in 1990s, took shape through collective experiences in social centres, squats and virtual spaces such as BBSes (Bulletin Board systems), and promoted the idea of building up self-organized and economically independent spaces of networking and interactions ^[1].

The idea of creating nets of relations among individuals and collective experiences where radical use of technology is connected to radical politics is not just limited to the creative use of computers and technology. Sex might also be seen as a working field of hacker experimentation and a context in which to express the DIY punk approach. While hactivism is the direct political and social action online, pornography becomes the direct political and social action on one's own body (outside and within the network). Some experiences in the European queer and activist culture (mainly in Italy and Spain, if we consider their diffusion on a national scale) showed how to transfer this experimental hacker and DIY attitude from technology to the body and to the broader concept of sexuality.

^[1] For a more complete history of the hacker underground communities in Italy, see my book: (2006) *Networking. The Net as Artwork*, Aarhus, DK, Digital Aesthetics Research Centre, 2009. Online at: www.networkingart.eu/english.html. Some of the reflections in this text are developments of the topics discussed in the last chapter of the book ('Extra Gender', translated from Italian to English by Maria Anna Calamia).

Experiences where the DIY-structure of the punk scene, and the hacker ideas of sharing, openness, decentralization, free access to information, and the hands-on imperative (Levy, 1984) became a challenge to create a different kind of pornography^[2].

Punk Porn as an Activist and Art Strategy

Pornography is the obvious demonstration of how different dynamics of sexual power are written and perpetuated through the body. But it can also become a territory of both radical and playful action, as some of the experiences in performance art, the post porn scene and the later queer culture demonstrate. A thread that connects practices and theories, from Genesis P. Orridge and Cosey Fanny Tutti to Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch, to Annie Sprinkle, BruceLaBruce, Maria Beatty, Emilie Jouvett and Beatriz Preciado, just to mention a few^[2].

Contrary to the 'traditional' approach of a type of feminism which considers itself politically correct, but which perpetuates and consolidates a traditional dichotomy between genders and doesn't resolve the problem of power structures - pointing out porn as a form of exploitation - it is necessary to start to consider pornography no longer as an enemy, but as something which should be appropriated from below.

As long as we continue to label pornography as sexist, chauvinist and macho, we will be leaving it in the hands of those who really want it as such, making it a mirror for relationships of hierarchical power between men and women, and a territory of repetitive banalities.

As Stewart Home pointed out, quoting Cosey Fanny Tutti:

'You get feminists saying you're being exploited and all the rest of it. But it's not like that. It's a total power trip. When you are being exploited, it's when

^[2] Some Italian examples in the past ten years: the cyber-punk-transgender Helena Vena (www.helenavena.com); the activity of the women and gender laboratory Sexyshock in Bologna (www.ecn.org/sexyshock / www.betty-books.com); the queer-party experience of Phag-Off and what followed it (www.myspace.com/warbear); Tekfestival (www.tekfestival.it); the Pornflakes collective (www.pornflakes.org); Carni Scelte (www.myspace.com/carniscelte); Vida Loca Records (www.myspace.com/vidalocarecords); and, experiences in Berlin which follow the same Italian thread: Poopsyclub (<http://www.myspace.com/poopsyclub>) and Sabot°Age (<http://www.sabotage-berlin.com>), just to mention a few. In Spain: Girlswholikeporno (<http://girlswholikeporno.com>); Ex-dones (www.exdones.blogspot.com); Post Op (<http://postporno.blogspot.com>); GoFist Foundation (<http://gofistfoundation.pimienta.org>); Diana Pornoterrorista (<http://pornoterrorismo.blogspot.com>); La Quimera Rosa (<http://laquimerarosa.blogspot.com>).

^[3] To know more about the above-mentioned practices and theories, see the list of books and essays suggested in the bibliography.

you are doing something you're not comfortable with. Where it's not you. Where someone is saying 'do this.'^[4]

The answer, and the challenge, might be in making porn punk, or rather making punk porn: Pornography becomes an experimental field open to all of us, and an occasion for breaking the dynamics of crystallized power, self-governing one's own sexuality. The conscious role of women (and men) in this vision is to personally enter inside the mechanisms of bodily expression and the production of desire, to subvert them from within, in favour of a fluid dimension; a mirror of a fanciful expressive everyday life.

This concept of punk porn is not a recent invention, but follows in a long tradition on the fringes of alt porn and amateur porn, and has been taking shape through the net (blogs, p2p technologies, platforms of video and photo sharing, etc.) and social networks since the middle 2000s. As Katrien Jacobs wrote in 2007, in the introduction of her book on netporn:

'Porn is successfully being appropriated and reinterpreted by alternative producers and active sex workers, young pro-porn feminists, queer porn networks, aesthetic-technological vanguards, p2p traders, radical sex/perv culture, and free speech activists'^[5].

But describing the process of bringing porn studies into the humanities, approaching the field as participant observers, and making it the subject of 'alternative porn' or 'post porn' events, Florian Cramer argued:

'The price for such integration is the avoidance of all conflict. Whether as a provocation, as an expression of the power of sex or of sexual politics _ what is thus liquidated, the obscene, was what marked the points of intersection between the experimental arts and commercial pornography, in Courbet and Duchamp, in Bataille's novels, Hans Bellmer's dolls, Viennese Actionism, Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, but also in pornographers later honored as artists, such as photographers Nobuyoshi Araki and Irving Klaw, fetish comic strip artist Eric Stanton and sexploitation moviemakers Russ Meyer, Doris Wishman, Jean Rollin (whose work was honored by Aida Ruilova during the most recent Berlin

^[4] Stewart Home: *Confusion Incorporated. A Collection of Lies, Hoaxes & Hidden Thruths*. Hove, UK: Codex Books, 1999, p.70.

^[5] Katrien Jacobs: *Netporn. DIY web culture and sexual politics*. Lanham, Maryland, USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007, p.3.

Biennial) and Jess Franco^[6].

This point of view shows that pornography is still expressing itself through a dichotomy. It is the mirror of the desires and the needs of two very different categories of people: Those who like commercial pornography or those who like 'alternative' pornography. It doesn't touch a larger group of people, the 'middle zone' of individuals who are not much excited by the often male-oriented mainstream porn, neither are they part of the queer / alt porn communities.

The DIY-punk approach of the post porn, netporn festivals and queer communities often resolve itself in creating a new aesthetics, with the result of making porn more accessible, but to a narrow group of people. The challenge is in which way it will be possible to 'open porn to everyone', rather than making it a field of study among specialists – or a successful niche market within the porn business.

One of the strengths of punk culture was to open the concept of art to all, everyone could sing or be a pop star. You didn't need to be pushed by the musical industry, at least in the beginning of the phenomenon. This is the punk approach we should still follow. This is where the vision of Hacktivist Porn comes from.

Hacktivist porn might be seen as an opportunity to invent the 'porn of the future', reconstructing its meaning beyond gender stereotypes or specific political and sexual inclinations. It might be the challenge to make porn an everyday practice of life, which belongs to all, like Fluxus artists did with art in the Sixties and Seventies.

In 1972 Wolf Vostell, one of the pioneers of video art, happenings and the Fluxus movement, wrote in a postcard: 'Duchamp has qualified the object into art. I have qualified life into art'. We should qualify porn into life.

Networked Porn: The experience of CUM2CUT – Indie-Porn Short Film Festival

The concepts of openness and Do-It-Yourself were the starting points for the development of punk culture and hacker ethics, but also for networked art such as mail art, for example. The art of networking was based on the figure of the artist as networker: a creator of sharing platforms and of contexts for connecting

[6] Florian Cramer: Sodom Blogging: Alternative Porn and Aesthetic Sensibility. In the C'lick Me Reader, Amsterdam, 2007, which can be downloaded at: http://www.networkcultures.org/clickme/pdf/clickmeReader_9MB.pdf.

and exchanging. It was not based on objects, nor solely on digital or analogical instruments, but on the relationships and processes in progress between individuals. Individuals who could in turn create other contexts of sharing. The same Do It Yourself hands-on practice was used to describe subsequent phenomena of networking and hacktivism; from Neoism to Plagiarism, up until the 1990s when the network dynamics were affirmed on a broader level through computers and the Internet.

Inspired by the 'hacktivist attitude', which referred to an acknowledgement of the net as a political space, with the possibility of decentralized, autonomous and grassroots participation, Gaia Novati and I created the experience of CUM2CUT: Indie-Porn Short Film Festival (indie as in 'independent'), where we wanted to apply the hacktivist attitude and the idea of open network to pornography.

From www.cum2cut.net, 2006:

'CUM2CUT is an independent pornography competition, a four day marathon in which participants are invited to make a short film. The short film must be pornographic, but participants don't need to be actors or porn experts.

The main idea of CUM2CUT is to connect a heterogeneous and international network of people who wants to create art independently and to freely express their sexuality. Therefore, CUM2CUT is a networking platform, which aims to create open and free artistic networks where people can address the topic of pornography without being marginalized.

CUM2CUT is an opportunity for participants to play with sexuality and pornography by producing and enjoying indie-porn-short-films: the best short-films you'd want to make and to watch! An expert jury formed by people involved in porn/queer subculture, visual art and experimental cinema select three winners, whom will receive a prize.^[7]

CUM2CUT started in the city of Berlin, in October 2006 as part of the Porn Film Festival Berlin, a week-long event managed by the German filmmaker Jürgen Brüning. To ensure that the films were made during these four days, the participants had to follow a few rules – incorporating specific symbols, objects, sentences and sounds, and had to randomly pick a 'genre' for their films:

^[7] CUM2CUT: Indie-Porn Short Film Festival, 2006, <http://www.cum2cut.net/06/index.html>.

Superhero XXX, Splatter Porn, Pop Star Porn, Alien Porn, Horror College Porn, Dadaist Porn, Christian Porn, Socialist Porn, 9/11 Porn, and so on...

The jury, formed by people like Joe Gallant, Julia Ostertag, Shu Lea Cheang, Ela Troyano, Tessa Hughes Freeland, Shu Lea Cheang, Francesco 'Warbear' Macarone Palmieri, and many others, saw the films for the first time at the premiere like everyone else and selected the winners also considering the audience reactions. In November 2008, the CUM2CUT films were part of the exhibition 'Porno 2.0', at the D21 Art Gallery in Leipzig, and in 2009, CUM2CUT started to travel around Europe as a nomadic entity. The CUM2CUT films have been shown in many international festivals and conferences (see <http://www.cum2cut.net/en/index.php> for a complete list of the screenings), and last year (2009), we were partners of the Arse Elektronika Festival and the films were selected for the Prixxx Arse Elektronika at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco.

What is the concept behind CUM2CUT and why do we connect it with the above-mentioned idea of hacktivist porn? This is how we presented CUM2CUT in 2007, when we organized two different porn marathons, one in the city of Berlin (the porn competition) and one on the net (the pr0n competition):

'Unlike mainstream porn, the event CUM2CUT in Berlin focuses on the activities of the international independent and countercultural queer movement and presents a platform where artists, filmmakers, DJs, actors and everyone interested can collaborate.

This happens through the activities of people who are part of the queer countercultural movement. The goal of the festival is to develop and enjoy new forms of subversive body-politics in terms of gender and sexual orientation. In this context, queer means to express sexuality beyond boundaries of identities and to cross the limits of fixed genders and stereotype. At the same time, the idea of queer is closely connected to D.I.Y. punk and hacker culture: CUM2CUT wants to encourage everyone to express themselves using their bodies and media from an independent point of view, creating new experimental queer languages. The idea is to broaden possible imaginaries and 'desirescapes' related to pornography.

The concept of play is directly linked to CUM2CUT: body-games and sex toys are the starting point for subverting the mainstream expression of pornography, through the practice of détournement. CUM2CUT aims to reach

those who are fed up with mainstream pornography, who are frustrated by tolerating the rules of normalized society. At the same time, CUM2CUT provides a critical perspective on political imagination and rejects the notion of radical politics necessarily being boring and serious.

CUM2CUT proposes an experimental concept starting from bodies and space, spreading pornography as clouds of pollen to eroticize the city of Berlin, mixing up fluid bodies, nomad identities and playful sexualities. This year, CUM2CUT also takes on the challenge to eroticize the network, through a Pr0n competition, with the aim to sharing strategies, shortcuts, tricks and pranks, to 'dress up' the technology, turning it into a porn tool. Our bodies are not the only interfaces for expressing sexuality and desires, therefore why not try using other tools? Let's think about technology itself as a porn subject!

The Indie-Porn Short Film Festival is open to queer, homo, hetero, lesbo, bisexual and transsexual independent video- and filmmakers, pornographers, performers, screenwriters, directors, queer cultural activists and artists, hackers, free thinkers, excited minds and all the people that like to mix technology and bodies. The purpose is to develop ideas through film production and to share them with an interested community as a participatory exchange. Thus, in order to open not only the boundaries of sexuality but also those of artistic expression, the videos produced must be licensed under the Creative Commons.

Much like how the idea of peer-to-peer is expressed by the P2P symbol, we have created the term C2C (cum to cut). C2C closely links pleasure and orgasm to the action of sharing pornography experiences^[8].

Since we decided to released the films under Creative Commons, they are all available online at:

www.cum2cut.net/en/index.php?sect=movies2007;

www.cum2cut.net/en/index.php?sect=movies2006.

CUM2CUT was not only an occasion to rethink a different kind of porn, but also a collective workshop where the participants in the competition, the members of the jury and us – the porn-networkers – where joined together in collaboration. The end result was a kaleidoscopic assemblage of pornography, which most of the time hardly could have been considered porn in its traditional

[8] CUM2CUT: Indie-Porn Short Film Festival, 2007, <http://www.cum2cut.net/en/index.php?sect=background>.

connotation.

CUM2CUT was a challenge to try to see porn as an open concept, as a new way of living the city space creating a network of people through pornography, and an occasion to disrupt the boundaries and the limits of sexuality. It was an attempt to open the concept of porn to everyday life and to all possible personal interpretations and derivations.

Towards a Hacktivist Pornography

Trough the idea of hacktivist porn we demand a different vision of sexuality, creating projects, products and creative actions for which pornography becomes an artistic platform, an autonomous and experimental network. Pornography is the tool for exchanging and sharing sexual experiences.

Pornography, eroticism and sexual pleasure become opportunities in which to play, into which to bring a form of open desire, expressions of pleasure of the different men and women, or different expressions of sexualities not invented yet, in which diversity and otherness can cohabitate. To interact with pornography together with many other open identities, which go beyond the sterile definitions and stereotyping of gender, means to hack porn from within to make it a new form of free artistic experimentation. It is an expressive occasion in which people can consciously choose their own role.

This vision of porn, Hacktivist Porn, invest all kind of sexual preferences - heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, transsexual, and all kinds of porn; indie porn, queer porn, netporn, bear porn, dyke porn, kinky porn, science fiction porn, dada porn – what you think porn is – and all kinds of sex-conscious and sex-positive forms of desire, opening up to as many people as possible.

Hacktivist porn means to try to imagine the porn of the future, in which everyone has the right to express her or his own selves. It doesn't avoid conflicts, but it shows that it is possible to create a personal vision of porn formed by polyphonic desires.

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