

Empowerment through Pornography? **The Sexual Self-Portraits of Jeff Koons and Natacha Merritt**

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Abstract

For artists, self representation in the act of a sexual performance is very subversive, since it breaks a major social taboo. It is seldom a gratuitous subversion, as it actually raises a number of questions. First, these self-portraits highlight the dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment, which differ depending on the artist's gender. Indeed, in the sexual self-portraits of Jeff Koons and Natacha Merritt, our gender biases are challenged by the paradox that similar subject-matters, artists representing themselves in arguably submissive positions, do not convey the same first impression to the viewer depending on whether the artist is male or female. Besides, the representation of sexuality allows artists to comment on the place of religion in our society, with Koons wanting to rid sex of the shame and guilt it usually is associated with in most religions, and Merritt parodying the ritual of confession. Finally, Koons and Merritt's pornographic self-portraits both have feminist implications, as they assert the need for free speech about male and female pleasure and desire. In their pornographic self-portraits, Koons and Merritt thus put the artists' bodies at stake to show how political sex in art can be.

Résumé

Pour les artistes, le fait de s'auto-représenter en pleine performance sexuelle est un acte éminemment subversif, car il rompt un tabou social majeur. Cette subversion est rarement gratuite, soulevant de fait un grand nombre de questions. Ces autoportraits soulignent les dynamiques de prise et de perte de pouvoir, qui diffèrent selon le sexe de l'artiste. En effet, dans les autoportraits sexuels de Koons et Merritt, nos a priori sexuels sont remis en question par le paradoxe suivant : alors que le sujet des photographies est similaire (il s'agit des artistes eux-mêmes se représentant dans des postures que l'on peut qualifier de soumises), la première impression du spectateur diffère selon que l'artiste est un homme ou une femme. De plus, la représentation de leur sexualité permet aux artistes de commenter la place de la religion dans notre société : Koons souhaite débarrasser le sexe de la honte et la culpabilité que la plupart des religions y associe ; Merritt parodie le rituel de la confession. Enfin, les autoportraits pornographiques de Koons et de Merritt ont des implications féministes, car ils insistent sur la nécessité de la liberté de parole en ce qui concerne le plaisir et le désir masculin et féminin. Dans leurs autoportraits pornographiques, Koons et de Merritt mettent donc leurs corps en jeu pour montrer « le sexe politique de l'art »¹.

¹ F. BOUSTEAU, « Introduction », in Bousteau, Fabrice (dir), *Sexes, images, pratiques et pensées contemporaines*, Beaux Arts SAS, Paris, 2004, p. 11.

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Mots-clés : Autoportrait, sexe, religion, féminisme, liberté d'expression, intimité.

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Introduction

The use of pornography in self-portraits, in other words photographers taking self-portraits while having sex and making no use of ellipsis or metaphor in the representation of sexual acts or parts, combines two axes of a discussion of power, thus presenting the viewer with two different types of power: they are both images of power and powerful images. They are images of power, because they represent the photographers having sex, in different degrees of control, or loss of control, over the situation they represent. They are also powerful images in that they generate debates that push the limits of what is acceptable or not in art and challenge the expectations of the viewers, in a cultural context that placed the politics of representation of the body, sexuality and censorship at the forefront of artistic discourse.

[1] Jeff Koons, installation view of the Centre Pompidou exhibition, November 2014-April 2015
(*Made in Heaven* poster: lithograph billboard mounted on canvas, 317,5 x 690,9 cm)



To make my case I shall focus on two artists who use the pornographic genre in the representation of themselves. One of those artists, Jeff Koons, born in 1955 in Pennsylvania, currently based in New York, enjoys global fame but has “earned near-universal scorn”² for his depiction of his own sexuality. From November 2014 to April 2015, he had a retrospective exhibition in the Centre Pompidou in Paris [1], in which one of the series, entitled “Made in Heaven” (1990-1991), portrays him and his then partner, the porn star Iona Staller, also known as the Cicciolina, in various poses evoking foreplay or sex, a “postmodern appropriation [...] of hardcore porn photographs (themselves fashioned after art-historical paintings)”³.

² A. RUSSETH, “Jeff Koons’s ‘Made in Heaven’ Series: A Critical Compendium”, *16 Miles of String*, Monday, October 18, 2010, <http://www.16miles.com/2010/11/jeff-koons-made-in-heaven-series.html> (consulté le 12 mars 2015).

³ K. DENNIS, *Art/Porn, a History of Seeing and Touching*, Berg, Oxford, New York, 2009, p. 142.



[2] Natacha Merritt, *Untitled, Digital Diaries*, Taschen, 2000
(digital photograph, 22,86 x 15,49cm)

The other artist, photographer Natacha Merritt, born in 1977 in San Francisco and based there, published two books, *Digital Diaries*, by Taschen in 2000, and *Sexual Selection*, by Bongout in 2012, with a similar subject-matter as Koons's "Made in Heaven" series: she shoots a lot of self-portraits, most of which are explicitly sexual [2]. Much more was at stake for twenty-one-year-old Merritt than for the already famous artist, who was in his mid-thirties when he created "Made in Heaven". Indeed, in the depiction of her own sexuality, Merritt had to face stronger prejudices and taboos than Koons, such as the fact that she was making use of the old adage that "sex sells", hence being little more than a prostitute to her art, whereas Koons was criticized for the alleged bad quality of his new series, but not for the fact that he was staging himself in it, which can be seen as sexual double standards, maybe because male power and female power are not considered equally by the majority of viewers.

The paradox at the heart of Koons's and Merritt's pornographic self-portraits is that in them, the concepts of power and powerlessness seem to dovetail. Indeed, a position of submissiveness, for example, could be read as an actual strength, and conversely, a domineering stance could connote intrinsic weaknesses. Consequently, I shall first focus on the dynamics of self-representations that use the ideas of sexual power and vulnerability. As viewers, we may be socially programmed to respond differently depending on whether the character portrayed as submissive is a man or a woman. How do the works of the two artists redefine our preconceptions of power?

Our preconceptions on the proper place of man and woman in a sexual relationship may be an unconscious resurgence of the pervasive Christian culture we live in, in which, for example, the ideal woman happens to be a virgin. This is why, in a second movement, I will attempt to explain the omnipresence of religious iconography and vocabulary. Indeed, this presence is obvious in the case of Koons, who gave the prelapsarian name "Made in Heaven" to the series I shall focus on, but also underlies Merritt's work, whose pornographic self-portraits constitute a form of profane confession. Is this use of religion an avowal of powerlessness in the face of an overbearing religious context, or is it on the contrary the reclaiming of an artist's power and freedom of speech in a context of thorough attacks from America's religious far right?

Finally, I will discuss the feminist implications of picturing oneself in the pornographic mode, which asks, for both male and female photographers, the question of patriarchal power over female sexuality. The dynamics of power and powerlessness, and the resonance of religious and feminist rhetoric and discourses, will thus concur in shedding light into the ways in which shooting pornographic self-portraits, and consequently viewing them, can be empowering.

The dynamics of empowerment and disempowerment

When it was posted online at the end of the 1990s, Natacha Merritt's work was neither primarily destined for publication, nor to the mentions in debates about its artistic value it subsequently went through. At first, she was posting explicit digital images of herself and her sexual partners on her website as a sign of sexual and intellectual freedom. Viewing photographs of Merritt having sex with her partners, displaying herself or masturbating could be considered as a kind of "cybersex", a way for users to find some gratification without exposing themselves to the HIV-aids virus that was becoming rampant in that decade. Such work could also be considered as the epitome of "extimity", the intimacy made public in order to enrich the life of the person sharing their intimate thoughts and moments through the response they get to them. Extimity, a relatively new concept, was becoming more and more important because of the development of the Internet.⁴ However, after Merritt's work was scouted by Eric Kroll and published by Taschen in 2000, its prophylactic or freeing nature was lost in the debate between anti-pornography feminists such as Women Against Pornography and feminists in favour of freedom of expression, including in the field of the representation of one's sexuality⁵. Women Against Pornography do have a point in that Merritt gives disturbing, debased images of herself in which she seems to relinquish both dignity and power.

⁴ S. TISSERON, *L'Intimité Surexposée*, Éditions Ramsay, Paris, 2001, p. 52-53 : « Je propose d'appeler « extimité » le mouvement qui pousse chacun à mettre en avant une partie de sa vie intime, autant physique que psychique. Cette tendance est longtemps passée inaperçue bien qu'elle soit essentielle à l'être humain. Elle consiste dans le désir de communiquer à propos de son monde intérieur. Mais ce mouvement serait incompréhensible s'il ne s'agissait que de « s'exprimer ». Si les gens veulent extérioriser certains éléments de leur vie, c'est pour mieux se les approprier, dans un second temps, en les intériorisant sur un autre mode grâce aux réactions qu'ils suscitent chez leurs proches. Le désir d' « extimité » est en fait au service d'une intimité plus riche. »

⁵ In the notes of her essay on erotic photography, "Reconsidering Erotic Photography: Notes for a Project of Historical Salvage", in *Photography at the dock, essays on Photographic History, Institutions and Practices*, Media&Society 4, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, pp. 220 to 237, Abigail Solomon-Godeau suggests a selection of essays representing the anti-censorship stance, such as Elizabeth Cowie, "Woman as Sign," *M/F*, no. 1, 1978, p. 49-63; Beverly Brown, "A Feminist Interest in Pornography," *M/F*, nos 5&6, p. 5-18; Annette Kuhn, "Lawless Seeing" in Kuhn, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985, p. 19-47; F.A.C.T. Book Committee, *Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography and Censorship*, New York, Caught Looking, Inc., 1986; Alice Echols, "The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics, 1968-1983," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. By Carol S. Vance, Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 50-72; Ellen Willis, "Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1983, p. 460-467; Griselda Pollock, "What's Wrong with 'Images of Women,'" in *Screen Education*, vol. 24 (Autumn 1977), p. 25-33; Elizabeth Cowie, "Women, Representation and the Image," *Screen Education*, vol. 23 (Summer 1977), p. 15-23.



[3] Natacha Merritt, *Footkiss*, *Digital Diaries*, Taschen, 2000
(digital photograph, 22,86 x 15,49 cm)

In the photograph entitled “Footkiss” for example [3], Merritt represents herself in a position that is at first sight the epitome of powerlessness. Her posture is both submissive and sexual, sucking the toe of another beautiful woman who appears slightly out of focus in the background. The branch of feminism that was campaigning to ban the representation of sexuality took issue with such images of her, arguing that they were inherently violent as they represented a male idea of sexuality. Indeed, she might have internalized the masculine fantasy of a stylized lesbian relationship in which pleasure is more the visual pleasure of the (male) viewer than the actual pleasure of the protagonists in the scene, because most images of women are made by men for the use of men. This is the conventional photographic representations of lesbian sex, as it is described by Abigail Solomon-Godeau:

In these images, what is promised to the spectator is a hidden/forbidden knowledge: this is what women do alone, this is what women do together. But what appears to be an activity is, in fact, another version of spectacle, not simply because the image is patently simulated or static or non-narrative, but because of the imperatives of spectatorial address which dictates that this be staged as a sight. Women together, for example, are typically posed in ways that provide the viewer with maximum visual access to their bodies, which is sometimes augmented by the use of mirrors. The implicit requirement that the women be *for* the presumed male viewer, rather than for each other, belies the claim that such images illustrate lesbian sexuality. Instead they produce yet another variant of the feminine as spectacle, as erotic display. (Solomon-Godeau, 1991, 235)

Yet the composition and the framing of “Footkiss” are empowering for Merritt in that they do not correspond to such an artificial representation of female sexuality. Indeed, the hand on Merritt’s partner’s breast frustrates the public’s full voyeuristic satisfaction, and the focus on Merritt’s face, to the exclusion of any other part of her body, creates an emphasis on her subjective experience and enjoyment of the situation.

But another aspect of this photograph, namely her closed eyes, can be interpreted differently in relation to her depiction of power and powerlessness. As discussed above, it can be the sign that she avoids challenging the pleasure of the viewer/voyeur, consequently objectifying herself, that is to say portraying herself with less power. However this choice of a lowered gaze could also be a way to express that she is concentrating on the sensations of the kiss, hence an image of empowerment, a claim that her experience is paramount.

Consequently, if her depiction as the giver of the foot kiss, thus in a debased, less powerful position can be interpreted as a metaphor for a more general submission to the portrayal of female sexuality as non-threatening to men, such powerlessness is superficial. Indeed, the complexity of any situation of domination can be described as dynamic, subject to reversals, with a degree of power also held by the submissive protagonist. Here the seemingly

dominated person is also the one who is controlling the representation, thus actually in a position of considerable power.

Thus it appears that an image of debasement can result in depicting actual empowerment. As this seems to apply to a female artist, can we uncover similar meanings in the works of the controversial artist Jeff Koons?



[4] Robert Mapplethorpe, *Jim and Tom, Sausalito*, 1977 (gelatine silver print, 34,2 x 34,2 cm each)

[5] Andres Serrano, *Immersion (Piss Christ)*, 1987 (Ilforchrome mounted on plexiglas, 59,7 x 40,6 cm)

At the time Koons was exhibiting his “Made in Heaven” series in the early 1990s, the sexual and religious content of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe [4] and Andres Serrano [5] were one of the number of elements that brought the tensions that came to be called the Culture Wars to the attention of the general public⁶. Such tensions were felt in cuts of public funding and the censorship of exhibitions thought to have scandalous subject matter, such as homosexuality. However, considering the price of Koons’s works (*Ilona on top (Rosa background* [6]) sold for \$390.000), the questions of public funding and censorship posed by the Culture Wars were probably not his main concerns. If any subversion is to be found in his works, it lies in the amused display of the power conferred to him by his triumphant white male middle-class heterosexuality (all the artists who were censored or lost public funding during the Culture Wars belonged to ethnic and/or sexual minority⁷). “Made in Heaven” may appear more as the assertion of power unrelated to a commitment to progress than as the wish of empowerment through pornography. As with Merritt’s easily dismissible – at first sight – sexual self-portraits, we will see how to bring some nuance into our perception of Koons’s work.

⁶ In 1989 an anti NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) assault by the American religious right began over the exhibition of Andres Serrano’s photograph entitled “Piss Christ”, in which a small plastic crucifix is immersed in the artist’s urine. The same year, “The Perfect Moment”, Mapplethorpe’s exhibition, was cancelled because of its feature of the “X-portfolio”, photographs of sexual practices such as bondage, which was liable to attract the wrath of the aforementioned religious right. In 1990, Dennis Barrie, the director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, that was exhibiting “The Perfect Moment” was charged with violating obscenity laws for presenting Mapplethorpe’s exhibition. The exhibition scheduled at the Corcoran Gallery of Arts in Washington D.C. was then cancelled.

⁷ F. MARTEL, *De la culture en Amérique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2006, p. 260.



[6] Jeff Koons, *Ilona on Top (Rosa Background)*, 1990
 (Oil inks silkscreened on canvas, 243,8 x 365,8 cm)

[7] Jeff Koons, *Manet*, 1990
 (oil inks silkscreened on canvas, 243,8 x 365,8 cm)



How does Koons's depiction of power and powerlessness read, per se but also in relation to Merritt's tackling of the same topic? We can find an equivalent image of the photograph I have previously analyzed in Koons' *Made in Heaven* series. It is entitled "Manet" (a reference to the erotic connotations of Edouard Manet's at the time scandalous "Déjeuner sur l'herbe") with some inversions [7]. Here the sexual relationship only alluded to in Manet's painting is displayed. On a superficial level, Koons places himself in a disempowered situation: he is naked, and his body is bent in an awkward position in order to perform oral sex on his partner. However, keeping the Impressionist painting in mind, as the man in the photograph he still equates himself to the male figures of the painting, respectively a sculptor or a painter⁸, so that, as in the case of Merritt's previous image, his disempowerment is only superficial. Even his nudity is glorified, as his lean and muscular body harks back to the ecstatic energy of athletes or heroes we associate with high art as ancient as Greek statuary, according to Kenneth Clark⁹. In spite of all their formal differences, the similarities between Merritt's "Footkiss" and Koons's "Manet" are striking: they are both seemingly disempowered by a representation in a position of vulnerability, but as they master the situation of representation and all its discursive ramifications, the disempowerment is only a superficial impression.

⁸The two men in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* are modelled after Manet's brother Gustave Manet, a painter, and his future brother-in-law, Ferdinand Leenhoff, a Dutch sculptor.

⁹ K. CLARK, *The Nude, a Study in Ideal Form*, Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 173. "The Greeks discovered in the nude two embodiments of energy, which lived on throughout European art almost until our own day. They are the athlete and hero, and from the very beginning they were closely connected with one another."

Unfortunately, more or less inevitably, our perception of power in sexual images is contaminated by our preconceptions about gender, the fact that it has sometimes been considered normal that “*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at”¹⁰, as theorized the British art critic John Berger. Therefore, a woman in a sexual position is more easily perceived as exploited, whereas a man in the same position wields more power. Eleanor Heartney, in her article on pornography, quotes the view of the controversial, but nevertheless widely influential anti-pornography feminist, Andrea Dworkin, for whom the issue about pornography was the imbalance of power it demonstrated: “The woman is acted on; the man acts and through action expresses sexual power, the power of masculinity. [...] Male power is the *raison d’être* of pornography; the degradation of the female is the means of achieving this power.”¹¹ However, the comparison of Merritt’s and Koons’s self-portraits contributes to challenging our gender bias. Merritt, as the model and photographer, thoroughly controls her representation, as much, maybe even more so, than Koons who works with assistants. She intervenes in the creative field as a subject and not an object, and as a woman she claims the right to represent her own sexuality on an avant-garde and subversive mode. Through her role as a photographer, she is not the Other to the masculine norm, a sheer object of the gaze, but gains agency instead. In the same way, Koons goes against our preconceptions of the male artist as a creative genius by picturing himself alongside an adult film star and using her already established visual universe, pastel-coloured lace garments, flowery crowns and dream-like landscapes. However, those stylistic borrowings and this courage to represent himself in a relatively submissive position do not diminish his power but rather reassert it, as they demonstrate his thorough navigation of the full scope of freedom of speech.

Picturing oneself in a position of vulnerability and submission can thus be actually perceived as an act of empowerment in different ways depending on gender. Is the same paradox at work in the case of the use of a religious iconography or vocabulary, obvious in the recycling of religious iconography in the case of Jeff Koons, but also the underlying concept of the whole of Merritt’s and Koons’s corpuses? Does it indicate, on the part of the artists, a submission to this iconography, or a desire to reclaim their expressive power over all the modes of expression, using, if necessary, a verbal or visual vocabulary usually associated with religion?

The religious framework

In the tradition of such artists as Mapplethorpe, who claimed a strong influence of Catholic imagery in their works while having ways of life that were quite remote from Christian morals, the religious iconography is a strong reference for Jeff Koons. For example, one of his agendas is to rid sex of negative connotations¹². His association of sexuality with religious images is the kind of subversion that was regularly used by artists in the context of the Culture Wars, generating controversy, scandals, and censorship. Even entitling the series “Made in Heaven” puts it in a kind of prelapsarian perspective – or, to coin a phrase, a non-lapsarian

¹⁰ J. BERGER, *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, London, Harmondsworth, 1972, p. 47.

¹¹ A. DWORKIN, *Pornography : Men Possessing Women*, A Perigee Book, New York, 1979, pp. 16, 23, 24, quoted in Heartney, Eleanor, “Pornography”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Censorship II (Winter, 1991), p. 16-19.

¹²https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOf_pMWp0PM, 22 January 2016.

one, namely an era in which the human body and sexuality would not be subjected to the current moral restrictions they are currently subjected to. In the same vein, his nudity, far from being a metaphor for weakness, empowers him, equating him to Adam, not only visually, but also in the title “Jeff in the position of Adam”, a reference to Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* (1508-1512). He even puts himself in an even more powerful, god-like position in the photograph entitled “Ilona Host”, showing Staller’s ecstatic face and Koons' sperm and penis in the position of the holy host on her mouth. But Koons, a master of deadpan humour, denies that any fun is to be had about the works, which are about “transcendence”, “self-acceptance”, and intend to “remove the guilt and shame” attached to representations of the body, as depicted in Masaccio’s *The Expulsion* [8], painted circa 1425 for example.



[8] Masaccio, *The Expulsion*, c. 1425
 (fresco, Brancacci Chapel, 170 x 50 cm)

[9] Jeff Koons, *Glass Dildo*, 1990
 (oil inks silkscreened on canvas, 243,8 x 365,8 cm)



However, some props, situations, and backgrounds cannot but have ironical meanings. In the picture entitled “Glass Dildo” [9], Koons places his partner and himself on a warmly coloured

background evoking lava or hell, maybe suggesting the latent worry that their lax sexual mores might condemn them to damnation. However, if such a concern is part of the narrative of the series, Koons finds a kind of redemption in the fact that at some point in the creative process, he falls in love with Ilona Staller and marries her. That way, he puts himself back into the power of the “heterosexual matrix”, as Judith Butler described the repressive and regulatory patriarchy that makes heterosexuality, male domination, and monogamy a historical inevitability, while the project of feminists is to expose such thinking as “existential dialectic of misogyny” serving the vested interests of the men who came up with the theory¹³. In a religious framework, Koons places himself as the biblical stray sheep that has sinned by having (kinky) sex outside marriage but finally embraces the values of patriarchal society when he enters matrimony. Hence, Koons’ apparent subversion may be seen as actually reinforcing the instituted patriarchal power.

We could also argue that the idea of confession is the underlying religious matrix at the heart of both Koons’ and Merritt's pornographic self-portraits. Paradoxically, an almost religious feeling is present in the very fact of producing sexual self-portraits. In *The History of Sexuality*¹⁴, Michel Foucault refutes the preconception that in our society, a discourse on sexuality is censored by custom and the moral order. On the contrary, he underlines the multiple tensions within the discourses on sexuality. If it might at first sight appear as an empowering transgression of censorship, Foucault rejects this superficial interpretation and contends that discourses about sex rather exponentially multiply in modern society, encouraged mainly by the ritual of confession.

¹³ J. BUTLER, *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics, New York and London, [1990] 1999, p 48.

¹⁴ M. FOUCAULT, *Histoire de la Sexualité. Tome 1 : La volonté de savoir*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1976.



[10] Natacha Merritt, *In the dark*, 2000
(digital photograph, 22,86 x 15,49 cm)

A pervasive undercurrent of confession can indeed be perceived throughout Merritt's work. In her self-portrait entitled "In the dark" [10] for example, Merritt portrays herself while performing fellatio on her partner, whose genitals are bound with a thin rope. The theme of the photograph could be the public confession of the fact that she has multiple sex partners. It can in some measure be interpreted as a confession, the surrounding darkness and the closeness of the face reminding the claustrophobic aspect of the confessional. However, there is little of the spirit commonly associated with the Catholic ritual of confession. Indeed confession should be associated with a spirit of shame and, in theory at least, the expression of the wish that the behaviour confessed will never occur again, a feeling very much absent from the artist's corpus. Merritt creates a sexual discourse that uses the injunction to confess the sexual secret, but doubly parodies the spirit of confession: she shows sign neither of guilt nor shame, and she does not respect the secrecy that is the principle of confession. Indeed, within the religious and social injunctions to talk about sex, the illusion must remain that these discourses remain secret (Foucault, 1976, 49). Confessing one's sexual activities is not subversive. What is subversive, and thus empowering, is the publication of the confession.

Feminism

In the case of, for example, of Merritt sucking on the big toe of a female friend, we have seen in what ways a submissive pose could actually be a sign of empowerment. Then, discussing the confession aspect of the works of both Koons and Merritt, we have come to the view that the respect of a social injunction of sorts to produce a discourse on one's sexuality could also actually be the sign of an empowering freedom. In both cases, a preconception was belied by our analysis. If the very idea of pornographic self-portraits seems to contradict the possibility of a feminist content straight away, will the same dynamics of intertwined presence and absence of a feminist discourse be found in the works?

Earlier I alluded to the marriage that somehow unavoidably took place between Jeff and Ilona. The phrasing of the explanations of the Centre Pompidou exhibition does not insist on Staller's state of mind about their relationship. In French, Koons "tombe amoureux", in English, Koons's feeling is described as an "infatuation", resulting in their marriage, as if Staller had been submissively awaiting his proposal all along, as suggested by her perpetual sexy bride outfit and orange blossom crown. Does the relationship between artist and model make the series *Made in Heaven* sexist, exploitative of women in the person of Staller? I have already hinted at the tribute he seems to be paying her when he uses her kitsch accessories as

a ready-made décor. Then again, it could also be an ironical, even sarcastic use, to insist on the vulgarity, the bad taste of her plastic flowers and stilettos, thus doubly exploitative.

A male artist shooting pornographic self-portraits alongside his porn-star wife expects a measure of criticism by a part of second-wave feminists, who voiced their concerns about the link between sexual violence and female objectification. However, similar questionings occur about Merritt's work, her femininity not proving to be a redeeming factor, and the feminist debate on the politics of Merritt's work was heated. At the Linz Ars Electronica 2011 Festival, the theme of which was "Sex in the Age of Its Procreative Superfluousness", Merritt spoke at a symposium in which a woman "kept criticizing her in bizarre terms", one witness says¹⁵, emphasizing "[c]hiefly, that her images represented a male idea of sexuality." Of course it might seem contradictory for a female artist to give a male vision of sexuality, if we do not take into account the possibility of an internalization of a masculine idea of sex by women, a result of the hegemony of male representation of female sexuality. However the manifest pleasure she took in the process of shooting should be enough to make her work a feminist work. The representation by women of their own sexuality, desire, and pleasure was also a demand of feminism in the 1990s¹⁶ and the right to such a freedom of expression must be perpetually fought for.

¹⁵ S. KETTMAN, "The Narcissist", <http://www.laweekly.com/2000-10-19/art-books/the-narcissist>, 28 July 2011.

¹⁶ An example could be found in the iconic feminist play, *The Vagina Monologues* by American playwright Eve Ensler, which premiered in New York in 1996.

[11] Natacha Merritt, *Image 13.TIFF*, 2000
(digital photograph, 4 x 6cm)



The exhibition of one's vagina is the point of entry to a whole range of different issues. Can it be associated with a feminist discourse? Does a close-up of a woman's sex have a political importance? Is it an image of power or powerlessness, and can we agree with feminist critic Lynda Nead's assertion that works such as Judy Chicago's seminal photograph *Red Flag* (1971), which shows the removal of a bloody tampon, "deliberately push[es] the boundaries of artistic propriety to their limits by challenging the aesthetic ideal of sealed and finished female body (recalling here the symbolic sieve of Chastity)"¹⁷?

In "Image13.TIFF" [11], Merritt gives a foreshortened image of herself with her shaved, vagina in the foreground, hence exposing clearly the labia, then her breasts, then her face looking down on the viewer, somewhat interrogatingly, as if she were wondering about our interpretation of what we see. This image harks back to the long tradition of depicting femininity as pure sex, as nature not controlled by culture¹⁸. Again, it forces us to wonder about the internalization of male images of sexuality by women. Is the equation of woman and sex a masculine idea of woman so old and ingrained that it has become internalized by Merritt, and which explains such a depiction of herself, an example of the insidious disempowerment of women by themselves? I would argue that it is on the contrary the subversive reclaiming of body in her own terms, subverting the dominant visual economy (as the female body appears in advertisements for example), in which women are more likely to be objectified. Here Merritt asserts her right to represent her own body, desire and pleasure freely, a subversion of the heterosexist matrix through its margins, the most efficient mode, for Judith Butler, to take control over this social framework, to subvert it by becoming a proper subject. This is what is shown by the raw, honest, amateur-looking photographs of Natacha Merritt.

Besides, the empiric, experimental use of the first digital cameras was in itself political. (*Digital Diaries* was the first book printed wholly from digital photographs, which explains the blurry, orange, pixilated aesthetics). Indeed, she is not only pushing the limits of what is acceptable for a woman to show about herself and her own sexuality further, but is also creating the paradigm, the new modes of representation, ways of thinking, theories, research methods and standards that were in the process of creating the new field of digital photography. Superficially, her art form could also be considered as a lesser, subaltern art, more a popular form of self expression, a kind of folk art, like a craft or a hobby, than conventional high art. Again, there are two ways of considering the issue. These

¹⁷ L. NEAD, *The Female Nude, Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, p. 66.

¹⁸ E. ZABUNYAN, *Cachez ce sexe que je ne saurais voir*, Éditions Dis Voir, Paris, 2003.

representations are empowering insofar as she creates something new, thus abstracting herself from any possible comparison to male artists. They are the epitome of avant-garde, but such avant-gardism can in itself be disempowering, as it could mean that some critics could not see the point of her work, could not understand it or pretend not to in order to undermine its threat. If Koons defies morals through irony and blasphemy, Merritt does so by creating the code of digital self-portrait, she is a pioneer who cannot be compared to previous male artists. As such, she should be considered as the epitome of self-empowerment.

Conclusion

It appears that the notion of agency, that is to say the active choice to represent oneself having sex, is on the whole liberating, and consequently empowering, for an artist who knows that his or her intimacy will be made public. Indeed, in the social and political context of the USA at the end of the twentieth century, it asserts free speech and male and female desire and pleasure as a political right. Maybe what also irked the critics was that Merritt's work was a new development of the old debate on the value of lowbrow culture. Indeed, not only did they represent sex, but they also gave power and importance to popular culture in the form of an art inspired by the aesthetics of adult movies, for example, or the new popular art of digital photography.

The particularity of the two artists discussed in this article is that they have overcome the cleavage between the artistic and the obscene, that is to say "the distinction between that which can be seen and that which is just beyond representation" (Nead, 1992, 25). Using their sexuality as material is a way to reach the sublime of groundbreaking artistic expression. Indeed, it can be argued that they have represented themselves at their most vulnerable and weak, which has had the paradoxical effect of giving an image of strength and power. But it is also a political act, namely a feminist act, thus empowering the public of the photographs by raising awareness on the expressive power of sexuality. As Natacha Merritt says in her interview: "If we (Western privileged women) don't do it, who will?"

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Notice biographique

Juliette Melia poursuit ses recherches au sein du LARCA, Paris 7-Diderot, sur la représentation du corps et de l'identité en photographie, dont son sujet de thèse, « Ceci est mon corps, autoportrait, identité et mascarade », est l'aboutissement.