To my mind art exists in the realm of contemplation, and is bound by some sort of imaginative transposition. The moment art becomes an incentive to action it loses its true character. This is my objection to painting with a communist programme, and it would also apply to pornography. [KENNETH CLARK, testimony to the Lord Longford committee on pornography]

The evidence given by Kenneth Clark, one of the world’s leading art historians, to Lord Longford’s committee on pornography in Britain, in 1972 is just one fragment of a vast body of discourses that has been produced on the subject of pornography over the last few decades. The Longford committee was a privately sponsored investigation that claimed to represent public opinion. Its report, published in the form of a mass-market paperback and launched in a blaze of publicity, fueled the pornography debate in Britain in the 1970s. From the seventies onward, feminists, moral crusaders, governments, and various other pressure groups have presented their views on the issue, with the result that pornography has become one of the most fiercely and publicly contested areas within contemporary cultural production.


2 The published material on pornography is extensive so it is difficult to extract a handful of texts that accurately represent the debate. A very useful selection of British

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Perhaps one of the most disabling limitations of much of this public debate has been the attempt to look at pornography as a discrete realm of representation, cut off and clearly distinct from other forms of cultural production. This perspective is frequently attended by the view that the pornographic resides in the image, that it is a question of content rather than form, of production rather than consumption. Even when pornography is defined in terms of its circulation, as a matter of audience expectations, markets, and institutions, it is still separated off as though it exists in isolation and can be understood outside of its points of contact with the wider domain of cultural representation.

To suggest that pornography needs to be examined in relation to other forms of cultural production, however, is not to move toward the position that claims that all of patriarchal culture is therefore pornographic. It is simply to argue that we need to specify the ways in which pornography is defined and held in place. We need to get behind the commonsense notions of pornography in order to uncover the processes by which the term has been defined and the historical changes in the term's meaning. At any particular moment there is no one unified category of the pornographic but rather a struggle between several competing definitions of decency and indecency. As John Ellis has written, "These definitions will work within a context defined by several forces, the current form of the pornography industry and its particular attempts at legitimisation; the particular forms of the laws relating to obscenity and censorship; and the general mobilisation of various moral and philosophical positions and themes that characterise a particular social moment." Ellis's comments begin to move the debate toward a model of the discursive formation of pornography; a formation that includes its operations as an industry, its forms of distribution and consumption, its visual codings, and its very status as the illicit.

One of the most significant ways in which pornography is historically defined is in relation to other forms of cultural production; we know the pornographic in terms of its difference, in terms of what it is not. The most commonplace opposition to pornography is art. If art is a reflection of the highest social values, then pornography is a symptom of a rotten society; if art stands for

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lasting, universal values, then pornography represents disposability, trash. Art is a sign of cleanliness and licit morality, whereas pornography symbolizes filth and the illicit. In this cultural system, aesthetic values readily communicate sexual and moral values. This is the basis of Kenneth Clark’s testimony in which art and pornography are defined in terms of their effects on the spectator. Art is pacifying and contemplative, whereas communist painting and pornography incite the viewer to action and therefore cannot belong to the realm of high artistic culture.4

Although conventionally art and pornography are set up in this oppositional relationship, they can be seen instead as two terms within a greater signifying system that is continually being redefined and that includes other categories, such as obscenity, the erotic, and the sensual. All of these terms occupy particular sexual and cultural spaces; none of them can be understood in isolation since each depends on the other for its meaning. From this position we can begin to examine the changing historical relationships between the terms and the ways in which the boundaries between these categories have been and continue to be policed in order to maintain the aesthetic and the pornographic as a necessary ideological polarity in patriarchal society.

The female nude: Policing the boundaries

It is often at the very edge of social categories that the work of definition takes place most energetically and that meaning is anchored most forcefully. For art history, the female nude is both at the center and at the margins of high culture. It is at the center because within art historical discourse paintings of the nude are seen as the visual culmination of Renaissance idealism and humanism. This authority is nevertheless always under threat, for the nude also stands at the edge of the art category, where it risks losing its respectability and spilling out and over into the pornographic. It is the vagueness and instability of such cultural definitions that make these marginal areas so open and precarious. Since pornography may be defined as any representation that achieves a certain degree of sexual explicitness, art has to be protected from being engulfed by pornography in order to maintain its position as the

4 It is Kant’s theory of the self-contained aesthetic experience that is at the bottom of all this, but in Clark’s usage it becomes simplified and popularized, an accessible formula for cultural definition (see Immanuel Kant, Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, trans. J. C. Meredith [Oxford: Clarendon, 1911]).
opposition to pornography. In other words, through a process of mutual definition, the two categories keep each other and the whole system in place. Categories such as the erotic and the sensual play an important role as middle terms in the system—defining what can or cannot be seen, differentiating allowable and illicit representations of the female body, and categorizing respectable and nonrespectable forms of cultural consumption.

Within the history of art, the female nude is not simply one subject among others, one form among many, it is the subject, the form. It is a paradigm of Western high culture with its network of contingent values: civilization, edification, and aesthetic pleasure. The female nude is also a sign of those other, more hidden properties of patriarchal culture, that is, possession, power, and subordination. The female nude works both as a sexual and a cultural category, but this is not simply a matter of content or some intrinsic meaning. The signification of the female nude cannot be separated from the historical discourses of culture, that is, the representation of the nude by critics and art historians. These texts do not simply analyze an already constituted area of cultural knowledge, rather, they actively define cultural knowledge. The nude is always organized into a particular cultural industry and thus circulates new definitions of class, gender, and morality. Moreover, representations of the female nude created by male artists testify not only to patriarchal understandings of female sexuality and femininity, but they also endorse certain definitions of male sexuality and masculinity.

In Britain in the 1970s, the discourse of critics and art historians was implicated in a radical redefinition of sexuality. In the art world, there were renewed efforts to pin down the female nude in high art so as to free it from debasing associations with the sexual. These efforts were countered by other attempts to implicate the images of high culture in the pornographic. In the 1980s context created by AIDS, political conservatism, and religious revivalism, the debate regarding sexuality and representation that took place in the 1970s has taken on a renewed significance. The boundaries between art and pornography continue to shift and to raise complex issues for feminist cultural and sexual politics.

The decade of the sixties in Britain was characterized by a series of legislative reforms in the sphere of moral and sexual conduct. Stuart Hall has described the general tendency of British national legislation in the 1960s as the shift toward “increased regulation coupled with selective privatisation through contract or consent.”

The Sexual Offences Act of 1967 changed the laws on male homosexuality, decriminalizing private sexual relations between adult males. In the same year, the Abortion Act extended the grounds for a lawful termination of pregnancy, and the Family Planning Act introduced wider provision of contraceptives by local authorities. Other legislation made divorce more accessible (1969) and introduced the defense of literary merit into trials charging publications with obscenity (1959 and 1964). At the same time, modification of cinema and theater censorship allowed more explicit portrayals of sexuality in film and on the stage. This series of legislative reforms represents a shift in the style of moral regulation. Although collectively the British legislation shifted toward the general direction of a more relaxed, permissive moral code, the reforms of the sixties should be recognized as a revision of an older conservative moralism and an attempt to create a liberal form of morality at a moment when the main political and economic tendencies were also in the direction of a more libertarian form of capitalism.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the notion of permissiveness began to take on a particular symbolic importance. With signs of a breakdown in the old order, a growing sense of social crisis gave way, by the early 1970s, to a generalized moral panic—a moral backlash against the permissive legislation of the 1960s. On the Left, the women’s movement and the emerging gay liberation movement challenged the extent of the liberalism of the reforms, while on the Right, there was a revival of moral traditionalism, led, with evangelical fervor, by individuals such as Malcolm Muggeridge, Mary Whitehouse, and Lord Longford. According to this new authoritarian morality, the sixties legislation had been the final nail in the coffin of traditional values and Christian morality. The faction’s leaders called for a return to family values and retrenchment behind the institutions of law and order. The focus for this moral panic was the issue of pornography. Obscene and blasphemous material was seen to be the source of social and moral decay, undermining the family and corrupting both the public and the private spheres. As Jeffrey Weeks has commented, pornography became for the moral crusaders of the 1970s what prostitution had been for the social puritans of the 1880s—a symbol of decay and social breakdown.

The new moralism of the 1970s focused on the image and the word. In the early 1970s there was a cluster of prosecutions for

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7 Ibid., 280.
obscenity: the National Viewers and Listeners Association organized a popular campaign against immorality in broadcasting, and in 1972 Lord Longford published his report on pornography. The Longford report concluded that exposure to pornography adversely affected social behavior and morality. The state, it seemed, could not be relied on to maintain sexual standards, and the report cited the Danish and American situations as examples of the state either failing to cohere and reflect public attitudes or adopting a radically libertarian position. The most important point to be made about all these tactics is that moral regulation in the 1970s took the form of the regulation of representations of sexuality as opposed to regulation of sexual behavior. Indeed, representation was at the center of discourses on sexuality during the period.

In the context of this public debate, cultural classification became particularly significant, and the differentiation of terms such as the erotic and the obscene took on a heightened importance. The aesthetic had to be distinguished from the titillating; art had to be sealed off from pornography.

Historically, high culture has provided a space for a viable form of sexual representation: that which is aestheticized, contained, and allowed. In the 1970s this site had to be reinforced and shored up. The differences between paintings of the female nude and "pin-ups," glamour photography, soft- and hard-core porn had to be redefined. During this period the British Library cataloged the 1976 edition of Kenneth Clark’s high art survey, The Nude, in the general stacks but relegated Arthur Goldsmith’s The Nude in Photography and Michael Busselle’s Nude and Glamour Photography to the special locked cases. The special cases are reserved for books that are prone to theft or damage and that include commercial or titillating representations of sex, in other words, books that are regarded as an incitement to action rather than contemplative reading. In the 1970s, photographs of the female nude clearly were seen to fall within these guidelines; but the images included in Clark’s text escaped the contaminating associations of pornography and could be consulted without fearful

8 See Longford, pt. 1, chap. 7. Longford discusses the American congressional “Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, September 1970” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, September 30, 1970), which rejected any clear correlation between pornography and acts of sexual violence and advocated a liberalizing of sex education in order to foster “healthy” sexual development. The report resulted in a split between members of the commission and was rejected by the Senate and president.

consequences to either the book or the reader. In this way the classifications of the British Library map on to the conventional opposition of high and low culture, of fine art versus mass media.

Within traditional aesthetics, the painting has a peculiar status. Valued as an authentic and unique object, the singular product of a special act of creativity, the painting is, as Victor Burgin writes, “part holy relic, part gilt-edged security.” In contrast, the material and cultural value of the photograph is reduced by its reproducibility, and the photograph carries none of the connotations of human agency and cultural dignity. Unlike the connoisseur of high art, the consumer of photographic art does not possess a unique object, and within the polarity of high and low art, the photograph is devalued as the product of mass technology, popular and vulgar.

Thus, paintings of the female nude such as those illustrated in Clark’s book were set apart physically as well as symbolically from photographic images of the female nude. With obscenity as the focus of sexual regulation, high art had to be maintained as an edifying, moral, and privileged form of cultural consumption. Emphasis was placed on the nude as an ideal form that embodies perfection, universality, and unity. These conventions were in opposition to the codes and functions of pornography—fragmentation, particularity, titillation. Above all else, paintings of the female nude had to be closed off from any associations with commercialism or sexual arousal. Refusing the connotation of commodity, the discourse of high art retreated into a vocabulary of contemplation and aesthetic response. As Kenneth Clark explained to the Longford committee:

In a picture like Correggio’s Dänæ the sexual feelings have been transformed, and although we undoubtedly enjoy it all the more because of its sensuality, we are still in the realm of contemplation. The pornographic wall-paintings in Pompeii are documentaries and have nothing to do with art. There are one or two doubtful cases—a small picture of copulation by Géricault and a Rodin bronze of the same subject. Although each of these is a true work of art, I personally feel that the subject comes between me and complete aesthetic enjoyment. It is like too strong a flavour added to a dish. There remains the extraordinary example of Rembrandt’s etching of a couple on a bed, where I do not find the subject at all disturbing because it is seen entirely in human terms and is

not intended to promote action. But it is, I believe, unique, and only Rembrandt could have done it.11

In the end, Clark comes up with an extremely personal and idiosyncratic set of distinctions. Indeed, it is the very obscurity of his criteria that is most striking. His definition rests on a precarious differentiation between a sensuality that can be incorporated within aesthetic contemplation and a sexuality that disrupts this response and becomes an incitement to behavior. Sensuality thus performs an essential role, signifying a form of sexual representation that remains within the permissible limits of art.

But other art historians during the 1970s did not seek to keep high art as a discrete, desexualized category. In fact, they deliberately sought to break open and redefine the category’s boundaries and to address directly the representation of the sexual within paintings of the female nude. Far from being a separate plane of activity, art, they claimed, participates in the social definition of male and female sexuality. Three of these texts, all of which were produced outside of the mainstream of art history, reveal the competing definitions that were thrown up by the issue of cultural representation and sexuality during this period.

John Berger’s Ways of Seeing, first published in 1972, established a fundamental distinction between female nakedness and nudity. Whereas the nude is always subjected to pictorial conventions, “To be naked,” he writes, “is to be oneself.”12 In this framework, Berger juxtaposes European oil paintings with photographs from soft porn magazines, identifying the same range of poses, gestures, and looks in both mediums. The particularity of the medium and cultural form is not important. What matters is the repertoire of conventions that all nudes are believed to deploy, irrespective of historical or cultural specificity. But according to Berger there are a few valuable exceptions to the voyeurism that is constructed through the European high art tradition.

They are no longer nudes—they break the norms of the art-form; they are paintings of loved women, more or less naked. Among the hundreds of thousands of nudes which make up the tradition there are perhaps a hundred of these exceptions. In each case the painter’s personal vision of the particular women he is painting is so strong that it makes no allowance for the spectator. . . . The spectator can witness

11 Quoted in Longford (n. 1 above), 100.
their relationship—but he can do no more; he is forced to recognise himself as the outsider he is. He cannot deceive himself into believing that she is naked for him. He cannot turn her into a nude.13

Berger’s evocation of the hundred or so exceptions to the tradition of the female nude in European art assumes that the relationship between the male artist and the female model, a heterosexual relationship, is inherently natural and good. Power, for Berger, is constituted as public. Private relationships lie outside the domain of power; love transforms the nude into a naked woman and prevents the male spectator, the outsider, from turning the female figure into a voyeuristic spectacle. This interpretation, of course, is entirely based on a naive, humanist faith in the honesty and equality of private heterosexual relationships. It also assumes a familiarity with artistic biography; the spectator needs to know the nature of the relationship between a particular artist and his model in order to make this reading of the picture. Significantly, both Berger and Lord Clark, in his statement to the Longford committee, invoke paintings by Rembrandt as unique representations of sex. Great artists, apparently, produce exceptional images regardless of subject-matter, and cultural value is thus a safe index of moral worth.

Linda Nochlin’s feminist essay, “Eroticism and Female Imagery in Nineteenth-Century Art,” also published in 1972, represents one voice from the women’s movement, which during this period addressed the construction of patriarchy in high culture.14 Nochlin shares Berger’s analysis of the female nude as a patriarchal image for male consumption, but she goes much further, rejecting the idea of the personal erotic imagery of individual male artists in favor of a social basis for the sexual definitions established in images of the female nude. She also points to the absence of any public imagery for women’s desires and calls for an available language to express women’s erotic needs. This call for female erotica was part of a much wider demand by members of the women’s movement during the early 1970s. Unfortunately, Nochlin’s argument was recast by the publisher’s dust jacket to once again present female erotica

13 Ibid., 57.
from a male perspective. “The book is superbly illustrated and combines the pleasures of a rich catalogue of esoteric erotica, with the satisfaction of a penetrating and original study.”

Another effort to redefine sexuality and sexual pleasure in relation to the visual arts can be seen in Peter Webb’s *The Erotic Arts*, first published in 1975. The book is a paradigm of the sexual libertarianism that emerged in the late 1960s and continued into the 1970s, particularly within certain sections of the gay liberation movement. For Webb, sexual freedom was synonymous with social freedom, and sexual liberation was the first step toward social revolution. Webb challenged directly the antipornography lobby and obscenity trials of the early 1970s, which set up liberation in opposition to the authoritarian morality of censorship. Webb, however, was also keen to isolate a category of erotic art from that of pornography. “Pornography is related to obscenity rather than erotica and this is a vital distinction. Although some people may find a pornographic picture erotic, most people associate eroticism with love, rather than sex alone, and love has little or no part to play in pornography. . . . Eroticism, therefore, has none of the pejorative associations of pornography; it concerns something vital to us, the passion of love. Erotic art is art on a sexual theme related specifically to emotions rather than merely actions, and sexual depictions which are justifiable on aesthetic grounds.”15 Webb assumes an essentialist model of human sexuality, conceiving of it as a driving, instinctive force that must find expression through either legitimate or illegitimate channels. In his attempt to distinguish erotic art and pornography, he relies on a familiar set of oppositions: love versus sex, aesthetic value versus bad art, and feeling or emotion versus action. Again, as with the arguments of Clark and Berger, there is a juggling of aesthetic and moral criteria in order to justify one category of representation and to invalidate another.16

**The female nude and sexual metaphor**

In the three examples considered above, the authors directly address the issue of sexual definition in cultural representation, but they do so from different political and moral standpoints. In the

16 Interestingly, both Webb and Berger argue that Oriental art offers honest and frank representations of sex as opposed to the repressed and unhealthy sexuality of Western bourgeois art. In this way, they support the racist mythology of the unrestrained sexuality of non-European races and perpetuate the particular art historical version of the ideology of primitivism.
mainstream of art history, however, the approach is more indirect; sex has to be implicit rather than explicit in order to keep the art/contemplation coupling intact and to maintain the conventional polarity of art and pornography. Within traditional aesthetics, the language of connoisseurship has developed as an expression of aesthetic judgment, taste, and value. The way language is mobilized in discussions of paintings of the female nude allows us to assess the role of sexual metaphor in recent art criticism.

As cultural commodities, oil paintings have been relished by critics and art historians, and the practice of applying paint to canvas has been charged with sexual connotations. Light caresses form, shapes become voluptuous, color is sensuous, and the paint itself is luxuriously physical. This representation of artistic production supports the dominant stereotype of the male artist as productive, active, controlling, a man whose sexuality is channeled through his brush, who finds expression and satisfaction through the act of painting. The artist transmutes matter into form. The canvas is the empty but receptive surface, empty of meaning—naked—until it is inscribed and given meaning by him. Surface texture is thus charged with significance; the marks on the canvas are essential traces of human agency, evidence of art, and also signs of sexual virility, a kind of masculine identity.

These phallic and sexual metaphors take on an astonishing resonance when the painting is of a female nude. The artist transmutes matter into the form of the female body—the nude, ideal, perfect, the object of contemplation and delectation. Within the discourse of art history, sex is written into descriptions of paint, surface, and form. The category of art does not permit a sexuality that is an obvious or provocative element, but such sexuality can be articulated in the discussion of a particular painting’s handling and style. The sexual, then, is distanced from the subject represented on the canvas and is defined instead through the metaphorical language of connoisseurship. Lawrence Gowing, for example, describes a small female figure in a Matisse interior as “abandon(ing) herself to the colour.” In Nude Painting, Michael Jacobs refers to Titian’s Nymph and Shepherd, in which “the dynamics of flesh and blood are revealed in their rawest state, all distracting movement, colour and meaning are stripped away by the rigorous harshness of the artist’s late style.” And Malcolm Cormack describes a Veronese

17 For an important discussion of the metaphor of penis-as-paintbrush, see Carol Duncan, “The Esthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” Heresies, no. 1 (January 1977), 46–50.
18 Lawrence Gowing, Matisse (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 63.
in which “the whole is a riot of the senses where the sensuous mode of expression emphasises the theme.”

However, the issue of the representation of the female nude is not simply a question of the male artist or viewer imposing order on and controlling the canvas or the female body. There is another relationship at stake. The mythology of artistic genius proposes a model of masculinity and male sexuality that is free-ranging, unbounded, needing to be contained within forms. Woman and femininity provide that cultural frame; woman controls and regulates the impetuous and individualistic brush. In a review of an exhibition of impressionist drawings at the Ashmolean in Oxford, the art critic William Feaver considered the representation of the female nude. “A Renoir drawing ‘Nude Woman Seen from the Back,’ in red chalk with touches of white, illustrates more clearly than any painting the Impressionist concept of untrammelled instinct: Renoir’s caress, Monet’s spontaneity. But drawing was the basis. Without it Renoir would have been incoherent.” Just what is invoked by “the Impressionist concept of untrammelled instinct”? What are we to make of “Renoir’s caress” and “Monet’s spontaneity”? Artists and lovers, paintings and sex are collapsed into each other. Masculinity is defined as the site of unregulated instinct, potentially anarchic and incoherent. But the discipline of drawing and the form of the female nude—high culture and femininity—give order to this incoherence; together they civilize and tame the wild expressiveness of male sexuality.

Thus, pictures of the female nude are not about female sexuality in any simplistic way; they also testify to a particular cultural definition of male sexuality and are part of a wider debate around representation and cultural value. The female nude is both a cultural and a sexual category; it is part of a cultural industry whose languages and institutions propose specific definitions of gender and sexuality and particular forms of knowledge and pleasure.

The relationship between art and pornography as illustrated by the British discourse explored here begins to reveal the ways in which cultural and aesthetic designations are mapped onto the moral and sexual values of Western patriarchal culture generally. To date, the popular debate about pornography in both Britain and America has focused on a limited and rather too familiar set of issues. At the center is the issue of legal censorship. Debate about censorship has become polarized between those who advocate

state intervention to ban pornographic material and those who invoke the right of individual freedom of choice, particularly as it is reflected by the private consumption of pornography as opposed to its public display. Supporters of state intervention argue that at issue is the safety of women, that pornographic representations incite violence against women. Yet, social investigation, empirical research, statistics, and personal testimony have been used both to endorse and to refute the links between pornography and acts of sexual violence. Besides the ambiguities concerning these investigations and their conclusions, some of the social effects of pornography, such as women’s fear, embarrassment, and anger, cannot be measured and accounted for in any straightforward way.

The parallels between the poles of this debate and the poles of the pornography/art debate are striking. Both debates focus on the impetus to action as a criterion for classification of images of the female nude. Art critics argue over the merits of sensual or erotic images, and those who would either regulate or deregulate pornography argue over the implications of a patriarchal representation of female and male sexuality. These parallels suggest that the relationship between representation and reality, image and action, is not going to be resolved by tugging empirical data backward and forward between positions. Rather, the meanings of eroticism and obscenity, sensuality and sexuality, art and pornography change over time, their boundaries shaped by the forms and institutions of culture and society. Thus, censorship is only a provisional strategy by which to “contain” patriarchal culture; it is a categorization that reflects pornography’s present definition as outside the norm, as deviant, hidden culture. Only by continuing to examine the complexity with which such categorizations as pornography and art map out broad cultural notions of the licit and the illicit and societal notions of male and female sexuality will we come to a more subtle understanding of the implications of images of the female nude.

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In the social sciences there have been many publications on the relationship between exposure to images and resulting action. Recently, the publication in Britain of the Minneapolis public hearings on pornography (1983) has endorsed the link between the use of pornographic material and acts of sexual violence; see Pornography and Sexual Violence: Evidence of the Links: The Complete Transcript of Public Hearings on Ordinances to Add Pornography as Discrimination against Women: Minneapolis City Council, Government Operations Committee, December 12 and 13, 1983 (London: Everywoman, 1988).