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Can We Break the Horizontal Lines of Whorism?

Choi, Jaz Hee-jeong, Martyna Miller & Susanna Paasonen. *Interactions* July-August 2023, 18–19.

For the first time, this column has more than two named authors. This was consequential to the last one Jaz and Susanna wrote to which Martyna contributed images from her art project Sexinsitu (see images 20 - 22 here for examples of the work: <https://secondaryarchive.org/artists/martyna-miller/>). The original images we had chosen to include in the column were replaced to meet the ACM content policy requirement, which states:

While acknowledging the subjective nature of what constitutes indecency, or obscenity, or bad taste, ACM regards inappropriate content as material—images, video, audio, or text—that would present explicit/exploitive, obscene or degrading text, pictures, and/or illustrations related to sex, drugs, or alcohol.

ACM is not alone in its content policies among publishers. For example, Taylor & Francis, as the publisher of *Porn Studies* journal, regularly omits illustrations of the materials studied with the rationale that some readers may find these offensive, and that minors may find access to them – despite the journal being dedicated to the study of pornography and requiring a paywall access. The erasure of sexual content and communication from public view is somewhat endemic to contemporary networked media, from electronic journals to social media platforms, where nudity is controlled in a *horizontal* manner. For instance, Meta’s community standards construe sex as an arena of risk, offence, and potential harm so that Instagram and Facebook consequently disallow nudity, sexual suggestiveness, and sexual communication.

This comes with multiple worrying implications, most evident of which is the context-blind conflation of visual content featuring nudity with sexuality, obscenity, and even pornography. A radical articulation of this was recently witnessed in Florida where a principal was fired for showing images of Michelangelo’s David to sixth-grade students (<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/27/michelangelo-david-florida-florence-museum-school>). At play here is the same horizontal, context-blind logic observed in online content policies. The ubiquity of this horizontal logic highlights that its risks are wide-ranging from cultural heritage to contemporary self-expression and communication.

As such, we should question how largely US-based companies hold sway in construing ethical values for many global online platforms, informed by culturally specific local sets of moral norms. As the film studies scholar Linda Williams argued in her seminal book, *Hard Core* [Williams 1989], the abstract yet affectively loaded figure of obscenity literally stands for the obscene, the off-stage: content deemed unworthy for public display as something best, if at all,

consumed in private. The horizontal labelling of sex as obscene, then, is both premised and supports the problematic positioning of sex as external to public matters when it directly and fundamentally concerns human and civic rights [Choi & Paasonen 2023].

Can nipples be redeemable?

Uneven and unequal consequences of the effacement of sex from the public eye particularly concern female bodies, as seen in 2018 when Tumblr, once rich in sexual displays of all kinds, banned specifically “female-presenting nipples.” In the eyes of prurient interests, female nipples are sites of titillation and obscenity that must be tamed if redeemable or shunned with the power of the “cult of female modesty ... the belief that a woman’s worth, value and respect depend on her bodily modesty” [Bateman 2023] and situates those non-modest-conforming in the *whores* category. The cult reverberates in Meta’s policy on images containing women’s (or ‘girls’ in their words) swim and underwear made in alignment with Victoria’s Secret campaign [<https://saltyworld.net/exclusive-victorias-secret-influence-on-instagram-censorship-policies/>], or AI systems trained to recognize pornography through datasets focusing on young, thin, abled female bodies and defaults to seeing them as sexually suggestive [<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/feb/08/biased-ai-algorithms-racy-women-bodies>].

Robert W. Gehl et al. [Gehl et al. 2017] point to an underlying premise at play: “that pornography is limited to images of naked women; that sexuality is largely comprised of men looking at naked women; and that pornographic bodies comport to specific, predictable shapes, textures, and sizes.” Central to this kind of ocular selectivity is whiteness, which Sara Ahmed argues orients “bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space, and what they ‘can do’” [Ahmed 2007]. Which female bodies are the *default* bodies that are *redeemable*, more so than others? Which bodies might be deemed cheekily acceptable or hypersexualised? When the horizontal lines between these remain rigid, when non-white(passing) words remain top search terms on porn sites year after year, it does not take a sensitive analytical eye to figure out which bodies may here be cast as pornographic objects or otherwise obscene sights in white supremacist capitalist patriarchal [hooks 1996] narratives. And what does all this mean for artistic work?

Can an image be a shelter?

Let us return to the Sexinsitu project that seeks a new visibility of sexuality. As an archive of sexual experiences made of video recordings of individuals performatively recreating their sexual memories, it focuses on experience rather than fantasy, hence affirming the social dimensions of sex. Participants face the matter of their own bodies and the virtuality of their memories collectively forming a macro-organism that is the evolving archive. Sexinsitu is a story

of intimacy, cosmic possibilities, circulation, movement, and a motion picture that takes the shape of our imagination.

The project stems directly from the social reality that prevents us from presenting images of and discussing nudity and sex in virtual, public spaces. Each participant comes with a different motivation and experience that are not always fully shared with Martyna. Some people decide to take part impulsively and understanding the meaning of their participation comes much later, while others need a long time before deciding to participate. This makes the interconnection between the participants and Martyna not easily reducible to a prescriptive analysis of the "product" that is the visual image of their performing. Individual *Sexinsitu* recordings are in a sense anti-visual or "visually weak" and offer no transgression, no directness or immediacy. We see only one body, in addition, captured in a peculiar situation that is too abstract for visual interpretation. What matters is that it cannot be seen.

The creation of an image of *Sexinsitu* is thus also a practice of carving out social and visual spaces free from the horizontal logic discussed earlier. It vibrates in ways that render resonance as "a connection through which bodies—human and other-than-human alike—move together, shape and affect one another" [Paasonen 2019]. Here, the images become spaces for seeking not pornographic truths but rather safe places where we can attune to ourselves and our interconnections at multiple levels, from the social to the cosmological.

Initially, the further development of *Sexinsitu* was to take place in virtual reality, serving as both an archive and a place for people to meet and exchange. But, perhaps paradoxically, the only place to do this involves face-to-face meetings during recordings in the studio where we may encounter transformative materials together, have conversations, and connect the practice of *Sexinsitu* with other branches of our personal lives. This could be the shelter from what alienates us from issues of our hearts and bodies, and pushes issues of sexuality, pleasure and cohabitation beyond the margins of systemic organization, not least on networked media platforms.

A question for the readers: Which kinds of bodies, desires, and sexual cultures are likely to be rendered altogether invisible? Or, to rephrase, the implications for feminist ecologies should be evident. So what are we going to do about this? Let's create and hold spaces; let's break the horizontal lines of whorism, together.

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