Porno-graphing:
'dirty' subjectivities & self-objectification in contemporary lens-based art


By

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**Abstract**

Through my PhD thesis, 'Porno-graphing: 'dirty' subjectivities & self-objectification in contemporary lens-based art', I use the term 'porno-graphing' to group together and examine lens-based artworks where artists use as art-material sexual situations or sets of sexual dynamics present in their life independently of their art practice. I consider how artists act upon these sexual situations in order to make art out of them, the art-results they produce and their means of sharing them with audiences.

I argue that the artists whose work I examine, use sexual situations that can potentially be perceived as 'taboo'; for example Leigh Ledare involves incest-related dynamics in *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* and Kathy Acker with Alan Sondheim implicate child-sexual subjectivities in the *Blue Tape*. I argue that they choose and use these situations to self-submit into the 'dirtiness' of their sexual and artistic subjectivities and in doing so to negotiate how subjectivity is produced. To do so, they use visual vocabularies of autobiography to self-objectify into roles as both artists, e.g. assuming positions such as the white male pornographer-exploiter (the work of Ledare) and as sexual subjects, e.g. 'perverted' or hyper-sexual objects of desire (the work of Lo Liddell). In embracing these roles they create 'intensified encounters' (Edelman & Berlant, 2014) between the artist, the art-object and the viewer, to interrogate 'normative' and 'antinormative' patterns of meaning-making and value-attribution regarding subjectivity and art.

I frame self-objectification and self-submission as the main strategies within which the artists produce porno-graphing actions and discuss such strategies using Jennifer Doyle's 'rhetorics of prostitution' (Doyle, 2006). To approach the 'dirtiness' of these works as well as their processes I use the notion of 'negativity' (as developed under the anti-social turn in Queer Theory). My research being practice-led an art portfolio will be accompanying the written part of my thesis.

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## Acknowledgements

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I dedicate this work to my grandfather, Ioannis Papadopoulos, to say thank you for showing me how magical thinking can feel.

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I reproduce all these images with the permission of the artists.

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We enact something in order to write ourselves into a structure and this structure is through language. Then there is the idea that social structures subjectivise us by calling to us. But who is the 'us'? Who is it that they are calling? [1]

<div align="right">Leigh Ledare</div>

## Foreword

Porno-graphing may seem to be a lonely practice but it ultimately depends on dialogue. I will never be able to express enough gratitude to each artist I worked with for this research project: each of them allowed space for intensities to be drawn-out in our dialogues, without ever losing trust in me. This was very needed, when I started this PhD project I spent about two years trying to deal with the fact that I had to claim value for my own project and to generally make sense of how to articulate the fact that porno-graphing involves methodologies which resist articulation. Similarly, it was challenging to find the terms through which to navigate the determined yet elusive confidence that underlines porno-graphing actions – and the actual confidence to write about it. As my conceptualisation of what I call porno-graphing actions comes from my own art practice, it was needed that I would in a way and for a while separate from my attachment to it in order to find some of its expressions within other texts, terms and art works. Discovering the rich use of the notion and agency of negativity in the anti-social thesis in queer theory, especially as this negativity links with sex, was catalytic for me to start being able to shape my arguments.

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[1] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

Accepting the word 'dirty' was also complicated; such a word did not seem to fit nicely in a research project. 'Dirty' entered the English language around 1500, and in 1590 it already meant 'morally unclean'.[2] It felt that my using it as a core notion in a PhD was in itself a dirty, and inappropriate thing to do. But dialogue came and through it I could spell out my fears, and magically I found myself able to negotiate inappropriateness, as porno-graphing actions do; and with that I also came to terms with the smallness, the cheapness and the 'wrongness' that relate to porno-graphing. 'Wrongness' is especially important as it is never-ending: 'wrongness' characterises the orbit of porno-graphing methodologies. I use the term 'wrong' to approach how artists approach negatively their own artistic questions (such as 'what is it that makes art, art? Or as Leigh Ledare puts it 'where does meaning lie inside an art-work?'); also, how they approach (or appear to approach) sex with distance and detachment. Artists who use porno-graphing actions often become destabilised by the processes of self-objectifying into 'dirty' roles and the artistic, professional and personal results and consequences of doing so. Yet, they work from within this destabilisation (what I call 'non-sovereignty') to self-objectify to further 'dirty' positions. Therefore, I use terms such as 'wrong' in order to use in my analysis the very negativity through which artists who create porno-graphing actions complicate what may potentially be considered 'wrong' or 'dirty' in regards, for example, to sexual subjectivity. Also, to argue, that the ways artists treat this potentiality (that they may *potentially* be considered 'wrong', 'dirty' or 'sick'), is a way of exploring the un-answerable, the irresolvable, and in this sense, the 'unknowable'.

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[2] Online Etymology Dictionary, 2001, *Dirty*. Available from:
http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?allowed_in_frame=0&search=dirty. [15 November 2016].

I, as an artist, have a tendency to think through images and through these images I become very excited about notions and ideas. Therefore, another challenge of those years was not to fall to the charm of terms such as truth and real. Porno-graphing actions involve autobiographical and 'matter-of-fact'[3] significations, alongside pornographic vocabularies. Starting this project I considered it significant that I would examine this matter-of-factness because the way it is used in porno-graphing actions works so as to complicate signification. I tried to find an established theory of 'truth' that would help me discover the approach I wanted to take. I found that to me the philosophical histories of both the terms 'truth' and 'real', while inspiring, were too loaded for me to attempt to argue using these for the contradictions that porno-graphing involves. For this research I wanted to investigate incoherence in regards to meaning without being incoherent but also without betraying the particular ways that porno-graphing methodologies negotiate meaning-making patterns of creating and viewing images. 'Excess' is the word I chose to allow myself to get carried away with. I was lucky in that Leigh Ledare ran with me in thinking and grounded the term for me. It happened as I was trying to explain to him the thinking that brought me to this research and, consequently, in communication with him: I was telling him that I was after a locus, which was or felt like a void. I was also expressing my fears with respect to this void: it seemed like I could never reach it, it was always escaping me. And even if I could reach it, how could I then justify the desire of such a place in thinking, making and communicating; a place where everything collapses in-itself, or where nothing matters anymore but the very void that perpetually gulps it? Excess is what I call this gap – or rather what Ledare calls it and I came to use his words. More than being the place where articulation does not count anymore, excess is also the

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[3] I borrow the term 'matter-of-factly' from Chris Kraus, who uses it to describe the way Acker uses language in the *Blue Tape*. Kraus, C 2000, 'Sex, Truths, and Videotape', *FEED Magazine*, Available from: http://cubittartists.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/CKraus_BTape.pdf. [23 March 2014].

space, as he says, where the subjects can in a sense 'be' because language does not function anymore.[4] 'Be' instead of pointing to an essential truth or nature relates to the subject's agency, or the conditions within which the subject can practice agency through action. Therefore, my term 'porno-graphing actions' involves the word action because porno-graphing actions are not entire works of art, but actions within these works. And also because, for artists to create porno-graphing, they have to act on a sexual situation with the aim to make art from it.

These actions approximate 'excess' by methodologically using various situations and feelings, such as anxiety and lack of value. This lack of value is contextualised through the ways that porno-graphing actions approximate pornography. In short, these works often, but not always, look like porn. Sex and pornographic vocabularies are significant ingredients of porno-graphing actions yet, as I will argue, are used so as to complicate the art status of the works they are involved in. As I will explain in the 'Introduction', porno-graphing actions involve the artists allowing, and even inviting their works to be measured as pornography: one of the reasons for doing so, being to negotiate art-value. I consider that, within porn studies, a great job is done in terms of researching pornography as a significant part of society and culture and I draw from such studies to form some of my arguments. However, as I hope to show through this thesis, since artists and artworks, which use sex and pornographic vocabularies without particularly aiming to advocate or to demonise pornography, may be overlooked, the ways they deal with sex and image-making may also be overlooked. In a sense, because of the ways that porno-graphing methodologies use

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[4] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

negativity, which involves the artists taking seemingly apolitical positions, these works can slip into invisibility or get stuck into receptions that don't easily look beyond pathologising narratives. This is another reason why the dialogue between the artists themselves is so important: it creates space for communication regarding the artists' own deadlocks, fears and aspirations. I hope that this thesis will also function as a document of those dialogues.

# Introduction

## Definition of porno-graphing

In this introduction, I offer a description of my concept of the action of 'porno-graphing' as a methodology in contemporary lens-based art. I set out the research questions guiding my enquiry and explain how elements of porno-graphing practices form and inform my methodology as a researcher and as an artist. I then situate my work in relation to existing academic discourse in the fields of porn studies and queer theory; to do so I provide a brief account of the porn/art debate and an outline of how the practice and analysis of porno-graphing contributes to this debate. I offer an overview of the 'anti-social turn' in queer theory and then turn to the notions of 'dirty' and the 'unknowable', explaining their relationship and how I use them throughout my thesis.

The broader research question that motivates this project is what sex and sexuality, and in particular various manifestations of 'dirty,' 'wrong' and 'improper' sex and sexual subjectivity *do* to art: to the artist, to the image/s, to the viewer and to art-discourse, and what are the potential effects of lens-based art thus created. To address this enquiry, I look at cases of contemporary lens-based artworks that incorporate methods of producing material that I term 'porno-graphing actions.' Through this term I investigate how contemporary lens-based artists produce work that involves them regarding a sexual situation or set of sexual dynamics present in their life independently and outside of their art-practice as potential material for art-making; in

addition, how they then act upon this situation with the aim of making art out of it, the art-results they produce, and their means of sharing them with audiences.

My use of the term 'porno-graphing action' functions as the anchor point directing my enquiry, and I draw from the 'antisocial thesis' or 'antisocial turn'/ 'antirelational turn' in queer theory, in particular philosophical logics and forms of analysis driven by the concept and agency of 'negativity', which I offer an overview of later in this 'Introduction'. Broadly, the agency of 'negativity' is considered and used for the production of theory within the spectrum of the antisocial thesis in queer theory by scholars such as Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, Lauren Berlant and Judith Jack Halberstam to refer to

> libidinal energies given over to destabilisation, unbecoming, and unravelling
> – as 'self-shattering,' a shadowy sexual impulse that most people would
> rather deny or sublimate – if taken seriously, unbecoming may have its
> political equivalent in an anarchic refusal of coherence and agency.[5]

Through the ways that the anti-social turn is theorised by Lee Edelman and Laurent Berlant, negativity is cast as crucial to contemporary discourse concerned with sexual theory and the politics of knowledge.[6] Through my thesis I address how works that involve porno-graphing actions challenge politics of 'normativity' and 'antinormativity', and I argue that they do so by exposing how sexual subjectivity is a matter of discourse. Furthermore, that by using negativity, artists who create porno-

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[5] Halberstam, J 2010, 'The Artist is Object', *Bully Bloggers Blog,* blog post, 5 April. Available from: https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/the-artist-is-object-%E2%80%93-marina-abramovic-at-moma/. [13 December 2014].
[6] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Duke University Press, Durham.

graphing actions challenge the viewer's meaning-making patterns, complicating the relationship between sex and resolution, and by extension between image and meaning. Also, that through this complication they negotiate art-value by challenging futurism, 'this orientation toward the future, toward something always yet to come, conceived as bestowing a value of life by way of future anterior'.[7] Edelman and Berlant in *Sex, or the Unbearable* 'see sex as a site for experiencing this intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being'.[8] I will use these two scholars' propositions to argue that artists who create porno-graphing actions create 'intensified encounters' between themselves, their artworks and the viewer, thus underlining these relationships as the space of value-creation and attribution.

I describe porno-graphing as a complex and firm action of art-making that explores sex and sexuality through enactments, documentations, physical, technical and conceptual performances, logics and experiments of 'radical passivity'.[9] An example of how artists who create porno-graphing actions use positions and tactics of negativity is that they 'deprive' sex of its everyday private enjoyment and 'reduce' it to art-making. In this way, they expose how sex and sexuality are subjects of discourse and the 'normative' and 'antinormative' structures through which discourse is made by submitting into and appropriating these structures.[10] The example of the presence and use of negativity in the methodology of porno-graphing lies in how artists approach the frames of meaning and representation they seek to critique by

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[7] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.3.
[8] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.
[9] 'Radical passivity' is a term given by Judith Jack Halberstam to draw from the performance art traditions of Marina Abramović and Yoko Ono in discussing the 'refusal to be' as part of their work on the antisocial turn. Halberstam, J 2008, 'The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies', *The Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 150. Available from: DOAJ. [10 December 2014].
[10] I use these words, 'submission' and 'appropriation' in accordance to my discussions with the artist Leigh Ledare.

appropriating them, as I do here whilst referring to sex by using the words 'deprive' and 'reduce' for instance.

The particular creative conjuring that involves negativity in porno-graphing implicates a broad but determined, stable, continuous and unapologetic process of presenting sexual dynamics that can potentially be perceived as taboo, transgressive, 'dirty', 'wrong' and 'improper', for example, in the way that 'the incest taboo' is considered by Rosi Braidotti as 'the fundamental law of our social system'.[11] Through porno-graphing, contemporary lens-based artists who deal with the making of sexualised images approach or appear to approach these sexual dynamics or situations through distance, detachment, mockery, irony, undertones of child sexual subjectivity, the rhetorics of autobiography, submission, cheating, self-objectification, nihilism, cruelty, lack (of vividness, emotion and passion), negation, excess, the reduction sex to 'dry' reports, administration, matter-of-fact-ness, and ordering. I describe porno-graphing as an approach that is willing to embrace the undoing of itself by opening itself to scrutiny regarding its status as art or porn – by showing the work. Considering Feona Attwood's (co-founder of the journal *Porn Studies*) observation that 'whereas the high art body signifies reason, cleanliness and order, the porn body connotes passion, dirtiness and disorder'[12], I use the term porno-graphing to draw attention to the embrace of sexual vocabularies in art that are sufficiently sexually explicit, low-tech, challenging, suggestive, taboo, permissive and open-ended enough to be associated with pornography.

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[11] Braidotti, R 1994, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, p. 82, Columbia University Press, New York.
[12] Attwood, F 2002, 'Reading Porn: The Paradigm Shift in Pornography Research', *Sexualities*, vol. 5, no. 1*,* p. 96. Available from: SAGE Journals. [10 December 2014].

For the purposes of this thesis I consider visual pornography to be an image or series of images where all of the signifiers included in the image or images are either sexual content in themselves, or support the creation of sexual content, and so through this process become sexualised themselves. In other words, throughout this thesis, when I use terms such as pornographic vocabularies, codes and rhetorics, I mean depictions and significations that explicitly show sexual contact and/or nudity in ways that imply sexual activity, as well as using these terms to refer to how non-sexual situations and signifiers (such as a relationship or a domestic landscape) are framed as sexual and thus sexualised through this framing. In using these terms, I argue that porno-graphing actions invite themselves to be considered as porn not only through depicting sex explicitly but also through the ways that they use signifiers such as situations, dynamics, subjects and objects in 'wrong' or 'dirty' ways. Therefore, at times, porno-graphing actions involve little in the way of actual explicit pornographic vocabularies (i.e. sex) yet nevertheless still invite to be measured as pornographic in ways that possibly provoke an interrogation of their art-status and art-value. An important part of porno-graphing processes is that artists work from positions of non-sovereignty and self-doubt, in different ways and to different extents. Through this, they contemplate that they may be doing something 'wrong' or being 'dirty', and mobilise the ideological frames through which perception and judgment may allocate 'wrongness' and 'dirtiness' to their works. In other words, porno-graphing artists use pornographic vocabularies to evoke the 'dirtiness' of being pornographic, not just sexual. In porno-graphing, artists 'play' or 'flirt' with the possibility that their work may be received as pornographic and incorporate this possibility into how they produce their material. This opening, this invitation even, to the possibility of their works being received as porn involves a strategic embrace of the negative

connotations of porn as the 'dirty' other of art, such as Attwood describes. Therefore, the negotiation that porno-graphing strategies propose in their practice differ from art and 'art-porn' lens-based practices where the exploration of the relationship between art and pornography is grounded in a different approach.

By 'art-porn' work, I mean work sometimes presented in porn-festivals such as the Berlin Porn Film Festival or online platforms such as Pornceptual. Pornceptual states their purpose to be 'to de-contextualize pornography in its usual sense and show that an explicit sexual content can be considered art.'[13] On these terms, I consider that platforms such as Pornceptual represent works that invite themselves to be measured as both art and pornography, and that one of the aims of such works and platforms is to explore pornographic vocabularies as being *not* oppositional or threatening to/threatened by art. Thus, such works take a differently confident stance towards their use of and involvement in pornographic codes and structures. I have personally collaborated in making a video that I would now categorise as 'art-porn' and my experience is that such work finds its viewing market mainly, if not exclusively, in platforms such as the ones described above. At the same time, numerous kinds of lens-based works explore and poke the boundaries between art and pornography but are marketed by the artists themselves as art (i.e. not promoted through porn festivals or platforms such as Pornceptual). Examples of such works include those by Jeff Koons, Jeff Burton, Thomas Ruff and Del LaGrace Volcano, to name but a few. Such works can be encountered in art galleries, museums, art-books and art-magazines (rather than porn festivals); nevertheless, they present visual and performative dialogues between art and pornography. I also acknowledge that there are artists such

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[13] Pornceptual, 2017, *Pornceptual*. Available from: http://pornceptual.com/about/. [19 April 2017].

as Natacha Merritt who tap into both the 'art-world' and the 'porn-world', blurring distinctions between the two spheres even further. Similarly, I do not suggest that these or other artists' works don't embrace what may be thought of in porn as 'dirty'. My argument is that they do so differently than porno-graphing actions and artists; that they do so with a different brand of confidence and intentionally than is used in porno-graphing, where the artists complicate positions of confidence/intentionality and lack/self-doubt. The aim of this is to approach possible affective intensities, what I call 'excess', between binary positions (for instance porn as 'dirty' and disorderly/art as 'clean' and orderly) and to challenge the roles of such positions in meaning-making.

**Porno-graphing & the art/porn debate**

Through this section of the introduction, I offer an overview of the art/porn debate with the aim of contextualising how the porno-graphing approach (an artist inviting their artwork to be read as porn in a negative sense) in its practice, observation and analysis can be an alternative paradigm in entering this debate. This short overview draws from and crosses between anti/pro feminist positions, philosophy and legislations in both the UK and the US. This is because, firstly, the works I use in this thesis as case-studies were created in these two locations from artists either native to these countries or like me, living and working in them. Secondly, as someone who is not native to either of these two places but has studied and worked primarily using the English language, my understanding of pornography and art discourses has been

shaped by work created in these two places or circulated in English. As such, I at least partly consider that the discourses created by British and North American scholars and legal authorities as reflective of the general climate in the Global North in regards to art, pornography, and the debate between the two.

The porn/art debate can be thought of broadly as concerning the relationship between pornography and art – the two as defined against each other for reasons of legality, and political and aesthetic value. Consequently, how aspects of art and pornography may be examined, questioned and deliberated through each other. For example, in her book, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching*, Kelly Dennis argues that

> 'pornography' names the very confusion and ambiguity first identified by Plato in the viewer's relation to visual representation. Pornography indicates, in fact, the absence of a discrete limit between viewer and image, the instability of the distinction between subject and object of representation.[14]

By extension, an art-image that involves pornographic vocabularies such as nudity carries 'an anxiety over the materiality of art, the corporeality of the viewer'.[15] However, this is a 'debate' precisely because it involves and includes studies and arguments of art and pornography that focus on the question of whether pornography can be art, and vice versa. Scholars who have worked on such questions, examples of which I will review shortly, have typically drawn from legal definitions of pornography and historical examples of art being censored on the basis of its pornographic attributes. Thus, the wider art/porn debate is historically underlined by

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[14] Dennis, K 2009, *Art/Porn: A History of Seeing and Touching*, p. 3, Berg, Oxford.
[15] Dennis, K 2009, p. 3.

legal and political conflicts. As such, this debate can be thought of as spreading towards numerous branches of critical inquiry: from film theory to feminist social praxis and art politics, as well as from issues of art-censorship to issues of sex-workers' rights.

Most relevant to porno-graphing actions and methodologies, and therefore to my thesis, is that artists are open to and/or invite their work to be read as porn in a negative sense, therefore potentially as 'not art' or at least, not valuable art. Therefore, it is not a core-goal of this thesis to argue towards legitimising aspects of a piece of art that are pornographic, or to hypothesise on what may happen to the meaning and definitions, or the practice, showing and receiving of art if it could be established that a work can be a piece of pornography and art at the same time. It does not seem unusual for art-works involving sexual explicitness to be celebrated by the art-world; for example the works of Robert Mapplethorpe and Slava Mogutin. However, it is also not unusual that such works are publically censored or exhibited under age-warnings and disclaimers in regards to their sexual content. A particularly well-known and documented case of art-censorship is the 'culture wars' in the US 'which peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, and which remain prominent in the nation's ideological debate'.[16] At the heart of these 'wars' was the work of artist Robert Mapplethorpe: his *X Portfolio*, a series of 13 images made between 1977 and 1978 showing sex-acts such as fisting (*Helmut & Brooks, N.Y.C.*) and water-sports, where an individual urinates in the mouth of another (*Jim and Tom, Sausalito*). Another name for the 'culture wars' is the 'NEA wars', referencing NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) funds vetoed for a number of visual and performance artists

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[16] Dennis, K 2009, p. 5.

whose work was found to depict homosexuality and other acts/identities potentially offensive to religious views.[17] As art historian Jennifer Doyle attests

> Even as such legislation has been repealed or overturned, it has led to softer forms of censorship in which the expression of specific points of view becomes stunted as institutions hesitate to support challenging work and as artists anticipate censorious attention.[18]

Indeed, as Gary Needham discusses throughout his essay, '"Not on Public Display": The Art/Porn Debate', there has been an increase in art institutions taking cautionary measures as to how such works are presented, sometimes censoring aspects and elements of an artist's body of work to the point of excluding them from exhibitions.[19] The case-studies of works I examine in this thesis have at times been subjects to similar types of censorship and institutional conflicts but I don't document such instances for reasons of confidentiality. However, this should not be seen as a limitation of this thesis; what is most crucial for the practice and analysis of porno-graphing actions is that artists who create them do so from positions of personal anxiety and destabilisation regarding, for instance, the art-value of their works. Therefore, to understand porno-graphing, it is important to observe how artists address a generalised anxiety in regards to what pornographic rhetorics are and what they do, the possible or impossible consequences of producing them, showing them and encountering them. Artists who involve porno-graphing actions in their works address and negotiate this anxiety by allowing themselves to work from destabilised positions (what I call 'non-sovereignty'). Thus, they approximate tensions possibly

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[17] Doyle, J 2013, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, p. 9, Duke University Press, Durham.
[18] Doyle, J 2013, p. 9.
[19] Needham, G 2017, (in press), '"Not On Public Display": The Art/Porn Debate' in Smith, C, Attwood, F & McNair, B (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*, p. 170. Routledge, London.

generated by or existing within philosophical, political and legal efforts to produce or maintain polarising views and definitions of what art and pornography are and can be.

During the 1980s in the US and UK, 'pornography seemed to become *the* feminist issue'[20], with core and influential anti-pornography arguments coming from feminist positions such as those of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. Such arguments claimed that pornography is harmful to women, promotes and normalises their objectification and violence against them, and that the meaning of pornography *is* in fact 'the depiction of women as sexual objects'.[21] For instance, in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women,* originally published in 1981, Dworkin wrote that

> The word pornography does not mean 'writing about sex' or 'depictions of the erotic' […] or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores […] Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word's root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores, or, in our language, sluts, cows […] cunts.[22]

For the purposes of this research, I critically engage with what feminist theory – aligned with the traditions of Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon's anti-pornography work – casts as 'negative' in regards to pornography: its ability to be 'harmful', 'defined and assessed in terms of what it "does," its effects on the individual and society.'[23] I investigate how works that involve porno-graphing actions draw from such 'harmful' pornographic representations (such as sexist,

[20] Segal, L 1993, 'False Promises: Anti-Pornography Feminism', *Socialist Register*, vol. 29, p. 95. Available from: Socialist Register. [20 May 2017].
[21] Attwood, F 2004, 'Pornography and objectification: re-reading "the picture that divided Britain"', *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 6. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online. [20 May 2017].
[22] Dworkin, A 1991, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, p. 200, Plume, New York.
[23] Attwood, F 2002, pp. 91-92.

objectifying or exploitative) by performing a submission to their structures – which, as I will explain, is a form of critique; not a critique of the traditions of porn but of binary thought and thus, actual sexism, objectification and oppression. Contrary to Dworkin's take on the meaning of the word pornography, I do consider its etymological roots, and draw a picture of porno-graphing artists as 'dirty', as 'vile whores'. I explain what I mean by using this analogy of artists as 'whores' and how I use it in my analysis through the 'Rhetorics of prostitution' section in this introduction.

Anti-pornography arguments such as those made by Dworkin directly influenced anti-pornography legislations in the US[24], and as Lynne Segal, pro-pornography feminist scholar argued in 1993, 'contemporary feminist debate and discourses around heterosexuality remain engulfed by the anti-pornography campaigns and politics of the 1980s.'[25] However, numerous feminists such as Feminists Against Censorship in the UK 'passionately' rejected the feminist anti-pornography line of thought, 'its analysis and its related practice'.[26] Porn studies, an academic field that considers pornography as a cultural phenomenon worthy of scholarly attention, was largely introduced through the book *Porn Studies*, which Linda Williams edited in 2004. Introducing *Porn Studies*, Williams called out for a critical enquiry that expanded beyond feminist anti/pro debates.[27] In the UK in 2014, Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, two scholars already working with pornography, established the academic journal *Porn Studies*. One of the constitutive models of porn studies as a field of academic research is resisting adopting a pro- or anti-porn position (thus, by default,

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[24] Segal, L 1993, p. 96.
[25] Segal, L 1993, p. 94
[26] Segal, L 1993, p. 96
[27] Williams, L (ed) 2004, *Porn Studies*, Duke University Press, Durham.

leaning towards a more positive engagement with porn). It aims to be an interdisciplinary and critical academic research model on porn (representation, reception, consumption, etc.) seeing it as something that is not a monolith and that has cultural significance.[28] Critical work made in the field of porn studies exposes how 'definitions of "pornography"' are considered to 'produce rather than discover porn texts and, in fact, often reveal less about those texts than they do about fears of their audiences' susceptibility to be aroused, corrupted and depraved.'[29] In these broad terms, my work aligns with porn studies in that I draw from scholars' work in the field in order to investigate how porno-graphing methodologies negotiate pornographic vocabularies. In writing this thesis, the journal *Porn Studies*, as well as conferences and soirées put together through academic circles associated with porn studies have been valuable tools for accessing material for my research. While my own broader pro-porn approach cannot help but be evident, it is important to state that through this thesis I address limitations as to how pornographic vocabularies are examined in this academic field. While scholars in porn studies refer to traditions of dichotomising pornography and art (which I draw from for this thesis), my view is that the use of pornographic vocabularies in art are, so far, mostly ignored.

Williams, publishing her article 'Pornography, porno, porn: thoughts on a weedy field' in the first volume of the *Porn Studies* journal, addressed her concern over the very title 'porn studies'. In her view, the 'casual' use of terms such as 'porn' and 'porno' essentially signal a generalised alignment of porn studies as an academic field

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[28] Attwood, F & Smith, C 2014 'Porn Studies: an introduction', *Porn Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, pp. 1-6. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online. [10 December 2014].
[29] Attwood, F 2002, p. 95.

with pro-pornography positions, which she argues should not be the case.[30] Williams

attests that 'the same kind of false dichotomy between "anti" and "pro" pornography

with which feminist debates of the 1980s and 1990s were so entangled […]

unfortunately seem to be continuing today.'[31] Furthermore, she notes that it is often in

pro-porn texts that the words 'porn' and 'porno' are used whereas 'it is striking how

many of the articles or books that wish to signal disapproval of the genre typically use

the full term pornography.'[32] She asks: 'Why have we lost the *graph* – the part of the

word that indicates that it is a form of creating, representation, even, as the word itself

means, a kind of writing.'[33] For my study of what I call porno-graphing

methodologies in lens-based art, I use the term porno-graphing in order to draw

attention to this 'staging of contradictions' (to borrow a term that Leigh Ledare uses

to refer to elements of his practice[34]) between the introduction of the self (as non-

sovereign) into a 'dirty', pornographic or 'wrong' context, and the mark-making (not

in the sense of leaving a signature but in creating change or making something 'new'

through, for example, re-symbolisation, re-appropriation, re-orchestration of signs)

that aspires to locate itself in the realm of 'art.' I use the suffix -graphing in order to

underline an investigation of what is to be written – 'graphed' – and where, and in this

sense to suggest an investigation into the unknowable and unthinkable.


An aspect of the porn/art debate relates to issues of art-censorship as the borders

between pornography and art, which are often discussed on the grounds of the

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[30] Williams, L 2014, 'Pornography, porno, porn: thoughts on a weedy field', *Porn Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1-2, p. 24. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online. [20 May 2017].
[31] Williams, L 2014, p. 28.
[32] Williams, L 2014, p. 33.
[33] Williams, L 2014, p. 32.
[34] During our dialogue, when I asked Ledare what role pornography plays in his work, whether he considers that he uses it and how, he replied that pornography can trigger or contribute to the staging of contradictions. I will examine in detail such propositions in my third chapter in this thesis. Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.

vagueness of legal definitions of pornography. It is difficult, for example, to isolate a

recent UK legal definition of pornography without stumbling into the recently-coined

legal concept of 'extreme pornography'. According to the Criminal Justice and

Immigration Act 2008 ('otherwise known as the "Dangerous Pictures Act"'[35]) an

'extreme image' is a pornographic image which is also 'explicit and realistic' and

depicts 'extreme acts'. So, within the legal overview of what is now called 'extreme

pornography', an image is defined as 'pornographic'

> if it is of such a nature that it must reasonably be assumed to have been
>
> produced solely or principally for the purpose of sexual arousal. Whether an
>
> image is pornographic or not is an issue for the District Judge or jury to
>
> determine simply by looking at the image. Expert evidence should not
>
> normally be required to prove this element. It is not a question of the
>
> intentions of those who produced the image. Nor is it a question of the sexual
>
> arousal of the defendant.[36]

The ambiguity of pornography legislation is discussed by Josh Jaskiewicz in his

article 'Art & Pornography – A Critical Analysis', where he recalls the Audiovisual

Media Services Regulations 2014 that came into force in the UK on December 1st

2014, and which legally restricts the viewing and circulation of online depictions of

sexual acts such as spanking, face-sitting, fisting and female ejaculation.[37] The aim of

Jaskiewicz's article is to 'elucidate the different characteristics of art and

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[35] Attwood, F & Smith, C 2010, 'Extreme Concern: Regulating "Dangerous Pictures" in the United Kingdom', *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 37, no. 1, p. 171. Available from: Wiley Online Library. [20 May 2017].
[36] CPS 2016, *Extreme Pornography*. Available from:
http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/d_to_g/extreme_pornography/#an04. [30 April 2017].
[37] Hooton, C 2014, 'A long list of sex acts just got banned in UK porn', *The Independent*, 2 December. Available from: www.independent.co.uk. [10 May 2017].

pornography, and explore how the law has obfuscated the ability to clearly distinguish

the two' offering the conclusion, that:

> there is no way to draw a principled distinction between 'art' and
>
> 'pornography'; a substantial overlap between them will always exist. The
>
> context of a gallery or an adult shop can indicate to what might be expected
>
> yet it does not preclude that within small subclasses of these domains
>
> collections of work may very well qualify as both pornography *and* art.[38]

Along these lines, what qualifies as art or pornography becomes the decisive factor in

terms of what *is* art and what *is* pornography. Consequently, 'context' can be 'an

insightful tool in distinguishing art from pornography.'[39] Whilst Jaskiewicz's

examples of art-cases include Robert Mapplethorpe's work, his analysis ignores the

sexual politics of the work itself: a gay man photographing gay men and sexual acts

possibly not uncommon to other sexualities yet more specific to gay sex, such as

fisting (for example the *Helmut & Brooks, N.Y.C.* photograph). As Needham notes in

response to other defences of Mapplethorpe's art as not pornography, such arguments

come 'at the expense of identity, context and agency, which are necessary political

conditions of both queer and feminist art practice.'[40]A foundational methodology of

porno-graphing actions is that not only do they *not* seek to defend themselves as art

against accusations of being pornography, they also rely on the specificities of the

artists' identities, and how they negotiate and perform their identities and

subjectivities (for example as queers, women, mothers, sons etc.) in ways that may

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[38] Jaskiewicz, J 2015, 'Art & Pornography – A critical analysis', *Queen Mary Journal of Intellectual Property Blog*, blog post, 19 February. Available from: qmjip.wordpress.com. [25 May 2017].
[39] Jaskiewicz, J 2015.
[40] Needham, G 2017, p. 168.

potentially be perceived as sexually transgressive or 'dirty', in order to invite them to

be measured as pornography. These methodologies do so by relying on the material

present and evident in the artists' lives prior to them deciding to make art from them,

thus signaling a form of autobiographical authenticity. This places the works in a

unique position of unsettling the existing art/porn debate by challenging both

'normative' (in this instance anti-porn) and 'antinormative' (in this instance pro-porn,

or apt to defend a piece of work such as Mapplethorpe's as 'just art'[41]) positions.

In short, artists whose works involve porno-graphing actions are open for their works

to be measured as porn; in order to do so, they use, exploit even, their identities by

self-objectifying into subjectivities that may be received as 'dirty'. Furthermore, these

artists don't defend their works as art on the basis of a moral purpose or political

contribution; for example, making 'dirty' sexual subjectivities and practices visible to

raise social awareness. Therefore, their works cannot be defended against being called

pornography on these grounds and these artists know so. Porno-graphing works

neither seek legitimacy on the grounds that they are in fact art and not porn, nor on

the grounds that they are making a special contribution to society by virtue of being

queer, feminist etc. (although ultimately, they do make such contributions). Their

embrace of pornographic vocabularies means that they erode art's defences against

being defined as porn from within, whilst their self-reflexivity, the fact that

sometimes they don't show sexual contact explicitly, and the fact that they are at

times presented as art in galleries and art-institutions, prevents them from being

designated definitively as porn. Christy Mag Uidhuir in his essay, 'Why pornography

can't be art' enters the art/porn debate through the notion of purpose. Through

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[41] Needham, G 2017, p. 168.

thought-formulations and modes of analysis that he calls 'value neutral', he draws a distinction between 'manner specific' and 'manner inspecific', and claims that 'if art has a purpose, then that purpose is manner specific.'[42] He concludes that for someone to attempt to make something that is both art and pornography is 'to attempt the impossible.'[43] As I argue throughout my thesis, porno-graphing methodologies are (partly and individually) based on artists doubting the purpose (and value) of their own works. In this sense, they complicate the purpose which, according to Uidhir, would decisively distinguish their works from pornography.

In their article, 'Extreme Concern: Regulating "Dangerous Pictures" in the United Kingdom', and in response to the 'Dangerous Pictures Act', which I turned to earlier in order to offer a legal definition of pornography, Attwood and Smith explain how the use of terms such as 'torture porn' and 'war porn' 'suggest a crisis over the meaning of "porn".'[44] In turn, Needham points out that 'the crisis in meaning in relation to both art and pornography' may be 'what now defines art/porn.'[45] In these terms, porno-graphing actions and methodologies can be considered as sitting on this 'crisis of meaning'. Porn may be considered 'dirty' only within its' own frame, while in porno-graphing works, the 'dirtiness' escapes the frame and 'dirties' art, thus problematising value-attribution and meaning-making patterns. I argue that in creating porno-graphing actions, artists negotiate this 'crisis in meaning' by approximating the very 'gap in identity' that according to Lee Edelman, '"meaning",

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[42] Mag Uidhir, C 2009, 'Why Pornography Can't Be Art', *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 33, no.1, p. 194. Available from: Project MUSE. [13 May 2014].
[43] Mag Uidhir, C 2009, p. 202.
[44] Attwood, F & Smith, C 2010, p. 182.
[45] Needham, G 2017, p. 171.

despite itself, means'.[46] To do this, artists who use porno-graphing methodologies self-objectify into roles that may be perceived as 'dirty', thus using, exploiting even, their subjectivities. Bojana Kunst in her book *Artist at Work: The Proximity of Art and Capitalism* creates an account rotated around what she terms as the 'crisis of subjectivity', where 'subjectivity turns outward as an empty process', losing its centre. In these terms, the subject 'is no longer the locus of truth', as it is 'no longer established through an authentic core'.[47] The 'experimentation and the crisis of the subject drive the production of signs and gestures, which shifts the values about the importance of artistic gestures'[48] and as such, these experimentations are 'at the centre of capitalist production.'[49] In short, for Kunst, the current use of subjectivity in contemporary art, which exemplifies the crisis of subjectivity, is a product of contemporary capitalism and either a crucial part of its engines or running the risk of becoming so. Drawing from Giorgio Agamben's scholarship on 'profanantion', she argues that pornography can be 'denoted as the ultimate trait of production; indeed the most active (current) form of capitalism comes across as utterly obscene.'[50]

In his essay, 'Pornography and its Critical Reception: Toward a Theory of Masturbation'[51], Magnus Ullén makes a similar claim to Kunst in terms of the closeness of pornography and capitalism, albeit writing from a different perspective that doesn't figure art into its equation. He claims that studying the consumption of pornography (masturbation) can allow for a study of the 'cognitive space' that a

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[46] Edelman, L 2004, *No Future, Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, p. 13, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
[47] Kunst, B 2015, *Artist at Work Proximity of Art and Capitalism*, p. 20, Zero Books, Alresford.
[48] Kunst, B 2015, p. 37.
[49] Kunst, B 2015, p. 21.
[50] Kunst, B 2015, p. 36.
[51] Ullén, M 2009, 'Pornography and its Critical Reception: Toward a Theory of Masturbation', *Jump Cut*, vol. 51. Available from: ejumpcut.org. [20 June 2017].

consumer of consumer society is in when they consume. This is because when one consumes in a consumer society, one is encouraged and supported by the discourses through which they consume (from pornography and advertisements to tabloids and other mass media) to be in a 'cognitive space' where one is or feels 'free from all external ideological determinants'. For Ullén, pornography lies because firstly, it presents the sex shown as real in ways in which it is not (actors having sex for real 'but rarely or never in a way that people outside porn have sex') and secondly, because it pretends that the satisfaction it provides comes at 'no cost for anyone else' but for the one who consumes it. This second lie, for Ullén, is the lie of consumer society as well. In other words, this lie is based on how truth is mediated by mass media such as pornography and advertisements in consumer society. The 'cognitive space' through which mediated truth is in a sense accepted as truth (as the person doesn't question it, being 'free' from ideology and thus responsibility) is most exemplified for Ullén in the moments of porn consumption, as already mentioned. He argues that the consumption of meaning through pornography via masturbation equates the destruction of meaning. Considering that porno-graphing actions use subjectivity to negotiate the meaning and value of subjectivity and art, associations between subjectivity, meaning and complicity such as these drawn by Kunst and Ullén frame the political context of porno-graphing actions and this thesis.

Given that cultural politics are politics that involve 'struggle over meaning'[52], it can be considered that the 'crisis over the meanings of pornography', the 'crisis of subjectivity' at the centre of art-making, and the relationship between meaning (production and consumption) and complicity are at the heart of contemporary

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[52] Barett, M 1982 'Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics' in Brunt, R & Rowan, C (eds) *Feminism, Culture and Politics*, p. 37. Lawrence and Wishart, London.

cultural politics in the capitalist West. Such 'crises' in terms of the construction of subjectivity's value and meaning can also be discerned in how the language of identity politics can be appropriated by capitalist agendas in order to create more inequality. In his essay, 'Identity Politics: Nothing Personal'[53], written in 2015, Murat Aydemir reminds us that the aim 'of a productive identity politics is not to leverage the claims of one group over everyone else, but to dissolve, becoming unnecessary, in a society that is more just for everyone, not just for the one or the other group.' Contextualising his argument through an article published by *The Guardian* (UK newspaper) that reports on how the wealthiest people in the world ('the 1%') are claiming the status of a minority group that is made to feel shame (for being wealthy), Aydemir also reminds us that 'contemporary identity politics is becoming part of the West's global power play, just another form of "soft power" to help legitimize military and economic violence'. Subsequently, he notes that 'it is now entirely possible to mobilize the discourse of identity politics, not just in the absence of any concern for global material justice, but in active psychological support of extreme inequality.'[54] The intervention made into these debates by this thesis – along with my own practice – is the suggestion that meaning and value can be renegotiated through positions of non-sovereign subjectivity. I argue that the ways that non-sovereign subjectivity is used in porno-graphing methodologies questions the meaning and value ascribed to subjectivity through oppressive structures such as capitalism by questioning binary thought. Furthermore, I argue that they do so by addressing a lack, or gap, that emerges once the meaning and value ascribed to subjectivity and to art by the codes of market-exchange is challenged.

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[53] Aydemir, M 2015, 'Identity Politics: Nothing Personal', *UvA-DARE*. Available from: UvA-DARE. [10 June 2017].
[54] Aydemir, M 2015.

Artists who involve porno-graphing actions in their works self-objectify into 'dirty' roles and positions, and invite their work to be measured as pornography. On these terms, as I explained earlier, they open up the possibility for their work to be measured as pornography through their identities and subjectivities. These artists work from non-sovereign positions where the autonomy of the subject is destabilised, doubting themselves and the idea of the self as an 'original'. Considering Edelman and Berlant's suggestion that to encounter one's self as non-sovereign 'is to encounter relationality itself'[55], porno-graphing actions place subjectivity at the centre of contemporary tensions or 'crises' in regards to meaning (and value). For example, in the way that subjectivity is used in porno-graphing methodologies, the meaning and the value of the subject appears as dependent upon other subjects or on its relation to other subjects, as I explain in detail in the section 'The differences between "dirty" and "abject"' in this introduction. In these terms, porno-graphing actions, more than merely exposing how sexual subjectivity is made discursively, gesture towards a claiming of discourse as based on the relations between subjects. To negotiate meaning and value, instead of considering the subject or its centre 'lost' (such as Kunst suggests), they underline its presence, participation and complicity.

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[55] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. viii.

**An overview of 'the antisocial turn' in queer theory**

I argue that the agency and logics of negativity are present in porno-graphing actions in the ways they approach or appear to approach sex and sexuality in art-making. By logics, I mean lines of thinking, conceptualising and 'resolving' through the course of art-making, which I will describe here as parallel to traditions of critical practices that seek to foreground negativity. I put the word 'resolving' in inverted commas because its very definition of giving answers or finding solutions is at stake when negativity is at play, where asking questions without expecting solid answers is a focus, such as in the theory work of Edelman and Berlant[56], and also in artworks that use porno-graphing actions. In broad terms, my approach and understanding of negativity in regards to sex is that in so far as sex is considered as 'a locus of optimism' and 'a site at which the promise of overcoming division and antagonism is frequently played out', then 'the challenge of negativity' is a 'process of conceptualising sex in absence of such optimism'.[57]

'Queer negativity' may be thought of as embracing states, dynamics and processes culturally loaded with negative connotations and negative value, such as anti-production, masochism, self-destruction, abjection and negation as ways of decentering 'redemptive politics of affirmation, narratives of success, and politics that are founded on hope for an imagined future.'[58] Negativity can be found to be shaping, forming and informing various political projects, processes and artefacts, for example,

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[56] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014.
[57] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. xiv.
[58] Wang, J 2010, 'Negative feminism, anti-social queer theory and the politics of hope', *Giulia Tofana the Apothecary Blog*, blog spot, 22 June. Available from: lonelyberry.tumblr. [13 December 2014].

as Judith Jack Halberstam suggests, 'from anticolonialism to punk'.[59] In this sense, projects, processes and artefacts that use negativity in various forms logically predate the manner of negativity's theorisation that I present here. After all, the very term 'queer theory', referring to an academic theory, was proposed and coined by Theresa deLauretis in 1990[60] and 'the antisocial thesis' in 2005 when Robert Caserio 'organized a session for the MLA convention'[61], and used this term as the title for the conference.

The origins of what has come to be referred to as the 'anti-social turn', 'antisocial thesis' (or 'anti-relational' thesis) in queer theory can be found in the works of Guy Hocquenghem, Michel Foucault and Gayle Rubin. In 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' (first published in 1982), Rubin 'distinguishes between sex and sexuality' and 'analyses the social construction of sexual hierarchies and the consistent demonizing of non-normative sexualities.'[62] For example, she identifies 'ideological formations whose grip on sexual thought is so strong that to fail to discuss them is to remain enmeshed within them.'[63] Of these ideological formations

the most important is sex negativity. Western cultures generally consider sex

to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force […] Virtually all erotic

[59] Halberstam, J 2006, 'The Politics of Negativity in Recent Queer Theory', in
Caserio, L, Dean, T, Edelman, L, Halberstam, J & Muñoz, JE 2006, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory', *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, p. 824. Available from: JSTOR. [16 January 2015].
[60] Wiedlack, M K 2013, '*We're Punk as Fuck and Fuck like Punks:' Queer-Feminist Counter-Cultures, Punk Music and the Anti-Social Turn in Queer Theory*, p. 3, Ph.D thesis, University of Vienna. Available from: others.univitie.ac.at. [20 May 2017].
[61] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2015, 'Reading, Sex, and the Unbearable: A Response to Tim Dean', *American Literature History*, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 627. Available from: Project Muse. [10 June 2017].
[62] Rosenberg, T 2008, 'Locally Queer. A Note on the Feminist Genealogy of Queer Theory', *The Graduate Journal of Social Science*, Special Issue on Queer Studies, vol. 5, no. 2, p. 12. Available from: GJSS. [Available 14 May 2017].
[63] Rubin, G 2006, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in Aggleton, P & Parker, R (eds) *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*, p. 150. Routledge, New York.

behavior is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction and love.[64]

In *Homosexual Desire* (first published in 1978), Hocquenghem notes that within heteronormativity, homosexuality is considered a 'frightening non-humanity'[65] because homosexual sex doesn't breed. Yet, instead of arguing against such normative structures he suggests a submission to and celebration of that which the subject has been accused of (being unproductive in the Oedipal sense in this instance): as a 'perverse endorsement of the rhetoric of the enemies of that (homosexual) desire, showing them to understand the stakes better than those who would argue for liberal inclusiveness.'[66] In these terms, for Hocquenghem, the 'gay movement […] demonstrates that civilization is the trap into which desire keeps falling.'[67] Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* and his 'perverse implantation' thesis argues that we must 'abandon the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression' because 'pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement.'[68] For Foucault, 'the very concept of sexual liberation paradoxically limits our horizon of sexual freedom' because 'whether devaluing or elevating sexuality, it is always from the same attachment to the very

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[64] Rubin, G 2006, p. 150.
[65] Hocquenghem, G 1993, *Homosexual Desire*, p. 148, Duke University Press, Durham.
[66] Weiner, J & Young, D 2011, 'Queer Bonds', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2-3, pp. 223-241. Available from: Project MUSE. [8 December 2014].
[67] Hocquenghem, G 1993, p. 138.
[68] Foucault, M 1978, *History of Sexuality Vol 1: The Will to Knowledge*, pp. 48-49, Penguin, London.

bizarre idea that we are tied and chained to our irrepressible sexual drives'.[69] Along these lines, he suggests that 'once we understand that there is nothing to expect from outside or beyond the realm of power, our only chance to avoid being trapped in the "sex-desire grid" consists in subverting it from the inside', practicing 'a sort of counter-productivity'.[70] In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam revisits said scholarship and sums up queer negativity as: 'a project within which one remains committed to not only scrambling dominant logics of desire but also to contesting homogenous models of gay identity within which a queer victim stands up to his or her oppressors and emerges a hero.'[71] Put simply, the threads of critical thought that I just briefly reviewed can be thought of as adding up to the idea that trying to legitimise sexual subjectivities that are oppressed is not necessarily liberating, nor does it or always create progress because it can be a request for qualification by the same structures that pathologise and oppress.

The anti-social turn as a theoretical field that critically examines queer negativity is recognised as being first theorised by Leo Besrani, in the sense that he is 'credited for first questioning the desire to attribute an ethical project to every kind of gay sex.'[72] In 'The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies', Halberstam considers that Bersani's

> definition of sex as anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identitarian
>
> produces a counter-intuitive but crucial shift in thinking away from projects
>
> of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation and towards what

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[69] Princep, T 2012, 'Michel Foucault's "Perverse Implantation"', *DESIRE, LITTERATURE, CULTURE Postgraduate Symposium*, pp. 4-5. Available from: Academia.edu. [8 December 2012].
[70] Princep, T 2012, p. 6.
[71] Halberstam, J 2011, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 149, Duke University Press, Durham and London.
[72] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 149.

can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality.[73]

In his own words, in his chapter 'Gay Betrayals', Bersani states that 'I'm more excited by some glorious precedents for thinking of homosexuality as truly disruptive – as a force not limited to the modest goal of tolerance for diverse lifestyles, but perhaps even mandating the choice of an outlaw existence.'[74] In turn, Lee Edelman in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Sex Drive* 'argues that to be queer is to oppose futurity, coining the term "reproductive futurism" to describe the tendency to define political value in terms of a future "for the children" and insisting that the power of queer critique inheres in its opposition to this narrative and therefore to politics as we know it.'[75] Edelman's theoretical formation of rejecting the 'future' by rejecting the 'Child' since, for him, the 'Child remains the perpetual horizon of every political intervention'[76], incites

> a critique of the figure on which Edelman's analysis hinges for having the characteristics and privileges that accrue to middle- and upper-class white gay men. Calling for no future, it has been argued, might inform a (non)politics only for those for whom the future is given, even if undesirably so.[77]

[73] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 140.
[74] Bersani, L 2010, *Is the Rectum a Grave? and Other Essays*, p. 41, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.
[75] Lothian, A 2016, 'A Speculative History of No Future: Feminist Negativity and the Queer Dystopian Impulses of Katharine Burdekin's Swastika Night', *Poetics Today*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 443. Available from: Duke Journals. [25 May 2017].
[76] Edelman, L 2004, p. 3.
[77] Keeling, K 2009, 'Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, p. 568. Available from: Project MUSE. [20 May 2017].

For example, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, José Esteban Muñoz pointed-out that

> The future is only the stuff of some kids. Racialized kids, queer kids, are not
> the sovereign princes of futurity. Although Edelman does indicate that the
> future of the child as futurity is different from the future of actual children,
> his framing nonetheless accepts and reproduces this monolithic figure of the
> child that is indeed always white […] It is important to not hand over
> futurity to normative white reproductive futurity. That dominant mode of
> futurity is indeed 'winning,' but that is all the more reason to call on a
> utopian political imagination that will enable us to glimpse another time and
> place: a 'not-yet' where queer youths of color actually get to grow up.[78]

Calling out the anti-relational turn in queer studies as 'the gay white man's last stand', Muñoz argues for 'the essential need for an understanding of queerness as collectivity' and therefore for 'queerness as primarily about futurity.'[79] In these terms, even if Edelman's project can be seen as 'potentially radical or dismantling', it can also be considered as foreclosing 'any possibility of political activism.'[80] Halberstam identifies the 'archive that represents queer negativity' as 'excessively small', narrowed 'to a select group of antisocial queer aesthetes and camp icons and texts' such as Jean Genet, Andy Warhol and Virginia Woolf. They add to it less canonical projects such as those of Valerie Solanas, Jamaica Kincaid, Patricia Highsmith,

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[78] Muñoz, JE 2009, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, pp. 95-96, New York University Press, New York.
[79] Muñoz, JE 2006, 'Thinking beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique', in Caserio, L, Dean, T, Edelman, L, Halberstam, J & Muñoz, JE 2006, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory' *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, p. 825. Available from: JSTOR. [16 January 2015].
[80] Wiedlack, M K 2013, p. 8.

*SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Finding Nemo*.[81] In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam puts forward a proposition of 'exploring unknown territories of alternative knowledges and queer strategies of unknowing'[82], and challenges Edelman's rejection of the child figure as the embodiment of 'reproductive futurism, by recognizing childhood and childishness as queer experiences.'[83] Directly in relation to contemporary art, Halberstam proposes concepts such as 'radical passivity' and 'shadow feminism' as genres 'where we find no "feminist subject" but only un-subjects who cannot speak, who refuse to speak'[84] Furthermore, Halberstam underlines the anti-social turn's own shortcomings, arguing that 'negativity might well constitute an anti-politics but it should not register as apolitical'[85] because 'the apolitical anti-social agenda […] cuts both ways and while it mitigates against liberal fantasies of progressive enlightenment and community cohesion, it also coincides uncomfortably with a fascist sensibility'.[86] In turn, Tim Dean argues that 'queer theory and politics need a vigorously argued antisocial thesis, in order to grasp how beyond the normative selfhood lies an orgy of connection that no regime can regulate.'[87]

Artists who use porno-graphing methodologies, I argue, negotiate art-value by strategically and variously doubting the value of their work. They appear apolitical insofar as they refuse to defend the value of their works on the basis of their political

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[81] Halberstam, J 2006, p. 824.

[82] Szczygielska, M 2012, 'Judith Jack Halberstam. *The Queer Art of Failure*', *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, vol. 9, no. 2, p. 236. Available from: DOAJ. [8 December 2014].

[83] Szczygielska, M 2012, p. 237.

[84] Halberstam, J 2010.

[85] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 148.

[86] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 143.

[87] Dean T 2006, 'The Antisocial Homosexual', in Caserio, L, Dean, T, Edelman, L, Halberstam, J & Muñoz, JE 2006, 'The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory', *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 3, pp. 828. Available from: JSTOR. [16 January 2015].

beliefs and contribution, doubting its purpose, claiming at times to not know or own it
– or, to use Halberstam's term, 'unknowing' it. By not signposting their political
position, underlining the 'dirtiness' of the sexual subjectivities involved in these
works, they question the structures that assign value, or lack of value, to these
subjectivities and to these works. The question of what may be the best way to
involve sex's sociality in a discussion that holds the agency of negativity and the
value of passivity in affecting politics as its focal-point is addressed in Edelman and
Berlant's *Sex, or the Unbearable,* where they address the value of the 'personal' in
contemporary thought. They cast the 'personal' as in itself 'negative' because, they
suggest, in relation to current critical thinking and activist practice that focuses on
politics, it appears to be 'anachronistic' and 'narcissistic', as if it 'suggests a "refusal"
to move on.'[88] According to Edelman and Berlant, these are the very attributes of sex
that make it crucial within the spectrum of negativity because of how sexual desire
refuses to move on, remaining 'fixed to a primal attachment' that makes the object
'appear as desirable'.[89] Tim Dean has criticised several aspects of *Sex, or the*
*Unbearable*, from how Berlant and Edelman 'constantly risk rehabilitating negativity
as politically progressive'[90] to their 'love of abstraction as simultaneously a
disavowed hatred of sex', an abstraction that for him 'enables the maintenance of
hygienic distance from the messiness of embodied desire.'[91] Dean also underlines
how 'in their claims about the effects of sex and subjectivity, Berlant and Edelman do
not differentiate straight sex from queer sex; apparently, the distinction remains
irrelevant.'[92] Similarly, although argued before *Sex, or the Unbearable* was published,

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[88] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 63.
[89] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 63.
[90] Dean, T 2015, 'No Sex Please, We're American', *American Literature History*, vol. 27, no. 3, p. 620.
Available from: Project MUSE. [25 April 2017].
[91] Dean, T 2015, p. 621.
[92] Dean, T 2015, p. 619.

Bersani in 'Gay Betrayals' points out that 'queer critiques of homosexual identity have generally been desexualizing discourses […] "Queer" is preferred to "gay" […] in large part because of its sexually indeterminate reference; it becomes a universal political category, embracing every one who resists "regimes of normal."'[93]

The analytical grammars I use most in this thesis are those deployed in *Sex, or the Unbearable* and those developed in Edelman's own work. I use them to analyse artworks that involve porno-graphing methodologies and their means of negotiating the meaning and value of subjectivity. I also use Halberstam's proposed terms 'radical passivity' and 'shadow feminism' to investigate porno-graphing actions: their methodologies, effects and place in the spectrum of contemporary lens-based art. The reason I use theoretical work from the academic discourse of queer theory – to which I aspire to contribute – to look at works that involve heterosexual sex is not because I wish to make a claim to queerness as a universal category nor to label the sex of these works as queer. After all, as Maria Katharina Wiedlack argues, 'shortly following the annexation of queer in academia, a de-radicalization of the term queer within the mainstream became visible, and, queer became normalized within the academic landscape.'[94] My aim is to approach, via the lens of porno-graphing and for the purposes of its analysis, elements of sex and sexual dynamics that I consider unspeakable – difficult to approach through language and understanding – and to investigate how these elements can negotiate subjectivity, its meaning and its value when used in lens-based art.

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[93] Bersani, L 2010, p. 42.
[94] Wiedlack, M K 2013, p. 4.

The experiences, subjectivities and privileges I draw from in order to compose this work are the ones of a white queer woman, born and raised in Greece, who has lived most of her adult life in the UK. Furthermore, this thesis is an investigation into art and visual culture, themselves dependent upon a shared cultural context in order to create meaning. To clarify, since my femme-ness may have a complicated history with visibility, in saying I am queer I mean that I have sex and romance most often with women and other female-bodied people. Speaking from these experiences, I do see the sex involved in porno-graphing actions as deviating knowingly from certain norms, taking risks in doing so. Most importantly, my focus is on how these sexual situations and dynamics are acted upon to make art from them: how sexual subjectivity and sexual dynamics are reflected on by the artists who then orchestrate and strategically frame them to make art. In other words, I don't seek to reveal the nature of the sexual practices involved in porno-graphing as my focus is to investigate the 'dirtiness' of their framing.

My analysis takes at times nihilistic turns, as does my artwork, which is presented as part of this thesis. The nihilism involved in porno-graphing has to do with the extent to which the agency of negativity may be used, self-doubt becoming so extreme that the work is disabled from becoming complete or finalised, or not maintained and destroyed. In this sense, this nihilism is part of the personal explorations that porno-graphing methodologies sometimes entail, explorations concerning the artist's confidence or lack thereof, as well as their system of ideas, beliefs and ideals. In porno-graphing strategies, the potential extremity of negativity finds release in 'dirtiness' and its playfulness. This is because 'dirtiness' operates as a way of investigating the relationship of the personal to the collective: artists self-objectifying

into roles that may potentially be considered as 'dirty' by others, a negotiation of, to use Ledare's words, 'how external opinions, conceptions or perspectives are overlaid on who a subject is'.[95]

From my experience of practicing, researching and discussing porno-graphing with artists who I identify as using it and others who I identify as not using it, porno-graphing methodologies are likely to take place in contexts where individuals are willing to open themselves up to others enough to receive criticism and be challenged. Even more so, these individuals need (and know that they need) the communities and relationships they form in order to carry on in life and move forward, thus both maintaining and transforming themselves through relation. For example, the thinking that I have put into this thesis is shaped significantly by my living in a communal space for three years with one of the artists whose work I also examine in this thesis (which I talk about in the 'False Starts' chapter). We (the people living and working in this space) tried to 'be held by relationality', to borrow a term that Berlant uses when talking about her use of 'love as a political concept' in her scholarship, in an interview given to Heather Davis and Paige Sarlin.[96] We used our care for and our investment in each other and to our relationships to explore, amongst other things, positions of 'dirtiness' – ourselves as 'dirty' or 'dirtier' than one another – to accept or reject them, to use them differently and variously in our lives and projects. Another example of how important relationality is in porno-graphing methodologies can be found through my encounter with Leigh Ledare, which I have used to deepen my

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[95] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[96] Davis, H & Hard, M, 2011, '"On the Risk of a New Relationality:" An Interview with Lauren Berlant and Michael Hard', *Reviews in Cultural Theory*, no. 2-3. Available from: reviewsinculture.com. [10 June 2017].

understanding of these methodologies by observing how I voice them through our dialogue, as I describe extensively in the third chapter, 'Pretend'. My use of Edelman's theory on reproductive futurism and its rejection finds its motive in his argument that meaning is attached to a logic of futurism[97] and his analysis of said proposition. I use his analysis to argue that porno-graphing methodologies use subjectivity in such a way as to approach a gap inside the notions of meaning and value (a space where they are empty of their own meaning), approaching this gap or excess as a way of creating space for connection and communication.

Every action one takes, in my view, such as writing this thesis, is a gesture towards the future. This negotiation cannot be done but collectively. Collectivity and togetherness involves myriad frictions and forms of power negotiation and redistribution. Placing this power negotiation within the frame of a sexual dynamic, or between a work of art and the viewer, there is often, if not always, someone (or many) who think that they know and understand less, and trust themselves less. Edelman and Berlant propose that there are many ways 'that sexuality manifests itself as non-sovereignty' and 'radical incoherence' and that to understand more about how it does so may 'transform what sexuality stands for and does'.[98] My use of Edelman and Berlant's theory aims to approach what may be radically incoherent about sex (and how this may point to other elements of life which are also radically incoherent). Considering their work as 'a thought experiment that takes sex as a figure for what unleashes both disturbance and the effort to repair disturbance in the encounter with non-sovereignty (the encounter inherent in relationality, taken at any scale)'[99], I aim to approach how coherence and incoherence relate to lens-based art where

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[97] Edelman, L 2004, p. 11.
[98] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, pp. 2-3.
[99] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2015, p. 627.

pornographic vocabularies are used alongside autobiographical ones. I argue that the 'dirtiness' of the one who feels that they know less, who self-doubts and doesn't trust themselves, is used in porno-graphing methodologies as a way of approximating the excess involved in and produced by relating, and thus what may be escaping the language ascribed to sex and sexual subjectivity.

I acknowledge that some feminists working with theory and activism also use terms such as 'negativity' and 'optimism'; they use these terms to challenge how 'antinormative' discourses and activist practices aspiring towards 'sexual liberation' (such as queer theory and anti-censorship feminism) affect sex and sexual subjectivity.[100] For example, they consider that 'if it was once radical and marginal to assert an essential, or simply available, goodness to sex, it is now central, institutional' and therefore such discussions and practices are part of the same oppressive regimes of power. Thus, some feminist theorists propose a stand 'against optimism' because they cast such optimism as still 'existing alongside shame and silence'[101] and therefore as reproductive of normative structures. These theorists are situated against pornography, whether heteronormative or queer.[102] My thesis, which does engage with the question of what is considered 'normative' and 'antinormative' in relation to sex and sexual subjectivity in contemporary art and thought, is in no way a critique of pornography, whether heteronormative or otherwise. Instead, investigating porno-graphing actions in contemporary lens-based art, I inquire as to how pornographic vocabularies are used to create discussions concerning art-discourse and subjectivity in these actions. For example: how pornographic

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[100] An example of such position can be found in the essay: C.E. 2012, 'Undoing Sex: Against Sexual Optimism', *Lies: A Journal of Materialist Feminism* 2012, vol.1. Available from: liesjournal.net. [10 December 2012].
[101] C.E. 2012.
[102] C.E. 2012.

vocabularies are used to negotiate art-value and to challenge binary thinking; how in order to complicate the reception of their works, artists allow themselves to be open to readings that pathologise and destabilise them on the grounds of their use of pornographic codes; how they self-objectify into sexually and artistically 'dirty' subjectivities interchangeably; and how at times they use negativity by stretching subtlety to, or beyond limits of signification, rather than involving sexual explicitness.

In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault questions how structures of power from the 17th century onwards in European societies have come to be viewed as repressive regarding sexuality. He argues that sexual desire, 'far from being unspeakable,' has actually been forced to transform itself into discourse 'through explicit articulation and endlessly accustomed detail,' institutionally ritualised, medicalised, and pathologised by medical science, Christianity, and psychoanalysis.[103] I argue that methodologies of porno-graphing actions involve the conceptualisation and intellectualisation of sex as well as incorporating artists' lengthy processes of critically analysing and theorising about their own practice. This transformation of sex into discourse and ordering appears to take place through structures of confessionality. In this sense, artists submit, embrace, and appropriate structures of articulation and the 'rules of examination' that foreground structures of power within sex, sexual subjectivity and discourse. I examine how artists do so by using pornographic vocabularies next to other signifiers and argue that in the ways they do so, they challenge the viewer's patterns of perception, and thus problematise the links between image and meaning.

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[103] Foucault, M 1978, p. 18.

**Rhetorics of prostitution**

Working through the scope of negativity, I approach my wider question regarding what 'dirty', 'wrong,' 'sick' and 'improper' sex and sexual subjectivities *do* to art by addressing how works that involve porno-graphing actions challenge politics and logics of 'normativity' and 'antinormativity.' I put these words in inverted commas because my understanding is that under the critical agency of 'negativity' (antisocial theories), it is important that the fixity of these institutional positions is renegotiated.[104]

Jennifer Doyle, in her book *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire*, explores how 'sex happens in art and why it matters'[105], examining popular and critical traditions of thinking regarding the relationship between art and pornography, for example how 'the idea that art and pornography are mutually exclusive opposites is more convenient than it is true.'[106] Doyle recalls that the word 'pornography' etymologically derives from the words prostitute (pórne, πόρνη) and writing or graphing (graphé, γραφή), 'writing about or representations of prostitution (*pornográphos*: writing about harlots).'[107] My approach to the etymology of the word pornography is that it also means: that which is written/graphed/said *by* the whore. Approaching the work of Andy Warhol, Doyle refers to 'endless citations of Warholian axioms by grumpy pundits who read them as the cynical expressions of the whore who embraces the very system that exploits her.'[108] The theory that the whore

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[104] Berlant L & Edelman L, 2014.
[105] Doyle, J 2006, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire,* p. xxxi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
[106] Doyle, J 2006, p. xvii.
[107] Doyle, J 2006, p. 70.
[108] Doyle, J 2006, p. 45.

embraces the system that exploits 'her' is significant because it reveals how the agency of the whore may not just be ignored and dismissed, but is looked at and perceived as something abnormal and pathological, and in this sense, sick. For example, feminist scholar Anne McClintock, introducing her edition of the issue *Sex Workers and Sex Work* of the *Social Text* journal points out that

> as a theory of agency, the anti-sex work campaign against prostitution is internally contradictory. On the one hand, prostitutes are patronized and silenced as having an inherent *lack* of agency – as coerced slaves and victims of 'false consciousness.' On the other hand, they are castigated for having an *excess* of agency, as irresponsibly trafficking in male fantasies and commodification.[109]

McClintock's claim is based on anti-prostitution feminist practices such as the work of Kathleen Barry.[110] An example of Barry's anti-prostitution scholarship and social practice is brought forward by Carol Jacobsen in her essay, 'Fighting for Visibility: Notes on the Censorship Battle of "Porn'im'age'ry: Picturing Prostitutes"', published through the same issue of *Social Text*. Jacobsen revisits some histories of 'antiporn feminist silencing of sex-workers'[111], such as that time in 1983 when Barry was organising a conference on female sexual slavery in Rotterdam and forbade sex-workers to participate as public speakers. 'Her excuse for silencing the sex workers was that their histories of abuse, poverty, and their social "irresponsibility" rendered

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[109] McClintock, A 1993, 'Sex Workers and Sex Work: Introduction', *Social Text*, no. 37, p. 7. Available from: From JSTOR. [20 April 2017].
[110] McClintock, A 1993, p. 7.
[111] Jacobsen, C 1993, 'Fighting for Visibility: Notes on the Censorship Battle of "Porn'im'age'ery: Picturing Prostitutes"', *Social Text*, no. 37, p. 138. Available from: JSTOR. [3 June 2017].

them incapable of speaking objectively.'[112] Writing her way through various similar

historical examples, Jacobsen argues that such social practices (feminists telling sex-

workers what they can and cannot do and say, and where) coincide with 'the

MacKinnon/Dworkin view that working prostitutes are all victims of patriarchal

violence and that women who claim to choose sex work are suffering from "false

consciousness."'[113] In the words of Barry herself, 'prostitution is a human rights

violation, whether or not the prostitutes consent, whether they think of what they do

as "sex work" or sexual abuse, if indeed they are able to think about it at all.'[114]

Resuming McClintock's observation that in such anti-prostitution work the agency of

the sex-worker is considered as both lacking and excessive, Doyle in her book

concludes that the figure of the prostitute embodies a 'pathology of agency'.[115]


For the purposes of my thesis I examine porno-graphing works through propositions

and critiques such as those concerning 'pathological' agencies, the 'perversion' of

making art out of sex, the negativity implied in the embrace of structures of

exploitation and by extension, the doubting of the political and artistic 'relevance' and

significance – the value – of the works I investigate. By 'structures of exploitation', I

mean a person's or a group's conscious thought and action that functions so as to

benefit from another person's or situation's objectification and commodification. For

example, Barry defines prostitution as

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[112] Jacobsen, C 1993, p. 138.

[113] Jacobsen, C 1993, p. 139.

[114] Barry, K 1997, 'Prostitution of sexuality: A cause for new international human rights', *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 31. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online. [4 June 2017].

[115] Doyle, J 2006, p. 49. Doyle also footnotes in her book that the term 'pathology of agency' was initially coined by Mark Seltzer in his 1993 essay 'Serial Killers (01),' in *differences: A Journal of Cultural Studies,* vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 92-127.

the reconstruction of the self into a buyable sexual object for market exchange. The sex that is exchanged is the sex of sexual exploitation, which reduces a human being to a sexual thing, separate from human reality, dissociated from the self, and used (either taken or purchased) for sexual servicing.[116]

Thus, I understand the proposition that a prostitute embraces systems that exploit her (consequently, her being disqualified from speaking publically as she is not capable of conscious or responsible thought) as a proposition that assumes the broader financial system through which a sex-worker gets paid for their work is an exploitative system; consequently, that clients of sex-workers are too symptoms of this system. By extension, that the prostitutes are 'cynical' because they ignore that they are being exploited and embrace systems of exploitation for their own benefit, thus becoming exploitative themselves. For example, Barry identifies 'distancing' and 'disengagement' as integral aspects of sex-work: 'establishing emotional distance by dissociating from the commodity exchange in which their bodies and sexuality are involved', because for sex 'to be mechanically reproduced as commodity, sex requires that the women be there and "perform"'.[117] To examine porno-graphing actions and the works that include them *through* such propositions, I create analogies between the figure of the prostitute and artists who use porno-graphing actions. I argue that these artists embrace structures of exploitation and I investigate how by doing so they also display the 'pathological' agency of the figure of the prostitute, for example that they approach, or appear to approach sex through distance and detachment.

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[116] Barry, K 1997, p. 36.
[117] Barry, K 1997, p. 31-32.

At the same time, by using the term 'structures of exploitation' in regards to porno-graphing, I mean the structures of thought that may attribute a subject with 'dirtiness' or 'sickness' so as to benefit from their subordination; for example, heteronormative thought may attribute 'dirtiness' to a queer subject in order to socially weaken them. Or the structures of thought that may attribute 'dirtiness' and 'sickness' to an artist as a way of diminishing their work, which may be to serve the purposes of their own personal or professional agenda. I consider that such a dismissal may also have its cause in an unwillingness to face one's own complicity in constructing the meaning and value of a piece of work. As I argue throughout my thesis, and particularly through the third chapter, patterns of perception and reception that function so as to absolve one's own responsibility in meaning and value making can in turn reinforce structures that I view as actually oppressive (such as that sex-workers are sick and incapable of consciousness).

I claim that artists who use porno-graphing actions in their works self-submit into structures of exploitation because they consider that the contextual expressions of their very processes of self-submission and self-objectification may potentially be perceived as pathological (i.e. 'sick' and 'dirty'); so that in using these processes they create the frame through which they and their works *are* perceived as pathological. In other words, embracing structures of exploitation, self-submitting into them, is a 'dirty' thing for these artists to do, precisely because they do so knowingly to different extents and in different ways. This also illustrates the negative logic of what I call 'self-submission' and 'self-objectification'. Self-submission and self-objectification are the processes through which artists embrace structures they want to critique (such as a line of thought that may call one 'sick') as a means of critiquing it.

For example, Ledare says that he uses self-objectification as a means of objection.[118] This is essentially the negative logic that anti-social theory suggests, where the subject embraces what an oppressive structure attributes to it as negative instead of pleading for its normalisation. This is also a negative logic because not only does it necessitate the subject conceptualising a structure that could, for example, pathologise them but also involves, or implies, the subject exploiting or cheating themselves – or appearing to be doing so. In porno-graphing methodologies, such processes that could be seen as self-exploitative are illustrated by how artists willingly work from positions of non-sovereignty and 'lacking positions'; I will explain this further in the 'Unknowable & Unthinkable' section of this introduction later on.

A subject's embrace of the system that exploits them is what the anti-social turn itself interrogates and challenges. For example, part of Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis' concerns the narrative of the queer as the heroic figure that fights a world of puritans, a narrative that overlooks 'the actual mechanisms of the history of sexuality within which marginalized subjects participate in and endorse the very systems that marginalize them.'[119] I consider this position to be different to the one I mentioned above where the prostitute is viewed as 'embracing structures which exploit her' because this critique, addressed to the figure of the prostitute, does not refer to prostitutes' struggles and fights for decriminalisation, professional and personal safety and numerous other issues related to their work and human rights, but instead refers to their actual sexual (professionally sexual) practices.

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[118] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[119] Halberstam, J 2011, p.150.

In drawing a parallel between the figure of the prostitute and artists who use porno-graphing actions, I do not wish in any way to appropriate the lived subjectivities of sex-workers whose profession and struggles I wholeheartedly admire and respect. I do not claim that I or any other artists who use porno-graphing methodologies (except if we, each as individuals, indeed have practiced sex-work) understand what it feels like to be a sex-worker and what implications the social challenges that attend this profession may have in one's life, including to be considered sick (pathological) for having chosen this profession and for practicing it. I do not examine in this thesis whether artists whose work I investigate, including myself, make, have made or have ever attempted to make money through sex-work because my analogy between the figure of the prostitute and the use of artistic and sexual agency in porno-graphing actions is figurative. Additionally, this analogy solely concerns the context of my investigation regarding porno-graphing strategies of self-objectification and self-submission where sex is used as working-material. In social terms, I view the anti-prostitution considerations I use in this thesis (such as that the agency of the prostitute is pathological) as deeply misogynistic and whorephobic, and thus destructive. In political terms, I stand by sex-workers and their rights, and in no way believe that sex-workers are 'sick' or 'dirty', or by default exploitative or apt to be exploited. I use Doyle's research to refer to established traditions of popularly considering sex-work as well as pornography, and the role of these views in constructing opinions concerning the relationships between sex, representation, art, value and meaning-making.

In examining the relationships between structure, subjectivity, sex, art and value, I consider it crucial that it is the figure of the prostitute who can be considered as

illustrative of the agency of the one who embraces the very systems that exploit them. In other words, whilst I don't personally believe that sex-workers are exploitative and by default victims of exploitation, I do consider that the figure that is 'cynical' enough to embrace systems that exploit 'her' becomes identifiable with the name of the prostitute, the one who uses sex for money. In short, I don't think that prostitutes embrace exploitation but I consider how they are thought of as doing so (because they use sex for money) by anti-prostitution critiques such as those raised by Barry and revisited for the purposes of critique by scholars such as McClintock and Doyle. Researching the particular ways through which artists, in porno-graphing, use sex to make artworks, I do not investigate anti-prostitution logics but I do consider such logics as examples of thought that may pathologise usages of sex that differ from every-day uses of sex (i.e. private enjoyment). Furthermore, prostitution-discourse is relevant to art discourse regardless of how or whether a work of art uses sex. For example, Doyle uses the term 'rhetorics of prostitution' to 'mark a shift in discourse on art, in which the most important aspect in determining an artwork's aesthetic worth is the attitude it appears to take toward the act of being sold.'[120] Given that porno-graphing methodologies involve self-submission as a way of embracing systems of exploitation (and this as a means of critiquing these systems), these works complicate the attitudes a piece of art may take in terms of its aesthetic and financial value.

For my question, 'What do dirty subjectivities *do* to art?', it is important to consider the kinds of agency that may be considered as 'wrong' and 'sick'; for example, McClintock's and by extension Doyle's proposition that within feminist anti-prostitution and anti-pornography work, the agency of the prostitute is considered as

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[120] Doyle, J 2006, p. 53.

pathological (therefore 'sick'). However, in a sense, it is not significant from which

exact critical or personal agenda such considerations may arise as in using porno-

graphing strategies, I argue, artists self-objectify into what may *potentially* be

considered as 'dirty', 'wrong' and 'sick'. My understanding is that this potentiality is

not a nullifying generalisation, such that everyone *would* consider certain roles or

subjectivities as 'dirty'; instead, that it works so as to: 1) negotiate how anti- and pro-

positions (in regards to pornography or sex-work for example) may be part of the

same social milieu, and 2) actively create another way of investigating the

unknowable (that it is not possible for the artists who use porno-graphing actions in

their works to know who exactly may consider them as 'dirty'). In the case of the

works I examine, the artists' personal, professional and public environments, as well

as the artists themselves, raise such critiques.


The prostitute's sexual agency may potentially be considered pathological because, as

McClintock and Doyle remind us, it can be viewed as occupying two 'binary'

positions (that of having no agency and of having an excess of agency). It may be

considered pathological because of its economic exchange, through which the

prostitute may be viewed as being 'cynical'[121] and as representing 'an extremely

alienated relationship to their work, to their own bodies'.[122] In porno-graphing, artists

approach or appear to approach sexual situations through a similar quality of

detachment that is attributed to sex-work, reducing and depriving sex of its private-

enjoyment characteristics by acting upon it, and altering a sexual situation that pre-

existed their decision to make art from it, in order to make art out of it. My argument

is that in porno-graphing, artists incorporate negative assumptions attributed to sexual

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[121] Doyle, J 2006, p. 45.
[122] Doyle, J 2006, p. 51.

subjectivities such as those that may be attributed to the figure of the prostitute into how they use their subjectivities in their art-making process. In appropriating them, they negotiate power, subjectivity and agency, and aim to destabilise the systems or structures of thought and culture that pathologise such subjectivities, in the same way that Judith Butler has argued power can be appropriated so that it challenges the power that formed it in her book, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*.[123] I focus on theoretical discourses on how disciplines of sex-work (from prostitution to pornography) smear[124] with and relate to art-discourse, in the way that, for example, Doyle uses the etymological roots of pornography to approach how Warhol has at times been considered 'not really an artist' because the 'pleasures' of his work 'are extracted from the very act of "selling out"' like a 'prostitute', or how she starts her approach through 'the condensation and dismissal of issues key to Warhol's work under the rubric of prostitution', dismissals such as that through his 'prostitution', 'his art fails to provide a meaningful social critique'.[125] Similarly, I engage with negative critiques that have been attributed to the works I examine, levelled from the artists' personal and professional networks as well as by the artists themselves.

I argue that porno-graphing actions do perform 'social critiques' (and I believe that Warhol's work, albeit differently, does); for example, that they expose how subjectivities are a matter of discourse and that the art-viewer is complicit in constructing the meaning of the art-object as well as of the sexual subjectivities on

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[123] Butler, J 1997, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.

[124] I use the word 'smear' in the way that Ledare does when discussing 'excess' as the space which manifests as a 'gap' or 'void'. I will review his suggestion regarding 'excess' in a following section of this 'Introduction'. Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

[125] Doyle, J 2006, pp. 45-46.

display. One of my aims is to argue that works that involve porno-graphing actions are framed so as to appear apolitical or politically 'dirty', and lacking purpose and relevance. Therefore, another reason why I don't examine whether any of the artists whose work I discuss, myself included, are or have been sex-workers is because if I were to explain porno-graphing methodologies through the lens of the lived subjectivity of sex-workers (artists who are also sex-workers and use porno-graphing strategies), I would automatically be claiming a particular political context for these works whereas the works themselves don't claim such context automatically or in straightforward ways. An exception in regards to my acknowledgment of a person as a sex-worker in my thesis is Tina Peterson, Ledare's mother. In several ways, Ledare's work, *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* can be seen as a collaboration between him and Peterson; I see it as such because I consider Peterson's agency to be catalytic for the project's existence. However, Ledare has taken the authorial responsibility for this work and in doing so, as I will explain at length throughout the third chapter, finds another way of self-objectifying himself into various 'dirty' positions. Peterson in *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* performs herself in ways that involve her being visible as a sex-worker, and this is one of the contexts through which she also self-submits into 'dirty' roles. Besides reviewing how Peterson does so in my chapter on the work of Leigh Ledare, I use the analogy of artists who use porno-graphing actions and the 'pathological' agency of the prostitute throughout my thesis without making further reference to sex-workers or to any pornographic texts.

Doyle, within her scope of the rhetoric of prostitution, for which she uses the paradigm of Warhol, examines how the artists' intentionality, and thus the value of their work is dismissed when strategies of submission are at work. For example, she

reviews how some critics ascribe an 'intention to submit (or, more clearly, the intention to not resist)' to Warhol. Consequently, they perceive his work (and Pop art altogether) as lacking value by calling him out for not noticing or not knowing that Pop art 'wants us "to believe that it is in fact adopting a critical posture towards that to which it has actually surrendered"'.[126] In my thesis I will not make further reference to Pop art or its reception in terms of value as the focus of my research lies in re-framing discourses regarding the use sex, sexuality and image-making, which is not always the case in Pop art[127], a genre characterised more through its appropriation of mass-culture objects than through its association with the use of sex and sexuality. What I draw from referring to Warhol's Pop art in this introduction is specifically, as I have already mentioned, discourses that link value attribution, art and the figure of the prostitute.

Doyle, through her term 'rhetorics of prostitution', describes 'the ways that the artist, the art-object, and reader/spectator are represented in (especially) criticism as participating in an illicit sexual exchange'. She draws from philosophical work on money to frame how

> a set of assumptions about prostitution (as devoid of feeling, as nonproductive, the prostitute imagined as both diseased and sterile) [... ] describe the devastating effects of money on the individual's understanding of his or her own value.

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[126] Doyle, J 2006, p. 49.

[127] 'Pop art' is an art movement which emerged in the 1950's in the UK and the US and challenged traditions of fine art by involving and appropriating mass-culture objects and images. Pop art, *Wikipedia*, wiki. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pop_art. [12 January 2016].

And she concludes that,

> The rhetoric of prostitution manages the same problem in the work of art – the
> anxiety that it has no inherent value, no value outside relations of exchange. It
> works rhetorically to contain the fear that this lack is contagious, routing the
> lack at the heart of the art object through discourses that would appear to be
> external to aesthetics.[128]

I investigate how works that involve porno-graphing actions negotiate art-value (the status of a piece of work as art) by using the agency and methods of the prostitute to centre the relationship between artwork and viewer. For instance, how the artists in the works I examine use sex for the sake of work and are open – if not inviting themselves – to be associated with or measured as pornography and self-objectify into roles that could potentially be perceived as pathological. My argument is that these artists, in doing so, involve their own destabilisation and 'undoing'. Therefore, a crucial element of the methodologies of porno-graphing is that such critiques and associations are considered by the artists themselves – that they and their work may indeed be pathological or 'sick'; that it may be perceived as such, or that it may not be valued as art – and then incorporated into how these artists make and present their material. That in porno-graphing actions, artists self-objectify into embracing such positions and so mirror them back to the viewer, inviting the viewer to recognise that meaning 'lies on the side of reception'.[129] To examine these strategies, I will attend to how issues of intentionality, purpose and preparation are considered and processed in porno-graphing actions.

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[128] Doyle, J 2006, pp. 51-52.
[129] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.

**Dirty**

I use the terms 'excess' and 'dirtiness' (the last being the most prominent in my thesis) to draw a distinction between a mental or affective space, an excess that cannot be thoroughly touched – 'pinned down'[130] – or clearly described because 'it is protective of sets of conditions of temporality'[131] and a process of negotiating signification through 'dirtiness'. I acknowledge that terms such as 'dirty', 'wrong' and 'improper', as well as the notion of 'excess' are broad and subjective. Therefore, I don't claim a definition of these terms as solidified concepts. Furthermore, such solidity wouldn't serve my research as I am concerned with how artists conceptualise and anticipate possible and potential associations of their work with such broad notions. The destabilised and non-sovereign positions they work through relate to the very arbitrary and ambiguous qualities of notions such as 'excess' and 'dirtiness'. However, I do consider that the 'dirtiness' I claim for porno-graphing actions straightforwardly relates to pornography, as 'content and viewing relations are not enough to distinguish porn *as* porn. It is the dirty, naughty, debasing and disgusting style or quality of porn that becomes the decisive factor.'[132] Attwood draws from Lynda Nead to argue that: 'The pleasures associated with art are those of "contemplation, discrimination and transcendent value" while those of porn are "motivation, promiscuity and commodification"'.[133] One of the ways 'dirtiness' operates in porno-graphing works is that it facilitates a negotiation of the boundaries between pornography and art. My claim is that in porno-graphing methodologies, the boundaries between pornography and art operate symbolically as a means of

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[130] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[131] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[132] Attwood, F 2002, p. 96.
[133] Attwood, F 2002, p. 96.

approaching and negotiating other boundaries such as those between life/art, truth/false, right/wrong and knowable/unknowable. Alongside said binaries, porno-graphing methodologies approach notions of art-value, 'dirtying' it in the sense of complicating and challenging meaning and meaning-making patterns. Or, to put it differently, they contaminate art with the 'dirtiness' of porn or with the 'dirtiness' of their subjectivities. Exploitative (of the self and of others) and non-sovereign subjectivities are used in porno-graphing actions in such a way that they destabilise meaning and value. By 'value' and 'art-value', I don't mean financial or labour value; I consider that the art-value of an art-work concerns its status as art precisely independently of its place in the market. I investigate art-value through the question of 'What is it that makes art, art?', which in turn takes the space of the 'unknowable' in my thesis. I explain the 'unknowable', as well as how I use the term 'excess', later in this 'Introduction' in more detail. Through this section I offer an overview of my use of the terms 'dirty', 'wrong' and 'sick', and how I aim to approximate what in porno-graphing could be seen as a contagious lack of value through these terms.

Within my thesis, considering the agency of negativity as that which destabilises subjectivity/identity and manifests as 'nonsovereignity': 'the subject's constitutive division which keeps us, as subjects, from fully knowing or being in control of ourselves and that prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires'[134], 'dirtiness', 'wrongness' and 'impropriety' is what destabilises *sexual* and *artistic* subjectivity/identity. In order to inquire as to what 'dirty' sexual subjectivity *does* to art, how 'dirtiness' destabilises any sense of coherence that may be associated with art, we have to allow space for these terms to play out elusively because the ways they

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[134] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. viii.

refuse fixity of definition enable us, I argue, to enter into and trace the perplexing application of negativity's logics and methodologies in the case-studies under examination. For example, how 'dirtiness', 'wrongness,' and 'impropriety' are staged to address questions regarding what is (and what is not) taboo and transgressive, what is (and what is not) art.

I look at how artists who use porno-graphing actions in their work do so by claiming spaces of their own non-sovereignty, as subjects destabilised in themselves, embracing and submitting to their anxieties, contradictions, disappointments and frustrations in the ways that Edelman and Berlant work through their encounter, locating the locus of their production in asking questions rather than offering answers. Edelman and Berlant see personal states such as those mentioned above (anxiety, frustration, etc.) 'as central to our engagement with each other and to our ways of confronting the challenge of negativity and encounter.'[135] I consider non-sovereign subjectivity as that state of subjectivity where one is not able to explain one's self to one's self. In these terms, my research, which is the practice of porno-graphing as well as its analysis, is an investigation into the irresolvable/unthinkable – meaning both that which cannot be thought, and that which is unthinkable as in too 'dirty' or 'wrong' or 'improper.' Consequently, in writing about porno-graphing methodologies in art, the difficulty arises of how to write in ways that convey clear meaning without betraying the methodology, its 'dirtiness', and the destabilisation that this entails and requires. This potentially contagious elusiveness or withdrawal of meaning, and the feelings of destabilisation that this elicits, seem at times to infect the writing.

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[135] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. ix.

I acknowledge that through the work of feminist theory, terms such as 'dirty' when ascribed to sex and sexuality have been examined and questioned at length as being attached to normative and oppressive politics, and have subsequently been reclaimed as 'positive' regarding sexual subjectivity and representation, for example through the work of Pamela Gibson in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*.[136] For the purposes of this thesis, I claim the 'negativity' of such terms – and so the literally 'negative' implications of 'dirty', 'wrong' and 'improper' (as meaning 'unclean', 'unhealthy', 'unproductive', and 'impolite') on the grounds of the use of the agency of 'negativity' as seen in the works being produced under the anti-social turn in queer theory, in which 'projects of queer optimism that try to repair the subject's negativity into grounding experiential positivity' are rejected[137], and on which I base my analytical approach. I do so because these meanings are relevant to the strategies of porno-graphing actions where, as I will demonstrate, artists consider and play with the notion of subjectivity as a matter of discourse.

I argue that through these artistic subjectivities, which I call 'dirty', artists use 'pathological' sexual and artistic agencies in how they embrace systems of exploitation, and in how they negotiate passivity and excess. Attributes such as being diseased or contagious or pathological appear interchangeably implicit and explicit in porno-graphing methodologies. For example, I locate them as sometimes only apparent within the particular strategies of self-submission and self-objectification, and sometimes as explicitly exposed and represented as such. For this reason, I use terms such as 'dirty', 'wrong', 'sick' and 'improper' interchangeably, and depending on the particular elements of the porno-graphing actions I refer to. Broadly, what

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[136] Gibson, P 2003, *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, BFI, London.
[137] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 5.

openly appears as 'dirty' in porno-graphing actions (dirty in the sense of taboo sexual subjectivities or artistic subjectivities that exploit other subjects) are the roles that artists occupy. Roles such as: the sex-worker, the unfaithful, incestuous and therefore 'bad' mother (the works of Leigh Ledare); the incestuous daughter and grandson, the fetishist, and the hyper-sexual female (the works of Lo Liddell, Kim Quist, and myself); and the male-gaze pornographer who objectifies female subjects (the works of Leigh Ledare).

In corporeal or affective terms, I conceptualise 'dirtiness' as an attribute that could potentially and on any level make a singular subject or groups of people feel repulsed or appalled when coming into contact with it. Physically it can be related to contamination or to discharge, a potentially contagious substance one wouldn't want to touch or associate with. Similarly, I consider 'dirtiness' as unchangeable, uncleanable and therefore irreparable. I claim that manifestations of 'dirtiness' in porno-graphing actions involve the threat of a possibly contagious lack of value (regarding both art and sex) disguised under the use of sexual subjectivities that can be perceived as 'too much', excessive, transgressive, and as dealing with sexual taboos. At the same time, I use the word 'dirty' to draw attention to these actual situations, the 'taboo-ness' of their content, which is framed as enhancing the 'wrongness' of such sexual situations – for example the 'wrongness' of enhancing rather than hiding sexual dynamics within families.

In terms of sexual and artistic subjectivity, I use the words 'dirty' and 'dirtiness' (as well as 'wrong' and 'sick') to signify: 1) Conceptual and creative processes of consciously self-objectifying into roles, and of managing and orchestrating other

subjects' roles and representations. 2) Sexual situations that can be potentially thought of as 'taboo' such as incest, and 'perverse' art-processes of forcefully yet subtly sexualising a situation for the purpose of making art. This is the kind of perversion that has been critically attributed to Warhol in the way that, as Doyle explains, 'his work isn't about art but about sex (that it is ultimately prurient) and on the other hand that this sex is not about love but about money (and is, therefore, perverse)'[138]. The paradigm of Warhol shows that creatively processing sex in order to make work can be seen as perverse, and that this perversion automatically disqualifies the piece of work made through it from the status of art, negating its art-value. In my thesis, I argue that in porno-graphing, artists flag and frame the sexual material they use as autobiographical in order to purposefully – in different ways – underline that they exploit sex for their art-work. Given that Warhol was using sex to make art without underlining that he was *using* it (acting upon it with the aim to make work) in the same way artists who create porno-graphing actions do, and yet was understood to be perverse in the way I have described, I consider that porno-graphing strategies can be considered perverse. Furthermore, that through these strategies, artists self-objectify into the possibility that they may be viewed as perverse – they are inviting the possibility to be viewed as so. Therefore, they are 'dirty' because not only do they use sex for art, they consider from the outset that they may potentially be perceived as perverse, their work as not being art, and that they in fact invite this form of reception.

Georges Bataille in *Eroticism* suggests that 'not every woman is a prostitute, but prostitution is the logical consequence of the feminine attitude.'[139] 'Shame, real or pretended, is a woman's way of accepting the taboo that makes a human being out of

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[138] Doyle, J 2006, p. 46.
[139] Bataille, G 1987, *Eroticism*, p. 131, Marion Boyars, London and New York.

her.' Bataille draws the distinction between prostitution and 'low prostitution'. My understanding of it is that the first involves a woman who is in a literal or ambiguous and metaphorical way prostituting herself, feeling (or pretending to feel) shame. The last, the 'low prostitute' or the 'lowest kind of prostitute' is the one who has

> fallen as far as she can go. She may be no less indifferent to the taboo
>
> than animals are except that because what she knows about taboos is that
>
> others observe them, she cannot attain an absolute indifference; not only
>
> has she fallen but she knows she has.[140]

Therefore, following this line of thought, if Warhol is a prostitute because he uses sex for art, artists who use porno-graphing methodologies and therefore act upon sex to make art from it are the 'lowest kind' of prostitutes because not only do they use sex to make art and self-submit to be seen as 'dirty', they do so knowingly.

In doing so they 'dirty' the value of their work, they make their work appalling not so much through the sexual content or the aesthetics of the images they create but by contextually complicating and disordering their meaning. Through practices that use porno-graphing actions, the artists themselves voice this disorder in terms of meaning by often not being sure if they can perceive correctly; for instance, if and how much their works are sexually explicit, or if they indeed have any value or purpose, or what consequence their works may have in their careers. As I will explain in more detail later on in this introduction, in porno-graphing actions artists self-submit to numerous 'lacking positions' such as lacking purpose, point, structure and confidence. A form of anxiety that can be considered as self-inflicted underlines all of these positions of

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[140] Bataille, G 1987, pp. 134-135.

lack, yet I consider this anxiety as strategically embraced precisely in order for these artists to approach the issue of their works' value through radically doubting it methodologically.

This strategic embrace of 'lacking positions' is another way of artists appropriating and self-submitting into structures that they want to critique. As I described in the previous section of this introduction, the method of embracing structures of exploitation, especially when it takes place in a context that involves sex, may result in it being received as carrying the pathological agency of the prostitute. Furthermore, artists using their self-doubt to make art can be seen as a form of self-exploitation. For example, in the way that Bojana Kunst suggests that 'experimenting with subjectivity is at the center of capitalist production.'[141] Therefore, another way artists who use porno-graphing actions disorder notions of value is by appearing apolitical. Porno-graphing actions do not attempt to show how any given sexual situation is 'normal' and 'healthy' (not perverse) or not a taboo, even though it could potentially be considered a taboo. Porno-graphing doesn't attend to a sexual liberation or progressiveness or any sort of positivism concerning sexual 'diversity', at least not explicitly and not as its primary aim. Although porno-graphing works can indeed be seen as 'pro-sex' (which I believe they fundamentally are), these works are certainly not being publically shown under the proposition that their relevance and contribution lies in educating, advocating or promoting sex-positive views. These works don't establish their strength by foregrounding their political interests; in fact, many don't even foreground their status as 'art' and are indeed open to be scrutinised, measured and viewed as 'porn'.

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[141] Kunst, B 2015, p. 21.

In summary, through my use of the terms 'dirty' and 'dirtiness' I examine how artists who use porno-graphing actions in their works: 1) Self-submit into roles that could potentially be perceived as 'dirty' in order to critique the very structures of thought that would ascribe 'dirtiness' to them in the first place. I argue that, in order to do so, they use conceptual and creative processes of consciously self-objectifying into roles, and of managing and orchestrating other subjects' roles and representations. In this sense, these artists embrace the structures that exploit them like the figure of the prostitute does. 2) Use 'dirtiness' creatively so as not to crash into the irresolution and the space of excess that they are primarily set to approach in their use of negative logics and methodologies. Subsequently, how these artists use 'dirtiness' to challenge binaries such as art/porn, art/life, internal/external, good/bad, knowing/not-knowing, normative/antinormative etc., and then attend to the 'smearing' of such concepts and notions into each other. I argue that to employ 'dirtiness' in the ways that artists who use porno-graphing actions do involves premeditated and highly reflective processes that trigger the possibility, in terms of their reception, that they are exploitative (artistically 'dirty') or pathological (sexually 'dirty'). I claim that, in a sense, in order to embrace the structures of exploitation one wants to critique is in itself a 'dirty' trick because it invites the reception of the artist as 'sick'.

It is 'dirty' because it thoroughly complicates the boundaries between pro- and anti-positions, which, as I argue, is its aim. An example of such complication or 'dirtying' of boundaries could be how, on the one hand, anti-prostitution and 'normative' critiques may see this creative gesture as confirmation of the pathology that McClintock recalls as attributed by anti-prostitution feminists such as Barry to the

prostitute's agency while on the other hand, 'antinormative' critiques may see it as a duplication of oppressive logics such as those that attribute pathology to sex-workers. Thus, I contend that porno-graphing methodologies work in such a way as to suggest that 'normative' and 'antinormative' are part of the same milieu of binary thought. In bringing attention to 'dirtiness', my aim is to investigate the opaqueness and the logics of negativity of porno-graphing methodologies. For example, how 'dirtiness' is used to create 'encounters with the sexual that point to the sexual limit (of self-knowledge and of world building potential) in ways that are enigmatic'.[142] I propose that in porno-graphing, the use of sexual and artistic 'dirtiness' intensifies the '"shock" of negativity'[143] but in doing so, also intensifies the potential for self-knowledge and world-building.

## The differences between 'dirty' and 'abject'

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva creates a theoretical account of what she terms 'abjection'. Abjection for Kristeva is what first happens when the person separates from the mother, enters the symbolic order, 'the dependence and articulation of the speaking subject in the order of language'[144], and thus starts understanding itself as itself (separate and distinct from the maternal body). Thereafter, abjection echoes this separation from the maternal as it 'preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with

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[142] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.15.
[143] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.15.
[144] Kristeva, J 1982, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, p. 67, Columbia University Press, New York.

which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be'.[145] Abjection and abject experiences as established by Kristeva 'are common within our everyday lives'.[146] Such everyday experiences include for instance a person's repulsion, disgust but also fascination in response to phenomena such as death, illness, food and bodily fluids because these 'unsettle singular bodily integrity'[147] and bring one at the border of their 'condition as a living being'.[148] As such, it is 'not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.'[149] For Kristeva, 'abjection is above all ambiguity'[150], that 'which is both clean and dirty, sacred and profane, that which breaks borders and is yet held tightly within them.'[151] In turn, 'it is the fascination with the border itself, with the margin, that constitutes the abject' as 'abjection wavers between the loss of meaning in "absolute degradation" and the unbearable ecstasy in this suffering'.[152] Therefore Kristeva can be understood as herself being fascinated by 'the jouissance of abject encounters […] "The sublime point at which the abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us"'.[153]

Kristeva's abjection 'has been widely used in the arts, humanities and social sciences'.[154] It has also 'had an extraordinary influence on feminist theory.'[155] This is because Kristeva's theory underlined the maternal/female body and womanhood as

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[145] Kristeva, J 1982, p. 10.
[146] Tyler, I 2009, 'Against Abjection', *Feminist Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1,
p. 79. Available from: SAGE Journals. [15 May 2017].
[147] Tyler p. 80.
[148] Kristeva, J 1982, p. 3
[149] Kristeva, J 1982, p. 4
[150] Kristeva, J 1982, p. 9
[151] Lockford, L 2002, 'Performing the Abject Body: A Feminist Refusal of Disempowerment', *Theatre Annual*, vol. 55, p. 50. Available from: ProQuest. [15 May 2017].
[152] Davis D A, 2011, 'Bad Girls of Art and Law: Abjection, Power, and Sexual Exceptionalism' in (Kara Walker's) Art and (Jane Halley's) Law', *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism*, vol. 23, no. 1, p. 35. Available from: Hein Online. [16 June 2017].
[153] Tyler, I 2009, p. 80.
[154] Duschinsky, R 2013, 'Abjection and self-identity: Towards a revised account of purity and impurity', *The Sociological Review*, vol. 61, p. 710. Available from: SAGE Journals. [10 May 2017].
[155] Tyler, I 2009, p. 81.

the principal 'site/sight of cultural disgust'[156]: 'if someone personifies abjection without assurance of purification, it is a woman, "any woman," the "woman as a whole"; as far as he is concerned, man exposes abjection by showing it, and through that very act purifies it.'[157] In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler heavily questioned 'the body politics' of Kristeva, arguing that 'her theory appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace'.[158] For example, that Kristeva 'describes the maternal body as bearing a set of meanings that are prior to culture itself […] Her naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability.'[159] Similarly, although coming from the analytical angle of social sciences, Robbie Duschinsky revisits Kristeva's theory of abjection as a way of drawing a 'revised account of purity and impurity' and in doing so, notes that Kristeva's idea of identity is a homogenous one. Drawing out four 'senses' of 'identity' that Kristeva makes use of, Duschinsky calls attention to the 'first one': identity as 'unity (eg "identity without admixture").'[160] He argues that to understand 'when purity and impurity are invoked' in abjection theory, one needs to return to this first 'sense' of identity

> which is distinct from the way 'personal identity' is used in everyday
>
> language. The 'identities' particularly associated with the occasions when
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> phenomena referred to as 'abject' are impure are of a specific type, with
>
> two properties. First, the 'identities' in question do not contain any
>
> heterogeneous, foreign or inferior elements; all of their constitutive

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[156] Tyler, I 2009, p. 82.
[157] Kristeva, J 1982, p. 85.
[158] Butler, J 2006, *Gender Trouble*, p. 108, Routledge, New York.
[159] Butler, J 2006, p. 109.
[160] Duschinsky, R 2013, p. 717.

elements are 'the same' in some relevant sense. Secondly, the phenomena

in question are understood not to have deviated from their essence, whether

their conceptual or ontological ground.[161]

In this sense, Kristeva's notions of motherhood as well as abjection are 'pure'

notions/identities in the sense that they are homogenous. To exemplify this

further, Duschinsky draws from Kristeva's later work, *Colette*[162] to note that she

contradicts her proposition (made in *Powers of Horror*) that 'the anomalous or in-

between is considered impure' (abject). He reminds us that the approach taken by

Kristeva towards a lesbian relationship that Colette depicts in her work is that the

novelist 'turns a relationship which is the "very epitomy of anomaly, of the impure"

into "the ideal case of perfect purity"'. For Duschinsky, 'this is not only a case of

rhetorical inversion (pure is impure, etc.) but mobilises the fact that whatever is self-

identical and prior of heterogeneity can effectively be characterised as pure.'[163]

Taking into account Butler's and Duschinsky's critiques, it becomes evident that a

crucial difference between what I call 'dirty' and what Kristeva calls abjection lies in

the structural differences of approach. This is because throughout my analysis I don't

count on identity, gender, sexual subjectivity or any other phenomenon as existing

prior to the symbolic order. For example, I don't consider the meanings of the

maternal body as prior to culture and homogenous. Furthermore, I view the logic

through which Kristeva equals the maternal body with the female body and

womanhood as based on binary thought and therefore reproductive of it. As well as

claiming that womanhood takes the place of the abject in civilisation, Kristeva's logic

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[161] Duschinsky, R 2013, p. 718.
[162] Kristeva, J 2004, *Colette*, Columbia University Press, New York.
[163] Duschinsky, R 2013, p. 719.

also denotes a brand of homogenous womanhood (cis-gendered women who can physically reproduce) and frames this brand as pre-culture, ultimately ascribing it with the privilege of nature. Whilst I don't consider motherhood or womanhood as homogenous, natural or pure phenomena, my approach to gender and any other form of identity and subjectivity does not ignore inequalities such as those that exist between sexes, sexualities, races and classes, and I admire the work of feminists who dedicated their scholarship to calling attention to how civilisation is built on the subordination of women. In this sense, I am not blind to the fact that women are a group of people who persistently suffer in multiple and tragic ways. I am female myself, and my own background in theory and art is one of feminist theory and praxis. As someone who embraces the label of a femme identity, I enjoy and suffer several of the attributes socially ascribed to womanhood. I acknowledge that this rhetorical enjoyment, the fact that I have the time to reflect on my 'womanhood' and comment on it through my everyday life and my art-work is a privilege that is not available to every female-bodied person in this world; I know that the case is very much the opposite. Therefore, I do not in any way consider the experience of being female, of living as a woman, as trivial or irrelevant to identity politics nor do I ignore the ways in which female bodies, particularly those of colour, old, fat, sex-working, disabled, ill, poor, migrant, battered, raped, bleeding, queer or indeed, maternal female bodies take the position of an Other, of abject, in this world. But I also consider as crucial to identity politics that there are women who don't have vaginas and uteruses, who can be and *are* mothers despite not giving birth physically (trans women and cis-gender women who don't have wombs), just as there are trans and cis-gender women who don't want be parents; trans, intersex and non-binary women (and men) whose subjectivities, lives and struggles may be ignored and overwritten by an

essentialist view on gender. In these terms, the context of what I call 'dirty' sexual (and artistic) subjectivities and how these are used in porno-graphing strategies is based on my view that no identity or subjectivity is independent or prior to the symbolic order, in the same way that, for example, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, approaching the subject of Kristeva's 'body politics' argues that

> The recourse to the unconscious as a source of subversion makes sense, it seems, only if the paternal law is understood as a rigid and universal determinism which makes of 'identity' a fixed and phantasmatic affair. Even if we accept the phantasmatic content of identity, there is no reason to assume that the law which fixes the terms of that fantasy is impervious to historical variability and possibility.[164]

The meaning of the subjectivities, situations and strategies I term 'dirty' relies on the heterogeneity of opinions, morals and perceptions that vary between times, cultural contexts and individuals' own projections onto other individuals and groups – this is why I consider that artists who create porno-graphing actions self-objectify into roles that they themselves think may potentially be seen as 'dirty' by others. On the one hand, my use of terms such as 'dirty' does not aim to frame this sort of moralism as irrevocable but to underline that value (and lack of value) attributed to subjectivities (e.g. the value of a 'natural' identity) is constructed and reproducible. On the other hand, I claim a permanence of 'dirtiness' with the aim of arguing that its use in porno-graphing actions does not aim toward its' catharsis. I will outline the premises of this argument further at the end of this section; first, I will explain the phenomenological and ontological differences between abjection and 'dirtiness'.

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[164] Butler, J 2006, p. 90.

Taking into account that *Powers of Horror* was published in 1982, it may be assumed that what has been critiqued as Kristeva's essentialist approach could potentially be revisable to a form that would appear less essentialist, for example less dismissive or exclusionary of trans genders. However, the structural differences between my approach and Kristeva's further extend to ontological differences of approach and thus, to differences in material that each approach negotiates. As I understand and frame 'dirty' sexual subjectivity, a person's subjectivity is 'dirty' in relation to another's subjectivity. 'Dirtiness' depends on the arbitrary judgment of individuals, as this is informed according to social norms and values, and then incorporated into the subject's own sense and understanding of their self. For example, in the case of Ledare's *Pretend You are Actually Alive,* one reason that I consider his mother's subjectivity to be 'dirty' is because she is projecting herself to be a mother who allows her son to photograph her masturbating and having sex. I consider that this role could potentially be perceived as 'dirty', morally 'wrong', and pathological in relation to another possible perception by the same viewer of these images that a 'healthy', 'normal' or 'clean' mother wouldn't act in such ways. As I make evident through the research material I present in the chapter about Ledare's work, indeed both Ledare and Peterson (his mother) embarked on this project in the ways they did partly because of their aims to complicate and question patterns of perception. I consider the fact that Peterson and Ledare knew from the outset that their collaboration could be met with a pathologising reception, as I will argue through the third chapter, means that their artistic strategies were 'dirty' in that they self-objectified into the kinds of reception they wanted to critique (in order to critique them). Furthermore, these artistic strategies were 'dirty' because they involved the two of them putting

themselves into 'dirty' sexual roles (roles that may potentially be considered 'dirty').

In these terms, 'dirty' does not stand as binary opposite to a sharply defined or homogenous 'clean', as I consider 'dirty', 'clean', 'healthy', 'pathological' etc. as notions that, if ascribed to subjectivity, rely on the personal judgment (strongly dependent on cultural/social context) of the individual who is doing this ascribing. This kind of sexual 'dirtiness' does not relate to bodily fluids produced during sexual action except if such fluids would be a contextual element of the overall 'dirtiness' of the subject (if, for example, in *Pretend*, Peterson was presenting herself as a mother who ejaculates in front of her son to be photographed by him). Therefore, 'dirtiness' is a notion that depends on an idea of intersubjectivity rather than an idea of a unity/identity.

In the way that *Powers of Horror* is written, Kristeva seems to believe in the material and fundamental realness of abjection, that it exists and crucially shapes human existence. The ways abjection is attributed is contextual (women are considered abject within a patriarchal context) but abjection in itself, regardless of how it is attributed, is real. In this sense, abjection creates human experience, whereas 'dirtiness' is created *by* human experience. 'Dirtiness' calls attention to how judgements, labels and attributions are brought into being through the ways we interact and the ways we proscribe. As such, 'dirtiness' foregrounds the subject's complicity in meaning and value attribution (both their own and others') through the ways it is used in porno-graphing methodologies and in the ways I use it in this thesis. Furthermore, for me to formulate and use the term 'dirty/dirtiness' (as well as 'wrong' and 'sick'), I have to take a distance from it, and involve this distance in the form of disbelief, self-doubt and irony towards my own term throughout this analysis. I take a distance from it in

the sense that I both believe in 'dirtiness' and I don't. I believe in 'dirtiness' in the sense that I consider that, under shifting moral values and prejudices at any given time, certain sexual situations, dynamics, actions and subjectivities can be perceived and described as 'dirty'. For example, in 1992 Andrea Dworkin delivered a speech at the symposium 'Prostitution: From Academia to Activism' at the Law School at the University of Michigan where she stated that

> women in general are considered to be dirty [… ] But a prostitute lives the
> literal reality of being the dirty woman […] She is the woman covered in dirt
> […] The prostituted woman is, however, not static in this dirtiness. She's
> contagious. She's contagious because man after man after man comes on her
> and then he goes away.[165]

Dworkin, more than noting that women are generally perceived as dirty, which in this case could also mean abject, projects her own opinion on to prostitutes which is that these are the truly dirty women. From a different political angle, through his essay, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', originally published in 1987, Leo Bersani discussed how the AIDS crisis of the 1980's was met by an outburst of public fear that framed gay men (and drug users) as socially unacceptable. Drawing from Simon Watney's characterisation of gay men as 'killers', Bersani argued that

> The public discourse about homosexuals since the AIDS crisis began has
> a startling resemblance […] to the representation of female prostitutes in

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[165] Dworkin, A 1993, 'Prostitution and Male Supremacy', *Prostitution: From Academia to Activism Symposium*. Available from: nonstatusquo.com. [4 June 2017].

the nineteenth century 'as contaminated vessels, conveyancing "female"

venereal diseases to "innocent" men'.[166]

Therefore, I consider that if a person falls into a category that is perceived and described as 'dirty', this then creates an experience for this person, the experience of 'dirtiness'. Thus 'dirtiness' has a social and experiential reality whilst also being unreal in the sense that a person to whom such 'dirtiness' has been ascribed may know that it is a political yet arbitrary judgment. I don't believe in the term 'dirty' in that, in my view, to put the words 'sex' and 'dirty' together does not add up to anything meaningful; it is unfortunate wording. While sex can indeed be abusive and damaging, I don't consider the term 'dirty' to be of use in such cases because it could potentially normalise this abusive and damaging sex, or inspire guilt and shame in the victim. That is why my chosen central term is 'dirty' rather than 'wrong' or 'sick', which I use more lightly and playfully; I am not arguing that sex cannot be morally wrong and damaging. In short, Kristeva presents abjection as a true state even if its details are culturally and contextually dependent, whereas I don't think that there is 'dirty' sex and sexual subjectivity, rather that such a thing only exists in relation to others' perception, and moral and political judgment. The fact that I use a term in which I partly don't believe as the basis for my research question ('What do "dirty" sexual subjectivities do to art?') is in itself a 'dirty' thing to do. This is because in order to convey the meaning I want it to communicate, I must align (or appear to align) with the value-judgments that I argue porno-graphing methodologies negotiate, as the term 'dirty' itself is built on, in a sense, first accepting the values that it critiques. To do so, I approach my own term and its meaning through ironic and critical distance and negativity. To the extent that the ways I approach and use

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[166] Bersani, L 2010, p. 17.

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'dirtiness' matches the ways that 'dirtiness' operates in porno-graphing methodologies, it also exposes me to the same risks. For example, in formulating 'dirtiness' as a crucial term of this research, I incorporate irony and negativity in ways that involve the prospect of my own defeat: to the extent that the 'dirtiness' I rely on doesn't exist. This sense of the potential of my own defeat, to fail to prove or demonstrate what I set out to prove or demonstrate, or to be proven wrong (or indeed 'dirty' for trying to) is embedded in my approach and methodologies, which are those of porno-graphing. This particular strategy of risk-taking separates the 'dirtiness' at play in porno-graphing methodologies from the purification and catharsis of abjection that Kristeva attributes to art when she argues, for example, that 'the various means of *purifying* the abject […] end up with that catharsis par excellence called art […] the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity.'[167]

My understanding of Kristeva's linking of the purifying of abjection with art relies on how art theorists have historically used abjection to examine art-practices where the body is, or is represented as, opened-up, turned inside-out; where the body is performed and literalised as already abject (for example, the female body). Rina Arya in her essay, 'Taking Apart the Body' identifies 'one of the earlier manifestations of abjection in performance practice' as body art, where (particularly in body art made in the 1960s and 1970s) 'the artists' body was disclosed as a valid art material in its own right' and 'itself was very much the tool of experimentation for artists to explore philosophical and socio-political notions about identity, gender, sexuality and community, and by which they could question social structures imposed on art and

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[167] Kristeva, J 1982, p. 17.

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society.'[168] Some of the examples that Arya cites are Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Paintings* (1965), Judy Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972) and Gina Pane's *Lait Chaud* (1972) where 'abject materials (such as bodily fluids, excrement, dirt, dead animals and putrefying food substances)' were used to blur 'the boundaries between different states and to impart a sense of the vulnerability of the subject experiencing corporeal turmoil.' For Ayra, 'what was abject was the actual act of expulsion, where the excreta signalled the vulnerability of the body boundaries.'[169]Arya notes that 'many women used their mark of "defilement" – menstrual blood – as a symbol of empowerment and feminism.'[170] Similarly, Lesa Lockford, looking at performance works such as Karen Finley's *Yams Up My Granny's Ass* (1986) and Annie Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement* (1992), argues that

> By performing abjection – the willful act of self-degradation as a performance strategy – my suggestion is that the performer's agency is made present through resolute defiance of the cultural script in which women are always already abjectified. To do so allows the performer to resist cultural abjectification through a paradoxical act of self-abjection in performance.[171]

I have mentioned two out of numerous different theoretical approaches because the amount of scholarship that looks at art through the lens of abjection is large; I quote the above theory on willful abjectification of one's self as, to my knowledge, it is the one closest to my own framing of porno-graphing strategies where artists self-

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[168] Arya, R 2014, 'Taking Apart the Body', *Performance Research*, vol. 19, no. 1, p. 5. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online. [12 May 2017].
[169] Arya, R 2014, p. 6.
[170] Arya, R 2014, p. 7.
[171] Lockford, L 2002, p. 49.

objectify into roles they think others may potentially perceive as 'dirty'. The similarities of 'abjectification' and self-objectification exemplify how porno-graphing methodologies can be considered as performance strategies, placing porno-graphing within the spectrum of performance art. Given that porno-graphing strategies entail artists using their subjectivities and sexual dynamics in their lives to make art, porno-graphing actions can in fact be seen as belonging to the genre of body art – as I mentioned earlier, 'body art' describes a set of practices where the artist's body is used as art-material. However the differences between 'performing abjection' and self-objectification into 'dirty' sexual subjectivities lie in the contexts of the two notions (abjection/dirtiness), as I described in this section.

Some artists who have been theorised as performing abjection have been considered to be 'politically motivated' and wanting 'to make visible the plight of disenfranchised groups in society, thus promoting their identity politic'[172], whereas artists who involve porno-graphing actions in their works (and thus 'dirtiness') appear apolitical. By 'appearing apolitical', I don't mean that these artists are not politically motivated; I mean that porno-graphing actions don't straightforwardly frame and signal the politics at stake in them; their political force is directed in asking, through their very formation, what are the politics in which they participate? They pose this question by not defining their politics upfront, by not defending them, and in so doing ask how the subjectivities involved are a matter of politics, and what kind of politics are the ones that shape the value and the 'dirtiness' of these identities, subjectivities and art-works.

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[172] Arya, R 2014, pp. 6-7.

In my view, the use of Kristeva's theory in cultural analysis is significant because of the crucial works that it continues to provoke such as Sarah Ahmed's piece on race and identity politics, 'The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation'. Through this work, drawing from *Powers of Horror* and *Nations Without Nationalism*[173], Ahmed notes that for Kristeva, 'strangeness is universalized as belonging to everyone' and argues that actually 'some others are recognized as stranger than others and as already not belonging to the nation in the concreteness of their difference.'[174] My use of the term 'dirty', and how I distinguish it from abjection does not necessarily aim to rule-out scholarly use of abjection nor to imply that such works are not or can't be in dialogue with porno-graphing methodologies. However, by using the term 'dirty' instead of abjection, one of my aims is to firmly frame the use of a particular kind of sexual subjectivity in lens-based art as the subject of negotiation, whilst also acknowledging that the perspectives I offer, such as those of my own experiences, have certain limitations and so I cannot make universalised claims. In addition, I aim to limit the possibility that by calling these subjectivities 'dirty' I may be provoking the perception of them as elevated or idealised. Instead, my aim is to approach what may be meant or implied when sexual subjectivities are called or thought of as 'dirty' in everyday life as much as possible. As Duschinsky explains,

> Kristeva's description of abjection is evocative, and vast in scope. It
> promises profound insight on a range of important topics: the construction of
> identity; the operation of language; the meaning of negative emotions; the

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[173] Kristeva, J 1993, *Nations Without Nationalism*, Columbia University Press, New York.

[174] Ahmed, S 2005, 'The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation' in Chanter, T & Plonowska Ziaker, E (eds) *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*, p. 99, State University of New York, New York.

psychology of phobia; horror narratives as a literary genre, the repudiation

and oppression of outsiders, violence against women, *inter alia*.[175]

Duschinsky also recalls Juliana de Nooy's conclusion 'from her review of academic uses of *Powers of Horror* that in practice "the abject" has tended to "become a catch-all term for 'yucky' stuff".' [176] Along these lines, my use of the word 'dirty' aims to avoid becoming a claim to all sorts of identity-differences or to offer an elevated form of meaning to the sexual and artistic subjectivities and situations it does refer to. The word abjection is significantly tied to Kristeva's use of it; for example, the first result that comes up if this word is put into an Internet search-engine is a Wikipedia entry that gives a brief account of Kristeva's scholarship. Yet, only the people who have read her work or related theory know the meaning that Kristeva has attributed to the word abjection. Despite the elusiveness with which 'dirtiness' is used in porno-graphing actions, it is actually a more specific term than abjection in that it is used so commonly. I use it as an extension of the common usage of it, on which I base my own usage and which I continually play upon. This specificity is what makes 'dirtiness' risky – indeed, makes it 'dirty' – as it does not claim to refer to something superior or spectacularly different to its everyday meaning. This would be the case if, in my view, I was to replace it with abjection, a term that would automatically add theoretical weight and possibly value to the subjectivities and situations I refer to. Therefore, it wouldn't allow the space for drawing-out how 'dirtiness' in porno-graphing methodologies itself negotiates meaning and value.

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[175] Duschinsky, R 2013, p. 710.
[176] Duschinsky, R 2013, p. 711.

**Unknowable & unthinkable – 'What is to be written and where?'**


Through theory developed on 'affect', art has been considered as not only 'an object

of knowledge' but also as 'precisely antithetical to knowledge'.[177] 'Affects', first

conceptualised by Baruch Spinoza and later on by philosophers such as Gilles

Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Brian Massumi and Simon

O'Sullivan, and also used by feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva, are described as

'intensities' that operate beyond or alongside linguistic signification – what 'goes on

beneath, beyond, even parallel to signification', what cannot be read, but only

experienced and 'a reaction in/on the body at the level of matter'.[178] Affects are

conceptualised as standing independently of art in the sphere of everyday life and

experience, but also playing a significant role in the work of art theorists who seek to

challenge the hegemonic modes of art-analysis that are based on deconstruction,

representation and semiotics – 'no more asking "what is art?"'[179] For example, in

order to reaffirm the 'existence of affects, and their central role in art', O'Sullivan

reminds us that Deleuze and Guattari define art as 'a bundle of affects […] *a bloc of*

*sensations*, waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant.'[180] Thus, for

O'Sullivan art operates within the realm of affects and 'does what is its chief modus

operandi: it transforms, if only for a moment, our sense of our "selves" and our notion

of our world.' And its 'function' is 'to switch our intensive register, to reconnecting

us with the world. Art opens up to the non-human universe that we are part of.' In line

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[177] O'Sullivan, S 2001 'The Aesthetics of Affect, thinking art beyond representation', *Angelaki*, vol. 6,
no. 3, p. 125. Available from: simonosullivan.net. [10 May 2015].
[178] O'Sullivan, S 2001, p. 126.
[179] O'Sullivan, S 2001, p. 130.
[180] O'Sullivan, D 2001, p. 126.

with this thinking, 'this world of affects, this universe of forces, is our own world seen without the spectacles of subjectivity.'[181]

Throughout this introduction, I have explained that I use the suffix '-graphing' (in my term porno-graphing) in order to underline a questioning of what is to be written – 'graphed' – and where, and in this sense to suggest an investigation into the unknowable and unthinkable. To conceptually form the question of what it is to be written and where, I consider art as an 'autonomous' sphere. Conceiving art as 'autonomous' in the instance of porno-graphing invites two distinct ideas of 'autonomy'. Firstly, to consider art ontologically, as O'Sullivan suggests, as functioning in the realm of affects; in this sense, it operates to a significant degree in the sphere where understanding and meaning operate peripherally to, or even beyond the periphery of language and signification. Following O'Sullivan's theoretical grammar of art precisely as autonomous, art is 'important' and 'dangerous: a portal, an access point, to another world (our world experienced differently), a world of impermanence and interpretation'.[182] At the same time, in terms of sex, sexuality and knowledge, Doyle reminds us that

> Foucault famously warned critics against the seduction of unveiling
> sexuality as the ultimate truth of a story. The repressive hypothesis, in its
> promise to get at truth through the liberation of the sexual subject, he
> writes, promises to describe the mechanisms of 'not only an economy of
> pleasure but an ordered system of knowledge.' […] Sex as the Big Secret

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[181] O'Sullivan, D 2001, p. 128.
[182] O'Sullivan, S 2001, p. 128.

and the Ultimate Truth, as the thing that explains everything makes for a

great story – its narrative irresistible.[183]


I consider said readings of affects and art as autonomous and 'dangerous' in order to

investigate how in porno-graphing actions, confessional, autobiographical and, in this

sense, 'truth-telling' representations of sex and sexuality are used to negotiate

knowledge, knowing and knowability.


The second type of autonomy occurs in the sense that art sometimes 'happens'; it

takes place and exists without a human-authority or an audience other than its maker

designating it as such. A theoretical tradition of art's autonomy derives from Adorno,

his 'art for art's sake' thesis, attributing an independence from social significance to

art. In this case of 'autonomy', an artwork operates independently from its

sociopolitical or even artistic relevance (for example, how it could situate with other

art) and from the need for a cause or reasoning attached to social change.[184] However,

'the autonomy of art (the idea that aesthetic value is independent of economics, of

politics, of the body) emerges against the negative example of prostitution'.[185] The

way I understand the proposition that Doyle makes within the context of her

'Rhetorics of Prostitution' is that the figure of the prostitute representing 'an

extremely alienated relationship to their work, to their own bodies' is a 'negative

example' of artists having to whore themselves and their work out if they depend on

the art-market financially.[186] Or that if they seek out the economic value of their

work, they may 'dirty' its aesthetic value. I will use such considerations to examine

[183] Doyle, J 2006, p. xix.
[184] Ngai, S 2005, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2, Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London.
[185] Doyle, J 2006, p. 51.
[186] Doyle, J 2006, p. 51.

how relevance, purpose and value are approached and used in porno-graphing methodologies; for example, how artists may be seen as 'extremely alienated' from their work and their own bodies, via the ways they approach and act on sex in order to make their works. Also, how these artists also embrace lacking and self-doubting positions in regards to their works' value.

I don't propose that in order to understand how porno-graphing actions suggest an investigation into the unknowable and the unthinkable that we should consider 'what is to be written and where' is in-itself unknown and unknowable. Instead, my thesis is that this question refers to and suggests a potential unknowability through its negative presupposition or contemplation that there may be no 'value' or 'relevance' ('what to be written') and 'no place', 'nowhere' to be written onto. This 'no place' can be imagined in metaphysical terms: for example, as an immaterial 'substance'. It can also be translated in terms of reception: for example, in that there has been no audience to place the work when examining art that has never, or rarely, been shown publically, or else has only been shown in private spaces, as often is the case with works which use porno-graphing actions.

This negative contemplation in the methodologies of porno-graphing requires the artist to embrace 'lacking positions' when asking questions concerning the 'value' of their work; questions such as 'What is it which makes their work art?', as if the artist doesn't even know if their art is art, or whether it is 'good' enough to qualify as such. I consider this tenuous ('lacking') and self-questioning position as non-sovereignty. In this sense, the importance of occupying a confident position of self-conviction is questioned through porno-graphing methodologies – for instance, the presupposition

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that one should know what art is before one makes it, or that one should be the first to defend their art as such. Therefore, I contend that artists who use porno-graphing actions in their work are open to additional scrutiny regarding its status as art through adopting this position of 'not-knowing' whether it qualifies as such from the outset.

Thus, a fundamental manner in which porno-graphing actions relate to the 'unknowable/unthinkable' or the 'unknown' concerns the question of 'What is it that makes art, art?', manifesting through the artists' submission to this question in the making and presentation of their works. I consider that art can relate to knowledge and clarity by 'being' art, identified and identifiable as such and not something else; pornography for example. Feona Attwood, for the purposes of her work in porn studies, uses propositions put forward by art-historian Lynda Nead to argue that 'art and pornography are "caught in a cycle of reciprocal definition, in which each depends on the other for its meaning, significance and status"'. As 'it is the dirty, naughty, debasing and disgusting style or quality of porn that becomes the decisive factor', 'such a distinction is only possible within a representational system that opposes and elevates certain kinds of cultural texts over others'.[187] While these theorists voice this distinction as being applicable to the presumably general binary between art (whether this art shows sex and sexuality or doesn't) and pornography, I consider that this process of art and pornography becoming identifiable as one and not the other through being measured against each other concerns artworks that involve images of sex specifically; even more so if these works actually use 'the dirty, naughty, debasing and disgusting style or quality of porn', which is what porno-graphing actions do. In addition to using these visual vocabularies, works that involve

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[187] Attwood, F 2002, p. 96.

porno-graphing actions also employ low-tech and diaristic aesthetics, both in their

production and presentation strategies. Therefore, porno-graphing actions centre on

the question of what it is that makes these works art – the unknowable – through the

use of 'dirty' and cheap-looking visuals.

The terms 'unknowable' and 'unknown' can then be considered to be addressing the

question of what it is (aside from the artists' intention for it to be art) that renders

works that use porno-graphing methodologies as art. I pose the question of what it is

that makes these works art in order to examine the methodologies of porno-graphing

where the status and practice of art is negotiated through artists self-submitting to start

from positions of 'not-knowing' (for example, if their work is art). By critically

engaging with the idea that the 'dirty' vocabularies of porn distinguish it from art, I

approach my research question 'What do dirty sexual subjectivities *do* to art?' by

examining the limits of representational systems and binaries such as those of

porn/art, work/life, work/art and privacy/publicity.

Bojana Kunst in her study, *Artist at Work*, *The Proximity of Art and Capitalism*

suggests that 'truth' is produced through confession – the confessional uttering of the

'hardest things to say'; thus, that what is considered as 'truthful' in contemporary art

is what appears to be uttered through emotional hardship and confessionality.[188] She

argues that this model of truth-production ('exhausting and selling the most intimate

within us'[189]) is part of the current 'crisis of subjectivity'. In what appears to be a

symptom of, as well as the cause of boundaries between process and product blurring,

and the disappearance of borders between 'life and work, non-work and work, and

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[188] Kunst, B 2015, p. 29.
[189] Kunst, B 2015, p. 30.

production and reproduction […] with artistic subjectivity becoming the central image of this fusion'[190], Kunst states that this truth-telling in art sells, that it has become the establishment, the structure, re-enforcing the view that 'the personal' doesn't cater for political progress and advancement because it has become a current norm to confess 'intimate truths' as an artist for a living.[191] Through my thesis, I consider how artists who create porno-graphing actions use their subjectivities to make work to the point of exploitation and exhaustion in the ways that Kunst describes, as well as how they use 'truth-telling' to negotiate boundaries such as those between art/porn, art/life and life/work. Yet, I measure the particular ways that artists use porno-graphing actions of employing methodologies of 'truth-telling', autobiography and confessionality in opposition to Kunst's analysis of the current 'crisis of subjectivity'. For instance, I argue that porno-graphing artists' framing of their sexual material as autobiographical, through their particular use of the agency of negativity, aims to create 'intensified encounters' between the artist, the art-object and the viewer. The ways in which they do so cannot easily, if at all, be contained or reversed by the audience's familiarity with sexual 'truth-telling'. Furthermore, as these 'intensified encounters' destabilise the artist and the viewer, they also negotiate patterns of value-attribution regarding both subjectivity and art. Through my analysis, I draw at length from how artists who create porno-graphing actions engage with their own non-sovereignty, for instance, in the form of their indecision and anxiety, an anxiety existing precisely because of how these artists embrace ambiguity, and the lack of clear boundaries between their lives and work.

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[190] Kunst, B 2015, pp. 138-146.
[191] Kunst, B 2015, pp. 29-30.

Artists who create porno-graphing actions at times express anxiety regarding their own material and doubt their decisions to use said material; they feel that their intentions are ambiguous and they often don't feel confident to show their work. I will argue that this is a studied and crucial manner of enduring ambiguity and self-doubt, and a core aspect of porno-graphing actions. Scholars Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai make use of 'negative' or 'ugly' feelings because of the 'critical productivity' of such feelings. Ngai for example coins this 'critical productivity' at the 'deeply equivocal status' of such feelings and argues that whilst 'dysphoric affects often seem to be the psychic fuel on which capitalist society runs', all these

> emotional idioms […] are marked by an ambivalence that will enable them
> to resist, on the one hand, their reduction to mere expressions of class
> *ressentiment*, and on the other, their counter-valorization as therapeutic
> 'solutions' to the problems they highlight and condense.[192]

I examine how the 'negative' feelings of porno-graphing artists operate and influence their processes and historiographies of making and presenting art. I argue that these artists' self-doubting their works' relevance, purpose and value, and their questioning of their own role inside structure and art discourse, challenge the very structures of art discourse that would designate them (or not) as art and would attribute them (or not) artistic or social relevance. I consider that relevance and purpose pertain to the value and utility of the work but also to its rationale, its causes and effects, its role inside structure, its meaning within language, its situation within the 'art-world' and inside the artists' subjectivity. Furthermore, I use terms such as 'relevance' and 'purpose' in reference to how these works contribute to knowledge, to perception and to

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[192] Ngai, S 2005, p. 3.

understanding. I will use Ahmed's theory on the 'figure of the stranger' who, for her, is also the 'figure of the unknowable' and whose lack of purpose 'conceals the purpose of crime'[193] to examine how artists creating porno-graphing actions self-objectify into 'lacking positions' to 'suspend knowing' (to borrow a phrase from Edelman and Berlant[194]), their own knowing as well as that of the viewer.

Porno-graphing artists' radical doubting of their own artistic purpose and relevance by prejudging that they cannot reach it, that they cannot know and own it, even though they feel they would like to, is a form of longing mobilised by what can be thought of as the person's own resistance to 'knowing' in terms of their own desire. As explained earlier in my overview of the 'anti-social turn', I locate the resistance to resolution, to knowing as a 'refusal to move on' that Berlant and Edelman attribute to sex, and even more so in relation to how sex is considered irrelevant and unimportant by 'contemporary critical thought' that seems in their view 'eager to put the subject of sex behind it' because it is 'irreducibly and disconcertingly personal' and in this sense 'anachronistic'. They offer a Lacanian justification of sex as resisting 'narratives of moving on' by drawing attention to how desire 'remains fixed to a primal attachment that alone makes our object appear as desirable', an attachment that 'speaks to the negativity of sex, to our nonsovereign status as subjects'. In these terms, 'what we know of ourselves as desiring subjects remains fixed to the unknowable frame in which all such knowing occurs – fixed to the particular libidinal structure that enables but also disrupts it.'[195] Thus, the unknown has to do with what cannot be captured by knowing, for if it was to become known, then the desire to know it would ease. And

[193] Ahmed, S 2000, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, pp. 20-28, Routledge, New York.
[194] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 117.
[195] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, pp. 63-64.

the unknowable and unthinkable have to do with the subject's resistance for the unknown to become known – that this resistance renders the object that the subject desires to know as unknowable and unthinkable.

I also conceptualise this 'unknowable' and 'unthinkable' (or what Edelman and Berlant call 'unknowable frame' as I have quoted above) as a 'gap', a 'void', a negation, a radical 'emptiness', to approach the space where, in Lacanian terms, 'the signifier's difference from itself, its radical inability to signify itself'[196] becomes evident, this space where language – and structure – is captive to failure. Leigh Ledare proposes that this space, where it becomes evident that that which language tries to explain is rendered unexplainable through the very use of language, functions 'as excess':

> A gap, a central cord to everything and it is indescribable, you can surround it but you cannot pin it down […] functions as an excess and is actually protective of itself; it is this space where all of these potentials lie; the potential to empathise and to undo the negations of difference. But it also becomes this place where things smear into each other.[197]

For my thesis, I use the term 'excess' in accordance to the description above given by Ledare. This use of the term echoes George Bataille's proposition, written as an explanatory footnote in the preface to *Madame Edwarda*, which was originally published in 1937, that 'excess cannot be philosophically founded, since excess exceeds foundation: excess is the very thing for which being is, first and foremost,

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[196] Copjec, J 2015, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*, p. 121, Verso, London.
[197] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

beyond all limits.'[198] In a broader sense, or in a way that may seem less abstract and more directly linked with my use of the words 'dirty', 'wrong' and 'sick', my use of the word 'excess' also links with the meaning given to it by Bataille. For example, William Pawlett describes Bataillian 'excess' as referring to 'that which is dirty, pointless, terrifying, sickening, evil or even non-existent, yet still somehow palpable or configurable outside the categories and concepts of mainstream society and thought'.[199]

Therefore, through my use of the words 'excess' and 'dirtiness' (with the last being the most prominent in my thesis), I aim to draw a distinction between a mental or affective space, an excess that cannot be thoroughly 'touched' ('pinned down') or clearly described because 'it is protective of sets of conditions of temporality'[200] and a process of negotiating signification through 'dirtiness'. Additionally, I consider the 'unknowable', 'unthinkable' or 'unknown' as this space that, in its multiple forms of indefinability, allows for confusions, contradictions, and the formation of relationships and negotiations independent from meaning-making, resolution-seeking and clear knowing and understanding.

The position of self-submission into not-knowing still involves an action, that of willingly taking on and starting (an art project or artistic investigation, for example) from a position of not-understanding, and in doing so, of uncertainty. In this way, I suggest that a limit on thought and perception is being set and embodied in order to

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[198] Battaile, 1999, *My Mother, Madame Edwarda, The Dead Man*, p. 145, Marion Boyars, London and New York.
[199] Pawlett, W 1997, 'Utility and excess: the radical sociology of Bataille and Baudrillard', *Economy and Society*, vol.26, no.1, p.96. Available from: UVA Universiteitsbibliotheek SZ. [2 January 2015].
[200] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

precisely explore what happens to thinking, being and art-making once a position of defeat has been adopted as a starting point: a 'false start'. Brian Massumi, in setting out his theory of affect, draws from philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and William James to suggest that to begin from a cognitivist philosophy that asks 'what the subject can know of the world' is 'to get off to a false start'. For example, that to presuppose

> a subject-object divide, there is no way of preventing the separation from deepening into an abyss. How can the subject cross the divide to reattach itself to the objectivity 'out there' on the other side? Doubt takes over. What if there is no other side? What if it's all illusion? [201]

Assuming that the 'objectivity out there' is the structure, the meaning, the knowledge and system in which things find their place and make sense, a porno-graphing strategy is one of 'false starts' – starting the process of art-working in false ways, in that the artists often doubt the purpose and value of their work, its status as art for example; an endless questioning that doesn't lead to objectivity (to knowing the relevance of their work for example, which leads into the 'abyss'). Whilst this may be the case with art methodologies that are not porno-graphing, the difference is that in porno-graphing, the doubt, these 'false starts', are used to put the question of 'What is it that makes art, art?' within the artwork and so underline questions of value and meaning in regards to sexual and artistic subjectivities as well as art itself.

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[201] Massumi, B 2011, *Semblance and Event,* pp. 6-7, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

To fully follow the particular qualities of 'dirtiness' at play through the sexual and artistic subjectivities used in porno-graphing actions, I argue that it is necessary to attend to how sexual 'impropriety' appears alongside artists being unable to explain themselves to themselves, as it regards the 'radical incoherence' that Berlant and Edelman say is a way that sexuality manifests itself.[202] I argue that porno-graphing artists choose to use sexual subjectivities (such as ones referring to figures of incest and child subjectivities) that can be considered as too 'wrong' and dangerous (emotionally for example) to approximate through thinking. I argue that these artists don't always know how to think of, explain and justify the sexual situations and subjectivities they choose to use and act upon to themselves, but that this is not so that they maintain a safe distance from such situations and such work but in order to self-objectify further into 'dirty' positions of pleading 'guilty' through their lack of defence. In working from these positions of non-sovereignty, I argue that these artists invite the viewer to receive the work from similarly unguarded positions and that in doing so, they open channels of communications and project back to the viewer their own 'guilt', their own responsibility in the construction of value and meaning-making. The ways that these channels of communication differ from ones opened by other forms of art-making have to do with the fact that in porno-graphing, the relationships between the artist, the art-object and the viewer are placed within the excess, the gap or void. To put it another way: that the excess, the emptiness, is presented *as* these relationships, as that which cannot be fully figured-out or articulated, determined or resolved. In this sense, communication is not the success of clear understanding. On the contrary, it becomes the smearing, the processes through which identifications may occur; the 'dirtying' of one's authorities with the of

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[202] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 3.

powerlessness another, thus destabilising the ways that positions of authority and lack
may be reproduced through relations.

**Introduction to the three chapters**

The first chapter, 'False Starts', begins with a review of my earlier work and art-
practice; I describe the latter and in doing so, explain how I came to use the term
'porno-graphing actions' in my research. The very first definition I developed when I
tried to put porno-graphing into words was this: marking the domestic spaces I was
living in and using to make art with pornography. During that time, my use of
pornographic codes was particularly ambiguous and elusive, and in my mind, it was
also directly linked with the ways I was using my domestic spaces to create short and
simple video performances, even if these video performances didn't involve sexual
significations in themselves. I felt that I was 'dirtying' domesticity with pornography,
yet I was not quite sure how I was doing so. Furthermore, I thought that it was a
'wrong' thing to do, as not only was I in a sense exploiting domesticity (linking
privacy and homeliness with pornography for the sake of my art) but also my
willingness, purposes and intentions were undetermined and ambiguous. In short, in
my mind, the material I was producing was pornographic not through my use of
sexual explicitness (or with any intention to sexually arouse the viewer) but because
the relationship between sex, myself, my house, art and pornography were ambiguous
and contradictory in this material.

Throughout this thesis, I argue that the artists who create porno-graphing actions 'methodologically' embrace such ambiguities and contradictions. I use the words 'methodology', 'strategy' and 'tactic' to argue that each of these states (ambiguity and contradiction, but also several other states and positions that artists embrace) have utility in the making of porno-graphing actions; similarly, to argue that the artists who use them are, in different ways and on different levels, aware of the utility of these states and positions, and thus that they use them knowingly. One of these states or positions (which I call 'lacking positions'/'positions of lack') is a lack of confidence. Therefore, several aspects of porno-graphing methodologies seem undetermined. And while this indetermination is at times based on anxiety and uncertainty in regards to the value of their works, it isn't (nor does it claim to be) free of responsibility. Even positions of 'not-knowing' (what is the purpose of one's work or *how* 'dirty' exactly one may come across as) involve a kind of elusive or 'dirty' knowing. In other words, I use terms such as 'porno-graphing methodologies' aiming on the one hand to examine the methods through which porno-graphing actions are formed and to argue that these are precise methods because they repeat and don't happen accidentally. On the other hand, I use words such as methodology and strategy to denote the specific yet complex ways that artists who form porno-graphing actions creatively react to their complicity.

Through this first chapter, I examine such 'lacking positions' and how they are used methodologically; I do so by looking at my own work but also at the works of my peers, Lo Liddell and Kim Quist, and of the work made for the art exhibition *XXX*. I use my own work in this writing in order to explain patterns of working such as reduction and distance, and the ways in which I understood their methodological use

before coming to discover terms such as 'negativity' and 'radical passivity'. I use *XXX* as a case-study to examine how issues of intentionality and purpose relate to how artists approach vagueness, ambiguity and blurriness. These matters of blurriness are crucial to how 'dirtiness' in terms of sexual subjectivity is negotiated through porno-graphing actions; for instance, the blurriness involved in these artists' specific uses of autobiographical material and rhetorics of confessionality.

The second chapter, 'Blue Tape', borrows its title from the video I examine, *Blue Tape*, made by Kathy Acker and Alan Sondheim. This video was made in the 1970's but was rarely shown until the 2000's. I chose it as a case-study because it is one of the most vibrant examples of porno-graphing I have come across. At the same time, it is significant that while both Acker and Sondheim are acclaimed artists, this video was in a way 'thrown away', disregarded as insignificant or 'taboo' for many years; from my discussions with Sondheim, I understand that this was not so much due to its sexual content but more due to how its making drove Acker and Sondheim to an emotional and mental edge and exhaustion, as well as to the end of their relationship.[203]

This is important to my research as very often artists are so destabilised by their porno-graphing actions that they decide not to show their work. This issue is also apparent in my first chapter, but since this chapter examines the works of artists who currently have less exposure in the art-world, it is not possible to view their porno-graphing actions and those actions' impacts as clearly within the broader frame of their art careers. Alan Sondheim suggests that since it has started being shown, the

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[203] Sondheim, A 2014, pers. comm., 23 February.

*Blue Tape* has been viewed mainly as part of the legend of Kathy Acker.[204] For example, Chris Kraus sees this video as 'a gorgeous portrait of Acker as a young person in the process of becoming'.[205] Whilst I draw at length from Acker's practice as well as from its popular and critical receptions, I propose that a reading of the porno-graphing actions of this piece that ultimately credits both artists' artistic agency may create space for showing how this work complicates and destabilises (or intensifies) the relationship between the artist, the art-work and the art-viewer; this, I propose, may be a reason why it has been overlooked. The *Blue Tape* is comprised of several sequences in which the two artists engage with each other, often sexually, with the aim of making art out of their sexual dynamic. I consider certain sequences of this video as some of the most illustrative examples of porno-graphing actions I offer in this thesis. Under a broader scope, this work displays complex ways through which themes opened in one scene are followed up in another; yet some of the most significant, as well as most visually and contextually identifiable characteristics of porno-graphing actions such as dryness, distance and detachment in regards to sex, are present in individual scenes of this video. I use such sequences to investigate how artists approach (or appear to approach) sex through distance, detachment and negation; I argue that artists do so in order to create irresolution and incoherence in regards to meaning and value. To do so, I follow the theory work Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant developed in *Sex, or the Unbearable* to consider how meaning is linked to sexual enjoyment and satisfaction, and also to futurism; by extension, I examine how the porno-graphing actions in this video employ sex so as to disorganise meaning and knowing. Some other core strategies of porno-graphing that appear in these sequences are self-objectification, radical passivity, irony, becoming un-subjects

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[204] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 24 April.
[205] Kraus, C 2000.

and working from positions of non-sovereignty. I critically look at how Acker and Sondheim use their own non-sovereign positions to invite (or trick) the viewer into giving up their own sovereignty of looking and perceiving. For example, I propose that they use child sexual subjectivity in such ways as to invite the viewer to gaze in 'wrong' ways at the images in this video, and thus to 'dirty' the viewer by 'dirtying' their ways of looking for meaning.

The third chapter, 'Pretend', examines two bodies of work made by Leigh Ledare: *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* and *Double Bind*. This chapter begins with an introduction in three sections (a different format of the one-section introduction to the other two chapters). This is because I take some space to explain how I methodologically use my conversations with Leigh Ledare in this introduction to this third chapter: how, for example, I came to understand important elements or expressions of porno-graphing actions such as withdrawal of meaning and resistance to resolution, as well as the porno-graphing strategy of embracing 'lacking positions'. I have used the dialogues I developed with each artist whose work I examine (aside Kathy Acker) similarly, but it was through my dialogue with Ledare that I realised *how* I was using all of these dialogues. Contradictions, disappointments and irresolution were part of my conversations with all of these artists. This is not to say that there were disagreements per se; rather, that we endured the lack of clear answers and results, the destabilisation that came from the questions discussed being unresolved. By destabilisation, I mean that it was unsettling and frightening, at least for me, to never reach an end point or to feel how 'relational out-of-synchness' (to borrow a term of Edelman and Berlant[206]) was actually part of our ways of

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[206] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, pp. 66-67.

communication. Therefore, it is imperative that all of these conversations were durational (my conversations went on for at least four years with each of these artists). It is important because it reflects how artists who create porno-graphing actions endure irresolution and destabilisation as they work from 'lacking positions' (e.g. lacking confidence and purpose).

The reason why I became aware of how I was using my dialogues with artists methodologically for this research through my conversation with Ledare specifically was because of Ledare's particular manner of articulation, and the positions I took in relation to it. In my view, Ledare is not only very articulate but also accustomed to talking about his work, as he has to defend it frequently, publically and assertively. This meant that through our dialogues, Ledare was voicing his thoughts through, what I understood as, a confidence that, in a sense, mobilised me to take on positions of lack, defence and resistance. Observing how I was voicing those positions through our conversation, I came to understand that these were porno-graphing tactics. At the same time, continuing to engage with Ledare meant that I also came to recognise how it is possible to talk and write about porno-graphing in ways that make sense, that can be put in words; thus, one does not feel defeated by the negativity at work.

The two art-pieces by Ledare that I write about in the third chapter are the most widely shown works I examine in this thesis. More than counting on this artist's success, I use examples of how his work (as well as himself as an individual) have been criticised as pathological (and therefore 'sick'). *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* and *Double Bind* involve some of the clearest examples of the artist self-objectifying into 'dirty' sexual and artistic roles, as well as using other subjects' 'dirty'

subjectivities. I examine how Ledare used the reception around *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* to orchestrate further ways in which he could self-objectify more deeply into 'dirty' positions in *Double Bind*. I use this example to investigate exactly how the process of self-objectification into 'dirty' roles functions. Additionally, I look at how this artist uses pornographic vocabularies alongside other significations to break binary thinking in regards to the supposed binary of pornography versus art, as well as to binaries of 'the rational and the irrational, the masculine and the feminine, the logical and the corporeal, the analytical and the affective, the structural and the subjective'.[207] Finally, I argue that the ways in which Ledare invites the viewer to recognise their complicity in creating the meaning of a piece of work, as well as the subjectivities it displays, can destabilise the ways in which value is attributed to a work of art.

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[207] L Ledare 2015, pers.comm., 6 January

# Chapter I

# False Starts

## Introduction

Throughout this chapter I discuss my own practice-work, before and during my PhD, and the exhibition *XXX,* which includes my work along with the works of Lo Liddell and Kim Quist.[208] This chapter primarily operates as a basis for me to show how themes and methodologies of porno-graphing, such as self-objectification and self-submission into sexual and artistic positions that can potentially be perceived as 'dirty', 'wrong' or 'sick', emerge in artistic process and products. I will then use the following two chapters to look at these themes, methodologies and their possible effects more closely. In other words, this first chapter operates partly as an introduction to the methodologies, and the potential reception and effects of these methodologies, which I will then be investigating in the works *Blue Tape*, *Pretend You Are Actually Alive*, and *Double Bind* in the next two chapters. In this chapter, using my own work and the work of Liddell and Quist as case-studies, I also aim to illustrate the range of ways porno-graphing strategies are used, i.e. not just in work that involves explicit images of nudity or sexual acts. This is important because it exemplifies how core-strategies of porno-graphing, such as self-objectification, extend from the use of explicit pornographic vocabularies to other forms of visual and textual languages. In itself, this can be seen as an example of how the strategies used

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[208] For reasons of confidentiality I do not mention the date and geographical details of the show. The title has been replaced with a fictional one. Similarly, the names of the artists, aside from my own, are pseudo-names.

for the making of porno-graphing actions operate elusively and exploitatively – transmitting the 'dirtiness and disorder' that the 'porn body connotes'[209] to other visual languages that don't involve sex or sexual nudity, 'contaminating' them with such 'dirtiness and disorder'.

Offering these accounts of my own work alongside the works made by Liddell and Quist, I aim to illustrate how artists' own questions in regards to the art-value of their works (i.e. whether or not themselves and others consider their works to be 'art') form methodologies of self-objectification and self-submission. I argue that these artists address such questions through self-doubt, considering themselves as incapable of knowing their own selves and their own purpose. I draw attention to how these artists use porno-graphing methodologies in their works by embracing positions of lacking confidence, point, value, meaning, purpose and knowledge, which often leads to anxiety and paranoia – I call these 'lacking positions'. Artists using lacking positions (i.e. self-doubt and deep personal destabilisation) for the sake of production can be considered as a capitalisation of one's own subjectivity.

My understanding of Bojana Kunst's use of the term 'crisis of subjectivity' is that the 'crisis' is 'the loss of the subject's center (where the subject is no longer the locus of truth)'; or, as she also notes, that 'subjectivity is no longer established through an authentic core. We can no longer talk about a proportionate relationship between the subject's inside and outside; subjectivity turns outward as an empty process'.[210] Additionaly, Kunst observes that

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[209] Attwood, F 2002, p. 96.
[210] Kunst, B 2015, p. 20.

The crisis of subjectivity becomes highly interesting in connection with

production in contemporary capitalism, especially in the way in which

experimenting with subjectivity is at the center of capitalist production.[211]

Thus, the embrace of lacking positions as a porno-graphing strategy can be seen as a

way in which 'subjectivity turns outward as an empty process'; also, work produced

through these strategies is 'work that drives us to "go into ourselves fully and

completely", both socially and artistically' but which 'actually produces nothing of

value.'[212] My suggestion is that artists who create porno-graphing actions work from

lacking positions to, in a way, exaggerate 'the vanishing dividing line between life

and work' which, 'is also at the center of capitalist process of life exploitation.'[213] In

doing so, they also underline the blurring of categories between life and art, work

time and private time, and non-work and work, in the form of a mediated, cold and

distant embrace of self-exploitation.

In the paper 'Dirty Commerce: Sex Work and Art Work since the 1970s', Julia

Bryan-Wilson looks at 'artistic engagements with prostitution in a range of critical

and artistic contexts since the 1970s.'[214] One of the works she discusses is the show

*Prostitution* presented by the British music and performance collective COUM

Transmissions (active from 1969 to 1976) at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts

(ICA) in 1976. The main exhibit of *Prostitution* was a series of images of artist Cosey

Fanni Tutti posing for porn-magazines. Towards the end of the press release, the text

reads: 'Everything in the show is for sale, at a price, even the people.' Bryan-Wilson

[211] Kunst, B 2015, p. 21.
[212] Kunst, B 2015, p. 32.
[213] Kunst, B 2015, pp. 137-138.
[214] Bryan-Wilson, J 2012, 'Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s', *differences*, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 73. Available from: berkeley.edu. [12 September 2016].

uses the case-study of *Prostitution* to note that 'the issue of ambiguity has long

attended critical writings of artistic depictions of prostitution'.[215] As an example of

this, she recalls Lisa Tickner's criticism of the exhibition and of the role of Tutti in it;

Tickner's criticism is that in this exhibition, 'the spectacularized blurring of

categories (artist/sex worker) results in the further policing of their differences'.

> Lisa Tickner comments that 'a quasi-sexist' gesture such as Tutti's,
>
> which aims to co-opt, mime, and reflect the language of misogynistic
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> representation, 'grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual
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> exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and
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> confusion'. For Tickner such a strategy oscillates between incisive
>
> parody and base titillation, and its ambiguity ultimately risks serving an
>
> antifeminist, regressive agenda.[216]

I argue that the exaggerated, 'spectacularized blurring of categories' in porno-

graphing between art and pornography, art and life, work and non-work, self and lack,

whilst possibly 'collapsing' into confusion and a seeming regression ultimately does

not serve an oppressive agenda – as I also consider that *Prostitution* does not serve an

oppressive agenda despite Tickner's critique. This is because porno-graphing

methodologies somehow entail that artists are strikingly open to oppressive criticism,

such as that they may potentially be called 'dirty', or purposeless and valueless, or

anti-feminist, and self-objectify into it. These artists embrace structures of

exploitation such as the 'exhaustion' of their own subjectivities in the form of radical

self-doubt and they embrace lacking positions in order to work from within their own

non-sovereignty. Tickner's evaluation of *Prostitution* is a similar critique to those

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[215] Bryan-Wilson, J 2012, p. 79.
[216] Bryan-Wilson, J 2012, pp. 79-80.

directed towards Pop art as Doyle reminds us: an artwork pretending to have taken 'a critical posture towards that to which it has actually surrendered'.[217] In porno-graphing methodologies, such surrender is literalised and 'spectacularised' via the tactical embrace of lacking positions or, as I will explain, 'false starts'. By 'spectacularised', I mean porno-graphing tactics are those which underline and exaggerate processes of surrendering, making them visible also through their use of pornographic visuals.

The phrase 'false starts' essentially means that the artists are the first ones to self-doubt in regards to their own art and their purposes for making it. By making work out of this self-doubt, which can be seen as using one's own subjectivity to the point of self-exploitation in order to make art, they surrender to 'the language of power and manipulation', which according to Rosi Braidotti is 'the true pornography'.[218] Braidotti uses the term pornography 'in the sense suggested by Susan Kappelar' i.e. 'as being a system of representation that reinforces the mercenary logic of a market economy.'[219] Using the term pornography in this way, Braidotti puts forward the proposition that pornography 'cheats' because 'it rests on the fantasy that visibility and truth work together'.[220] My argument is that in surrendering, 'collapsing' into their own 'ambiguity and confusion', artists who use porno-graphing methodologies complicate the 'language of power and manipulation' and 'the mercenary logic of a market economy' by complicating ideas regarding 'truth' and 'origin', for example in terms of the artistic 'self' and 'subjectivity'. In other words, they methodologically 'cheat' their own selves to 'cheat' the idea of the 'self' and thus notions of 'truth' and

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[217] Doyle, J 2006, p. 49.
[218] Braidotti, R 1994, p. 70.
[219] Braidotti, R 1994, p. 68.
[220] Braidotti, R 1994, p. 69.

'origin'. They also suggest that notions of 'truth' and 'origin' may be dependent on the 'language of power and manipulation' and 'the mercenary logic of a market 'economy' – the language of manipulation and 'true pornography' that porno-graphing methodologies appear to be using.

In this chapter I first give an account of the working processes I used during my earlier art-practice (2004 to 2010) before the beginning of my PhD project, in order to give a context to the ideas, thoughts and circumstances that led me to generating and using the term 'porno-graphing'. Additionally, I aim to explain my own choice and use of words such as 'dirty' and 'wrong' in regards to my practice; my use of my own sexual and artistic subjectivities in my art-work, as well as in the building of this thesis. For example, how I use such terms loosely yet strategically so that I don't 'crash' into the negativity that's involved in porno-graphing methodologies.

I explain that, through my work, I consciously, deliberately and continuously explore and negotiate vocabularies of confessionality, diarism and disclosure in relation to the camera. Thus, my sense of 'dirtiness' is linked to my broad sense of 'self'. By 'self', I mean the milieu that constitutes 'who I am' and which involves the sociopolitical, personal and visual contexts through which I cognitively screen my understanding of myself. The sense and notion of self, and the filters through which I deliberate it, gain and lose it, is my core art-material both physically and conceptually. By this, I mean that in order to explore my core art interests (such as the relationship between image and sex) I don't ask 'who am I?' Instead, I consider that my physical presence, my histories, thoughts, relationships and the very thinking-patterns through which I try to make my life and subjectivities make sense to me, are the material most immediately

available for me to explore these art interests in relation to image and sex. Through the ways in which I use myself as readily available art-material, I consider that I am indeed always immediately available to myself if I want to make art – but this constancy also means that I cannot quite rid myself of this availability, I cannot get rid of myself, the burden of my body, tendencies, patterns and feelings. This burden is also part of my sense of self and the ways I use myself to make art. I say 'use' because I do consider that the ways in which the sense of self I have described is used in porno-graphing tactics is forceful enough to constitute a form of self-exploitation. The ways it borders on self-exploitation is tactical because it draws attention to the negotiations surrounding the very notions of self and subjectivity, and how these are produced. Through the first section of this chapter, I discuss how I use myself as art-material reductively and mock my own sense of self to question and negotiate the very idea of the self, and by extension the 'dirtiness' or 'wrongness' that I or another person could potentially attribute to me and my work. I give an account of how I came to use the word 'dirty' to describe my subjectivity through my work. Whilst my claims on 'dirtiness' and its role in lens-based works that involve porno-graphing actions concern all of the works that I examine and discuss, it is important that I critically reflect on my own use of porno-graphing methodologies to explain how 'dirtiness' catalytically sets in motion the negative tricks of such methodologies. The artists whose work I examine through this chapter, Liddell and Quist, often use a similar vocabulary of words such as 'abject', 'disgusting', 'grotesque' and 'perverted' to talk about their work and the notions that inspire them. I do not claim that they attach their practices to the word 'dirty' to the same extent that I do; however, they have given their consent for me to use this word to analyse their working process and intentions. As it is the case with every artist whose work I examine through my thesis

(aside from Kathy Acker), I have conducted lengthy conversations with Liddell and Quist to inform my analysis, explaining my approach. In turn, their own thoughts regarding their works and how they experienced the reception of their works inform my analysis.

My aim for this first section of this chapter is to present the grounding of my initial understanding of porno-graphing strategies, which pre-dates my familiarisation with the academic grammars I use to analyse them within the rest of my written thesis. The period I revisit through this section was a time when I wasn't aware of how 'negativity' is theorised under the 'anti-social' thesis in queer theory. Through this first part of this chapter, I treat my earlier work as a case-study and therefore narrate the art-processes I was employing without continuously using scholarship to assert the ideas I was working through. For example, I locate how I worked through attributing 'metaphysical' characteristics to the camera, such as abilities to 'reveal' and create 'new spheres'. I don't use scholarly work to establish or analyse such attributes because my aim is not to defend if and how such attributes do exist. This is because the purpose of recounting such ideas is to look critically at how I used processes of detachment and reduction in relation to my own ideas (such as those regarding the camera) to negotiate my artistic subjectivity through my work.

I next briefly discuss a period of three years during which I lived and worked in a shared studio (Studio 6) in a warehouse space. I use this as an example of the living and working conditions in which artists used the practices described throughout this thesis. I then turn to the exhibition *XXX* as a case-study, discussing the porno-graphing methodologies used in my works alongside those of my peers, Liddell and

Quist. For my analysis of our individual strategies of self-submitting into 'lacking' positions, I consider Sarah Ahmed's and Mary Douglas's scholarship on meaning-making patterns considered as founded upon expelling 'dirt' and the 'unknowable'. I also use Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant's 'anti-social' theory in regards to subjectivity, sex and negativity.

I include Liddell's and Quist's works as case-studies in this chapter because their works are in direct conversation with mine. I came into contact with these artists and their works through living and working together, through being friends and peers on similar paths – as opposed to the works of Leigh Ledare, Alan Sondheim and Kathy Acker, which to date have had a bigger level of exposure in the 'art-world'. Given the lack of published reception of our works due to our relatively limited public exposure, I use my conversations with the artists to draw insights into these works. Such conversations and insights also regard the reception of our works from our immediate environments such and the conversations we three artists had between us. Several of the works I discuss through this chapter are unfinished, unresolved, have been publicly presented only once (at *XXX*) or not at all (such as the works produced through the collaborative project *Daddy, I am Man!* between Liddell and I). Liddell, Quist and I are still in the process of considering these works and how we want to proceed with them. For example, Quist is currently invested in linking the more sexual aspects of his work, some of which I identify as involving porno-graphing methodologies and which I discuss in this chapter, with elements of his practice that are unrelated, or seemingly unrelated, to them. Also, given that the reception of *XXX* was marked, as I will explain, by a particular resentment voiced by our environments (which demonstrated how our works may actually be perceived as 'wrong' and

'dirty', as well as 'pointless' and 'purposeless'), we plan on the production of *XXX II*, in order to build on the reception of the first show methodologically.

***All the Things I Like*** **(my early porno-graphing)**

A principle of porno-graphing methodologies is the artist's self-objectification into sexual and artistic roles, which can potentially be perceived as 'dirty' or 'wrong'. I argue that the processes of such self-objectification requires the artist's tactical reflection and creative action in a manner of negativity and reduction, critical distance and detachment. For instance, that the artist employs said detached approach as to their use of self in their work. In what follows, I will use the example of my earlier practice, my use of pornography and my attachment to the camera, to illustrate the basic engine of negative logics of reduction in porno-graphing strategies. This section starts with a description of my earlier working routines, how my process involved me attributing a set of almost metaphysical attributes to the camera. Describing the creative tactics that I employed in my earlier work, I aim to illustrate how I treated my-own process reductively and thus exemplify the possible strengths and limitations of the negative mechanics at play in porno-graphing methodologies and by extension, how I use such mechanics in the building of this thesis – for example, how I use the words 'dirty' and 'wrong'.

My initial conception of 'porno-graphing' is located in the video-performances I created between 2004 and 2009 – *before* the beginning of this PhD project. During that time I created domestic micro video-performances where I extensively used interior landscapes and self-performativity, or the performance of the self. I call them 'micro' because some were of very short duration, only few seconds long, and could also be as seemingly uneventful as me scratching my hand with my other hand. My understanding of self-performativity was based on the documentations of live and

video performance art from the 60s and 70s, for example the works of Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Hannah Wilke, Chris Burden and Bas Jan Ader. My core interest at the time was, broadly, the relationship between sex and image. I explored it by setting a bundle of questions to myself as my inquiry-points before starting to video myself each time. Some of my most consistent questions in terms of sex and image were (and in several ways still are): Can sex, sexuality and the abstract world of images 'touch' each other? Can images have sex with each other? Can I have sex with someone through images? Can I have a sexual contact with the camera and the image? Can such sexual contact exist without me being sexually stimulated by this process? Can the image reveal aspects of sex and sexuality, which cannot otherwise be revealed? What can happen ontologically when sex and image come together? I was not performing answers for the camera each time; instead these were loose and instinctual responses. I was first asking such questions to myself and then deciding quickly to perform a gesture or an action in front of the camera – but without necessarily hoping that the material I produced would form or constitute an answer. In fact, I often thought that the gestures and actions I performed in front of the camera were unrelated to the questions in my mind, and what I felt as the space – or the gap – between the two contributed to the tension in the visual material generated. In other words, when I saw something in my images that seemed interesting or artistically strong to me, I considered how the effects of these images may relate with the gap between the questions that were my starting point and the seemingly unrelated action or gesture I ended-up recording. Resisting fixating my process on producing answers allowed me to maintain my drive to make art and to keep reorienting my artistic explorations toward the same source materials.

This period of my work and the grounds from which porno-graphing grew did not involve the recording of any sexual act with other people; instead, it involved my own body and the interior environment of the houses I lived in. My use of pornographic codes was opaque, implicit and infrequent; for example, I used my-own semi-nudity, performed sexual gestures such as air-humping and sexual poses, and the visual presence of underwear and sex-toys without necessarily wearing or using them. This phase of my practice prior to the beginning of my PhD led to the generation of a large archive of video material. On a small number of occasions I edited a few of these video-performances together and presented them publicly in contexts such as private screenings at friends' houses, my degree shows, small-scale events that I organised with friends, and one gallery group show called *Where is My Privacy?* at La Casa De Belle Arte in Istanbul. A large volume of the material I produced between 2004 and 2009 has been lost – I have thrown it away both knowingly and accidentally. I regard this loss as an outcome of my actual lack of confidence at the time, my doubt as to the worth of my work. However, I contend that this earlier phase of my art-practice includes the premise of the porno-graphing methodology, including the self-doubt and self-questioning of the value of my art processes and products. For this reason, I include videos such as *All the Things I Like* (video, 3' 53'', 2007-2008)*, Call Dad* (video, 4' 23'', 2007), *Lying-down Masturbation* (video extract, 2', 2007) and *Wall Masturbation Performance* (video extract, 2' 20'', 2007) in the portfolio-element of this thesis. Alongside these, other videos that comprise my portfolio are *Suspicious of Women* (video, 5' 43'', 2012), *I'm Illegal* (video extract, 4' 8'', 2012), *Together* (video, 6', 2013), *Modern Family vol. 1* (video, 3' 19'', 2016) and an untitled video (video, 2' 28'', 2014) I made for the show *XXX,* all of which I produced during my PhD.

During this earlier phase of my practice, the domestic interiors within my work, especially the furniture, home-appliances and personal and generic objects laid-out as if for daily use, were all significant. I incorporated these features into my videos without rearranging them in an attempt to explore themes such as literality, matter-of-factness and the significations of diarism, confessionality, disclosure, 'truth' and secret-telling. Creating minimal domestic video-performances, I arranged myself (my body and my performative actions or gestures) in relation to the domestic interior that I had framed within the camera. Such actions or gestures varied from staying still next to a wall, resting a part of my body next to an object, moving a body part repeatedly, tapping, caressing or humping a surface, freezing my body or face into a posture or expression such as a smile, rolling on a bed or floor, laying down passively, or peeing in the toilet.

I was using autobiography not in terms of presenting narratives of my life per-se but in using what I considered significations of 'truthfulness' – in that I was indeed including aspects of my private life such as the interior of my house and my every-day presence within it. Through such works, I attributed to the camera a power to create 'new spheres', to reveal the world, the world within the image/frame where I became part of the domestic landscape in a different way to how I physically occupied it outside the frame. Consequently, to me this sphere or world would be a new one as my physical and existential singularity would be altered, as I would become part of the unity of the flat image. I anticipated that this new sphere would become visible in an abstract and subtle form of shapes and lines – formed between my body and the interior landscape of the house.

To trigger the characteristics I had attributed to the camera, I hid things from it to see what the image 'revealed' through my performance of half- or quasi-concealment. For example, between 2006 and 2009 I created numerous masturbation video-performances where I would try to hide my orgasms from the camera (I would keep myself as silent, still and expressionless as possible). With my masturbation-performances I was anticipating that the video-camera, through my resistance against showing my sexual excitement fully would reveal something new inside the image to me, something which I could not foresee, an element of the physical expression of my stimulation or an enigmatic unity between my body and the space in the form of lines, shapes or shadows. Similarly, I set up situations such as calling my father as I lay naked on a bed, keeping my back to the camera so that the camera would autonomously reveal aspects of my relationship with him in the form of shapes through my process of exposing and withdrawing. I utilised my domestic environment as my working setting because I felt that it was the most immediate environment for me to make work in and, in a sense, the only environment that was available for me to work. Instead of thinking 'What do I want to use and do?', my line of thought was that of 'What can I use and do right now?' and consequently 'Do I really need to have any extra space or extra equipment?' In short, throughout these years of my practice I considered that if something such as extra equipment, a studio space or a prop was not absolutely necessary, it was not necessary at all – and in fact, acquiring something not essentially necessary would be detrimental to my work. This literal negativity regarding what may be available in terms of working-material (such as space and equipment) I identify as part of a reductively-invested methodology. Whilst there were genuine practical limitations in regards to the spaces and equipment I could use,

my attention to immediate availability and its lack are significant, pointing to how artistic agency and intentionality, artistic subjectivities, are used *as* art-material in porno-graphing strategies. As mentioned, by leaving my domestic setting unarranged, I was aiming to use significations of matter-of-factness and 'truthfulness'. In these terms, I was leaving the space unarranged to imply a lack of creative attention or creativity altogether and so to experiment with questioning the 'truthfulness' of my own artistic intention by detaching, or appearing to be detaching from it. This can potentially be seen as defeatist, as not determined enough; yet through the building of this thesis I argue that a seemingly defeatist position is part of porno-graphing strategies and is in fact very determined.

Similar processes of artists taking-on seemingly defeatist positions can be seen in the works of Lo Liddell and Kim Quist; in a later section of this writing, I will examine how a tactical embrace of positions of actual and seeming lack of confidence and purpose can be observed in the porno-graphing methodologies of these artists. This, as I will soon elaborate on while discussing said works and tactics, is a critical way through which works that involve porno-graphing strategies negotiate art-value by appearing to negatively and openly dismiss or 'dirty' their own value. Furthermore, I argue that it is this strategy of 'false starts' that is the basis of the process of self-objectification into 'dirty' and 'wrong' positions, which forms the main methodology of porno-graphing. In questioning the value of my creativity, surrendering it in what I considered to be a literality of signification (leaving my working settings unarranged) my aim was to question my authenticity, originality or honesty, my own sense of self. And the aim of this was my own destabilisation. I wanted to trigger a place inside me where, at least at the moment of recording, I would be destabilised by a fundamental

doubt. A doubt that I may be incapable of knowing whether I am saying, showing or performing something that was 'true'. By 'true' I mean for example that the story I am narrating has actually occurred, or that the sadness which supposedly induces my crying is genuine, or that I would have gone to the toilet to pee even if I hadn't decided to record myself peeing. Therefore, what I was interested in during this time of establishing my methodologies was the exploring of relations between languages of representation and the enduring of not knowing if there is a boundary or a difference between the self and the performance of this self, which I later came to call porno-graphing. I saw my usage of this uncertainty regarding boundaries (in the form of feeling it subjectively when I was performing a gesture for the camera) as a way of evoking incoherence within the languages of representation I was also using, such as that of my domestic spaces.

I considered and used my attachment to the camera (i.e. that it can reveal and create a new world/sphere), which is to say my attachment to my own sense and nous, as an idea or manifestation of my subjectivity. I mocked my own attachment to the camera in order to mock the idea of 'myself', to mock my own sense of self and my relative self-assurance in regards to my subjectivity. As I mentioned earlier, this mocking took place through self-doubting the value of my work – but it was also contextual. In numerous video-clips I created during that time, I involved performative gestures and camera compositions where I was deliberately insinuating an irony in regards to my own art-doings (I talk extensively about the use of irony in porno-graphing methodologies in my chapter, 'Blue Tape'). Whilst I never cut each clip itself, I did edit them together to form split screens where two videos run next to each other. In doing so, on the one hand I was aiming to draw attention to the shapes and lines

formed by my body and the domestic landscape while on the other hand, I was

framing each clip as vaguely or 'enigmatically' antagonistic to the one next to it. For

example, in my video *All the Things I Like,* I included a split-screen composition

where on the left-hand side of the screen I am dressed, bent over a fridge and self-

spanking my own ass, while on the right side of the video I am standing inside a

bathtub with a shower-curtain and coats hanging from the railing. Hiding my body

between the curtain and the coats I extend my head and arms out to wave hello to the

camera and send kisses to it while wearing sunglasses and smiling. In making this

second clip my aim was to perform and mock my 'femme diva'-ness at the same time

by performing it from a bathtub (figure 1). Additionally, in placing this clip next to

the one where I spank myself over a fridge, my goals were: 1. To direct the attention

of the viewer away from my ass-spanking and towards the proposition that I watch

them watching me, that we are caught together in a cycle of constructing and

attributing meaning and value, and 2. To mock my own sexual and artistic

subjectivity: my sense that in the privacy of my self-reflection and artistic process, I

am being 'myself'. The title of the whole piece, *All the Things I Like*, which includes

other clips composed in the same split-screen format, is aimed at performing a similar

way of mocking its own confessional tone.

The process of self-doubting and mockery involved in the porno-graphing strategies

of self-objectification and self-submission are at risk from a situation whereby rather

than making the work happen, the process instead sabotages itself, crashing into a

debilitating state of self-doubt and self-mockery, and so instead of creatively and

tactically incorporating self-doubt and mockery into the work, this process becomes

completely self-destructive, as was the case when I refused to show my work, threw it

away or allowed myself lose it. My use of the words 'dirty' and 'wrong' in this thesis operate so as to duplicate porno-graphing processes of unsettling stability in terms of subjectivity without dismissing the negative self-doubting and mocking which triggers such unsettlement and destabilisation – and at the same time so as to not crash into this self-doubt and self-mocking. I will explain how this functions whilst first looking into how I made use of pornographic vocabularies throughout my earlier work.

As mentioned, during this earlier phase of my practice my use of pornographic codes was opaque and complex. I thought and felt that I was using pornography even when I was doing a performative gesture unrelated or seemingly unrelated to pornography or sex, such as tapping the surface of a cooker with my hand in front of the kitchen window. This is important because it exemplifies the artist's (in this case my own) opposing tendencies and contradictions as methodological elements in porno-graphing. For example, in the gesture of tapping a surface with my hand, I felt both that 1) I was willingly sexualising the gesture by thinking it may be sexual, and 2) I was unwillingly sexualising the gesture – that I was doing so without clear intent but was doing so anyway as if I had no control over this sexualisation. By 'no control' I don't mean that I didn't hold myself responsible for my choices and actions but that I was doubting myself, feeling that I was doing something 'wrong', 'inappropriate' or 'dirty' – that I was inserting sex where it shouldn't be or, more literally, that whatever I was touching was becoming 'dirty', contaminated with my own dirtiness. 'No control' can also be thought of in terms of the 'pathological' agency that the 'figure of the prostitute embodies', as Doyle recalls; that the simultaneous lack of agency/excess

of agency 'she' embodies is 'pathological'.[221] Thus, it can be said that for me to create porno-graphing actions, I experience, embody and display the 'pathological' agency of 'the figure of the prostitute'. In mentioning the 'pathological agency' here, my aim is to draw attention to how 'lack' and 'excess' in terms of the artist's agency and intention play out simultaneously in the making of porno-graphing actions. This simultaneity, this 'pathology' is important because artists who involve porno-graphing actions in their works use it so that they may work from positions of non-sovereignty, as I will be arguing throughout my whole thesis.

Not being certain as to how my intentions were shaping the elements of sex in the images I was producing, while feeling both guilty and excited that I was invoking or inserting sex where I felt there wasn't or shouldn't be any, I also felt that I was in a continuous correspondence to pornography. I felt as though I was in more than mere dialogue with it; that I was continuously conscious and surrounded by its genre, concept and history even when I wasn't using its vocabularies. This is important because it illustrates how my core understanding of porno-graphing actions were shaped at a time where I felt that pornography was wide, ambiguous and that it was 'complicated' and 'rather tricky' to define it, as Christopher Bartel attests when discussing the 'conflict between artistic value and pornographic value'[222] – so in a sense it was everywhere around me. Considering for example that sexualised nudity and actual sexual acts can be found not only in material whose producers mark it as pornographic but also in advertisements, films and music videos, the boundaries between pornographic and non-pornographic seemed vague and blurry to me.

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[221] Doyle, J 2006, p. 49.
[222] Bartel, C 2010, 'The "Fine Art" of Pornography?: The Conflict Between Artistic Value and Pornographic Value' in D Monroe, (ed), *Porn-Philosophy for Everyone: How to Think with Kink*, pp. 151-165. Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, West Sussex.

Furthermore, my impression was that this vagueness surrounds the visual languages of representation. Steve Jones in his essay '"Extreme" Porn? The implications of a Label' attests that '…the function of "porn" as a signifier of visual excess has led to the label being applied to all manner of visual imagery, including representations of architecture, food, and poverty'.[223] By extension, for me this vagueness concerns the power-structures that attribute value to images and to subjectivity, i.e. who authorises the use of the word 'porn' to different visual material and how does the use of the word influence how the viewer attributes value, or lack of value, to such material. During my earlier work, I used my sense of vagueness and uncertainty regarding the boundaries between sexual vocabularies that are pornographic and those that are not by holding on to and enduring this vagueness and uncertainty.

In making my creative decisions, I was videoing myself daily and spontaneously making use of what was immediately available to me in my domestic space. I was using my indecision and uncertainty to trigger blurriness in the material I was producing. Each time I took a few minutes before recording to consider what was around me, and to decide how I would position myself in the space and in relation to what was around me. Often, I wasn't aware that the ways I was orchestrating the camera-frame involved sexual connotations. Realising that this was the case when looking back at the footage, I was shocked and again felt simultaneously successful and guilty. My shock can be cast in the way that Edelman and Berlant see the 'shock' of 'negativity' as that which 'displaces what we thought we knew or could reliably predict and reveals the presence of something else at work in the decisions, desires,

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[223] Jones, S 2016, '"Extreme" Porn? The Implications Of A Label', *Porn Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 256-257. Available from: Taylor & Francis Online. [28 October 2016].

and acts we think of as our own.'[224] And my simultaneous feelings of guilt and success as 'the pain and pleasure of unlearning or "breaking down" what we thought our object was and who we are in relation to it.' Such is the effect of the 'suspension of knowing'[225] and precisely the effect I was intending to create in making my work.

My goal – which was clear to me in different degrees at different times – was the creation of footage which involved sex in ways which were awkward and difficult to place – for example, difficult for the viewer to say if sex was indeed present, why and how. An example of this is a clip from my video *All the Things I Like* where, sitting in front of my desk after having taken a shower (but fully clothed), I bend my head forward so that my wet hair covers my profile. Half a meter behind me stands a camera tripod. Because of the way that the camera frame is arranged, the viewer cannot see any part of my face but it looks as if the edge of my face, at the level of my mouth, is in contact with the top part of the tripod. Whilst it is clear that the tripod is further away than my body from the camera, the frame-composition suggests that I am touching the tripod with my mouth, that I am giving the tripod a blowjob (figure 2). In the clip I have just described, there is nothing sexual aside from the insinuation of a possible contact between my mouth and the tripod. And yet because of this mirage of contact between my bended head and the tripod I argue that this footage can be perceived as fairly sexual, as it has been perceived by people who have watched the video.

A contradiction, an adapted distance, can be observed in regards to my position when making decisions regarding the potency of sexual significations in the material I was

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[224] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 15.
[225] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 117.

creating. It seems that I simultaneously wanted and did not want to create sexual

material; that I didn't know exactly what my intentions were whilst knowing them.

Furthermore, it was and in several ways still is almost impossible for me to say

clearly which of the materials I was producing were sexual or sexually explicit, and to

what degrees. Such contradictions mean that I was working from a position of non-

sovereignty, a position of 'suspense' of my own knowing, an inability to explain

myself to myself. As I will keep demonstrating throughout my thesis, this is a crucial

position adopted by artists that use porno-graphing methodologies.

I consider that my 'suspended' knowing is contextually marked through numerous

video clips where I am merely laying down, as if I have given up, or I don't know

what to do. One of these clips is edited next to the aforementioned footage of my

profile and the tripod. In this clip, I lay down naked and still on the back of a sofa,

letting the upper part of my body fall on the sitting part of it. Such a video-clip can be

deliberated upon in terms of what Halberstam calls 'radical passivity' – a

performative 'act of unbecoming' which 'may signal […] the refusal quite simply to

be'.[226] I will be using Halberstam's proposed term at length during the second and

third chapter of this thesis as I argue that 'radical passivity' is also a key ingredient of

porno-graphing strategies.

During the first two years of my PhD project, I experimented with using different

intensities of pornographic language (recording actual sex for example) in order to

understand the role of the recorded sexual act in porno-graphing. I hadn't previously

done so mainly because I was scared that filming sex could have been ethically

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[226] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 150.

'wrong'. This was an arbitrary judgment, an example of my earlier encounter with feelings of 'wrongness' and 'dirtiness' in regards to making art that involves sex and sexuality. I have never believed that for someone to record sex, whether for personal, artistic or pornographic reasons, involves ethical problems by default. I merely felt that *my* doing it would be 'wrong'. One of the reasons I use words such as 'wrong' and 'dirty' is because, in the rawness of my artistic process and my relationship to myself as an artist, these are the most accurate words to describe how it felt and still feels like to employ porno-graphing methodologies.

Giving myself permission to experiment with recording sex in making art as well as studying other case-works which involve porno-graphing actions, I came to understand that what I call 'dirty' (i.e. 'dirty' sexual and artistic subjectivity) does not depend on the extremity of sexual representation but on the artists' processes of self-objectifying themselves as being or doing something 'dirty'. Whilst making work that involved more sexual significations than before, I recognised that despite the periodic involvement of other people I was still interested in my aloneness, absence and the processes of drying sex of its 'juices', reducing its joyful characteristics and turning it into administrative and distant reports. It was never a matter of questioning or devaluing sexual or any other form of joy; my aim was to experiment with logics of reduction in order to see where they would lead me and the material I was producing. Instead of giving the same attention to the domestic space as I did during my earlier work (a reason for which was the change of my living circumstances, which I will explain in the section 'Studio 6'), I focused on the deliberate and furthest reduction of sex from the parts of it which regard satisfaction and enjoyment. I experimented with creating dry reports of my sexual and romantic encounters through writing. In some

cases, I read these reports to the camera whilst intentionally creating obstacles for a clear or engaged reading, such as reading straight from my obscured handwriting or reading whilst eating. A document of such experimentation is my video *Suspicious of Women* where I am reading a diary entry, a letter to myself for a lover who is leaving me.

I filmed and photographed myself and other people having sex and masturbating in ways that didn't have specific observational and conceptual strategies – just filming and photographing. I filmed my face while I was being sexually penetrated, trying to keep it as straight and expressionless as possible as I had done before with my masturbation clips. The processes of making said material involved porno-graphing methodologies: the artist treating their sex and love life as potential art-material. Through this experimentation, I understood that it is particularly significant that the artist (myself in this case) allows themselves to embrace the feeling that using one's sex and love life as art material is (or might potentially be perceived as) a 'wrong' thing to do, and in so feeling to become destabilised and involve their destabilisation and non-sovereignty in their work. This can be and is done in several ways – it doesn't mean that the artist needs to declare their 'wrongness' or their feelings around that 'wrongness' in a confessional format. Later in this chapter, I will be discussing the show *XXX* and how the artists involved engaged with their own ideas of being and doing something 'wrong'.

Several videos that I produced during this research project and which I understand to be employing some porno-graphing methodologies don't involve images of sex or even explicit nudity. For example, in *Together*, made in a friend's house during their

holiday vacation, I recorded myself in numerous spaces of their house talking to the camera as if I am talking to an absent lover. Through my video-performance *I'm Illegal,* I convey the strategy of embracing my paranoia and anxiety (I will also be explaining the role of those feelings when discussing the exhibition *XXX* at a later section of this chapter) without involving any sexual significations. *I'm Illegal* is a video performance recorded in one shot where I am lying upside down with my face near the camera saying that 'I do things that people think are wrong, illegal', that 'I do these things because I have to', that 'I AM dangerous, I AM illegal', that I am never caught, that I am always winning, always hiding and impossible to be found. It appears as a personal declaration, a confession to the world. Whilst making it, I did not have myself in mind, but rather a stereotypical 'criminal' such as a male robber in a film. I was interested in being a male who is uncatchable, untamable and belongs to an existential sphere where risk-taking is more thrilling and more rewarding than freedom. Seen through the wider spectrum of my practice, this video utters the tension of the porno-graphing strategy of self-objectification into 'dirty' sexual and artistic subjectivities.

The distance and detachment that the process of self-objectification into 'dirty' and 'wrong' roles entails points back to the use of myself in my earlier work, when I was essentially putting myself in a position of being caught by myself not knowing if I am being 'myself' (saying or performing a truth, being honest) or if am being a fraud. Being myself and being ironic, mocking my own belief in and the use of subjectivity, I felt that I was cheating myself and my actual work, objectifying myself as a cold and distant cheater, and my work as a valueless farce. Standing critically in relation to the idea of *my* self, of my subjectivities, I essentially stand critical in relation to the idea

of the self in general, this bundle of subjectivities as some pre-existing construction or 'how external opinions, conceptions or perspectives are overlaid on who a subject is'.[227] As mentioned, this process risks the danger of caving in on itself into a self-doubt so all-encompassing as to disable the work.

My use of words such as 'dirty' first and foremost refers to specific artists' creative processes of using sexual and artistic subjectivities in their works, as I have explained in the 'Introduction' to this thesis. At the same time, the way I use this word aims to fuel a creative playfulness that allows space for looseness and ambiguity. In this way, through my analysis, I can parallel porno-graphing processes without crashing into the extremity of the negativity that these processes necessitate. My use of the word 'dirty' comes from how I experience and use 'dirtiness' and 'wrongness' in my practice-work and creation of porno-graphing actions. In the context of the work I produced prior to starting this thesis, one of the ways I felt that I was 'dirty' was by sexualising whatever I came into contact with during my artistic process. Furthermore, this sexualisation could have also occurred without it being my intention and thus, it could have been 'shocking' to me (i.e. it entailed displacement or destabilisation of what I knew and of myself). The consistency and durability with which 'dirtiness' 'shockingly' kept appearing in my work made me consider 'dirtiness' as my actual subjectivity.

Consequently, in applying methods of mocking myself (my 'dirty' subjectivity) in my work, I mocked and critiqued the structures of thought which would attribute such 'dirtiness' and 'wrongness' to me and my work; for example, involving sex in my

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[227] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

work. In other words, by deciding to consciously self-submit to artistic and sexual 'dirty' subjectivities, as I argue throughout my thesis, the artist enables a critical negotiation in regards to art, subjectivity and value. In a sense, the writing of this thesis is another act of 'reducing' and 'drying' sex through detailed report, analysis and articulation, and the use of academic language and structure that in themselves can potentially be considered distant. Additionally, in terms of this writing, it enables me to perform the distance involved in porno-graphing strategies. The 'suspension' of my knowing, my premeditated distance as to my own positions, allows me to approach the mimicking mechanisms of porno-graphing (the self-submission into which I want to critique for example) without crashing into the tension, the excess, that this process simultaneously generates and approximates.

As I will explain, this tension concerns how porno-graphing strategies challenge 'the need of the viewer to categorise' and the 'tendency to cling on to order'.[228] For example, my possible need to strictly clarify between myself and my self-deception or self-mockery in the making of my work. My use of the word 'dirty' permits me to endure this destabilisation (my detachment from a stable, clear-cut and unshakable position) whilst preventing the project's failure on account of to the negativity at work. Through my use of the word 'dirty' I instead find ways to closely observe and analyse the specific elusiveness that is used in porno-graphing strategies: how through this elusiveness artists manage to negotiate boundaries such as those between art and life or 'the structural and the subjective'[229], and in doing so propose ways for the viewer to acknowledge their complicity in the reproduction of value and meaning construction and attribution.

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[228] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.
[229] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.

**Studio 6**

I shared a working and living space, called Studio 6, with the artist Kim Quist for three years. We were meant to be three people sharing this space but needing to cut living costs we eventually built two extra rooms inside the studio and sublet them, resulting in a flow of people moving in and out. Before I moved to Studio 6, my photo and video work had been principally concerned with my physical presence and my domestic spaces, the material around me and furniture in particular as I explained through the previous section of this chapter. These elements of domesticity that I was drawing from in the production of what I identify as my earlier porno-graphing works (diaristic video performances involving my body and the domestic landscape) were lacking in Studio 6: the space didn't function clearly and solely as domestic because it was in fact a communal studio space where living and working were utterly unified and where privacy was eliminated (for example most bedrooms didn't have doors).

The aesthetics of diarism that I had used before aimed to negotiate the performativity of confessionality and disclosure through using my private landscapes of domesticity; feeling that domesticity was all I had to make work from, my most immediate and accessible material. My working and living were already intertwined yet these conditions felt relatively protected in the sense that I was not being seen, watched or observed whilst working, my process was private. At Studio 6, the lack of privacy was a more tangible reality; consequently, my working material became the relationships between the people living there, our bonds, struggles, interdependency and the ways we were communally addressing questions regarding sex, sexuality, romantic love, safety, exposure, money making, freedom, survival and specifically

what it means to make work out of sex and sexual subjectivity. Studio 6 was also a somewhat dysfunctional environment: we all lived on very small incomes, experiencing practical and mental instability and often felt as if the survival and well-being of each of us literally depended on the others. The main body of work I was invested in making during this time was photographing the people coming in and out of Studio 6, mainly in every-day situations such as sitting around, working, eating, drinking, talking, dancing, sleeping, laughing, crying, having fun, arguing, showering, drying, using the toilet, sleeping and having sex and sometimes specifically posing for me nude or masturbating. Some of this material forms part of the practical element of this thesis. The working title of this image archive is *Giant Doggy* and also includes photographs of my family, lovers and friends who weren't living in Studio 6, taken in the same period using the same daily, diaristic format.

What I have just described is a period in my life during which the concept of porno-graphing, as well as this thesis itself, were shaping in relation to the ways of living and working (also using this living as research). The ways we were experiencing and exploring our private and professional lives and our relationships were reflected in the works we developed. For example, living and discussing with a close friend whom started working as a sex-worker whilst we lived together influenced my research. This person's own artistic endeavours and her personal, professional and activist struggles and victories have contributed to my thinking in regards to questions concerning sex, subjectivity, art and value, as well as to my use of the term porno-graphing itself.

Another example from living and working in Studio 6 is the works that Quist and I produced for the *XXX* show, which I will discuss next in this chapter. These works

were shaped by our discussions regarding how we were experiencing sex and love, and the value, or potential lack of value, in considering sexual situations as art-material. In particular, we discussed how we experienced feelings of 'wrongness' about making art using potentially taboo sexual situations, and how we came to deliberately use these elements of 'wrongness' in its production by using our self-doubt and lack of confidence, by not investing in defending these works against critiques that would nominate them as sexually and ethically 'wrong' or 'dirty'. Additionally, discussions were carried out on how we experienced our own subjectivities and used such experiences to produce work; how our conversations in regards to how we experienced loving, trusting, betraying and losing each other in our day-to-day realities shaped our works and our use of subjectivity in them.

*XXX*

Artists Lo Liddell, Kim Quist and I produced and organised an exhibition at a business space, which was run by Liddell's partner at the time. Lo Liddell is an artist who works mainly with sculpture, photography and performance. Through this writing, I will refer to this space as 'Y' and to its owner as 'Z' because although this was a public and thus traceable exhibition, Liddell prefers her former partner not to be identified in this document. Y is a space that sells sex-toys and other material related to sex and sexuality. It has a permanent display of different sorts of sex images and objects, a screening space, and a space for performances related to sex and BDSM, and it is promoted as both a sex shop and a 'creative space'.

The show we organised was called *XXX* and was loosely themed around 'incest' and sexual dynamics within (our) biological families. The working title was *Daddy, my Pussy XXX* but eventually changed to *XXX* because Quist felt that he didn't identify with the 'daddy' and 'pussy' parts, and he also felt that the word 'daddy' was pigeonholing the show and its potential reception. In preparing material for *XXX*, Quist visited his grandmother's house a few days after she moved into an old people's home. He took pictures of the vacated space, which still had all her decoration and personal objects, family pictures and memorabilia untouched, and he created a recording of himself masturbating on her bed under the covers. It is a steady, long shot lasting approximately 5 minutes where the viewer can see the entire bed and only the artist's head peeking from under the white bedcovers. The viewer wouldn't necessarily be aware that the artist is masturbating unless this information were given directly. His masturbation lasts only a few minutes and he then orgasms without any sound or expression. He showed me the footage when he produced it, asking for my opinion, which was positive and encouraging. Given my research and art interests, I read the piece as 'dirty' with incestual connotations; for instance, that he was masturbating there because it was his grandma's bed. I believed that the reason he decided to do so wasn't because his grandma or her absence or her bed necessarily stimulated him sexually but that he himself considered that masturbating in her bed could potentially be perceived as a 'wrong' thing to do, especially because she had just been moved into an elderly care home. Furthermore, that he may have thought that such an act could also potentially be perceived as 'wrong' or 'dirty' and that the artist could potentially be seen as exploiting the condition of her absence for the purposes of his work. As mentioned, the fact that he is masturbating is not clearly

visible in the footage, nor is it obvious that it is his grandma's bed; therefore if and how this information is framed would depend on the artist's decision to do so at a later stage of the creative production or exhibition. Although he chose not to include this video in the exhibition, the reasons for which I will discuss later, he did include pictures of her house, including a picture of the wall where his grandma's bed used to be after it was removed, along with a text he wrote identifying the house as his grandma's in the publication accompanying the exhibition.

Quist and I discussed this footage and his decision not to publicly show it for weeks. Our discussion was strongly informed by considering how Quist's then partner received this work. They had previously had issues with him using his body and sexual subjectivity within his work, and upon viewing this material they asked him why he did this, saying that the idea confused and upset them. They questioned its artistic value and relevance, asking him, What was the point of this video? Why did he do it? How could he stand by it? What was the value of it? What was its 'message'? At that time, Quist found their remarks useful and decided that this footage wasn't the kind of work he would like to make or be recognised for. He concluded that making this footage was in a way intellectualised – produced for the purpose of the show and that it was therefore somewhat mechanistic, possibly influenced by me and my work, therefore not coming from a 'true' place. Or, he wasn't clear as to whether or not that was the case and so asked himself whether he would like or be able to defend the work if it was presented. He instead produced and showed a video called *Me and My Brother*, (2', 2014) showing his' and his brother's naked bodies (we can see from their thighs up to above their belly buttons) standing up and rhythmically but slowly moving to a background instrumental tune which

resembles porn groove.[230] The video cuts to their blank and serious faces, also moving

to the same tune, and then back to the previously mentioned frame, looping back and

forth between their faces and their penises etc. He also showed a small collection of

family photographs such as one of him as a younger man with his mother smiling in a

flower-filled valley, a picture of him and his brother as babies playing and laughing

inside a bathtub, and a photograph documenting a live performance called *Together*,

which he made with his father and presented at *Wrong Love*, at A Foundation in

Liverpool in 2012. In this performance, the two were taped together with black tape,

Quist behind his dad, trying to balance and stand up, falling and trying to stand up

again.


At the opening of *XXX*, Z spent the evening threatening to leave the private view

because they felt upset over the 'pornographic' content of the works. Specifically,

they considered Liddell's artwork to be 'pornography and not art'. They were

referring to Liddell's artwork *Saccharine*, a series of edible photographs in which she

is laying down inserting an edible double-ended dildo made out of toffee into her

vagina (figures 3 & 4). Liddell made the penises herself, as well as the photographs,

which were printed on edible rice-paper and put inside frames also made out of toffee.

She had written a text to accompany the work, which she included in the publication

accompanying the show but chose not to have it displayed on the walls next to the

edible photographs. According to Liddell, this work was an outcome of locating a

desire in herself to be like her father, to be a man, and also desiring a 'daddy' figure

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[230] 'Porn groove (or porno groove) is the music soundtrack to typical pornographic films, or a genre of music that imitates such music. The electric guitar with wah-wah pedal is the most common instrument associated with porn groove, and synonymous with the genre. Simple, often minimalistic-sounding drums, with the rimshot sound being commonly associated with porn groove.' Porn groove, *Wikipedia*, wiki. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porn_groove. [15 July 2015].

as her lover. By inserting the double-ended dildo into her vagina she was both penetrated and appeared to have a penis that showed from her inside out. She had been considering her fantasy of being a man and her masturbatory habits of fantasising over having a flesh penis and penetrating females as working material. Z's arguments against Liddell's work were that it signified a perverse desire of hers towards her father (i.e. that she actually wanted to have sex with her dad) which they, as her lover, had to suffer, and they wanted the text to go alongside the images in order to expose to everyone who would view the exhibition what a 'perv' she was and what they had to go through and put up with by being her partner. Yet they felt, in contradiction, that without the text, these objects were 'just pornography'. Furthermore, they suggested that in producing this work she was humiliating her family, getting back at them for childhood traumas by being disrespectful towards them, that her work was dishonouring and improper, that she was using it for her own benefit to 'cure' herself from these traumas. In trying to convince her to display the text, they aimed to expose her perversion and troubled psychological synthesis for the world to see, calling on common consensus that what she was doing was improper because 'everyone would view it as improper'.[231]

During and around the time of putting together *XXX* I myself had similar experiences, being questioned and criticised about my work; the exact circumstances of such critiques and attacks on my work I cannot describe in this document for reasons of confidentiality. However, I mention it here with the aim of underlining the similar conditions in the private lives of Liddell, Quist and myself around the time of the making of *XXX*. The critiques we received on a personal level illustrate the level of

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[231] Liddell, L 2015, pers.comm., 15 July.

emotional openness from which each of us was producing work at that time, and the destabilisation we were exposing ourselves to. The nature of the doubts voiced by our close environments articulates not only the criticisms that works involving porno-graphing methodologies are open to but also the artists' own doubts and the 'lacking positions' they work from. In what follows I will be reviewing the curatorial choices we took in making *XXX* to illustrate how such positions, when used strategically, can negotiate art-value. By using the word 'strategically' I don't mean that such positions that involve self-doubt and destabilisation don't personally affect the artists – that if the 'strategy' is successful the artist remains unaffected. Instead I argue that the paranoia, anxiety and lack of confidence and purpose that these artists incorporate into their work can be used to negotiate meaning and value regarding art, and sexual and artistic subjectivities – at least for as long as such internal processes and feelings enable and inform the work.

We curated the show in an ad-hoc way having been given freedom to move the stock as we wished. We included small stickers with our names, the titles and dates on the walls next to each group of works, identifying and framing ourselves within the traditional gallery format of eponymous artistic representation. However, we left large amounts of the material already on display in its original setting so there was not a clear distinction between what was 'art' and what were 'sex objects' and 'sex toys' for sale. I didn't reorganise the exhibiting space, Y for the exhibition of our pieces because I didn't feel there was a clear reason to do so, similarly to how I treated my working-settings in the earlier phase of my practice, described in the first section of this chapter. Liddell's photographs were designed to melt over the duration of the show and starting doing so from the opening night (figure 5). Next to them were

sculptures of edible life-size penises also made out of toffee by Liddell. The photographs and sculptures were placed amongst pornographic material and sex toys in the shop (figure 6). Our videos were screened on a single screen projection above the shop's coffee table, which had porn books and publications on it. Our unclear or seemingly undetermined manner of placing our works inside the space resulted in a highly ambiguous relationship between them and the other objects. Our works were being 'lost' or dissolved inside the structure that we chose for accommodating them. The question of how these works could 'stand' in the world (a question leveled by Quist's ex partner) – in the porn-world and in the art-world – was literalised through the melting photographs and penises – that they actually couldn't 'stand'. The question of their 'relevance' and purpose (of their potential impact on audiences, and their art-value) was addressed through becoming too sleazy, 'dirty', unstructured and indeterminate even for a sex-shop. Through their appearance as insignificant, as not standing out in any specific way, through resisting to appear as either particularly confident or actually apologetic, they were 'dirtying' up the sex-shop – they were contaminating the space with a 'dirtiness' dirtier than the sexual and pornographic content of the shop. Through the way the works we presented in *XXX* appeared uncertain of themselves and in decay, their indetermination poked through the clarity of usage attributed to the other objects they were surrounded by (i.e. the sex toys) and furthermore, were questioning their 'point', their meaning. By underling this questioning I do not aim to belittle the 'meaning' or value of sex toys, the same way our works at *XXX* didn't seek to do so. Instead, I argue that whatever structures designate specific discursive spaces to 'sex' (the commercial western 'sex-shop' for example) are challenged by porno-graphing works. By submitting to (various forms of) 'pointlessness', such works challenge systems of separation and value-attribution

that aim to legitimise subjects of sex and sexuality by actually exploring such subjects as illegitimate. In other words, in 'belittling' themselves and the non-art sex objects around them, these porno-graphing works were pointing to elements of sex and sexuality (and surrounding discourses including art, success and personal/romantic happiness) that lack a 'point', or exist beyond one.

In saying 'lack of point'/'point', I refer to the worth, value, usefulness and relevance of the works – 'relevance' meaning the 'effort of thinking the aesthetic and political together'[232] for example. Also, the works' reasoning, rationale, meaning, their causes and effects, their participation inside order, the 'sense' they make inside language, structure, in the 'art-world' and inside the artists' subjectivity, how these works situate and 'contribute' to knowledge, to perceiving and to understanding, their 'purpose'. Sarah Ahmed points out that the 'lack of purpose' in the 'figure of the stranger', 'conceals the purpose of crime'. The 'stranger' being the figure that becomes identifiable through the construction of the commonsensical 'we': the figure that our perception rejects in order to understand ourselves as part of the sense-making, logical 'we'. Therefore, according to Ahmed, the 'stranger' is also the figure of the 'unknowable'.[233] Following this line of thought, in 'suspending' our knowing in *XXX*, not defending the purpose of our works, underlying these works' qualities as not being purposeful enough to 'stand up', melting away, we suggested an unknowability in regards to the value of the use of sex in our art-works, an unknowability destabilising to us and others. In a similar manner of analysis to Ahmed, Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* defines dirt as 'matter out of place', 'place' meaning a system or an order, suggesting that 'where there is dirt there is a

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[232] Ngai, S 2005, p. 3.
[233] Ahmed, S 2000, pp. 20-28.

system. Dirt is the by-product of a systemic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements'.[234] Given that 'dirtiness' relative to subjectivity belongs to the world of ideas and perception, it is therefore (and in accordance with Douglas' ideas) what we reject whilst in the process of perceiving, what falls out of our 'pattern-making tendencies'.[235] In this sense, dirt is something that we cannot actually perceive as it is the very thing we reject in order to perceive and in order to have the confidence that we are perceiving correctly. Bringing Ahmed's and Douglas's theories side-by-side offers the hypothesis that 'dirt' and the 'unknowable' stand hand-in-hand, if not being tantamount to each other. Both propositions explore the same train of thought: the patterns of sense and meaning-making, the 'we', depends on the exclusion of 'waste' or the 'figure of the stranger'. This figure standing on the other side of meaning-making is the unknowable and it's 'dirty'. Additionally, according to Ahmed, the 'figure of the stranger', the 'unknowable', and I add based on Douglas, the 'dirty', is 'dangerous' and destabilising because inside its lack is concealed 'the purpose of crime'.

The artists I use as case-studies in this instance, Liddell, Quist and myself don't practice formed strategies of 'defending' ourselves, at least we certainly didn't at the time of *XXX*. Instead we question ourselves on the same grounds and in the same ways regarding the worth, meaning and value of our works: whether these are art and whether their making and showing is worthy of putting ourselves into potential personal and institutional troubles or difficulties. The works we presented in *XXX* and the manners through which we presented them resist being viewed as contributing to a critical agenda. Their artistic or political relevance is not, for example, that they

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[234] Douglas, M 2002, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p. 36, Routledge, New York.
[235] Douglas, M 2002, p. 37.

represent diverse bodies and sexualities, pro-porn or pro-sex politics. They don't present a certain kind of positivism and so their 'purpose' and 'contribution' is questionable and unclear.

Liddell, whilst 'standing by' the sexual interest she invests into her work, questions whether her work is 'real art' because she feels that the quality of her work may be compromised by how she is using it as self-therapy (a critique leveled by her then-lover, Z). This presupposes that this artist is 'sick' and presents the question of what it is she needs to be cured from; consequently the question arises of how the illness is related to the sexually-related works she produces that I identify as involving porno-graphing actions. I am aware that the questioning of art's value on the basis of self-indulgence and self-therapy is imposed on many practitioners whether they use sex as material or not but in meeting, living and working with artists practicing several art-forms I don't think that such questioning takes place as readily as when dealing with artists who use sex and sexuality in their works, especially if their use of sex and sexuality doesn't seem to add up to a clearly framed political contribution. For example, I have rarely, if ever, witnessed an abstract illustrator or painter to be accused that their work is not 'fully' art but (or because it also functions as) self-therapy. I don't dismiss the value of art therapy or the healing qualities and capabilities of making and viewing art; nor do I believe that practices that focus on the therapeutic qualities of art pathologise the participants. My critique specifically targets how Z rushed to simplistically and explicitly pathologise Liddell, insinuating that the work may also be therapeutic to her as the most immediately apparent way of pointing to its lack of art-value. Thus, in underlining how Liddell incorporated this critique of not producing 'full' or 'complete' art in to a self-doubting position of

lacking as an artist, I draw attention to associations between works that involve

porno-graphing actions with being 'sick', meaning something is going – or has gone –

'wrong'. Z's critique of Liddell's practice as 'sick' targeted not only *XXX* but also the

collaborative and ongoing project between Liddell and I, *Daddy, I am a Man!*


Through *Daddy, I am a Man!* Liddell and I explored female masculinity through

performance and drag. We created male characters that through their clothes,

appearances and behavior appeared to be sleazy, sexist, exploitative and corrupt. To

build and perform these characters we considered our own histories and desires. For

my character 'The Painter' I considered the male extramarital lover of a member of

my biological family whom I met when I was a child and spent time with, unaware

until much later that he had had an affair with my relative. Working on 'The Painter' I

asked myself questions such as, Who was this person whom my relative fell in love

with? and considered other romantic and violent specificities of their affair, which I

don't identify here because I don't wish for my relative to become recognisable. 'The

Painter' resulted in a series of four digital photographs entitled *The Painter* and

untitled video footage where 'The Painter' interacts with Liddell's character 'The

Detective'. 'The Detective' is a gender-ambiguous figure, a woman disguised as a

man disguised as a woman who is investigating 'The Painter's' affair. For our live

and video performance *Like a Record Baby* we built the characters 'Buck' and

'Volcano'. A fellow queer academic gave feedback that these characters could be

offensive to trans men in their sleaziness and 'dirtiness'. Another work developed

during *Daddy, I am a Man!* was *Father & Sons. Father & Sons* is another series of

four digital photographs where Liddell, her father and me pose as well-groomed men

with our penises hanging out of our open trouser-zippers. Liddell's penis and mine are

made out of silicon but her father's is his flesh one. Whilst her father was evidently

knowingly and willingly participating in our project, Z accused Liddell of exploiting

her father, ridiculing him, and that she was 'sick' for doing so. They additionally

made known to her that people they both personally knew believed the same,

suggesting that 'everyone' agreed with them. Liddell, following her former partner's

reaction to her practice, initially chose to take her website down. She would later

restructure this website, changing the given name that she had used up to that point to

Lo Liddell, which she now uses for all projects she is involved in.


Using porno-graphing methodologies for said works, we tactically self-objectified and

opened up to the possibility that our works may be perceived as pornography as well

as exploitative and offensive and thus lack art-value. In doing so, we worked from

non-sovereign positions, meaning that we experienced ourselves as contradictory and

uncertain, as not able to see or know precisely *how much* our work is pornography, or

exactly how much it can be perceived as 'dirty', 'wrong' or 'sick' (or offensive), as

was also the case with my earlier work, as I have discussed in the first section of this

chapter. Self-objectifying into being 'dirty' or 'wrong' thus entails not knowing

exactly how we are going to be perceived and the anxiety and paranoia of not

knowing the consequences of being perceived as such. The artists whose work I

examine in this chapter (myself included), whilst acutely aware that other artists,

entertainers, writers, pornographers, performers and activists expose themselves

significantly more in terms of 'controversial' and 'transgressive' subjects concerning

sexuality  still feel that the results or consequences of showing the work may be

troubling to our lives,  regardless of whether these other more exposed, more proud,

and more commercially established artists get into institutional or personal conflicts or not.

These issues are present through an ongoing discussion between Quist and I, a discussion that started when we lived together in Studio 6, where he at times appears clear that he doesn't want to associate at all with works he made such as the video of himself masturbating at his grandma's bed, while at other times he states that this is not how he really feels but that he tends to do so when overtaken by anxiety. To some degree the anxiety that accompanies porno-graphing practices could be considered unjustifiable or classed as 'paranoia', the latter not in a medical sense but in terms of how a person may individually create such value judgment in every-day life in regards to themselves or another person. Therefore, most relevant to the practice and research of porno-graphing is that the artists' anxiety regarding the porno-graphing elements of their practices is considered as unjustifiable, or on the margins between logical and illogical by the artists themselves, not quite knowing how to locate themselves in systems of rationality. I myself have often felt that I cannot trust my perception and judgment as to how much and how exactly my work is sexually explicit as well as 'dirty', so knowing that my anxiety is unjustifiable I also feel agitated because I can't overcome it and so let it block me.

In writing this thesis I engaged in a lengthy dialogue with the artist Leigh Ledare, whose work I will be discussing in the third chapter of this thesis. During our conversation, as I will explain in the introduction of the third chapter, I became aware of several aspects of porno-graphing methodologies because of how I started experiencing them and voicing them through our conversations. For example, I

understood that it is part of porno-graphing strategies to resist answers and resolution, articulation and clear-cut understanding. Moreover, a crucial part of porno-graphing methodologies is for the artist to engage with their non-sovereignty, such as feeling that they lack purpose, meaning and confidence, and to work from these exact spaces. Asking Ledare if he personally ever feels vulnerable and anxious in regards to his exposure and reception he – saying that he does and that he does use emotional and mental states to inform his work – pointed to the notion of affect as 'related to the excess, that which stands outside cause and effect in relationships: the anxiety, the conflict, the vulnerability', as 'an intensity that begs to find an object'.[236] Taking Ledare's approach that such emotional states are related to affect, or are themselves affects, an intensity that begs to find its place inside relations, anxiety, paranoia and confusion can be considered as critically contributing to porno-graphing strategies. Due to the negative logics they employ, such creative strategies negotiate 'sex as a site for experiencing this intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being'.[237] Thus affects such as anxiety work catalytically in porno-graphing methodologies to disorganise and produce 'intensified encounters' between the artists' and their own selves and, by extension, between the artists and others, as well as between the artists and art – even if so in the form of 'false starts'.

As I mentioned in the introduction to my PhD, Brian Massumi, building his theory on affect, suggests that to follow a cognitivist philosophy that asks 'what the subject can know of the world' is to set off to a 'false start'. Artists who use porno-graphing methodologies start from the seemingly hopeless position of a 'false start' but do so defiantly. The 'false start' of what Copjec, in the context of her analysis on lack and

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[236] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[237] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

desire (drawing from Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud), refers to as a destabilising anxiety, a desire to 'know' that results in a need to 'not know'[238] in regards to how and how much their work is sexually explicit and pornographic, or how and how much it is 'truthful' or merely therapeutic, or what will happen to their personal lives and careers once the work is shown, *how* 'dirty' will they be perceived to be.

The strategy at play is negative, self-submitting into positions of lacking confidence, purpose and value, into anxiety and paranoia, therefore self-submitting into positions that can potentially be considered 'wrong' – a 'false start' for negotiating sexual and artistic subjectivities. Such positions of anxiety and paranoia may be considered 'wrong' (by the artist who uses them to make art and by the viewer of this art), for example, if the way that 'queerness' can 'sever us… from *knowing* our own "good"'[239] can also be considered 'wrong'. Thus, 'false starts' can be considered 'wrong' for as long as 'not knowing our own "good"' is 'wrong'. Edelman credits 'queerness' as never capable 'to define an identity […] only ever disturb one'; this queerness then 'would deliberately sever us from ourselves, from the assurance, that is, of *knowing* ourselves'.[240] In the same way, anxiety, paranoia and lack are deliberately used in porno-graphing strategies as artists tactically use them to self-submit into not-knowing their own purpose and value, their own selves and their own 'good'.

Not knowing our 'selves' and our 'good' in creating works that involve porno-graphing methodologies, we doubt 'ourselves' (e.g. our purpose, point and value) and by extension underline the very idea of the autonomous self, 'the subject's

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[238] Copjec, J 2015, pp. 118-120.
[239] Edelman, L 2004, pp. 5.
[240] Edelman, L 2004, pp. 5-17.

fantasmatic sovereignty'[241] as worth questioning. Doubting the 'self' and its use,

value and purpose in art-making is the starting point – engaging with this radical

doubt and doing it anyway. Instead of stopping, in porno-graphing, artists engage with

the idea that this is where it starts from, the 'false start' that appears to lead us

nowhere or to what seems impossible for us to know in certainty. This works

strategically so that the artists critically detach (or appear to detach) from our own

ideas of our artistic (and sexual) subjectivities, so that we can negotiate subjectivity

through the work. A contextual example of the methodology of submitting into

'lacking' positions is the seemingly undetermined curatorial choices of *XXX* and the

melting of objects it involved (Liddell's melting framed photographs and dildos). I

have argued that through the effect of indetermination, melt and disappearance in this

exhibition, the art-works on display 'dirtied' meaning (art meaning and porn or sex-

object meaning) by 'smearing' the one with the other. The methodological use of self-

doubt that generates 'spectacularized blurring of categories' (between art and

pornography for example) creates a case of artists literally exploiting their own

subjectivities to the point of 'melting' them in order to make art. Such use of one's

own self for the sake of art-making becomes evident in what Kunst refers to as

'capitalist processes of life exploitation'[242] as it involves and reflects a nullification of

the boundaries between life and work.

Exploiting our subjectivities can also be seen as exploiting what Braidotti terms as the

'fantasy that visibility and truth work together' because we engage with or practice

'true pornography […] the language of power and manipulation'.[243] This porno-

graphing strategy works counter to Braidotti's proposition that 'the pornographic

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[241] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 2.
[242] Kunst, B 2015, p. 138.
[243] Braidotti, R 1994, p. 70.

nature of visual culture […] cheats' because 'it shows you a bloody mess of red flesh and it tells you, "This is the origin of life"'.[244] The proposition that porno-graphing methodologies of 'false starts' make is that by exploiting, 'cheating' themselves, artists aim to 'cheat' ideas regarding origin and truth in regards to, for example, subjectivity.

Porno-graphing strategies of self-submission into exploitation (of one's self and others, for example, when Z suggested that Liddell 'exploited' her father for her work) negatively ask 'is there any other language beside that of power and manipulation?' Asking this – using the 'language of power and manipulation' to make their work – artists who create porno-graphing actions situate such hypothetical language that operates beside 'power and manipulation' as unknowable and unthinkable. Given they have already situated their selves as unknowable (that they cannot know their selves, purpose and 'good') via their 'false starts', it can be considered that they locate such unknowable language within themselves or within the tension of relation (with themselves, others and art). In other words, it can be said that artists using porno-graphing methodologies suggest the undoing of the 'language of manipulation and power', by undoing themselves through an 'entropic' or 'centrifugal force'[245]. They undo themselves through it because they encounter it – as to 'encounter another is to encounter the otherness in ourselves'. And by encountering this language, they may be able to 'experience the unbearable undoing of the logic that binds us to this world'[246] – thus, to undo it in the moment of the encounter.

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[244] Braidotti, R 1994, pp. 68-70.
[245] I borrow the terms 'entropic' and 'centrifugal force' from curator Simon Baker's writing on the work of Leigh Ledare. Baker, S 2011, 'LEIGH LEDARE: "Double Bind" (2010)' *American Suburb X*, blog post, 13 January. Available from:http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/01/leigh-ledare-double-bind-2010.html/. [25 May 2016].
[246] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, pp. 68-69.

To do so, these artists use pornographic vocabularies and self-objectify their work and themselves as pornography, as the 'dirty' language of 'power and manipulation'. In the seeming 'pointlessness' and 'purposelessness' of the tautological qualities of this method may be found the 'vertiginous nonidentity of negativity', 'what cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are'[247] and so, the other side of, or that against which 'we' is built. In these terms, porno-graphing methodologies suggest that to move towards a language that is not based on exploitation, on 'power and manipulation', attention should be taken away from the meaning-making patterns which create the 'we'. Or that attention be put to how the language of 'power and manipulation' may be the one that 'we' is based on. The use of porno-graphing methodologies suggests that the 'wrong', 'dirt', 'exploitation' or the 'purpose of crime' may not rest outside the 'structure' or 'content' of the meaning-making patterns; that they help one using them feel safe and assured that their perception and the ways they compose and contribute to meaning are correct. To do so, artists who use these methodologies draw focus to 'the otherness of relation as seen in the moment of encounter'[248] – by drawing attention to their own participation in such 'otherness', by self-objectifying as 'dirty'. They submit into and use 'lacking positions' to detach from ideas of their own 'selves' and subjectivities as sovereign and independent and to 'cheat' their way into more encounters.

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[247] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 121.
[248] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 122.

## Chapter II

## Blue Tape

**Introduction**

This chapter is on the *Blue Tape* (video, 53', 1974), made by the artists Kathy Acker and Alan Sondheim. It is a black and white video comprised of several sequences where the two artists, through a series of creative and sexual exercises, explore their bodies, their subjectivities and their relationship. As I will describe in the following section of this chapter, through the 1st sequence of this video the two artists introduce themselves and their relationship by each talking about who they are, addressing the camera and the viewer. To do so they use the letters Acker sent to Sondheim before their video project in which she expresses a desire for him to take the place of her father. Thereafter they perform various activities such as Sondheim trying to pleasure Acker's vagina with his fingers and Acker leading Sondheim to orgasm by giving him a blowjob whilst he recites his theory-work over a microphone and applies these theories to the experience of the blowjob at the same time. Other sequences don't involve any sexual significations, for example when Sondheim laughs out loud for several minutes whilst sitting on a kitchen floor, again holding a microphone, or when they write what seem to be their last thoughts about each other and their project on a surface from which the writing disappears and is thus almost unreadable.

The *Blue Tape* occupies an important place in my research, as the only example in my thesis of a piece of work that involves porno-graphing actions where all (both) the

participants identify as artists and have sex with each other in order to produce art. It is also the longest video piece I examine. Acker and Sondheim began this collaboration because they were sexually and intellectually stimulated by one-another and saw this situation as potential art material. I argue that in deciding to make art from it rather than seeking the 'stability of a knowable relation'[249] they explore sex as 'an economy of danger where shifts of scale can at any moment reorganize value or empty it out, articulate new meaning or dislocate the subject of meaning all together'.[250]

Edelman and Berlant propose that 'the normativity of happiness', or 'the political program of happiness as a regulatory norm', gives the 'promise of a consistent pleasure in and access to one's objects.'[251] Through this chapter I draw from such propositions to argue that in the *Blue Tape* the two artists' relation is consciously acted upon so that they *don't* materialise or perpetuate such a promise. Instead, I will argue, they create an 'intensified encounter'[252] between themselves and the viewer and in doing so reorganise or dislocate value and meaning in regards to art, subjectivity, and their production. An important strategy they employ to do so is that of being, or appearing to be, distant and detached in regards to sex. This approach to sex is a foundation of porno-graphing methodologies. To support my analysis, which is informed by my personal communication with Alan Sondheim, I offer throughout this chapter transcriptions of fragments of the dialogues that take place in the video.

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[249] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 18.
[250] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 15.
[251] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 18.
[252] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

Both Acker and Sondheim became increasingly recognised throughout the decades following the making of this video, but not because of it, as the *Blue Tape* has rarely been shown. Agreeing to screen the piece only if both would be present, there were initial screenings in roughly five university spaces in North America, then 'falling away' from each other, they decided to not show it again.[253] Alan Sondheim also recalls that when, close to the time of the first screenings of the *Blue Tape*, art critic Edit Deak and artist and art critic Walter Robinson were interviewed about the video both said that 'it wasn't art'.[254] After its first screenings it is unclear precisely how long and by whom a copy of the video was kept (with speculations that it was North American video and sound artist Tony Conrad[255]) or how it ended up being distributed by the French company Le Peuple Qui Manque (it is worth noting that Le Peuple Qui Manque does not pay money to Alan Sondheim from profits made, Kathy Acker died in 1997, and that Sondheim views the recent attention given to the *Blue Tape* as an outcome of the video being received as a 'Kathy Acker artefact').[256] I consider that the way in which Acker and Sondheim treated the *Blue Tape*, deciding to not show it again shortly after making it, confirms my claim that works which involve porno-graphing actions are met with ambivalence and doubt by the artists making them, which results in works sometimes remaining unscreened or being lost. In recent years, since 2010, the *Blue Tape* has started to be shown again publically, for example at the *Interiority Complex* show curated by Jamie Stevens at Cubitt Artists gallery in the UK in 2012, where I watched it for the first time, and as part of the *Lost Treasures from Bay Area Art Archives* screening organised by the Bay Area Video Coalition in the USA, 2013.

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[253] Sondheim, A 2014, pers. comm., 23 February.
[254] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 17 December.
[255] Stevens, J 2014, pers. comm., 5 February.
[256] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 24 April.

I consider that the duration of the *Blue Tape* is relatively long so that the two artists can expose themselves to 'the differences we neither comprehend nor control'[257] in multiple ways, via a series of creative exercises. Examining how Acker and Sondheim don't seem to ground the value of the *Blue Tape* in political purposefulness, in terms of subjectivity and representation, I argue that the porno-graphing actions in this video function as what Edelman and Berlant call 'a resistance to the norms by which political possibility is defined – and defined precisely to exclude negativity'.[258] Acting on their sexual dynamic with the aim to produce art, as I will examine through this chapter, Acker and Sondheim approach (or seem to approach) sex through detachment, dryness, distance, literally turning it into reports. Acker assumes distance through matter-of-fact self-objectification and radical passivity whilst Sondheim increasingly self-submits into non-sovereignty, as a means of breaking-down understanding and knowing, and in doing so, in a complex way, he invites the viewer to do the same. I will continue to draw from Edelman and Berlant's work on sex and negativity and will also consider George Bataille's associations between excess, unproductivity and anguish to examine how Acker and Sondheim's porno-graphing methodologies create irresolution in regards, for instance, to meaning and value. For example, how the two artists use their sexual dynamics to question the sovereignty of consciousness and in doing so – in becoming themselves 'undone' and non-sovereign – they destabilise meaning-making patterns that seem to seek to seal the 'gap' or 'void' inside meaning.

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[257] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 18.
[258] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 19.

Alan Sondheim was 31 years old and Kathy Acker was 26 years old when making the video and as mentioned both became individually recognised for their art-practices throughout the years that followed them making the *Blue Tape*. Chris Kraus, writing the only two published critical articles on this video to date: 'Sex, Truths, and Videotape'[259] and 'Discuss Rules Beforehand: Ferocity and Vulnerability in a Posthumously Published Collection of Emails from Writer/Artist/Feminist Icon Kathy Acker'[260], suggested that most of the themes which underline Acker's later literary work and achievements (after the *Blue Tape*) emerge in this video. Examining some of the most prominent methodologies traversing Acker's work, such as appropriation and plagiarism, and the structuring of her public persona, I will explain how the roots of such methodologies can be noticed within the porno-graphing methodologies of the *Blue Tape*. My aim is not to claim that porno-graphing is the main art-action that Acker practiced in her later work; instead, drawing from critical vocabularies developed in regards to her later work I examine the role that certain themes, consistent throughout her practice, play in the formation of the porno-graphing actions and methodologies of the *Blue Tape*. Richard Anthony Dooner notes in his study of Acker's work that she uses appropriation and plagiarism with the intention to 'use narrative against itself' and to disturb 'masculine rationality and sense-making'.[261] I draw from Dooner's proposition to argue that in porno-graphing methodologies artists plagiarise, or 'cheat', the notion of the 'self', by examining how

[259] Kraus, C 2000.
[260] Kraus, C 2014, 'Discuss Rules Beforehand: Ferocity and Vulnerability in a Posthumously Published Collection of Emails from Writer/Artist/Feminist Icon Kathy Acker', *Believer Magazine*, vol. 12, no. 7, Available from: believermag.com. [1 October 2014].
[261] Dooner, RA 1993, *Repetition in postmodern fiction: The works of Kathy Acker, Donald Barthleme and Don Delillo*, Ph.D thesis, University of Florida. pp. 13-14. Available from: archive.org. [12 August 2014].

Acker employs processes of self-submission and radical passivity in the making of the *Blue Tape*.

A difference between how Acker plagiarises in her literary practice and how she does so in the *Blue Tape* is that her porno-graphing methodologies of self-submission and self-objectification in this video operate less polemically than they do in her writing work. For example, in her literary practice Acker repeatedly copied and pasted texts belonging to other authors in her work without crediting these authors, alongside material which she flagged as autobiographical. Thus her use of autobiographical significations is clearly marked by her tactics of appropriation, inviting the reader to consider 'that no particular representation of Acker can "really" be she'.[262] In other words, I consider that Acker plagiarises and appropriates others to signify that when she uses autobiographical vocabularies she also appropriates her 'self', which is to say that she plagiarises and cheats the idea of the 'original' – whether the 'original' seems to belong to her or to others. Thus, Acker cheats others to denote the proposition that she cheats herself. I argue that through the *Blue Tape* Acker's methodology of self-submission, whilst closely analogous with or even the same as the plagiarising in her texts, takes significantly more subtle and quiet form and is more distant, detached and, in a sense, negative. Because of the detached and distant characteristics of her self-submission, I identify this submission as a porno-graphing tactic and argue that through it she becomes what Halberstam calls an 'un-subject'.[263]

[262] Dooner, R A 1993, pp. 66.
[263] Halberstam, J 2010.

The notions of appropriation and plagiarism also concern how Acker self-objectified into the roles of the 'bad girl'[264] and 'bad writer'[265] as well as how she spoke about these roles publically, linking them to tactics of submission. Acker drew back and forth from such receptions regarding her identity and work, and self-objectified onto these roles to produce more work. I will draw a parallel between how she self-submitted to the roles of 'bad girl' and 'bad writer' so as to creatively challenge reproducing structures of thought which nominate subjectivities as 'bad', and the operations of porno-graphing strategies of self-objectification into 'dirty' roles.

Kraus argues that Acker in the *Blue Tape* is, or presents herself as, 'Kathy-as-lost-little-girl-outsider'; that the video operates as 'a gorgeous portrait of Acker as a young person in the process of becoming', 'an amazing portrait of the young Kathy, when she was inventing herself for herself'. She also argues that the two artists' encounter is an 'abrupt coupling' which could not support 'generosity of exchange'.[266] Throughout this chapter I will draw from such propositions alongside Edelman's 'anti-social' theory on the 'figure of the Child' as the emblem of reproductive futurism and 'futurity's unquestionable value'[267] to investigate the use of child sexual subjectivity in the *Blue Tape*. I will also suggest that they use child-like or childish ways to bring together their sexual and artistic subjectivities; that this strategy can be seen as affirming the 'silliness' which for Halberstam can form a kind of 'knowing, that operates independently of coherence and linear narrative or progression'.[268] I suggest that by approaching sex via child-like silliness Acker and Sondheim

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[264] Kraus, C 2000.
[265] Friedman, GE 1989, 'A Conversation with Kathy Acker and Ellen G. Friedman', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 9, no. 3. Available from: Dalkey Archive Press. [22 January 2014].
[266] Kraus, C 2000.
[267] Edelman, L 2004.
[268] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 54.

undertake porno-graphing actions, which result in irresolution or, to borrow a term Edelman and Berlant use, 'radical incoherence'.[269] I will argue that through porno-graphing methodologies the two artists 'dirty' the figure of the Child and what Edelman calls its 'sacredness'[270] in multiple, interchangeable and entropic ways. I suggest that they sexualise the figure of the Child – Acker as a 'lost-little-girl' asking Sondheim to take the place of her absent father in their encounter – only to end-up withdrawing their sexualising proposition which functions so as to withdraw the meaning of the 'sacredness' of the Child and in doing so to invite the viewer to gaze onto their images in 'wrong' ways.

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[269] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 3.
[270] Edelman, L 2004, pp. 20-21.

**'Do you want to play my father now?'**

Kathy Acker and Alan Sondheim met at a dinner party in New York, and realised that they shared interests and ideas. Once Acker returned to California, where she was living with her boyfriend, she and Sondheim wrote letters to each other. Not long after their first meeting, Sondheim gathered funds and invited Acker to make a piece with him suggesting that they can 'explore sexuality on tapes'.[271] The video was made in a domestic space – the New York apartment where Alan Sondheim had lived with his ex-wife. During the making of the video, Sondheim and his ex-wife were in the process of separating: according to Sondheim, this contributed to the high tension under which the video was made.[272] Sondheim and Acker spent a couple of days recording, on and off; Sondheim cannot remember how long it took and how many video-tapes they produced, nor how they came to title the piece *Blue Tape*.[273] The premise of porno-graphing methodologies – artists recognising a sexual dynamic as potential art material, and acting upon it to make art – is evident in the structural beginning of the *Blue Tape*. Acker and Sondheim, after mutually recognising a certain sexual dynamic between them, decided to act on it with the aim of making art from it, to 'explore it on tape' instead of enjoying it privately. Furthermore, their on-tape exploration is premised on approaching and acting on their sexual dynamic critically, instead of treating and representing it as a subject of sexual passion, satisfaction or liberation.

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[271] Kraus, C 2000.
[272] Sondheim, A 2014, pers. comm., 23 February.
[273] Sondheim, A 2003, *Alan Sondheim Mail Archive*. Available from: http://sondheim.rupamsunyata.org/2002/09/20/. [14 November 2013].

The *Blue Tape*, which Chris Kraus describes as a 'twenty-four-hour sex-and-truth marathon'[274] is composed of eight sequences. In each sequence, Acker and Sondheim engage in sexual and reflective actions and exercises. Aesthetically the video is straightforward: each sequence is uncut and camera movement is infrequent. Contextual complexity manifests through the ways the artists address and implicate each other and the viewer in their sexual and artistic exploration: for example, by looking at the camera while talking to each other in the third-person. When sexual acts take place, the camera (operated by a student of Sondheim called Emily[275]) zooms close, underlining to the viewer that creative choices are taking place and that Acker and Sondheim directly use and negotiate their sexual dynamic and their subjectivities as art-material. For example, in the opening sequence of the *Blue Tape*, they introduce themselves and the themes of power and authority, as subjects of their dynamic and collaboration, as well as describing how they met. The frame of their introduction is the absence of Acker's father (he left her mother when she was three months pregnant), Acker's subjectivity as an abandoned child and how, through their writing correspondence, Acker situated Sondheim in the place of her absent father. Sitting down and looking towards the camera, Acker narrates their first meeting. She pauses her narration to mention that she has never met her father and that she had recently started thinking and feeling about him. She continues saying that she had sent some writing about her father to Sondheim, who then starts reading a passage ('Breaking Through Memories Into Desire'[276]), whilst Acker keeps looking at the camera (figure 7):

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[274] Kraus, C 2000.
[275] Sondheim, A 2014, pers. comm., 18 May.
[276] *Breaking Through Memories Into Desire* is distributed as part of *Series V* published by Lost & Found: The Cuny Poetics Document Initiative. As part of this publication Gabrielle Kappes presents a 'chapbook' titled 'Kathy Acker: Homage to Leroi Jones & Other Early Works', 'the unpublished "exercises," correspondence, and diary excerpts' of Acker, 'from her archived papers, spanning the

AS: I know who Alan is, Alan is my father… I don't want that, not now, I

don't want parents, I don't want anything but Alan's hands on me. I want to

know what's happening… I keep remembering.

Subsequently, the two artists enter into a dialogue whilst the camera continues to

frame Acker's sitting torso:

KA: Do you want to play my father now?

AS: I feel like I am playing your father now.

KA: You do? Why?

AS: I do. Why? Because it is the only safe position.

Kraus argues that the dialogue between the two artists is motivated by competition:

Acker challenges Sondheim and uses such challenges for the sake of her own artistic

development, while Sonhdeim's approach is critical regarding how 'personal' Acker

is.[277] Whilst I don't necessarily agree that Sondheim criticises Acker or that she

competes with him for the purposes of her career in the ways that Kraus suggests, her

comment certainly illustrates that the two artists' ways of relating with each other in

this video can be perceived as exploitative (towards each other) which, in turn, reveals

the porno-graphing nature of their methodologies.

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years 1971-1974', including 'selected correspondence from Acker to poet and theorist Alan Sondheim'
– the correspondence Acker maintained with Sondheim prior to making the *Blue Tape*. Kappes
accessed said documents through the Davd M. Rubestein Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Duke
University and reproduced them with the permission of the executor of the Kathy Acker Literary Trust.
Acker, K, Kappes, G & Alcalay, A et al, 2015, *Series V*, Lost & Found: The Cuny Poetics Document
Initiative, New York.
[277] Kraus, C 2000.

Through porno-graphing methodologies, negative attention is drawn to the conflicts, contradictions, asymmetries, antagonisms and confusions within a sexual dynamic, to approach, sometimes slowly and sometimes rapidly what Berlant and Edelman call the 'relational out-of-synchness that threateningly traverse the subject and the world'. Artists' embrace of how others may see them is another way of voicing such 'relational out-of-synchness'. To self-objectify into how they think others may perceive them, they present themselves as destabilised subjects, as 'incomplete, contradictory and out of control'.[278] For example, further on in his dialogue with Acker in this sequence of the video, Sondheim states that he wants to be in control as Acker's father was when he left. Acker says that 'Alan can do this also', i.e. make such a decision and take such control. Sondheim then talks of his subjectivity as underlined by lack of control and frames his sexual and art-making process as non-sovereign. He refers to his social and artistic subjectivities based on how he thinks that others perceive him:

> AS: Alan is just a 31-year-old artist… Alan is not in a position to control or to
> manipulate lives. Alan is on the outside of everything. Alan is an underground
> man. Alan is made underground.

Acker argues back that these are just Sondheim's decisions about himself, not the truth. He answers by saying:

> AS: It is very hard to know whether these are decisions about myself or
> whether they have been decided for me. In my mind, they are not decisions I
> have made consciously.

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[278] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, pp. 66-67.

In return, Sondheim ascribes power to Acker:

> AS: You are a very powerful person, at this point. God knows if you are so
> powerful now, where you are going to be like in a couple of years… you
> are going to burn people. You are going to kill people baby, you really are,
> don't kid yourself if you don't think you are.

This is the end of the first sequence, with Kathy Acker smiling all the way through
Alan Sondheim's statements about her. Chris Kraus calls those statements 'prophetic'
and casts Acker's smiling as a confirmation of this prophecy and her willingness to
live through the dangerous agency that Sondheim attributes to her. [279]

**Passivity & Plagiarism**

Kathy Acker published her first book, *Politics* in 1972 and became increasingly
known to the New York punk scene by publishing books through small publishing
houses until her novel *Great Expectations*[280] received wider critical attention in 1983.
Acker is acknowledged as influential to numerous art-genres and political
movements, for example punk music and literature and to pro-sex feminism, as a
poet, scriptwriter, performer, novelist, essayist and theorist.[281] Gabrielle Kappes

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[279]  Kraus, C 2000.
[280]  Acker, K 1983, *Great expectations*, Grove Press, New York.
[281]  Kathy Acker, *Wikipedia*, wiki. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathy_Acker. [15 September 2014].

frames the question 'Who are you? Who is Kathy Acker?' as the query of her pamphlet on Acker's unpublished work, *Lost & Found*. She continues that 'Everyone has a Kathy. The media's Acker is the cult icon of punk, feminism, and post-modernism'; that for The European Graduate School, Saas-Fee, Switzerland, Acker is a '"literary terrorist" and "high priestess of punk"'.[282] Acker has been widely celebrated as a pioneer of experimental writing, for example because of her use and defence of particular methodologies of appropriation and unresolved narration. Acker unapologetically 'stole' texts and stories which she sewed together, and didn't reference or acknowledge which parts were which, to whom they belonged nor where she found them, nor when such stolen parts were mixed with original writings of her own.[283] Kappes describes Acker novels such as *Blood and Guts in High School*[284], *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote*[285] as 'meta-fictional'.[286] Richard Anthony Dooner uses the term 'plagiarism' to examine Acker's use of appropriation in her writing work and her intention to 'use narrative against itself, to question, challenge, complicate and disrupt the way previous discourses have manipulated the model of the universe'. Dooner defines these 'previous discourses of the universe' as 'masculine models of representations', 'masculine rationality and sense-making' and 'mythic logic'.[287] I consider that 'masculine rationality and sense-making' relates to hegemonic systems of meaning-making, the 'common sense', which 'depends heavily on the production of norms'.[288] For example, the structures under which notions such as truth/non-truth, inside/outside, male/female, rational/irrational and right/wrong can be considered clear-cut binaries.

[282] Kappes, G 2015.
[283] Friedman, GE 1989.
[284] Acker, K 1984, *Blood and Guts in High School*, New York, Grove Press.
[285] Acker, K 1986, *Don Quixote, which was a dream*, New York, Grove Press.
[286] Kappes, G 2015.
[287] Dooner, RA 1993, pp.13-14.

[40] Halberstam, J 2011, *The Queer Art of Failure*, p. 89, Duke University Press, Durham and London.

I consider that Dooner's analysis of Acker's methodological use of plagiarism demonstrates elements of 'wrongness' and 'dirtiness' in the working-strategies she employs in her literary practice – for example, how she cheats or exploits other people's writings, in order to exploit the potential expectations the reader may have in regards to the relations between narration and coherence, sex and identity. In her writings, Acker forcefully addresses a seemingly immediate need for the reader to identify with her authoring of subjectivity. For example, on the back cover of her book *Hannibal Lecter, My Father,* she writes: 'This writing is all fake (copied from other writing) so you should go away and not read any of it'[289] and she places these words next to a picture of herself. She will use the same quote to open the chapter 'Translations of the Diaries of Laure the Schoolgirl (No Form Cause I Don't Give a Shit About Anything Anymore)' in her book *Eurydice in the Underworld*.[290] Moreover*,* Acker points towards autobiography in her texts – at times literally writing from her own life-stories without announcing it, and at times loudly suggesting that she does so even when it's false. For example, talking about *Black Tarantula* she said: 'I used a lot of autobiographical material in *Black Tarantula*. I put autobiographical material next to material that couldn't be autobiographical.'[291] She juxtaposes and mixes these elements with the copy-pasted texts of other writers and stories she has heard, thus disrupting the potential narrative and/or contextual linearity that she builds towards in her books at times. As a result, throughout her life-work, in addition to appropriating other people's texts, Acker actively uses autobiography to confuse and mislead the reader, to invite the reader to question for example what is really 'real' in the material they receive.

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[289] Acker, A 1991, *Hannibal Lecter, My Father*, Semiotext(e), New York.
[290] Acker, K 1998, *Eurydice in the Underworld*, Arcadia Books, London.
[291] Friedman, GE 1989.

This creates contradictions regarding perception, the patterns and processes of receiving and building information about a person's (i.e. the author's) subjectivity. Her 'autobiographical material is continually reframed in such a way that it forces the reader to note that no particular representation of Acker can "really" be she'.[292] For example, in her novel *Kathy Goes to Haiti*[293]*,* Acker exploits autobiographical rhetorics to 'plagiarise' and negotiate the very notion of identity. In this novel, a central female character, Kathy, encounters men throughout her journey to Haiti and all of these men want to have sex with her. Kathy does have sex with most of them and a passionate romantic plot takes place with one of them in particular. The narrative structure of the sexual scenes is often dry and report-like, as well as long and graphic. Acker begins narrating as 'I', and heavily implies that the material is autobiographical by naming the main character of the book after herself before systematically demonstrating to the reader that she is not telling her 'true' story. As the novel progresses, Acker inserts passages taken from other writers' works and her descriptions increasingly reveal that most of the situations she speaks of have probably never occurred, and that the ones that may have occurred have been altered significantly. Furthermore, the experiences she describes appear progressively less plausible.

The explicit and pornographic use of her sexual first-person, seemingly autobiographical narrations plays an important role in how she forces the viewer to consider that none of the identities she seems to inhabit and represent are 'really' her. Dooner brings numerous such paradigms from Acker's literary practice to exemplify

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[292] Dooner, RA 1993, p. 66.
[293] Acker, K 1990, *Kathy Goes to Haiti,* Arcadia Books, London.

that 'Acker plagiarizes the notion of autobiography, which to her always repeats versions of the same story'.[294] For example, he brings into account the following passage from *Black Tarantula*:

> 1952-1957 Educated by private tutor, the Black Virgin Mary, and I teach her to suck my cunt. She corresponds with many famous poets. My mind, my sole repository of freedom, is beginning to be born.

He argues that this passage 'declares itself to be a plagiarized autobiography by declaring itself to be a story beginning to be born. To begin anew, it must move away from the myths that have informed previous autobiographies'.[295] Similarly, throughout the *Blue Tape* Acker and Sondheim form porno-graphing methodologies using pornographic visual and verbal language to plagiarise their 'selves' and subjectivities and, in doing so, to call the viewer 'to unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think it anew as the site of failure and unbecoming'.[296] An example of Acker's way of plagiarising the idea of the 'self' in the *Blue Tape* through 'radical passivity' is her seeming self-submission into the camera's (and the viewer's) gaze in the 7th sequence. In this scene, which is the second-to-last, Acker stands in front of the camera naked apart from some jewelry and runs her hands over her skin. It starts with a close-up shot of her face. Looking at the camera, Acker touches her head with both of her hands, then her face, passes by her eyes, puts her fingers in her nostrils and then in her mouth, stretching it from both sides (figures 8 & 9). The camera frame widens and she uses each of her hands to trace the opposite arm before she touches her breasts. She goes lower down to her

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[294] Dooner, RA 1993, p. 59.
[295] Dooner, RA 1993, p. 59.
[296] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 145.

belly and her vagina and thighs whilst the camera follows her movement downwards. Acker traces all the way down to her feet and toes, the shot zooming slightly in and out. The sequence stops when she finishes going over the whole of the front of her body, and she stands up again looking at the camera. Her serious face suggests that her action is a 'presentation' of herself to the camera and to the viewer but it is also reminiscent of a child who is looking over and discovering themselves.

Whilst Acker uses and reframes autobiographical literary grammars in her later written works in order to guide the reader to the point that they, themselves, understand or decide that the material at stake is not purely or linearly factual, in the *Blue Tape* she uses autobiography (e.g. the 1st sequence) without clearly disrupting its rhetorics. The ways she touches and models her body passively in front of the camera in the 7th sequence can be considered a self-submission to structures of perception, to 'models of representation'.[297] In this sense, she plagiarises the idea of an 'original self' in the context of a lens-based work, tracing over her bare body, pulling the edges of her mouth to show that nothing hides, unexposed, inside her, leading the viewer to potentially consider that she 'really' is her 'self'. Viewed within the context of the whole of the *Blue Tape,* a video-project grounded in the two artists using their sexual dynamic to make art from it whilst also approaching it with critical distance and detachment, which involves several methodologies of porno-graphing, Acker's method of showing her 'self' to the camera can be seen as a self-submission to whatever the viewer may want to project on her. She doesn't submit to a certain role, but performs a process of self-objectification, a passive and subtle appropriation or plagiarism of how others may perceive her subjectivities. The methodological

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[297] Dooner, RA 1993, pp. 13-14.

character of this creative gesture becomes evident when also considering that Acker self-submitted into roles of being 'bad' ('bad girl' and 'bad writer') throughout her career and public persona. I will shortly review instances of how she was perceived as a 'bad girl' and 'bad writer' and also of how she publicly defended her tactics of embracing such roles in her work and career.

As I also explain in my third chapter on the work of Leigh Ledare, Judith Jack Halberstam uses the terms 'radical passivity' and 'shadow feminism' to study works by performance artists such as Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović and Faith Wilding. Halberstam argues that works such as Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965) and Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) suggest an 'ambivalent model of female selfhood' through masochism and 'complete surrender'. I consider the way in which Acker silently traces her naked body for the camera in the *Blue Tape* involves a similarly passive 'surrender', which matter-of-factly illustrates how she self-submits into roles of her 'self' (roles which later came to be those of a 'bad girl' and a 'bad writer'). In short, in being 'herself' through her nudity – a nudity which she underlines and duplicates by tracing her body with her hands, she becomes an 'unsubject', and in doing so reflects the viewer's perceptions back at them. Her porno-graphing methodology, then, is a form of 'resistance', of the subject who 'does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing'.[298]

As Dooner argues, Acker appropriates established and commonsensical structures and patterns of logic and meaning-making in order to disrupt them. Analogously I argue

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[298] Halberstam, J 2011, pp. 129-139.

that her tactics of appropriation are a submission intending to critique the very thing she is submitting within. For example, through plagiarism she self-objectifies into being a 'bad' writer, and in doing so she critiques the structures that would give her the status of being 'bad'. Consequently, through this scene of the *Blue Tape*, she quietly self-submits into essentially whatever the viewer wants to project onto her – but also 'unravels' and 'refuses to cohere' through her refusal to speak. She is one of the shadow feminist subjects 'who refuse "being" where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject'.[299] Through this sequence, using autobiographical rhetorics in manners which question and complicate truthfulness and authenticity in regards to subjectivity and its representation, Acker and Sondheim underline the lack which in Lacanian theory is examined as residing in the centre of the notion of identity. For example, Laura Rascaroli in her book *The Personal Camera* quotes Stuart Hall: 'identity arises, not so much from the fullness of identity which is already inside us as individuals, but from a *lack* of wholeness which is "filled" from *outside* us, by the ways we imagine ourselves to be seen by *other*s'.[300] This lack as the locus of identity is circled and negotiated in porno-graphing methodologies through the artists' self-subjection into 'lacking' positions, such as that of Acker's speechlessness, as well as multiple positions of non-sovereignty, which I will examine drawing from other sequences of the *Blue Tape*.

[299] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 126.
[300] Rascalori L, 2009, *The Personal Camera, Subjective Cinema And The Essay Film*, p.10, London, Wallflower Press.

**Too dry - Stubborn resistance and politics of production**

The 3ʳᵈ sequence of the *Blue Tape* is a 6 minute and 30 second long uncut video which features Kathy Acker's vagina and Alan Sondheim's fingers as he tries to sexually stimulate her (figure 10). The audience can hear Acker's voice as she is directing and instructing Sondheim. The video shot is just wide enough to allow the viewer to identify the vagina and fingers as such – we see half to three quarters of the fingers covering and moving along Acker's vagina. With intervals of few seconds she gives instructions and makes observations to Sondheim such as: 'No – lower. That's it. I am going to close my eyes. No that's too hard. Higher. No no no no no. Yeah that's ok. Am I too dry? Ok, right there, ok. Oh, that's good. Not up, right there. Yeah that's nice. Your fingers are really dry. Come on, concentrate. Look, it's ridiculous. No no no keep going. It feels nice, I am just never gonna come. I don't care, it feels nice. Ouch, shit! Oh, that's better. I am really dry so try to not move back and forth so much. What the hell are you doing? No, come on.' The porno-graphing attributes of the sequence can be observed in how the two artists appear to approach sex through critical detachment, distance, resistance, negation and negativity, in short, reducing it into reports and drying it of its 'juices', literally resisting the lubrication and pleasuring of Acker's vagina, favouring the observational and recording process of the sexual situation they author.

Acker and Sondheim's intentions are not framed from the outset as seeking to resolve into non-pleasure, such as the impossibility of orgasm – for example, whilst they don't include penetrative vagina/penis sex in the video, they include a physically and visually loud and visceral orgasm (Sondheim orgasming in the 6ᵗʰ sequence) which I

will soon return to. Overall it is communicated to the viewer that the two artists'

decision to 'explore sexuality on tape' does not involve a pre-meditated negative

stance towards sex and their own particular sexual dynamic, in fact it was the strength

and 'potential' of the felt dynamic that lead them to make art out of it. Using porno-

graphing methodologies, Acker and Sondheim put processes of sexual stimulation at

play with the aim of making art and in doing so they complicate issues of reasoning,

resolution and coherence concerning art-making. For example, they set themselves up

to attend to their sexual dynamic as potential art-material by trying to lubricate and

pleasure Acker's body, to find the 'truth' or secrets of her body; in doing so they

instead reach and explore the lack of such pleasure or the lack in their ability to reveal

such secrets. Acker and Sondheim not managing to synchronise into pleasuring Acker

can be seen as what Edelman and Berlant term as the 'shock of discontinuity'.[301]

Similarly the two artists not being able to discover what it is that pleasures Acker can

be seen as what Edelman and Berlant call 'the encounter with nonknowledge'.[302]

What pleasures Acker remains unknown and – to the viewer – unknowable. By not

confirming that their sexual chemistry – the very reason they decided to work together

– 'works', both their sexual and artistic subjectivities become 'undone'. This is

because to create porno-graphing actions these two artists embrace 'the ways that sex

undoes the subject'[303] and in letting themselves become 'undone' they invite the

viewing subject to endure similar destabilisation. By exposing the fragility of whether

and how attraction 'makes sense' they implicate the viewer in the process of meaning-

making – staging for example their relationship, attraction and collaboration as

matters that exceed the private model of enjoyment and the reproductive purposes of

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[301] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.4.
[302] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.4.
[303] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.4.

copulation attributed to the figure of the couple, into the domain of public reception and contemplation.

Sondheim's proposition to 'explore sexuality on tapes' can be seen as a direct gesture of placing the two artists' sexual dynamic in the terrain of art – in this sense in the realm of public reception, reflection and scrutiny. Therefore, the actions the two artists embark on in the making of the *Blue Tape* can be seen as exercises investing in spelling-out answers and breaking down their subjectivities and chemistry as public matters, or as if staging them as public would contribute to the artists themselves understanding the 'truth' of their encounter and its potential. However, in considering their sexual dynamic as art material, as a public matter, Acker and Sondheim complicate the spheres of the private, the public and the artistic. Instead of reaching answers and enjoyment they employ porno-graphing methods of distance, detachment and negation to approximate the void or gap at the place where clarity, sexual synchronicity and answers may be expected to be found. Through porno-graphing methodologies, negatively and distantly inclined 'truth-telling' – how for example Acker signifies 'honesty' by being ruthless in admitting to her lover and collaborator that she isn't getting turned on and she isn't going to come – is manifested in 'the insistent particularity of the subject, impossible fully to articulate'.[304]

Casting this method of truth-telling in line with queer negativity where 'truth […] finds its value not in a good susceptible to generalization, but only in the stubborn particularity that voids any notion of general good'[305] the truth-telling in the porno-graphing actions of the *Blue Tape* challenges the 'good susceptible to generalization'

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[304] Edelman, L 2004, p. 5.
[305] Edelman, L 2004, p. 6.

of answering, articulation and resolution. As the value of queer negativity 'resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social'[306], truth-telling and detached matter-of-factness in porno-graphing are employed to negotiate binaries and boundaries between notions such as good and bad, right and wrong, dirty and clean, private and public – which I consider examples of 'value as defined by the social'.

In resisting giving definite resolution, for example in the form of sexual pleasure or a developing and consequently clear understanding of their dynamic, the artists of the *Blue Tape* foreground the space between boundaries as unknowable – signalled for example by how what pleasures Acker remains unknown – in order to break down their encounter and approach excess: for example; 'excess produced in attempting to break "it" down'. Berlant and Edelman call 'it' both the thing that we try to comprehend when contemplating the negativity of a sexual encounter, and the unaccountable excess produced in trying to comprehend it – the gap, void, or 'the locus of resistance to the consciousness that tries to comprehend "it"'.[307] In the *Blue Tape* 'it' can be considered as the hypothetical centre of their sexual chemistry, that by which their desire is driven, and the space of sexual enjoyment which would be synonymous with resolution and comprehension.

Porno-graphing methodologies, such as those used in the *Blue Tape* challenge and put to the test issues regarding productivity openly but with complexity. On the one hand porno-graphing methodologies straightforwardly challenge notions of futurism and productivity attached to sex due to the fact that through such methodologies sex is not used for having babies or for private enjoyment but in order to make art. However, on

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[306] Edelman, L 2004, p. 6.
[307] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.76.

the other hand, making art out of sexual situations can be seen precisely as an outcome of the artist being conditioned to capitalise on their subjectivity and their unquestioned familiarity with the increasing blurring of the boundaries between 'life and work, non-work and work, and production and reproduction'[308]; their capitalist nature so to speak. But the case with porno-graphing methodologies is that the technique of self-objectification – regarding for example subjectivity – is an acutely conscious process, which aims to maintain a strategic and stubborn apparent distance from resolution, in the same way that Acker appears to maintain a stubborn distance from getting turned on. In doing so, what falls under interrogation is precisely this blurriness of boundaries between production and reproduction, in the form of 'the unbearable, often unknowable, psychic conflicts that constitute the subject to the social forms of negation that also, but differently, produce subjectivity'. In short, porno-graphing strategies adapt politically problematic or 'dirty' positions – such as the process of appropriating life in order to produce work – and through their particular use of negativity, 'the dissent without which politics disappears'[309], create jumps into the 'unknowable' frames of the production of subjectivity.

Another example of how methods of self-objectification used in porno-graphing actions such as those of the *Blue Tape* operate, at the same time framing the artists using them as apolitical, is how Acker is allowed to be 'reduced' to her vagina through this sequence. She speaks her mind precisely yet we do not see her face, only a close-up of her vagina that fills the camera frame; so (the image of) her vagina takes the place of her face/identity. Whilst similar strategies of self-objectification have of course been claimed before, both after and around the same time as the *Blue Tape* by

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[308] Kunst, B 2015, pp. 138-146.
[309] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.xii.

performance artists such as Hannah Wilke and VALIE EXPORT, the difference is that these artists were clearly signalling their political concerns through their work. They were using self-objectifying methodologies to bring attention to how they were already being objectified as subjects – a female 'narcissist' in the case of Wilke, a female sexualised object in the case of VALIE EXPORT. It is therefore the use of negativity, in the form of distance, detachment and apathy that can potentially raise critiques regarding political engagement and its absence when porno-graphing methodologies are in use. Through these methodologies, the appropriation of life in the form of making art out of sex, the 'experimenting with subjectivity' that sits as 'the centre of capitalist production'[310] because of its particular use of negativity, results in a 'resistance to, or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence, as imposed on thought and lived experience.'[311] The insistence on irresolution through this resistance to claiming value for the work on the ground of its political praxis, and a placement of the viewer in the exact spot of tension and ambiguity *between* the boundaries of binaries, operates precisely to challenge these binaries. A vibrant example of such binaries concerning politics is the object/subject divide regarding identity, as it perhaps determines the value of the subject and the ways in which the subject questions how their own subjectivity is produced and by whom. In negatively attending to the in-between of this divide, porno-graphing actions resist 'translating' desire 'into a narrative' or a 'teleological determination' (to borrow phrases Edelman uses to discuss the politics of reproductive futurism) and pose the question of what politics they participate in. In turn, porno-graphing actions generously level 'the gap that divides us and, paradoxically, makes us subjects *through that act of division*

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[310] Kunst, B 2015, p.21.
[311] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p.xii.

*alone*'[312] to the side of the viewer and into paths of communication.


**'Kathy doesn't know' – orgasms and thinking in excess of its consciousness**


The aforementioned 3rd sequence of the *Blue Tape* where Acker employs a rhetorical style of matter-of-factness, appearing immediate and honest yet detached, distant, negative and dry whilst Sondheim tries to lubricate and pleasure her vagina, comes straight after a scene where Sondheim has confessed to the viewer – whispering – that Acker 'doesn't know', 'what is going on', 'what this piece is about'. Through this sequence of the video, we see Acker caressing her own breasts (figure 11) and hear Sondheim speaking quickly but quietly:


> I don't want you to look at that image. I don't want that image to do
> anything at all for you. I am speaking really softly… I don't want you to
> pay any attention, I want you to look at the left of the monitor and listen to
> me talk about the world… You can hear me, no one else can hear me, no
> one else knows what is going on, Kathy doesn't know what is going on,
> Kathy doesn't know what this piece is. This piece is between you and me.
> Between me and the audience… One of the characteristics of the world is
> sexuality. I'd rather talk about sexuality than do it. I'd rather talk about a
> reference to the body than refer to the body… One of the characteristics of
> the world is differentiation. If this, if that… You thought I would start with
> sexuality but I didn't, I'll continue to talk, I'll continue to produce this tape.

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[312] Edelman, L 2004, pp.8-9.

Placing this as the second sequence in their video, the two artists set 'not-knowing' as part of the frame within which they are making art from their sexual situation, and therefore very beginning. The subtle irony through which Sondheim approaches sex and sexuality, an irony that spreads from this sequence, passes through another where he 'melts' down to the final one where he orgasms – two sequences I will also be discussing in this section – is a porno-graphing tool. For example, Sondheim is being ironic in that he suggests explicitly to the viewer that Acker cannot 'know what is going on' and 'what this piece is' because she is so reduced to her body, as if her sexual and artistic agencies are pre-determinedly incompatible, with the result that she is unable to know or 'own' the piece of work she co-authors with him. He suggests that through the presence of her sexuality (her naked body) Acker is so absent in terms of consciousness that she cannot even hear him talking. In doing so he marks the beginning of a quest regarding the 'smearing' of theory, its alleged clarity, with the body, 'as if there were thinking which might take us elsewhere, out of the grit of the body' which is 'always dirty'.[313] Sondheim's process of approaching sex and sexuality in the *Blue Tape* through negating self-reflexive irony, his self-mocking, becomes more vivid in later sequences, but is also apparent here in how he 'confesses' that he would 'rather talk about sexuality than do it'.

Thus, Sondheim uses negative, self-mocking traits to stage and foreground his intellect within the sexual and artistic structure of the video, and to consequently negotiate the role of thinking in sex. Sondheim takes 'knowing' away from Acker and places it between him and the viewer – 'this piece is between you and me' – before handing it over completely to the viewer – 'no one else knows what is going on'.

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[313] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 24 April.

Whilst this piece obviously has its roots in the sexual encounter between himself and Acker, Sondheim says that this same sexual encounter is actually between him and the viewer and consequently prompts questions concerning sex and perception (such as who is involved in this sexual dynamic and how and who can give answers). He ironically – yet through anguish – asks of the viewer that they know what he and Acker cannot know about either their dynamic or their piece of work. As far as 'sex… can be seen as a name for what breaks down the fantasy of sovereignty'[314], and considering that non-sovereignty is the state of the self not being able to explain itself to itself, Sondheim tricks the viewer into non-sovereignty by telling the viewer that he counts on their sovereignty. In other words, Sondheim makes the viewer part of the sexual and artistic situation at play, precisely by telling them that the piece is between him and them and that only they can understand 'what is going on' whilst at the same time confessing his own and Acker's inability to know. By inviting the viewer to identify with the sexual dynamic at play and by extension with the two artists' 'not knowing', he actually invites the viewer to surrender their own ability to know as well.

Sondheim underlines the matter of absence – by marking Acker as absent and stating that the piece is between him and the audience – and uses irony, in the form of self-mockery, to do so. Given that 'irony expresses the nonsovereignty we encounter in our status as subjects of language'[315] the absence he subtly foregrounds becomes the space that can also be thought to manifest as a gap, void, emptiness or excess, the space where 'the signifier's difference from itself, its radical inability to signify itself'[316] becomes apparent. Therefore, the absence that Sondheim underlines may be

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[314] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 71.
[315] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 70.
[316] Copjec, J 2015, p. 121.

the absence of the object that desire is driven by but doesn't want to find, a radical absence opposite to clarity and articulation of, for example, theory. Furthermore, Edelman and Berlant, arguing against Teresa De Lauretis's proposition that '"self-reflexive irony […] is incompatible with the business of politics, as are all rhetorical figures that fissure the solidity of meaning"' suggest that '"the fissure in the solidity of meaning," […] may actually define' politics.[317] In this sense, Acker's absence (as a subject who 'doesn't know') is used by the two artists so that they tautologically circle this space which functions as what Leigh Ledare has described as 'excess' and which is actually protective of itself'.[318]

By submitting to 'not-knowing', the two artists circle this excess in a way similar to the way that Berlant and Edelman think both 'with and against' each other simultaneously in order to investigate how sex 'breaks down' the 'fantasy of sovereignty' without 'breaking the relational threat that binds us to each other and to the object'[319]. Furthermore, Acker's absence – marked as such in this scene by Sondheim but also relating to her distant, detached and dry approach to sex in the previously discussed 3rd sequence of the *Blue Tape* – can also be seen as an example of the 'extremely alienated relationship' of the prostitute 'to their work, to their own bodies'.[320] For example, Acker can be seen as alienated from her body and sex (by being so dry in her approach, by not getting turned on) and from her work (not knowing what it is about). So the two artists use the 'pathological agency' of the prostitute – playing with the binary 'no agency' / 'excess of agency' to approach the 'fissure in the solidity of meaning' ironically – which is to say that they approach the 'figural movements, which make "politics of relationality" into "object of

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[317] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, pp. 70-71.
[318] Ledare, L 2015, pers.comm., 25 January.
[319] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 71.
[320] Doyle, J 2006, p. 51.

thought"'.[321] Therefore, Acker and Sondheim use the pathological agency of the prostitute to underline, again, how relationality and its politics may relate to how subjectivity and its production is tied onto or into a gap.

Alan Sondheim, himself a theorist as well as a visual artist, poet and musician, at the time of the making of the *Blue Tape*, 'had just written a three-hundred-page tract called *A General Theory of Reality'*.[322] Since the beginning of the Internet era he has been a pioneer of internet-theory – for example since '1994 he has been working on the "Internet Text" a continuous meditation on philosophy, psychology, language, body, and virtuality'.[323] His work deals with the abject, the 'entangled, tawdry, sleazy […] the realm of death, of anguish, of sexuality, of slaughter and scorched earth politics'. He explores such themes working within 'virtual worlds, around coherent language and coherent coding', the 'digital domain', which he considers as 'always already corporate, governed by protocols, and a clean and proper body…tied to consumerism, to the clever.' He calls the 'center and periphery' of his work 'the cry', what 'one's left with' when one approaches how 'the symbolic itself, the ability to construct and deploy language/s, no longer functions' [324] – which is the same space I have described previously as a gap, void or excess. For example, in the 5th and 6th sequences of the *Blue Tape* Alan Sondheim self-mocks and despairs over his investment in theory.[325]

Through the 6th sequence of the *Blue Tape*, Sondheim is naked, lying down on a bed holding a microphone with his left hand. His right arm is above his forehead,

[321] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 71.
[322] Kraus, C 2000.
[323] Kraus, C 2000.
[324] Damon, M & Nemet-Nejat, M, 2016, 'Surging toward Abjection: An Interview with Alan Sondheim', *Rain Taxi.* Available from: http://www.raintaxi.com/surging-toward-abjection-an-interview-with-alan-sondheim/. [20 May 2016].
[325] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 24 April.

suggesting a laid-back stance (figure 12). The sequence starts with a bust-shot of him

and opens slowly. He introduces what he is going to be doing which is an analytical

description of 'what is happening':

> This is a piece, which is a combination of an external structure and the
>
> grounding of that structure in a certain kind of sexuality. In other
>
> words, I am going to describe the situation which is being established.
>
> And at the same time we are going to be acting the situation. And the
>
> description is going to be along the lines of *The General Theory of*
>
> *Reality* we've been working on the past year. The theory at present is
>
> 300 pages and consists of a mathematical formulism…

As Sondheim works through his theory the camera moves up and down and zooms in

and out his body. We see Acker licking his feet, moving towards his genitals,

eventually licking his anus and rubbing his penis before giving him a blowjob (figures

13 & 14). Sondheim gets increasingly aroused and increasingly struggles to keep his

focus on the theory – reciting:

> A confusion, a real temptation, a defense, I defend myself against
>
> Kathy, I don't want to give in, I don't want to come, I want to be able to
>
> continue talking to you, to describe the theory to show how the structure
>
> of the world works so that there is, that can be a separation between me
>
> and the world, I really feel the need for this separation. Oh god.
>
> Otherwise I am likely to follow into something and realise how little I
>
> understand about things, I don't want to do that, I don't want to stop
>
> understanding… Because in a way this is a kind of a battle, holding on
>
> to, holding on to my mind…

The two artists go on until Sondheim orgasms and asks that the camera stops

recording. In the 5<sup>th</sup> sequence Sondheim appears to be sitting down on a kitchen floor

holding a microphone. He says 'I think – everybody – should buy and read – *Love's*

*Body* – by Norman O. Brown'. He then bursts into a two minute-long bout of loud,

seemingly irrational, unreasonable or purposeless laughter, still holding his

microphone close to his mouth whilst a kettle boils on a cooker behind him (figure

15). The action that Sondheim calls 'smearing of theory in relation to the body'

operates within porno-graphing methodologies as a self-submission to the 'dirtiness'

of the body versus, for example, the cleanliness of theoretical resolution and the

potential confidence in knowing that comes with it. Sondheim continues this same

method in the following sequence where he orgasms whilst reciting his own theory-

work, allowing himself to tear apart and be torn apart by his own work – into the 'cry'

or what he calls annihilation.[326] In this sense, the porno-graphing actions of the *Blue*

*Tape* suggest and investigate a permanent branch of 'dirtiness', a stubborn or un-

cleanable 'dirtiness', and the negativity that comes with it. Sondheim's proposition

for example that the 'body is always dirty', a 'dirtiness' which cannot be cleared-out

or clarified through resolution or confident knowing, and thus challenges the value of

determination, purpose and the 'fixity of definition' by involving such attempts to

define, 'to break "it"' down. For example, when Sondheim tries to break 'it' down, to

understand the encounter between him and Acker, and to determine it by 'exploring it

on tapes', *he* breaks down. Furthermore, the continuous trait of negativity – that his

orgasm for example is not a joyful private event and the fact that it is artwork and

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[326] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 24 April.

theory-infused – creates a feedback loop into radical incoherence – a continuous

attention of the subject to its 'radical unpresentability' in the form of its 'undoing'.[327]

Georges Bataille sets out a framework for transgression and excess as specifically

related to unproductivity; he for example connects sex with productivity the way that

queer theorists of the antisocial turn have also underlined and challenged the

reproductive and reparative logics attached to sex and sexuality. Bataille unlinks sex

from 'erotic unions' because the reproductive character of the first in his view caters

for the 'world order's aim for homogeneity and individuation'. Antithetically, the

goals that 'erotic unions' have relate with an intimacy through which the participants

reach an ontology of 'continuity', and is not related with reproduction but with

'extreme pleasure' and also with 'waste' (Bataille groups 'sexual indulgence' together

with 'gambling and drunkenness').[328] Bataillian excess isn't about pleasure reached

through orgasm for example, but about the anguish reached through the pleasure in

that orgasm – 'a glance into the continuity of death'.[329] Under this light, and keeping

in mind the example of the *Blue Tape,* the excess at play in porno-graphing actions

relates to this anguish, such as Sondheim's 'cry' – the undoing of the self through

'exploring' sexuality as a public subject, through not-knowing and through non-

sovereignty. In short, the fact that the subject in porno-graphing actions willingly

becomes undone is a form of unproductivity (versus investment into personal up-

levelling and confidence) and in this sense, the undoing of the subject is a form of

excess. Or a different way to get to how porno-graphing actions negotiate excess,

considering Bataillian theory, is to think that the sexual pleasure at play in the *Blue*

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[327] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 65.
[328] Fuchs, R 2009, 'Taboos and Transgressions: Georges Bataille on Eroticism and Death', *Gnosis*, vol. 10, no. 3. Available from: PhilPapers. [10 February 2016].
[329] Fuchs, R 2009.

*Tape* is not and does not offer answers or a resolution. On the contrary, it is used to explore and underline the 'void' or 'gap', the space where things are unknowable, the 'radical incoherence' – for example how Sondheim melting into his orgasm cries out that he doesn't want to stop understanding, he wants to hold on – but he lets himself be unable to hold on to knowing.

And so, sex and pleasure in the form of orgasm is used in porno-graphing actions, in the literal form of report and account-making through this sequence – for example where Sondheim reports to the viewer what is taking place, whilst also analysing it in relation to his body and his consciousness. Thus, through this pleasure, attention is brought back to negativity, to the reduction of sex into administration. But this methodology of negativity, dryness and administration operates as what Berlant and Edelman describe as a 'mode of thought, in excess of the consciousness that tries to describe it'[330] and serves for the approximation of excess, of the gap or void, of what is unknowable.

**The 'dirty' Child ('lost-little-girl')**

Whilst Acker uses autobiographical grammars within the content of her books – for example in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* – she also flags such content as autobiographical by frequently titling and subtitling her texts using the first-person pronoun. For example, a chapter in *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by The Black Tarantula* is

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[330] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 76.

entitled 'The story of my life' and subtitled 'More details about my actual childhood.'[331] Additionally, Acker uses references to child sexual subjectivity and merges sexual content with childhood and first-person narration to signify 'actual' autobiography. She creates narratives where children are sexual, swearing and violent, and on occasions speaks in the first-person as a kid who is sexualised and incestuous. For example, she titles a sub-chapter of the *Empire of the Senseless* as 'Rape by the Father (Abhor through Thivai)' and another sub-chapter as 'Child Sex (Thivai Speaks)'.[332] The opening chapter of her novel *Blood and Guts in High School*[333] (a book which according to Acker was criticised as 'anti-male' and made people 'very upset' but which she wrote thinking 'at the time' that 'it was kind of sweet…but of course it's not'[334]) is based on the conflict between a child/woman called Janey and a man called Father who is her lover. Janey needs him, admits that she has been 'bad', naughty and jealous of his other lovers, and begs that he won't abandon her. In using plagiarism and child sexual subjectivity Acker self-submits, in terms of how she is received, into overlapping 'dirty' roles regarding both her sexual and artistic subjectivities. In her conversation with Ellen G. Friedman for *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, which took place in 1989 in North America whilst Acker was living in England, Acker mentions that 'the feminists hate' her, or that they did so 'ten years ago' but that in England they 'complain' that she is a 'bad writer'. Asked if she is 'purposefully' a 'bad writer', she settles with 'Yes, sure – "piss, fuck, shit" scrawled all over the page – sure, of course. This appalls the literary establishment.' Thus, whilst there isn't a general consensus that Acker was a 'bad writer'– if anything, as I mentioned, her work is highly acclaimed and considered influential,

[331] Acker, K 1978, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by The Black Tarantula,* New York, TVRT Press.
[332] Acker, K 1988, *Empire of the Senseless*, London, Picador.
[333] Acker, K 1984, *Blood and Guts in High School*, New York, Grove Press.
[334] Friedman, GE 1989.

even if it made people 'very upset' – Acker herself draws from how she is perceived 'negatively' due to working 'against the literary culture'. During this interview and straight after her claim that she is considered a 'bad writer' she mentions an anecdote to explain: 'When I appeared on a radio program, the announcer said, "We now have Kathy Acker, the author of *Blood and Guts*. She is the most evil person in the world". Thus, for Acker, to be a 'bad writer' – to be perceived by peers (in this instance the 'literary establishment') as bad at her profession – strongly relates to being considered as 'evil' or 'bad' more generally, to making people 'upset'. Furthermore, for her to deliberately be 'bad' or 'evil' means to embrace, in multiple ways, the reception of being perceived as such (to not defend against it). I consider that Acker's ways of using her reception as 'bad' or 'evil' illuminates the processes through which in porno-graphing, artists invite that they be understood as 'dirty' to then be themselves destabilised when they are indeed received as such; to then embrace such reception and self-objectify into it further and use it to make more work. Such processes involve the artists' own contradictions and antagonisms, resulting for example in how Acker seems to almost take a pride in being considered 'the most evil person in the world' as well as how she nearly equates being considered 'evil' with being viewed as a 'bad' writer (pissing off the literally establishment).

Chris Kraus, 'studying Kathy Acker's life and work', notes that her legacy is tied to her 'myth as a Bad Girl'[335], for example her androgynous looks; shaved head; tattoos; bodybuilding; leather-wearing and motorcycle-driving, all of which attracted public attention in the 80s and 90s. During those decades, Acker was frequently asked in public interviews about being a 'bad girl'. Acker calls 'bad girl' an unfortunate

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[335] Kraus, C. 2000.

wording and she suggests that the process of 'submission' results in 'taking control over one's self'.[336] Essentially applying logics of negativity, and foreshadowing the grammars of reiteration and repetition that Judith Butler developed in her 1990 work *Gender Trouble*[337] to discuss gender, copying and authenticity, Acker publicly argues that to deny or bury a certain condition of oppression, for instance that women are submissive because they have been trained to be so, can only result in re-enforcing it. She suggests instead that to acknowledge and creatively embrace models of oppressive presumption, such as that women are passive and submissive, can result in taking back control[338], hence her methodology of self-submission and self-objectification into the roles of being a 'bad' girl and writer.

As I describe above, I consider Acker's use of plagiarism in her literary practice as a literal copying and pasting of what structurally can be thought to stand outside of her subjectivity (other people's agency) into her own autobiographical narratives – both those in book-writing and publicly-living – in order to challenge what Dooner terms as 'masculine rationality and sense making'.[339] Acker and Sondheim employ similar strategies in building their porno-graphing actions in the *Blue Tape*: they self-objectify into how they think, know or imagine that others' perceive or may perceive them. They acknowledge – and challenge – presupposed binaries such as 'inside' (meaning the 'self'), and 'outside' (meaning others' perceptions), as well as binaries such as good and bad, right and wrong, truth and non-truth, knowledge and non-knowledge, life and art. Their embrace of such binaries becomes apparent through their own positions of non-sovereignty, for example how in the *Blue Tape* Sondheim

[336] Juno, A & Vale, V 1991, 'Angry Women', *Re/Search*, San Francisco, Re/Search Publications, p. 179.
[337] Butler, J 1990, *Gender Trouble*, London, Routledge.
[338] Juno, A. and Vale. V. 1991, p.179.
[339] Dooner, RA 1993, pp. 13-14.

feels out of control and out-cast, and how Acker performs a detached surrender to the camera's gaze. Through the embrace and usage of non-sovereign states in the making of their porno-graphing actions, these artists attend to irresolution rather than to resolution and definition, and thus challenge and renegotiate the binaries at stake, as well as the structures of thought which reproduce them.

Dooner contends that Acker 'counts on the assumption that plagiarism is recognized as a part of culture and yet not really a part, rather, an anti-part, a crime or violation'.[340] Throughout the *Blue Tape,* crimes, transgressions and violations take place implicitly and subtly through, for example, referencing, embodying and using child sexual subjectivity and incestuous possibilities, as Acker does by being a 'lost-little-girl', implicating the figure of her father and her subjectivity as an abandoned child into her sexual exchange with Sondheim. Through this particular form of implicating child sexual subjectivity, the two artists opaquely pose a potential threat of violation precisely because, whilst using straight-forward and matter of fact linguistic and visual vocabularies, they aim, I argue, to make the viewer unsure of what is 'really' going on. In other words, in the same way that Acker uses autobiographical significations and first person pronouns, including child sexual subjectivities, to lead the reader of her books to the idea that 'no particular representation of Acker can "really" be she'[341], through the *Blue Tape* the two artists may be aiming to threaten or violate the viewers' meaning-making patterns by making them uncertain of what may or may not be 'really' real in the video material, or, as I will shortly explain, inviting the viewer to gaze at their images in a 'wrong' way.

[340] Dooner, RA 1993, pp. 13-14.
[341] Dooner, RA 1993, p. 66.

Edelman, through his work within the anti-social turn in queer theory, describes the figure of the 'sacred Child' as

> the Child who might find information about dangerous 'lifestyles' on the
> Internet; the Child who might choose a provocative book from the shelves
> of the public library; the Child, in short, who might find an enjoyment
> that would nullify the figural value, itself imposed by adult desire, of the
> Child as unmarked by the adult's adulterating implication in desire itself;
> the Child, that is, made to image, for the satisfaction of adults, an
> Imaginary fullness that's considered to want, and therefore to want for,
> nothing.[342]

I consider that the violating and 'dirty' undertone set implicitly and ambiguously through the opening sequence of the *Blue Tape* and its references to childhood is that of corruption or molestation; and that such associations can easily be brought to mind via the mere mention of a child figure within a sexual adult context.

Keeping in mind Acker's investment in 'crime' and 'violation' throughout her written work, it becomes evident that such threats of corruption don't have to do with molesting actual children in any way, but with 'violating' patterns of thinking and perception regarding identity and meaning-making. In this sense, the use of child sexual subjectivity, or merely bringing the Child (its 'sacredness') into a sexual context, operates so that a wider context of threat and violation becomes underlined via the connotations created by bringing childhood and adult-sex together. Edelman proposes that the set of normative morals standing behind the figure of the Child and its sacredness can be challenged by queerness – using the term queer, as I do, not to

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[342] Edelman, L 2004, pp. 20-21.

refer to homosexuality exclusively, but to 'all so stigmatized for failing to comply

with heteronormative mandates'.[343] He argues that 'queerness, for contemporary

culture at large…is understood as bringing children and childhood to an end'.[344] Thus

Edelman reminds us that talking of adult-sex and childhood in one space, bringing the

two words or notions onto the same page or into the same frame or image in ways

which don't 'comply with heteronormative mandates' potentially means exposing the

figure of the Child to the danger of violating its sacredness, or to appear willing to do

so.

An example of how easily and quickly associations of child-molestation can be

brought to mind by works which 'put at risk'[345] (to borrow a phrase Edelman uses)

the Child and its sacredness can be found in a critique of Edelman's work. In his

review of *No Future* (posted by Melissa Hardie at the University of Sydney Theory

Cluster Blog) Billy Stevenson argues that should Edelman's work be 'read in the

wrong way – or even read in a manner slightly different from that which Edelman has

intended' it can easily be assumed that he 'figuratively equates queerness with the

destruction of children' which 'is extremely unfortunate, given the popular equation

of queerness and paedophilia'. He draws a comparison between Edelman and novelist

Dennis Cooper to continue that 'Like Cooper, Edelman transforms the most morally

transgressive image available – a dead, tortured child – into an aesthetic consideration

and, in doing so, promotes literature as a value-free space'.[346] In short Stevenson

worries that Edelman's queer anti-social critique of futurism based on the figure of

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[343] Edelman, L 2004, p. 17.
[344] Edelman, L 2004, p. 19.
[345] Edelman, L 2004, p. 11.
[346] Hardie, M 2006, 'Lee Edelman's No Future: Queer Theory And the Death Drive', *Theory Cluster*,
blog post, 3 September. Available from:
http://blogs.usyd.edu.au/theorycluster/2006/09/lee_edelmans_no_future_queer_t.html/. [12 May 2016].

the Child, could serve or enable the propagation and perpetuation of 'the popular equation of queerness and paedophilia' if read in the 'wrong' way.

For the purposes of his paper 'Pornographic Protections? Itineraries of Childhood Innocence', Joseph J. Fischel locates the 1970's as the decade in which 'child pornography emerged as a source of popular and political anxiety'[347], and he positions anti-child-pornography laws in North America alongside scholarly works that investigate the censorship forced by these laws. For example, he uses Amy Adler's essay 'The Perverse Law of Child Pornography'[348] to review how 'federal and state definitions and judicial interpretations of child pornography include terms like 'sexually explicit', 'sexually suggestive', 'coyness', and 'lascivious exhibition of the genitals'. He argues that 'the vagueness of these terms has permitted broad criminalization (or at least prosecution)' of, for example, photographers' images of kids.[349] One of the arguments he forms through his study regards ways of reading or looking at a cultural text, which too may be 'wrong':

> As we have doctrinally and statutorily moved away from the 'harm to the child' in the production of pornography to 'harm the child' in the viewing and possession of the image, we are asked to 'gaze' like a 'paedophile', to search for the possibility of sex ('lascivious display'; 'coyness') in the image, and thus to sexualize the image.[350]

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[347] Fischel J. J 2013, 'Pornographic Protections? Itineraries of Childhood Innocence', *WSPA* Discourses on LGBT Politics 2013 conference, p.3. Available from: WPSA.research.pdx.edu. [12 September 2016].
[348] Adler, A 2001, 'The Perverse Law of Child Pornography', Columbia Law Review, vol.101, no. 2, pp. 209-273. Available from: ccoso.org. [12 September 2016].
[349] Fischel J. J 2013, p. 4.
[350] Fischel J. J 2013, p. 7.

I suggest that one way that the porno-graphing actions of the *Blue Tape* pose the threat of violation of the Child is by inviting the viewer to look at the images in a 'wrong' way (for the possibility of sex which involves children), turning the viewer's gaze into a paedophilic gaze and by extension suggesting that meaning lies on the side of reception. Bearing in mind the opening scene of the video where the two artists have said that they enact (or may enact) a loose father/daughter role-play, the invitation for the viewer to search out if and how the child is implicated in sex in the video is offered, for example, via the ways that Acker surrenders to the viewer's gaze as described above, and also through the ways that Sondheim declares to the viewer that only they (the viewer) can know what is really going on in the piece, what the piece is about.

However, the overall processes through which Acker and Sondheim use child sexual subjectivity in the *Blue Tape* are complicated because they involve creative shifts that seem contradictory; and yet this complexity also illustrates how these are porno-graphing processes. I will shortly argue that Acker and Sondheim sexualise the Child to violate its sacredness, and that they then desexualise it so as also to violate that sacredness. This appears tautological or impossible, as the first act of sexualising it would have destroyed its sacredness already, but my suggestion is that through repetitively withdrawing resolution they imply that there is no sacredness to be violated – and thus they actually violate it by cheating the Child of its ability to be sacred (as, like Edelman suggests, it is sacred only because its sacredness affords it the potential to stay sacred forever). Or, they suggest that if it has such an ability then this may rely heavily on the viewer's meaning-making mechanism. In short, I will argue that their processes of withdrawing meaning and withdrawing actual sex

(drying it) are a 'dirty' trick because through them they call for the viewer to perform 'wrong' ways of looking, to occupy, in a sense, a paedophiliac gaze. Throughout the *Blue Tape*, Acker and Sondheim withdraw every proposition they build. They do so via a series of negations, or what Simon Baker calls an 'entropic', or 'centrifugal force'[351] when discussing the work of Leigh Ledare. For example, they start their art-project communicating to the viewer that Acker is a 'lost-little-girl' and that Sondheim plays her father, and frame a loose sexual scenario based on these positions, only to retract, to gradually and increasingly withdraw it. However, they don't ever explicitly or fully withdraw it – they lead it into advancing disorder through their use of negativity as they keep re-approaching sex through distance and detachment. In each of their creative movements they make the viewer aware of a given situation, such as the 'lost-little-girl'/father, only to refuse it, moving further into sexual distance and, in terms of meaning, obscurity and irresolution.

First, framing herself as a 'lost-little-girl' in the beginning of the video, Acker says that she wants Sondheim to be her father – that she *knows* he is her father, but that she doesn't want parents anymore, she only wants his arms around her – and Sondheim says that he is indeed 'playing' her father. Then, Acker continues to be child-like throughout the video, as Kraus suggests[352], for example, tracing her naked body like a child who is trying to figure herself out. So, it could be considered that when the two artists do have physical sexual contact they 'dirty' the figure of the Child, meaning that they get-off on Acker being a 'little-girl'. But they don't; they certainly don't do so through an actual 'daddy/daughter' sexual age-play – they don't frame their encounter as involving sexual role-play. Instead, they use the figure of the Child to

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[351] Baker, S 2011.
[352] Kraus, C 2000.

create and participate in 'intensified encounters' – and negotiate through their sexual and artistic exchange their individual processes of self-submitting their subjectivities to how others may perceive them.

Acker and Sondheim in the *Blue Tape* actually don't particularly get-off on anything at all, as if each sexual activity they involve themselves in is a step further away from sexual enjoyment, satisfaction or resolution. Even when Sondheim reaches a sexual climax he does so via, or despite, a device of detachment – not only reporting to the viewer what happens to him as he receives a blowjob by Acker but filtering his report through his theory of phenomenology. Thus, as I have argued above, it could be seen that his orgasm wasn't a resolution but another way of reaching irresolution, as his pleasure is used to approximate the 'void' or 'gap', the space where things are unknowable. But the two artists' use of distancing and detaching from or within sex does not mean that they don't 'dirty' the Child. I suggest they do so but not by involving its figure in their sexual encounter.

Of course, there is no contextual signposting within the *Blue Tape* that their child-referencing concerns the 'figure of the Child', as their conversation in the first sequence has a matter of fact and confessional character, and although it is self-analytical, it is not theory-infused. Thus, by not announcing that their implication of child subjectivity is in some way figurative, the two artists exploit whichever assumptions regarding innocence (Edelman's 'sacredness') may come to the viewer's mind when child subjectivity is present in a sexual situation. Their implication of child subjectivity can be seen as 'dirty' exactly because the artists use it for the purposes of the project and because – although their 'knowing' is ambiguous and

perplexing, as I have examined in previous sections – they do so knowingly.

Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* draws on popular animated films to discuss 'forgetting, losing, looping' and to propose 'a queer and fluid form of knowing, that operates independently of coherence and linear narrative or progression', a 'silliness', which 'leads […] to new and different forms of relations and actions'.[353] Additionally, Halberstam suggests that

> there are alternative productions of the child that recognize in the image of the nonadult body a propensity to incompetence, a clumsy inability to make sense, a desire for independence from the tyranny of the adult, and a total indifference to adult conceptions of success and failure.[354]

Thus another way to consider the use of child sexual subjectivity in the *Blue Tape* is as queer child-like ways of exploring sexuality and art-making: Acker's references to her childhood and to looking for her father from both her child and adult subjectivities, in conjunction with her child-like tracing and discovery of her body in front of the camera, as well as Sondheim's confession of not knowing, not owning power and being out of control, can be considered as strategies of negotiating sex and art in 'silly' ways. The two artists' displays of child-like, silly ways of negotiating sexuality between them – doing so more like children rather than in-control adults – can thus also potentially disturb expectations the viewer may hold for 'coherence and linear narrative or progression'.[355] Through the use of child sexual subjectivity and child-like silliness implicated in the porno-graphing actions of the *Blue Tape*, they

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[353] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 54.
[354] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 120.
[355] Halberstam, J 2011, p. 54.

themselves enter their sexual dynamic as something unknowable and radically incoherent. In using their adult agency to approach sex as if they were children, or in silly ways, they promise meaning in two ways: in so far as the Child is the emblem of futurism and 'it is the logic of futurism on which meaning always depends'[356] and in so far as they make a piece of art which itself is also expected to bear meaning and purpose.

Berlant and Edelman approach how sexuality manifests as 'radical incoherence' by looking at 'sex as a site for experiencing this intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being.' To look at sex this way, which is the same approach that Acker and Sondheim employ by taking-on overlapping positions of being child-like as well as being adult agents of art and analysis, requires 'the effort to push beyond limits (internal and external both) imposed by the fantasy of the sovereign self (the self detached from negativity)'.[357] 'Pushing beyond limits' in these terms necessitates a self-submission into non-sovereignty, not being able to explain clearly, not being able to explain one's self to one's self and feel 'good' and confident, which also becomes evident in how Sondheim and Acker felt and acted after the end of making their video – 'emotionally exhausted and collapsed'.[358] As mentioned above, the *Blue Tape* was ambiguously self-censored rather than banned, due to how the two artists were feeling about it and each other. Shortly after making it they informally screened the piece in about five universities across North America (St. Mark's, Yale, Rhode Island School of Design, San Diego University and/or Cal

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[356] Edelman, L 2004, p. 11.
[357] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.
[358] Sondheim, A 2014, pers. comm., 23 February.

Arts)[359] with an agreement that they would only show it if both of them were present. Soon after these screenings they 'fell away' and Sondheim remembers that the video became increasingly difficult for him to watch because 'it was too real and filled with self-hatred'.[360]

Kraus suggests that throughout the video Acker carries herself as 'Kathy-as-lost-little-girl-outsider', and that Sondheim's and Acker's encounter is an 'abrupt coupling, in which there could be no love, no sustained generosity of exchange'. She concludes that:

> While *Blue Tape* is a gorgeous portrait of Acker as a young person in the
> process of becoming, viewed historically, it also sounds a warning about
> the cyclic repetition of aesthetic style – when becoming is not ongoing.[361]

The lack or impossibility of sustainability and ongoing-ness that Kraus describes relates to the irresolution that the porno-graphing strategies of the *Blue Tape* attend to and willingly form. Acker shifts between being a 'lost-little-girl' and a powerful and 'dangerous' figure and Sondheim between embracing and rejecting the position of her 'father', not as a sexual role but as a position of control, safety and sovereignty. Through the constant shifting of their positions they repetitively pose and withdraw their roles and the potential meaning of these roles in order to resist meaning and resolution.

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[359] Sondheim, A 2003, *Alan Sondheim Mail Archive*. Available from:
http://sondheim.rupamsunyata.org/2002/09/20/. [14 November 2013].
[360] Sondheim, A 2014, pers. comm., 23 February.
[361] Kraus, C 2000.

Kraus proposes that Acker isn't pretending to be a 'lost-little-girl' – she *is* one – as she considers the video 'an amazing portrait of the young Kathy, when she was inventing herself for herself'.[362] By the two artists being matter-of-factly themselves and yet continually shifting between positions, they mirror the ways that the figure of the Child, in Edelman's description, symbolises 'a logic of repetition that fixes identity though identification with the future of the social order.'[363] In this way they 'dirty' the Child, not by getting-off over the idea of it, but by copying or paralleling the ways it promises fixity of identification (solidity of meaning) as a means of never fulfilling it.

By being 'themselves' and denoting autobiography; by not actually turning the 'lost-little-girl' and the 'father' figures into a sexual game per se, but approaching it through intellectual distance and detachment, they exploit every instance of their personal self-reflection and sexual dynamic to invite the viewer to look in 'wrong' ways. As the sequences of the *Blue Tape* progress, it becomes obvious that their processes of self-reflection and their dynamic do not operate so that they become sexually or otherwise 'satisfied' through their shared project of sex and creativity, but that they in fact stubbornly resist resolution (of meaning, in the form of sexual enjoyment) by all means possible. Therefore, Acker and Sondheim use the notion of the 'self' as a vehicle to suggest a process of molesting meaning into disorder. Acker (I use her name as she is the one who plays the 'lost-little-girl' even though both artists participate equally in conjuring the elusiveness of the 'lost-little-girl' in the video) uses herself to invite the viewer to check who she is, whether she *is* a child, through their act of looking. Thus, she is 'dirty' because she invites the viewer to look

[362] Kraus, C 2000.
[363] Edelman, L 2004, p. 25.

in 'wrong', ways – by inviting them to consider whether they participate in paedophilic acts by looking at her.

If Acker and Sondheim can be considered artists in a 'process of becoming' in the *Blue Tape*, then their exploitation of notions of value attached to the Child and to futurism can perhaps be considered as destabilising or disorganising to the relationship a piece of art can have with its own potential future. In other words, in 'dirtying' the figure of the Child by inviting the viewer to look in 'wrong' ways – a process that involves looking to find what is 'really' going on – the artists stubbornly resist moving on into futurism. Thus, Acker and Sondheim place the question of 'what is to be written and where', which is to say that they underline the excess or void existing between the artist, art-object and the viewer, all of whom may be waiting to see what value the future may bring to a piece of work.

## Chapter III

## Pretend



**Introduction**



Throughout this chapter I discuss two art-works, *Pretend You Are Actually Alive*,

(*Pretend*), (2000-2008) and *Double Bind* (2010) by the artist Leigh Ledare, using

them as case-studies of lens-based works which use porno-graphing actions. Ledare's

work plays a vital role in my thesis because first of all, the very act of an artist

photographing a parent having sex and presenting it publically as Ledare did for

*Pretend* has never – to my knowledge – been done before. The potential 'taboo' and

'transgressive' sexual situations that this body of work hints towards and often

tangibly touches upon are most prominently those of incest and child sexual

subjectivity. Additionally, through this project Ledare and his mother use and

comment on a wide range of other 'dirty' sexual and artistic subjectivities such as the

sexual and therefore bad mother, the pornographer son, the male artist who objectifies

his female subjects etc.


In the first part of the chapter I concentrate on *Pretend* and in the second, on *Double

Bind*. In each part I explain how I identify these two works as involving porno-

graphing actions and how each applies porno-graphing methodologies. For example, I

review how each piece starts with Ledare using sexual situations present in his life

independently from his art-practice in order to make art from them. I argue that these

particular situations (sets of sexual dynamics) he chose to make art from could

potentially be perceived as 'taboo' or 'wrong' – and that this is why he chose them.

Through this chapter I frame self-objectification as a primary strategy within which

the artists whose work I examine in this thesis exercise their creative process in

producing porno-graphing actions. During my analysis throughout my thesis, I

continuously consider the methodology of self-objectification and self-submission as

analogous to the hypothesis that the prostitute embraces the structures that exploit

'her' – essentially, that being a prostitute is an act of embracing exploitation (as

expressed through the anti-prostitution theory and praxis of feminists such as Barry,

as I explained in the 'Introduction'). Similarly, I link the 'pathological' agency of the

prostitute (zero agency/excess agency) to the ways that strategies of self-submission

take place in the making of porno-graphing actions. In my thesis, the 'porno-' of

porno-graphing (which etymologically means prostitute/something a prostitute says or

does) refers broadly to the 'figure of the prostitute' as well as to vocabularies of and

discourses around pornography, and how the artists whose work I examine use those

same vocabularies and discourses. For example, through this chapter I describe and

explain how Ledare's orchestration and self-submission into 'dirty' roles and his use

of pornographic language function in these two pieces of work. I examine how he

submits specifically into roles that may potentially be perceived as pathological,

'wrong' or 'dirty'; how he uses passivity and distance to do so; how he creates and

negotiates excess. I do so in order to explain how and why I use words such as 'dirty'

and 'wrong'. I also consider the artist's own aims (as he communicated them to me

through our personal conversation as well as how he has explained them in public

platforms that I will refer to), for example, how he self-submits to and orchestrates

those subjectivities in order to complicate and challenge processes of subjectivity-

production and meaning-making. I argue that his strategy of self-objectification into

artistic and sexually 'dirty' and 'wrong' roles aims to frame and question both 'normative' and 'antinormative' thinking that can potentially locate these positions as 'dirty' and 'wrong'.

For my approach I consider Foucauldian lines of thinking regarding sexual subjectivity. For example, 'that what we call "ourselves", or what we are referring to when considering us as "sexual subjects", is always and already constituted within and through a certain normative framework'[364] or as Ledare puts it, 'how external opinions, conceptions or perspectives are overlaid on who a subject is'.[365] I investigate how Ledare anticipates, reflects upon and uses the external reception of his work; for example, how the reception around his and his mother's self-objectification onto certain 'dirty' roles in *Pretend* destabilised him, and how this led to the making of *Double Bind* and further strategies of self-objectification. I consider the content, the extents and the different expressions of these states of self-objectification under the light of theories of negativity. For example, I use the terms 'radical passivity' and 'shadow feminism' proposed as theoretical grammars by Halberstam in examining the performance art of artists such as Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono and Chris Burden[366] to support my arguments concerning porno-graphing strategies of self-objectification. I use Edelman and Berlant's work in *Sex, or the Unbearable* to examine how in *Pretend* and *Double Bind*, Ledare strategically uses his own non-sovereignty to produce work. Later in the chapter, I link his non-sovereign positions to the '-graphing' of porno-graphing, (the investigation into the unknowable, unthinkable and impossible), 'what is to be written and where'. This investigation can be considered through my question 'What is it that makes art, art?'

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[364] Princep, T 2012, p.5.
[365] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[366] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 150.

For the purposes of this writing I consider Ledare's own question, 'where does meaning reside inside an art-work?'[367] as suggestive of the same investigation. Whilst my wording (What is it that makes art, art?) is purposely broader and negatively inclined, I contend that these two questions are similar in that their common aim is to approach how an art-work that involves sexual and pornographic images can relate to what is knowable and what is unknowable, what is visible and what is invisible regarding meaning and value. I examine how Ledare uses pornographic alongside autobiographical vocabularies to pose and deal with such questions (e.g. 'where does meaning lie inside an art-work'). I argue that in doing so he involves discourses that can be thought of as binaries in order to invite the viewer to recognise their own patterns of meaning-making and to build their own relationship to the work. For example, he uses pornographic and autobiographic rhetorics not as binaries to each other per se but in order to bring up discourses regarding subjectivity that can be thought of as binary and contradictive. They are also used in order to underline matters concerning the photographic medium and its use in art and representation, such as traditions of autobiographic art-photography versus conceptually mediated pornographic aesthetics and media.

Throughout my thesis, I argue that due to their negative methodologies, porno-graphing actions hypothesise such questions (What is it that makes art, art? Where does meaning reside inside an art-work?) in, at times, a seemingly defeatist manner. For example, artists explicitly and implicitly self-submit to doubting the value of their own work and its status as art. That is to say that it may not be art but pornography or the document of pathology. Such thought-figurations can appear close to propositions

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[367] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.

put forward by art-theorists such as Kraus and Kunst. Kraus in her book *Where Art Belongs* states that to ask '"what is contemporary art"' is 'meaningless' because 'all art now is conceptual, defined by its relation to other art and its place in the market.' Also, that 'like pornography, art no longer exists because it is virtually everywhere.'[368] Kraus's suggestion aligns with Kunst's thesis that there is an increasing erosion of the boundaries between art and life, non-work and work etc. Kunst sums up this set of conditions as a 'crisis of subjectivity'. She locates subjectivity and its exploitation at the core of capitalist production but also of art.[369] Kunst underlines that 'the art of today faces a deep crisis in terms of value articulation and its social role'. Consequently, 'art is a result of the choices made by individuals rather than for the common good'.[370] In examining how Ledare uses autobiography, pornographic vocabularies and lens-based media, as well as his own sexual and artistic subjectivities interdependently, I argue that he challenges the very idea of subjectivity as something existing prior to its production and construction. I also examine how his use of negativity may be questioning the idea of 'common good' and what this may have to offer in the relationship between art and value. I examine how his apparent gestures of literalising the dissolution of boundaries between art and life in extreme ways through the use of 'dirtiness' may result in a crucial re-positioning of art's value and meaning. For example, I argue that through his use of 'dirty' sexual and artistic subjectivities he 'undoes' himself and destabilises the very idea of subjectivity, its 'fantasmatic sovereignty'.[371] Ledare uses sex to challenge meaning-making; through this chapter I suggest that this unraveling may offer new ideas regarding art and the breaking of limits, for example the limits of binary

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[368] Kraus, C 2011, *Where Art Belongs*, p. 119, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles.
[369] Kunst, B 2015, p. 21.
[370] Kunst, B 2015, pp. 177-178.
[371] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 2.

thought. Thus, through this chapter I investigate how Ledare's porno-graphing actions involve the submission to the possibility that this art may not exist, in that it may not be art (because it reminds us that art is 'everywhere', 'like porn') and therefore how his art may offer suggestions about art's 'existence' (What is art? What is it that makes art, art? etc.) that push the very definition and function of art.

**Methodology**

My research for the writing of this chapter is based on a personal dialogue between the artist and I over the past four years. I use the theoretical grammars of the anti-social thesis to create my analytical approach to Ledare's work as well as to consider my own participation in our dialogue critically. My encounter and personal dialogue with Leigh Ledare for the purposes of this research has been one of my fundamental methodological tools for the writing of this thesis. After I first saw Ledare's work and decided to use it as a case-study for this thesis, I invited him to approach and address issues regarding taboo, sex, sexual subjectivities and unknowability. I presented broad questions to him such as: on which terms, if any, can we engage with and describe what can be considered as 'dirty' and 'wrong'? Or, how can we claim a use of language to describe what feels mostly 'dirty' in sex and sexuality, and therefore unthinkable, unspeakable and indescribable? In this sense, how is it possible to find or create a language that, when it comes to sex and sexuality, doesn't exist? Or, how to address and talk about the importance of insisting on the non-existence of such language since, after all, porno-graphing methodologies display a thorough resistance

to resolution and indeed to clear articulation, knowing and understanding, and a withdrawal of meaning? I personally became aware of certain aspects of porno-graphing methodologies such as the resistance to resolution because I started occupying and voicing such resistance to articulation and answers, as well as lack and disappointment, through our dialogue. During this encounter, I became aware of my non-sovereignty and how it functions methodologically, and I therefore understood how non-sovereignty operates in porno-graphing methodologies, which I explain in the introduction to this PhD. Using the part of the research and practice of porno-graphing that concerns non-sovereignty, I aim to approach the 'excess' that I associate with 'dirty' sexual subjectivity and sex. According to Ledare, it is exactly this 'excess' that discursively has no language authorised to it but from which 'the potential to empathise with someone else, to undo the negations of difference floats.'[372]

Through our conversation, Ledare's suggestion regarding sexual subjectivities that cannot be talked about was that these don't have language discursively authorised to them because they relate to and operate as 'excess'; that they function as pointers to how language (and in this sense structure) renders what it tries to reach unspeakable and unapproachable through its own use (I have explained the Lacanian position regarding language and desire in the 'Introduction' to this thesis). Ledare's own question 'where does meaning reside inside an art-work' operates as an approach to said matters regarding language and sexual 'dirtiness'. As I have explained, I regard this question as close to my question 'What is it that makes art, art?' To explore these issues of meaning-making in porno-graphing actions I examine how Ledare uses

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[372] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

pornographic vocabularies, and artistic and sexual dirtiness to 'question the assumptions of the universal through a position of lack or of difference' in his works *Pretend* and *Double Bind*.

**Leigh Ledare**

Leigh Ledare started showing his work publically in 2007 and his first solo show was the body of work *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* in 2008 at Rivington Arms in New York. His biggest solo exhibition *Et Al* was in WIELS Contemporary Centre in Brussels in autumn 2012. *Et Al* was accompanied by a limited-edition publication (entitled *Leigh Ledare, et al.*). Along with *Pretend*, this publication, curated by Elena Filipovic, displayed all of Ledare's other works: *Collectors Commissions* 2008, *Personal Commissions* 2008, *Double Bind* 2010, *A Modest Exchange* 2011 and *An Invitation* 2012. *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* (consisting mainly of images that feature the artist's mother having sex) attracted attention from the 'art-scene' and 'art-market'[373] and thus marked Ledare's entry into the art-world. Ledare currently has an established art-career in the sense that his work is presented in well-known events in the West such as Manifesta and the Whitney Biennial. His work (*Pretend* and *Double Bind*) stands in my PhD as an example of work that involves porno-graphing methodologies within the contemporary art frame whilst receiving a volume of attention greater than the rest of my case-studies. For example, whilst the authors of the *Blue Tape*, Kathy Acker and Alan Sondheim are also acclaimed and influential,

the *Blue Tape* itself is an older piece of work (made in the 1970's) that has only started being shown since the mid-2000's and is most often if not always discussed within the frame of the legacy and practice of Kathy Acker. In this sense, the porno-graphing methodologies of self-objectification in these works take place in different contexts, revealing the distinct operations and key aspects of those approaches.

In my thesis, I examine how artists who use porno-graphing actions self-objectify into how they may *potentially* be perceived and also how they deal with their own and their work's exposure. So, an important reason that I include Ledare's work as a case-study in my PhD is because his work receives this volume of current public attention. For example, I examine how Ledare self-objectified for the making of *Pretend*, considering instances of the actual reception and discussing how he later used this reception to further self-objectify into 'dirty' subjectivities for the making of *Double Bind*. Ledare's work and in particular *Pretend* (especially around the time of its first exhibition) has been discussed as much for its apparent subject-matter as its status as art. Numerous online authors have used the term 'Oedipal complex' to discuss and comment on the situation in which Ledare made this work with his mother.[374] By framing *Pretend* as the expression of an Oedipal complex, such articles project a first reading of the situations that *Pretend* uses as involving psychologically 'troubled', pathological individuals and relationships. On one level, Ledare himself challenges pathological readings through his other art-projects, his writing, and public speaking;

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[374] Examples of such articles:  Carpentier, M 2008, 'Leigh Ledare's Oedipal Complex Is Not Our Gain', *Jezebel*, blog post, 30 July. Available from: http://jezebel.com/5031205/leigh-ledares-oedipal-complex-is-not-our-gain/. [27 May 2015].
Mathieson, F 2013, 'Does Photographing Your Mother Having Sex Really Qualify As Art?', *Refinery29*, blog post, 11 October. Available from: http://www.refinery29.com/2013/10/55129/leigh-ledare-mother-having-sex-photo/. [27 May 2015].

my own analysis is heavily informed, as I have noted, by my conversations with him. In this sense, it is evident in my approach that my understanding of how Ledare's work exceeds this form of simplified readings is based on my personal contact with him. Therefore, I argue that when deliberating upon pathologising readings, it is more crucial to consider that it is the porno-graphing actions and the art-works themselves that challenge such readings because their artist, in this instance Ledare, is prepared for this sort of reception. By 'prepared' I don't mean that such readings don't personally affect Ledare but that he opens himself and the work up strategically to such negative scrutiny so as to complicate and challenge the viewer's patterns of meaning-making. Therefore, part of the contribution of works that involve porno-graphing actions is shaped by how the artist acknowledges and structures the making and presentation of their work through techniques of self-objectification.

Through this writing, my aim is to maintain focus on the methodologies of deliberate self-submission to and provocation of pathologising readings such as those described above whilst also focusing on the destabilisation that such readings (whether possible or actual) generate within artists who create porno-graphing actions. I argue that the two situations i.e. self-objectifying into 'dirty' roles and being destabilised by being called 'dirty' (whether actually or potentially) work hand-in-hand. The apparent contradiction of the two factors (being open to being called 'dirty' and then feeling destabilised due to this very openness) essentially means that artists work from within positions of non-sovereignty. The use of non-sovereign positions in porno-graphing methodologies frames a space of excess such as a gap or void in meaning-making, which I consider to be one of the very aims of these works. Contextually and in terms of the mechanics of visual representation, this space of excess, gap or void manifests

through the use of pornographic and sexually explicit vocabularies alongside other signifiers of subjectivities, intersubjectivities and interrelationships. Examining how Ledare uses and displays lens-made images in *Pretend* and *Double Bind,* I argue that he suggests specific complications regarding the relationship between image and meaning that confront the viewer's own lens of perception.

Overall, I argue that *Pretend* and *Double Bind* require detailed critical attention that does not simply either dismiss as problematic (i.e. pathological) or celebrate its sexual explicitness and the ways that the artist explores and uses taboo – in terms of both the images and the context of their making – under the light of traditions of diaristic documentation of intimacy and family conflict. Instead, I argue that his use and exploitation of certain subjectivities through the form of self-objectification can be regarded and analysed on the basis of the artist's 'negative' tricks. I argue that such an approach can negotiate artistic value by attending to how the artist strategically self-objectifies into the very contradictions of what art may or may not be.

*Pretend* is primarily made up of images of Ledare's 'aging mother, who offers herself with disarming graphicness to her son's camera and to the unknown public who will then see the images.'[375] The first information given to the viewer – via the titling of the pictures – is that the woman portrayed is the photographer's mother: *Mom and Me in Mirror*, *Mom with Wrist Brace*, *Mother Tied to Catch 22*, *Mom with Scepter, Mom Pulling Down Panties with Purple Chair, Mom Spread with Red Heels,* etc. Ledare describes the beginning of *Pretend* as follows: 'I arrived home not having seen her for a year and a half. She knew I was coming and opened the door naked. A young man, almost exactly my age, was sprawled out naked.' The artist frames this moment as his mother's 'way of announcing to me what she was up to, at this period of her life – almost as to say "take it or leave it". I had a camera and began making photos of her then. She was the catalyst'.[376]

Therefore, what I cast as the foundational frame of porno-graphing actions inside lens-based art-works – artists producing work that involves them regarding a sexual situation or set of sexual dynamics present in their life independently and outside their art practice as potential material for art making – is evident in *Pretend*. Ledare was literally faced with a sexual situation, the way his mother was living and communicating her sexual activities and subjectivity at a particular moment of her and his life, and he decided to observe and act upon this situation with the aim of

[375] Filipovic, E 2012, 'The Mother of Photography' in E Filipovic, (ed), *Leigh Ledare, et al.*, p. 16, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre and Mousse, Brussels and Milan.
[376] O'Hagan, S 2013, 'Oedipal exposure: Leigh Ledare's photographs of his mother having sex', *The Guardian*, 10 October. Available from: www.theguardian.com. [20 November 2014].

producing art. Another aspect of the porno-graphing action present in this work is that of introducing non-sovereign subjectivities through sexual situations that are or appear to be taboo or transgressive. *Pretend* is suggestive of violating 'some unspoken social and moral codes' and 'taboos that are unwritten or unspoken in any book of law (or photography)'.[377] If these 'taboos' are what Michael Taussig in *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* defines as the 'public secret', that 'which is generally known, but cannot be articulated'[378], then the functioning of the porno-graphing action is that of a literal and explicit articulation (literal and explicit in terms of its photographic nature and the use of memorabilia), an active making of and working through such a taboo sexuality, which in this case relates to incest.

Additionally, Ledare *explicitly* hints towards the possibility of desiring his mother sexually. Alongside numerous photographs (the number of images varies from show-case to show-case) and three videos, texts are presented in frames on the walls: handwritten and typed notes, journal entries and saved magazine pages. One of them, *Girls I Wanted to Do*, is a note written by the 10-year-old Ledare to himself about all the girls he would like to have sex with which includes 'all of my brother's girlfriends' and 'mother'. *Mom and Me in Photobooth* (figure 16) is a piece composed of 16 small scale black and white photobooth pictures placed in a single frame where we see Ledare posing with his mother: first they look at the camera, then they hug, cheek-kiss, lip-kiss and eventually embrace in a seemingly passionate tongue-kiss. These are some of the most suggestive moments of the project regarding the sexual

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[377] Filipovic, E 2012, pp. 18-36.
[378] Taussig, M 1999, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*, p. 5, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA.

dynamic between Ledare and his mother. The porno-graphing methodology at work is of taking-on a situation that when seen from an outsider position (not the participants) has the potential of being received as transgressive, taboo and 'wrong' and acting upon it to make art from it. The 'wrong' situation is this of a mother answering the door to her son naked as her lover, who is her son's age, lays on her bed also naked. The acting upon this situation involves the process of the artist's (her son's) reflection of the possibility of how this situation could be received as sexually 'wrong' and taboo. He acts upon this possibility, using the camera and activating the 'wrongness' of the situation further and in doing so, introducing his (and her) agency into the frame under which such a situation would be considered taboo to begin with. For example, I argue that Ledare decides to produce, gather and present material such as *Mom and Me in Photobooth* and *Girls I Wanted to Do* exactly because he conceived, conceptualised and framed his project as dealing with issues of 'dirty' sexual subjectivity, taboo and representation.

The sexual subjectivity of Leigh Ledare's mother (who doesn't remain anonymous; her name, Tina Peterson features in several texts as part of and in reference to the exhibition) is foregrounded by the fact that she is someone who allows her son to take pictures of her in sexual situations consistently over eight years, even posing for him. The subjectivity of Ledare as the artist responsible for this body of work is cast as part of the project in multiple ways: the deviancy of a son who is interested in, willing to, and actively taking pictures of his mother in such situations; the 'improper' act of producing such material and projecting them into the world; and that of the male author who uses a woman as a sexual object for the benefits of his work. Considering this work as involving actions of porno-graphing and applying the ideas of the anti-

social thesis within queer theory, Ledare uses the agency of negativity to challenge

the normative subjectivity of the male who directs his photographic gaze to a female

subject by submitting into this role. Ledare negotiates the production of sexualised

images through self-objectifying into a position that is possibly politically 'wrong'.

The artist uses this methodology of self-objectification, making it more central and

explicit in *Double Bind,* which is a lens-based body of work that 'writes back into the

reception of *Pretend*'[379] and which I will be discussing in detail in the second section

of this chapter.

What is presented as the central focus of the images in *Pretend*, whose making

process is described as a collaboration between Ledare and Peterson[380] is Peterson's

sexual persona, echoing through possible roles and stereotypes regarding aging,

womanhood, femininity, motherhood and daughterhood. For example, while the

majority of pictures in the exhibition feature Peterson 'au naturel' – a term that

Filipovic gives which describes both Peterson's nudity and the diaristic, often low-

tech aesthetics of some of the images – Ledare invites the viewer to consider her

sexual subjectivity through other details of her life. Through visual and written

material, he gives information about her personal and professional past, her

relationship to other members of their family, the various ways Peterson addresses her

agency and authorship through the photographic lens and her ways of using various

outfits to express her creativity. For example, Ledare positions his mother as a subject

inscribed socially through her attachments to her family members by including

images of her parents (for example, *Grandparents & Grandma and Me in Hospital)*

[379] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 19 December.
[380] Lange, C 2009, 'Leigh Ledare. Confession, amateur porn, vulnerability and a complicated mother-son relationship', *Frieze*, blog post, 5 May. Available from: https://frieze.com/article/leigh-ledare. [20 November 2014].

and images of her other son (such as *Brother in Providence* and *Brother Pressed Charges)*. Ledare displays a portrait of her as a 16-year-old 'award-winning ballerina' entitled *Mom's Profile in Seventeen Magazine, 1966*, photographed diagonally from above in a pink dress and wearing her hair in a ponytail with a ribbon (figure 17). Tina Peterson as a teenager was a ballet prodigy, later a model, an aerobics instructor and a stripper, and she participated in soft-core porn films.[381] Sometime before Ledare moved back in with her she used her other son's credit cards fraudulently to buy luxury goods that she claimed were gifts to her by wealthy men. Ledare changed his surname to 'Ledare' partly to escape the legal troubles caused by these frauds.[382] In making all this information available visually and textually, Peterson's 'clean' and 'orderly' side as the ballerina teenager and her 'dirty' and 'disorderly' side as the unlawful adult, a mother who is a stripper, committing frauds against her son, letting her other son photograph her when having sex, Ledare invites the viewer to build their own relationship to the material in presentation, by presenting 'discourses that typically are seen as binaries'[383] alongside each other.

The concept of 'destabilization' being the premise of Ledare's art-practice – 'when identity becomes unmanageable and the ideas of ourselves are thrown into crisis'[384] – his practice can be seen as an exploration of production from within the space of non-sovereign subjectivity. This is the ground Edelman and Berlant attend to and address in *Sex or the Unbearable* where they experiment with producing from within the

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[381] I consider a generic and commercial definition of 'soft-core pornography' such as: 'commercial still photography or film which has a pornographic or erotic component. It is less sexually graphic and intrusive than hardcore pornography'. Softcore pornography, *Wikipedia*, wiki. Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Softcore_pornography. [16 July 2016].

[382] Ledare, L 2013, pers. comm., 15 November.

[383] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 27.

[384] Joselit, D & Ledare, L 2012, 'David Joselit and Leigh Ledare, An Interview' in Filipovic, (ed), *Leigh Ledare, et al.*, p. 93. WIELS Contemporary Art Centre and Mousse, Brussels and Milan.

space between 'knowing' as that of coherence and 'the encounter' – and that of destabilisation and incoherence. Ledare's work can therefore be seen as approaching binaries and the boundaries between these binaries by strategically submitting to his own non-sovereignty, by allowing himself to be destabilised empirically whilst producing the work and opening himself to scrutiny, moral judgment and projection by showing his work.

Ledare's use of 'dirty', 'improper', 'taboo' and 'wrong' sexual subjectivities can be considered as creating 'encounters with the sexual that point to the sexual limit (of self-knowledge and of world building potential) in ways that are enigmatic'.[385] This 'enigma' is relevant to the -graphing element of his porno-graphing actions because it is this graphing that questions what is to be written and where, what is knowable and unknowable, what is visible and what invisible. For example, Ledare uses the term 'negative models' to contextualise what he describes as his 'graphing; opening information about dynamic relationships, sounding out structures that we are submitting to. Then the viewer figures from that point how to participate in them.'[386] So, Ledare uses porno-graphing actions to invite the viewer to 'perform an active reading' of what it is that actually takes place in *Pretend* and what prohibitions and boundaries have been transgressed: whether for example the incest taboo has been physically transgressed or 'enigmatically' transgressed via the photographic process.

Porno-graphing methodologies such as those at work in *Pretend* use sexually 'taboo' situations (like incest) implicitly and 'enigmatically' to address questions regarding art-value. For example, Ledare uses visual vocabularies that may be easily linked to

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[385] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 15.
[386] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.

the testimonial and diaristic photographic tradition of Nan Goldin; his work has on one occasion actually been curated by Goldin (for the exhibition *Ça me touché, Nan Goldin's Guests* at the annual photography-festival Les Rencontres d'Arles, in Arles, France in 2009). Yet, Ledare's use of those vocabularies is made intending, at least partly, to complicate such use of the photographic medium and the established art-value attributed to it. Goldin's work deals with private intimacy and trauma on the ground of building a discourse between authenticity, testimony, repair and photography. Goldin's widely exhibited and published acclaimed anthologies of photography such as *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) and *I'll Be Your Mirror* (1996) are 'visual diary works'[387]. 'Marginal'[388] groups such as drunks, drug-users, queers and people infected with HIV feature in her images alongside heterosexual sex, domestic fighting, death, pain and trauma. Goldin's work is associated with the documentation of human 'dirt': unmade beds; bathrooms; 'messy; messy lives'.[389] Her work, 'a measure of the relation between a particular moment of bohemian history, the art world and, to a more limited degree, mainstream culture' is to a great extent acclaimed on the ground of it 'offering an authentic document of life'[390] and is frequently characterised as 'intensely personal, spontaneous, sexual, and transgressive'.[391] The notion of 'testimony' is also strongly attached to her later work such as the project *The Devil's Playground* (2004) where she continues to produce and present photographs of herself and people she is close to but also moves on to landscapes. Goldin insists on photography's power to tell the truth, 'rejecting

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[387] Prosser, J 2002, 'Testimonies in Light: Nan Goldin: Devil's Playground', *Women: A Cultural Review,* vol.13, no.3, p. 345. Available from: Tandfondline [3 January 2105].
[388] Prosser, J 2002, 344.
[389] Prosser, J 2002, 341.
[390] Townsend, C 2003, 'Nan Goldin: Bohemian Ballads' in Hughes, A & Noble, A (eds) *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, p. 103, University of Mexico Press, Albuquerque.
[391] Matthew Marks Gallery, *Nan Goldin*. Available from: http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/artists/nan-goldin/. [10 January 2015].

fictionality: the staged photograph, digitalization, any too theoretical or clever conception of photography', stating that 'we need testimonial photography to tell the truth'.[392] Leigh Ledare dissociates his art-practice from hers on the grounds that her position 'under-theorises and suppresses theory around the actual complicated power relations between photographer and subject' and 'nullifies any intellectual or theoretical discussion around those complexities of representation'.[393] Considering that Goldin attributes and defends the capacity of truth-telling (as in the absence of conceptual mediation) to the use of photography she has been a pioneer of, Ledare's approach to the photographic medium can be seen as a form of 'dirtying' its testimonial capacity through his critical distance, detachment and even dryness. In a sense, Ledare uses and exploits the art-value of this testimonial truth-telling in order to complicate and question it. For example, while he creates snap-shot diaristic images and presents them in an autobiographical framework, he doesn't aim so much as to tell a 'true story' as to point to the different discourses that make up the subjects of this 'story'. Ultimately his project aims to reveal how subjectivity is a matter of discourse and to achieve this he 'models' characteristics, notions and discourses which can be seen as binary. Ledare describes the binaries his practice addresses as 'the rational and the irrational, the masculine and the feminine, the logical and the corporeal, the analytical and the affective, the structural and the subjective'.[394] He uses these as contexts of sexual subjectivity in his work by placing them in the framework of the encounter between the private and the public: 'placing the dialogic, which is very intimate and concentrated, in a broader social network'.[395] Thus, porno-graphing methodologies differ from 'testimonial' photographic practices in that they

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[392] Prosser, J 2002, p. 342.
[393] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.
[394] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.
[395] Joselit, D & Ledare, L 2012, p. 94.

don't draw art-value from testimonial claims to capturing truth or authenticity in terms of subjectivity for example – what, in my understanding, the artist Andrea Fraser refers to as the seductive 'romance of catharsis'.[396] They use autobiographical aesthetics precisely to question the ground between 'truthful' and 'fake' and so to also question the art-value attributed to the use of such notions.

Specifically, Ledare uses elements of autobiography in ways that, seen through the antisocial thesis, operate as 'an unwriting, an undoing, an unraveling of self'[397] – 'an unbecoming, a cleaving to that which seems to shame or annihilate.'[398] For example, to produce *Pretend*, Ledare (given that he does visually participate in the project) performs 'a double persona: a sleazy participant, suspended between complicity and bewilderment, and a detached, transgressive artist' and marks his image with the 'mustache of the pornographer, which is also the artist's trademark'.[399] These open-ended gestures that Ledare orchestrates to 'model binaries and contradictions' – here, for example, between art and pornography, success and failure – are tricks of the porno-graphing action. It is a perplexing marking of the space of art-making with elements associated with pornography – here for example, 'the mustache of the pornographer' – because it is enigmatic in how it remains elusive, moving between explicitness and implicitness. The ways that Ledare invites the viewer both explicitly and opaquely to consider the sexual subjectivities that he uses as his art-material by intersecting discourses and contexts (such as those of art and pornography) appears to be distant, detached and vague, as if the artist withholds meaning and resists

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[396] Anastas R, Bordowitz G, Fraser A, Koether K & Ligon G 2006, 'The Artist Is a Currency', *Grey Room*, no. 24, p. 112. Available from: The MIT Press [19 January 2015].

[397] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 149.

[398] Halberstam, J 2008, p. 151.

[399] Guagnini, N 2012, 'Pretend You Are Actually Dead' in E Filipovic, (ed), *Leigh Ledare, et al.*, p. 62-64, WIELS Contemporary Art Centre and Mousse, Brussels and Milan.

resolution. For example, when the author of the article 'Oedipal exposure' asks 'the obvious question', 'Why did he do it?', Ledare's answer is: '(It) comments on the confusion around these sexual boundaries […] through imposing herself on me as a subject, she was asking me to be complicit in her sexualisation. I saw her sexuality as a means of antagonising her father and refuting expectations he had for how she should behave as a mother, daughter, and woman of her age'. His answer is described by the journalist as a 'retreat to a mixture of conceptual art speak'. [400] In conceptualising sexual subjectivity, and in that sense critically detaching himself from it, Ledare addresses and problematises any potential tendency of the receiver of *Pretend* to read the work under a light of pathologisation (an Oedipal complex for example) yet he doesn't redress it directly, maintaining a position that Edelman casts as 'an ongoing effort of divestitude, a practice of undoing' that 'can make no claim – no claim to the good or proper, and so to no ground from which identitarian claims for redress of wrongs may be launched'.[401] For example, Ledare does not at any point apologise for or reproach the elements of his mother's personality and life that can be presented as 'harmful' to him – such as her association with fraud and pornography. To the contrary, attention is drawn to Peterson's experience of commercial porn through the inclusion of clips from a porn-film she participated in, which was made before *Pretend*. Ledare puts this appropriated footage in a video-piece that he calls *The Gift*. The title of this body of work, *Pretend You Are Actually Alive,* derives from this same video – 'pretend you are actually alive' is an unscripted sentence the male actor says to Peterson, challenging her performance. Ledare chose to display a scene from this video where Peterson gets spanked over a man's knees (until she slips off), which makes literal Peterson's behaviors of self-objectification, submission and

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[400] O'Hagan, S 2013.
[401] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 19.

masochism which are the very tools she uses to enter the making of *Pretend*. As

Ledare himself describes it:

> I see her using a masochistic model as a negation: by submitting herself to
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> a trauma as a means of transgressing a normative logic, it paradoxically
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> became possible for her to overwrite the power dynamics within our
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> family. She was actively stigmatizing herself as an indirect means of
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> stigmatizing and disempowering her father.[402]

Following the thinking of the antisocial theory and its concept of the value of the

agency of negativity, Peterson taking a position of submission into the normative

logic she seeks to transgress can be cast as 'shadow feminism'. Shadow feminism is a

'category of thought, performance and art' that Halberstam developed to refer to the

performance work of Marina Abramović, Yoko Ono and Chris Burden. 'In this genre,

we find no "feminist subject" but only un-subjects who cannot speak, who refuse to

speak; subjects who unravel, who refuse to cohere; subjects who refuse "being" where

being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal

subject.' Through the 1960's and 70's, performance art 'often presented extreme

forms of self-punishment, discipline and evacuation in order to dramatize new

relations between body, self and power'.[403] For example in *Cut Piece* (1965), Ono

invited members of the audience to scissor-cut her clothes as they willed; Burden

'allowed himself to be shot'[404] for and during his performance piece *Shoot* (1971); in

*Rhythm 0* (1974) Abramović 'invited her audience to use and abuse her with 72

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[402] Joselit, D & Ledare, L 2012, p. 112.
[403] Halberstam, J 2010.
[404] Halberstam, J 2010.

objects she laid out on a table'.[405] For Halberstam, these works explored the 'ground of masochistic collapse'.[406] In response to Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* (2010), which involved presentations and recreations of all of her earlier works and a new performance where the artist sat on a chair at the Museum of Modern Art in New York with audience members invited to sit silently opposite her one at a time for their chosen duration, Halberstam wrote the article 'The Artist is Object' (2010). Through this article Halberstam address Abramović's will 'to become an object' and in doing so to 'stand in potent opposition to all of the clichéd forms of rationality that collect around embodied subjectivity'.[407] Keeping in mind Halberstam's analytical grammar in regards to the use of radical passivity in performance art, it quickly becomes evident that processes of self-objectification and self-submission in porno-graphing practices (which I examine in greater length in the second half of this chapter) play upon a refusal to speak and cohere, play upon the possibility of becoming 'un-subjects', essentially aiming to critique both the 'normative' and 'antinormative' structures that ascribe subjectivity. In her study of the 'proximity of art and capitalism', Kunst locates subjectivity at the core of artistic and capitalist production. She suggests that 'experimentation and the crisis of the subject drive the production of signs and gestures, which shifts the values about the importance of artistic gestures.'[408] Kunst additionally argues that 'contemporary work is strongly marked by transformation and flexibility' resulting in 'rigid and exploitative working conditions, in which every moment (including those of inactivity) is dedicating to seizing work better'.[409] She notices that 'many contemporary artistic works are interested in methods of creation that have an interesting and incestuous relationship with laziness

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[405] Halberstam, J 2010.
[406] Halberstam, J 2010.
[407] Halberstam, J 2010.
[408] Kunst, B 2015, p. 37.
[409] Kunst, B 2015, p. 183.

and non-work: mistakes, minimum effort, coincidence, duration, passivity etc.'[410] I argue that she uses the word 'incestuous' exactly because the methods through which art-works deliberate subjectivity and its production via passivity, 'minimum effort' and self-objectification can be thought of as 'perverse' or 'pathological'. For example, works that involve porno-graphing actions use the 'pathological' agency of the prostitute who embraces structures of exploitation.  Furthermore porno-graphing actions literalise and contextualise what can be considered 'pathological' in embracing exploitation through the means of self-submission into 'dirty' sexual situations and subjectivities, as Ledare does in *Pretend* for example, choosing to work with a sexual situation that openly hints towards incest.

*Pretend* presents the tension between the explicitness of the images with their rhetorics of autobiography and straightforwardness, and their inability (or refusal) to articulate that which they create as a whole – the 'dirtiness' they speak of, from and about. This 'dirtiness' is visually framed and marked through *Pink Stain*, a photographic image of a dirty wet-patch spread out on what appears to be a pink wall, ceiling or bed-sheets. *Pink Stain* is also the opening image of the *Et Al* publication that functions so as to introduce the reader to a set of domestic, interpersonal and sexual relations that could be considered 'dirty', 'disorderly' or unproductive. If 'social narratives work to domesticate the incoherence, at once affective and conceptual, that's designated as "sex"', *Pink Stain* is the graphing of the incoherence that exists within the domestic as the art-result of porno-graphing action. It does not refuse or run away from that incoherence but submits to it. The action of porno-graphing, making art out of sex, producing something out of sex, under the light of

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[410] Kunst, B 2015, p. 183.

anti-social theory can be cast as commenting on 'the compulsion to produce the "after" of sex, in the privileging of reproduction' and 'in the conflation of meaning itself with those forms of historical knowing whose authority depends on the fetishistic prestige of origin, geneology, telos'.[411] Instead of producing biological life out of sex, porno-graphing actions are used in this instance by Ledare to produce a body of work that aims to point back to the 'incoherence' of sex. Considering the 'politics that privilege heterosexual reproduction for its continuation of civilization' and 'position the Oedipal family as the figure of civilized ideology'[412] Ledare makes an 'antisocial' gesture by submitting to what potentially can be perceived as 'wrong' and 'dirty' about his biological family and standing responsible for the 'improper' authoring of images that foreground his family's 'dirtiness'.

The majority of the photographs in *Pretend* show Peterson in sexual poses or involved in sexual activities such as *Mom on Top of Boyfriend* where Peterson sits naked on the face of her lover who performs cunnilingus; *Mom Spread with Tiara* where Peterson lays naked on a bed with her legs open, her eyes closed, wearing a set of jewelry with a tiara inserted inside her vagina, and *Untitled (Entire Roll),* a spread-sheet of 34 images where the subject, Peterson, laying down smiling and posing provocatively for her son pulls her black underwear down and touches herself over and over in various directions and postures while Ledare encircles her with his camera from different angles (figure 18). In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes considers that:

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[411] Edelman, L 2007, 'Ever After: History, Negativity, and the Social', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol.106, no. 3, p. 470. Available from: South Atlantic Quarterly. [20 December 2014].
[412] Stamm, L 2010, 'Exploring the antisocial thesis in Queer Theory', *Creating Histories Through Film, 12th Annual Conference San Francisco State University Department of Cinema Studies*. Available from: Liberal Arts Scholarly Repository (LASR). [8 December 2014].

Pornography ordinarily represents the sexual organs, making them into a motionless object (a fetish), flattered like an idol that does not leave its niche; for me there is no *punctum* in the pornographic image, at most it amuses me (and even then, boredom follows quickly). The erotic photograph, on the contrary (and this is its very condition), does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it may as well not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside the frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me. The *punctum* then, is a kind of subtle beyond.[413]

Whilst several pictures of *Pretend* such as *Fur is Fabulous* can be read subjectively as having 'the elusive point of inexplicable but piercing interest' that Barthes calls 'punctum'[414] as well as being 'erotic' rather than 'pornographic', Ledare openly and unapologetically flirts with contextualising the whole of the project (the sum of its material) as pornographic. An example of an image that can be considered 'erotic' rather than 'pornographic' is *Fur is Fabulous*; a black and white photograph of Peterson posing elegantly with her hand under her chin and looking away from the camera, wearing a black fur coat and black top that is sliding down her shoulders, revealing part of her breasts whilst at the other side of the photograph, a bunch of flowers can be seen out-of-focus. On the other hand, images such as *Untitled (Entire Roll)* suggest through their small scale and repetition of content that the search in them for a punctum would be redundant. The lack of punctum is what makes it difficult to describe these images individually in ways that wouldn't sound merely like bland reports. In fact, these images that Ledare calls 'anti-photographs' seek to be read as bland reports exposing how, as Foucault has pointed out, sexual subjectivity

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[413] Barthes, R 1981, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, pp. 57-59, Hill and Wang, New York.
[414] Filipovic, E 2012, p. 21.

has been historically negotiated through reporting that sought to privilege articulation and coherence.[415] Peterson and Ledare embrace and reply to this administration of sex and sexuality through self-mockery, for example the photograph *Mom Spread with Red Heels* where Peterson, wearing just a pair of red high heel shoes performs an acrobatic manoeuvre, lifting herself through her arms and spreading her legs whilst making a serious yet deliberately ugly facial expression.

Overall, Ledare's porno-graphing actions in *Pretend* appear to put the value attributed to photography-art, the value of the 'punctum' to the test. Through the ways that Ledare places images that could be thought of as having a 'punctum' and therefore as pointing 'outside the frame' towards 'reason' and 'higher value'[416] next to the 'porn body' that signifies 'dirtiness and disorder'[417] the artist doesn't aim to highlight the properties of such images so as to clearly differentiate between the two and claim art-value (the status of his work as art) based on this differentiation. He instead creates 'ambivalence'[418] or 'open systems'[419] in regards to how the work can be received and how it negotiates coherence. Through these 'open systems' it is suggested that the viewer's attempt to cling on to coherence may be missing the means of approaching the excess, which is what discourse (i.e. the language and structure that attribute 'punctum' with value and porn with dirtiness and disorder) in a sense covers up. I will further examine how Ledare uses porno-graphing actions to approach and surround excess in the second half of this chapter. I mention it here to draw attention to how one of Ledare's aims is to expose how the discourse within which his work may be considered pornographic depends upon other discourses such as ones surrounding

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[415] Foucault, M 1978.
[416] Barthes, R 1981, p. 42.
[417] Attwood, F 2002, p. 93.
[418] Filipovic, E 2012, p. 21.
[419] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 30 January.

photography-art. Thus, the meaning and value of an image heavily depends upon established structures of representation. He presents sexual dynamics and situations and autobiographical material as reports, as the titles of the images function as literal and brutally honest descriptions of what is taking place inside the images. Therefore, he appears to invite the viewer to apply their perception with no fear of misrecognising the content of the images. The way *Pretend* works with 'dirty' sexual subjectivity and thus with the destabilisation of subjectivity forces the viewer to acknowledge their 'tendency to cling on to order'[420] and to engage with the work through their own non-sovereignty. I will also use the second half of this chapter to further investigate how Ledare multiplies challenges to this 'clinging to order' and actively employs his and the viewer's non-sovereignty by examining *Double Bind*.

I have so-far described how in *Pretend You Are Actually Alive*, the artist Leigh Ledare and his mother, Tina Peterson use porno-graphing actions such as self-objectification, radical passivity and submission into destabilisation as tools in art-making. I exemplified some of the ways contexts and markers associated with pornography are used in *Pretend*, and that Ledare does this to expose how subjectivity (in this case his own and his mother's) is conjured from such contexts and marks. In approaching the question 'what does "dirtiness" do to art?' I suggest that if the 'subject itself by its definition is the crisis'[421] then the 'dirty' subject who transgresses sexual taboos and the artist subject who uses dirty subjectivities mobilise the agency of 'negativity', thus submitting to incoherence and inviting the viewer to do the same. In this way, Ledare's work poses new complexities that challenge binaries and boundaries between discourses of representation. Further on in this chapter I will demonstrate

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[420] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.
[421] Anastas R, Bordowitz G, Fraser A, Koether K & Ligon G 2006, p. 111.

how Ledare uses porno-graphing methodologies such as self-objectification to negotiate subjectivity and lens-based art-making by approaching and, in a sense, surrounding the space of excess, a space 'protective of sets of conditions of temporality and [is] this space where all of these potentials lie'.[422] How this space can generate an 'intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being'[423] and how those encounters may suggest ways of deliberating art, the viewer's participation and the value created through 'open-systems' of communication between art-object and the viewing subject.

### *Double Bind*

Leigh Ledare created *Double Bind* in 2009-2010, 'making use of a select set of social facts from his lived experience'. Ledare asked his ex-wife, Meghan Ledare-Fedderly to join him for a three-day trip in upstate New York 'and to participate in photography work during the trip'. He subsequently produced five-hundred black-and-white photographs of Ledare-Fedderly. He then invited her to take the exact same trip with her current husband, Adam Fedderly and paid for it. Adam Fedderly is a photographer and Ledare asked him to shoot the same volume of photographs; Fedderly upon his return handed to Ledare fourteen rolls of unprocessed film. Ledare then

> produced the other elements of *Double Bind*: a print-media collection of
> some six thousand pages appropriated from a wide variety of magazines,

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[422] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[423] Berlant & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

newspapers, and other periodicals, and forty-eight panels of imagery that

arranged and montaged his and Fedderly's photographs with these mass-

media materials.

The installation of *Double Bind* has been presented publically multiple times; I saw it

in the *Leigh Ledare et al* art-show in WIELS Contemporary Centre in Brussels in

2012 alongside *Pretend* and other works by Ledare. Some other show-cases *of Double

Bind* have taken place at the Michele Didier gallery in Paris (2012) and at Basel Art

Fair (2015). In 2015, a book with the same title, *Double Bind,* was published by

A.R.T press.[424] The dialogical format of the book, set between Leigh Ledare and Rhea

Anastas, aims to 'reach for the contingencies of viewing and the recording of those

dynamics in language, at every turn pointing to the gaps that lie between work and

receiver, work and interpretation'.[425] The two authors' approach is that the book, like

the installation of *Double Bind*, wants 'to redress spectacle without falling into the

sterile critiques of so-called correct positions'.[426] I use their dialogue to support my

own analysis specifically because I regard the two authors' approach as a critical

examination that goes beyond dogmatisms and the potential comfort or safety of

clear-cut positions. I contend that they are not invested in a particular direction, for

example a specifically 'antinormative' (what Ledare calls 'so-called correct') frame

because they discuss the conflicts they examine from within and thus not as

uninvolved observers.

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[424] Anastas, R & Ledare, L 2015, *Double Bind*, A.R.T. PRESS, New York. This book being written in dialogical format, from now on every time I quote from it I will be noting in my references only the name of the person who speaks, Anastas or Ledare, to distinct the two authors' voices and approaches.
[425] Anastas R 2015, pp. 7-8.
[426] Ledare, L 2015, p. 19.

The two issues – one of meaning-making and its relation to excess, to gaps, and the other of disordering, destabilising as part of the creation and negotiation of the art-image – are both at the core of what I term as porno-graphing actions. The fact that *Double Bind* involves porno-graphing methodologies is made clear by the fact that Ledare took a situation, that unfolded outside his artistic conjuring and control – his ex-wife remarrying – and decided to make work from it. Whilst Ledare-Fedderly's remarriage is not a sexual situation per se, Ledare acts precisely on sexualising it, pushing out and framing up the sexual dynamics embedded in it through his particular strategies of structuring the piece both in its production and installation. For example, in addition to taking semi-nude pictures of Ledare-Fedderly, Ledare – whilst not giving any instructions to Fedderly as to how to photograph his wife – anticipated that Fedderly would take nude and post-coitus pictures of her (since Ledare-Fedderly and Fedderly are a couple). Fedderly indeed shot such images, and Anastas calls these 'trophy' pictures. [427]

The installation of *Double Bind* is composed of a large series of wall-frames and desk-vitrines where Ledare collages the original material taken by the two men during the two trips – mostly images of Ledare-Fedderly but also some interior and exterior landscapes – with found media images and 'personal artifacts, …various notes and fliers, drawings, my and Meghan's marriage certificate, photographs that Larry Clark had taken of me.'[428] The content of those media images – which at various instances appear under, on top of, or next to pictures of Ledare-Fedderly, and at others are individually framed – ranges from advertisements and pictures of food to articles

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[427] Anastas, R 2015, p. 37.
[428] Ledare, L 2015, p. 223.

referring to 'significant political events'[429] and feminist book reviews. Popularly

distributed pornographic images – such as naked women and heterosexual, gay and

lesbian sex – are spread rhythmically throughout the installation and surround the

image of Meghan Ledare-Fedderly. Her image in the installation is 'continually

present and has the effect of surrounding the viewer…immersing the viewer in her

looking and the looking that surrounds her image,' in this way standing 'as an

individual, a bastion of privacy and interiority against the mass-cultural pages.'[430]

Ledare-Fedderly's self-performance and representation as well as the contexts of

being photographed by the two men can be perceived as linked to the private or the

interior. At the same time, the public print-media pornographic images can be

considered as the commodification and objectification of the female subject. Ledare's

mixing of material in *Double Bind* is

> after another theory of external life and the internal, interiority, one that
>
> sees the necessary rejection of the way feminist tools blocked the psychic
>
> workings of sexism and its self-internalization, and which reproduces the
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> Freudian repression/liberation logic.[431]

In this sense, in porno-graphing actions artists make use of sexual images to contain

binaries such as interior/exterior and exploitation/empowerment within one art-work.

Sex and sexual subjectivity is thus used 'as a site for experiencing this intensified

encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being'.[432] Edelman and Berlant

frequently use the term 'with and against' to refer to their process of deliberating sex

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[429] Anastas, R 2015, p. 217.
[430] Anastas, R 2015, p. 218.
[431] Anastas, R 2015, p. 60.
[432] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

and sexuality through negativity without 'breaking down the relational thread that binds us to each other and to the object'.[433] In this sense, it is as though Ledare has orchestrated these images with and against each other. He complicates the boundaries between notions such as interior and exterior, private and public, 'trash' and 'critical art'[434] to 'touch on the regulation of appearances, and the subsequent excess left over from that process of regulating.'[435] This particular use of pornographic material – which I identify as involving porno-graphing methodologies – operates in *Double Bind* as a strategy of addressing and challenging any tendencies of the viewer to 'cling on to order' and 'need to categorize,' by putting the viewer in a spot of not knowing how to enter the work. For example, this becomes evident when Anastas states that

It is difficult to view *Double Bind* in any kind of stable way on the scale of presentation that the work uses and at the level of detail – or its accumulation – that it presents. I literally can't take it in, and in moments, as I watch myself regarding this sexual-difference narrative, a narrative for me about contemporary theory itself, I almost can't stand it.[436]

Anastas' description of feeling unable to take in the work nor stand it comments on the effect of *Double Bind* as a whole, and so on how Ledare uses and combines all the previously mentioned material within the art-work. I argue that his particular use of pornographic elements whose presence is understood by Anastas as 'repeated and

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[433] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 71.
[434] Anastas and Ledare uses terms such as 'trash' and 'so-called critical art' in several occasions in their book, referring to value attributions that can be projected on to the material Ledare uses and produces. For example, Anasta's use of the term 'so-called critical art' in p. 61 and Ledare's use of the word 'trash' in p. 227.
[435] Ledare, L 2015, p. 60.
[436] Anastas, R 2015, p. 28.

significant' as well as 'intense'[437] is crucial and catalytic in achieving this level of confrontation in the entire composition. His working process involves porno-graphing methodologies because his reason and strategy is not concerned with the arguably 'shocking' effect of pornographic language but with the posing and challenging of binaries (such as interior/exterior, order/disorder, right/wrong etc.).

Proposing that the 'mass-media pornography in *Double Bind* may also speak to an additional set of cultural conflicts or oppositions'[438], Ledare uses pornography because binary-infused thinking is and has been attached to it in great lengths. He thus uses pornography in order to tackle dichotomies and the viewer's meaning-making patterns that are attached to and 'clinging onto order'.[439] Take for example the thinking that frames pornography and art as a binary on the basis of their value, the value of art versus the lack of value in pornography such as Doyle describes: 'a defining aspect of modern (legal) distinction between obscenity and art lies in the perception of the pornographic text as having no value – no textual density, no instructive purpose – other than a sexual one. *That* value is in turn negated because porn substitutes a text for "the real thing"'.[440] In a framed collage of *Double Bind*, we see an image of Ledare-Fedderly covering her face with her hands, laying on her side with her underwear pulled down her thighs, an 'apparently postcoital image of Adam's'. Beneath this lies a 'highly produced pornographic image' while on top of both images lies the picture of two coins. The two coins largely obscure the found pornographic image; all that is left visible is 'a teal bedspread on top of which, fragmented, leans a woman's face, her lips parted sensuously – a parallel to what's

[437] Anastas, R 2015, p. 58.
[438] Ledare, L 2015, p. 59.
[439] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.
[440] Doyle, J 2006, p. 14.

covered by Meghan's hands.' Above the image of Meghan Ledare-Fedderly is the image of a bowl of blackberries next to a martini glass, 'an indicator of consumer and consumed'[441] and between the two is a portrait of Georges Bataille that is also partially hidden. At the bottom of this composition the viewer sees the picture of an ambiguous form burning-up in flames (figure 19). In this instance, Ledare uses the image of the coins and the portrait of Bataille – whose work on sex, intimacy, excess and productivity has been widely influential to Western critical thinking, and therefore carries a certain level of currency – to signify value matter-of-factly. He reminds the viewer that both the image of Ledare-Fedderly laying down semi-naked and hiding her face after sex, and the pornographic picture are viewed via lenses of representational traditions that pre-date either of these two images. Consequently, his 'montage' doesn't challenge notions of value that could possibly be attached to each image but the value of viewing and reception based on rigid positions.

In regards to pornography, Ledare suggests that

> Complexly staging something that may be pornographic presents an access
> or a means to transcend simplified critiques of pornography, whether those
> are anti-pornography feminist orthodoxies or politically correct pro-sex
> positions that can be easily just as simplifying in terms of a notion of
> liberation.[442]

Pornographic vocabularies are then used in porno-graphing methodologies such as those at play in *Double Bind* in order to tackle issues of 'normativity' and 'anti-

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[441] Ledare, L 2015, p. 50.
[442] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.

normativity' crucial in contemporary theory, as Anastas suggests. Sets of 'complex staging,' that push boundaries of critiques such as these propose that a certain attachment to anti- or pro-porn positions may only be regulating that which they are set to 'liberate' or to 'progress.' For example, operating on binaries such as 'self/other, rational/irrational, masculine/feminine', such critiques may just be reproducing categorising and structuring methods instead of moving beyond them. Also, 'despite how progressive we may claim to be', this regulation can result in 'logics of inclusion/exclusion' and the actual penalization of difference.[443] Subsequently,

> *Double Bind* centers its subjects and the viewer on its representations in order
> to foreground these asymmetries that we might not want to recognize, so as to
> stress that we're not over these issues – we're not in a postgender situation for
> one. This extends to suggest how as singular subjects we're submitted, and
> submit ourselves, to systems; how we are written by discourse, how we trade
> our autonomy, with all the trappings that accompany this.[444]

Ledare positions signifiers of meaning (e.g. a woman being photographed by her husband and ex-husband) and signifiers of value and discourse (e.g. pornography, advertisement, 'critical art') within a seemingly open-ended framework. The overwhelming volume of material in *Double Bind* generates 'abundance' or an 'abyss of meaning'. [445] He centres issues regarding subjectivity, ('how as singular subjects we're submitted, and submit ourselves, to systems') by self-submitting into certain positions, 'trading' his own subjectivity. To approach his tactics of self-objectification

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[443] Ledare, L 2015, pp. 57-58.
[444] Ledare, L 2015, p. 28.
[445] Ledare, L 2015, p. 88.

as well as their results, it must be considered how *Double Bind* writes back into the

reception of *Pretend*. For example, how the 'mass-cultural materials of *Double Bind*

[…] may recast the genre of realism that *Pretend* locates'[446] unveiling how the

autobiographical language the artist employed in *Pretend* is also a conscious use or

staging of aesthetics adopted from the conceptual outset of his project. By extension,

this reveals that when Ledare intentionally enacts and presents certain sexualities and

subjectivities into the world, he is consciously playing with the possibility that his

relationship with his mother could be read as incestuous, in this way 'calling forward

and complicating the judgments of other people.'[447] This reveals that a condition of

porno-graphing actions is that artists pre-consider how a sexual situation in their life

may potentially be perceived as 'taboo', 'sick' or 'wrong' and make work from such

situations, submitting and using – even exploiting – this 'taboo-ness'. Their aim is to

challenge the structures of thought that may regard such situations as 'wrong' and

'sick', to question systems of subjectivity-production and to ultimately suggest modes

of agency that on first glance may seem 'pathological' – for example empty of or in

excess of agency like the 'agency of the prostitute' – and thus easily dismissible.

Ledare attests that quick readings that frame *Pretend* within an Oedipal narrative

actually overlook and ignore Peterson's agency – for example how 'she was

performing a self-objectification as a negation.' Also, that such readings either

'charge' *him* for 'enabling her to fulfill something that people may regard in light of a

narrow morality'[448] or cast him as a victim of their relationship,[449] presumably a

victim of her incestuous or otherwise inappropriate and 'dirty' sexual subjectivity and

behavior. In Ledare's view, the fact that he staged *Pretend* 'without saying it means

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[446] Anastas, R L 2015, p. 223.
[447] Ledare, L 2015, p. 224.
[448] Ledare, L 2015, p. 94.
[449] Ledare, L 2015, p. 224.

this or that', not favoring or contextually underlining one particular meaning or judgment regarding his and his mother's subjectivities 'interferes with viewers' desires to categorize.' In this sense 'the sensationalizing of the work as taboo' and its reduction to 'this absurd Oedipal reading' is essentially a hurried categorisation so that the viewer does not encounter traits of Ledare's relationship with his mother that 'in reality were highly ambiguous'.[450] Whilst Ledare attests that he 'certainly played with assumptions like these…complicated them, as well as exploited them',[451] (assumptions such as the pathology of their relationship) he also explains that the reception around *Pretend* 'was particularly difficult to manage' for him.[452] That for example viewers or critics would take any fragment from the project or the book and present it such as to fit their own agenda, taking it out of context. Or that 'people were writing without even having seen the work. Just moralistically dismissing it as pathological.'[453]

Bringing together Ledare's thoughts outlined above makes it clear that the artist's investment in opening the ground to readings that are pathologising on multiple levels works in dialogue with how such readings, or the possibility of such readings destabilise him. Or, that in order to push beyond such readings, to push beyond categorisation and the viewers' desire for order and clear-cut meaning-making, he first allows himself to be open to such readings so that he can 'complicate' and 'exploit' them. The fact that this process involves his own destabilisation, his non-sovereignty, and the deliberation of his apparent contradictions – for example that he finds it difficult to manage a reception to which he willingly exposed and, in fact,

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[450] Ledare, L 2015, pp. 93-94.
[451] Ledare, L 2015, p. 224.
[452] Ledare, L 2015, p. 93.
[453] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.

self-objectified himself into – further reveals the porno-graphing nature of his methodology. His personal destabilisation (e.g. frustration, fear, contradictions) functions methodologically to pose the question of 'what it is that makes art, art?' or, as Ledare words it, 'where does meaning reside inside an art-work?' within the art-work. Whilst running the risk that the viewer may dismiss the work altogether (deciding that it is not art/has no meaning or value because it solely demonstrates a narrative of pathology or a pornographic rhetoric) it also offers the possibility for the viewer to perform an 'active reading' of the work, to build up a personal relationship to the work.[454] This in turn allows the potential for actual engagement and connection between the viewer and the wide spectrum of complexities that the work presents. Those complexities involve matters regarding the production of subjectivities and their manifestation and so the viewer's own participation in structures of creating and trading subjectivities. Ultimately, to engage with the images of *Double Bind*, which do not make claims to representation but on the contrary, are 'anti-photographs' or 'negative models'[455] and therefore concern the potential unpresentability of the subject, the viewer has to participate in what Edelman and Berlant term as 'encounters with negativity'.[456] This encounter can manifest, as Anastas describes, as the viewer feeling unable to stand the work, the work being 'unbearable', a term that Edelman and Berlant use to describe 'what cannot be borne by the subjects we think we are.'[457] For them, what is unbearable in terms of one's subjectivity is not merely the opposite of who one thinks one is but the 'vertiginous nonidentity' of negativity – what remains incoherent and unknowable no matter how 'much we think we know of our own and the world's incoherence.' In these terms, what is unbearable is not the

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[454] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.
[455] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.
[456] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 121.
[457] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 121.

opposite of how one comprehends their subjectivity but the incoherence against which one has built ways of understanding one's self.[458] Such are the 'categories' and 'order' that Ledare's work challenges. Thus, given that the porno-graphing actions in *Double Bind* employ negativity to deal with subjectivity, the 'unbearable' is evoked through the 'intensified encounters' the viewer becomes part of by being invited to endure and participate in determining their meaning. And so, the 'dirty' (in this instance pathological) subjectivity that the artist has self-objectified into operates as to underline 'the wrongheadedness of any reparative politics that turns being undone into a symptom of an illness or a measure of injustice.'[459] Ledare's 'undoing' of himself by self-objectifying into sexually and artistically 'dirty' roles and self-submitting into non-sovereignty functions so as to tempt the viewer to endure what may remain unknowable, for example in the relationship between Ledare and his mother through *Pretend*, or irresolvable, as in the interrelationships between the people, images and discourses of *Double Bind*. His use of porno-graphing action proposes modes of relating to these works such as enduring rather than categorising, and recognising one's own complicity in the construction of meaning. Edelman and Berlant's proposition is that negativity may be 'a challenge to engage with politics in unexpected places and in unpredicted ways'.[460] Following a similar line of thought, porno-graphing methodologies suggest to the viewer a manner of engagement with representation that may in turn offer an opportunity to challenge oppression or division (regarding subjectivity for example) by not succumbing to a plea for normalisation and legitimisation.

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[458] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 121.
[459] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 7.
[460] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. xvi.

To examine how such methodologies pose questions regarding value, art and meaning-making, it is important to review how the process of Ledare's self-submission into 'dirty' roles and subjectivities takes into account not only 'normative' potential readings of the work but also, as I mentioned earlier on, possible 'antinormative' critiques. In *Double Bind*, Ledare created 'analog' or 'copy' roles for the subjectivities that his mother self-submitted into; in this way his own self-objectification 'may have been aimed back at judgment structures within reception, certain tendencies that came up around *Pretend* '.[461] The curator Simon Baker uses the term 'entropy' to refer to how the images of both *Pretend* and *Double Bind* generate their 'own centrifugal force' and operate towards 'the same impossible conclusion'[462] regarding the representation of Peterson and Ledare-Fedderly. Due to the contextual complexity of the works, the representation of the two women is an 'impossible conclusion' – for example it is 'impossible' for the viewer to firmly conclude who these women may be, what they represent and how they do so. However, a significant apparatus through which meaning is ascribed to the images of Peterson and Ledare-Fedderly is the reception of Ledare's own positions and subjectivities (such as the son, the ex-husband, the pornographer, the artist etc.). Thus, the 'entropy' that Baker credits to these works is rather a generation, and most importantly a tool of how the artist self-objectifies himself into positions and subjectivities. An example of how the strategy of self-objectification into roles or subjectivities in porno-graphing actions is continuously and 'entropically' invested in and informed by how the artists think that those roles can potentially be perceived as 'wrong' or 'dirty,' can be seen in Ledare's claim that he takes on 'copy' roles of

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[461] Ledare, L 2015, p. 93.
[462] Baker, S 2011, 'LEIGH LEDARE: "Double Bind" (2010)', *American Suburb X*. Available from:http://www.americansuburbx.com/2011/01/leigh-ledare-double-bind-2010.html/. [25 May 2016].

Peterson's. Essentially, he responds to this part of the reception of *Pretend* that pathologised him and Peterson by self-objectifying into potential further pathologisation or criticism regarding the subjectivities he occupies and the ways he does so. This 'entropic' system – an inward movement towards a decline or excess of order – operates so as to surround the construction of subjectivity, aiming towards its destabilisation or disordering. Or, in other words, Ledare bases his decisions regarding the roles he self-objectifies into not so as to turn away from the excess that is potentially negatively attributed to him through the reception of his work but in order to surround this excess as close as possible. In doing so he points towards or creates a gap in regards to the thinking patterns of meaning-making that negotiate such subjectivities on the basis of a health/illness dichotomy for example.

In claiming that he copies Peterson, Ledare could potentially be criticised for being politically irresponsible or unengaged for assuming that he, a beneficiary of young, white, heterosexual and male privileges could in any way identify with or self-submit into the stigmatisation, criminalisation and shaming that targets female subjects, especially sex-workers; or that him copying her is in itself an act of objectification and exploitation, and therefore an injustice. The porno-graphing methodology of these processes becomes evident in Ledare's strong awareness of all these potential readings. In fact, his self-objectification is aimed at these possible critiques as much as it is also aimed at critiquing structures that actually, in realistic and sociopolitical terms, attribute him his privileges. His use of porno-graphing methodologies suggests that both lines of thinking (that which affords him certain privileges, and that which can radically dismiss him on the grounds of such privileges) are part of the same social milieu of binary right/wrong or healthy/sick structural thinking that would, and

did, reduce *Pretend* as well as his and Peterson's subjectivities to an 'Oedipal complex':

> What's at stake is really acknowledging how much we are not in a post-gender situation. So the work is raising asymmetries in order to bring forward the antagonisms of the different positions. And I think what's problematic is that if you try to stand outside of those positions and you just try to analyse from a non-complicit space, like structurally analyse a critique of pornography, it creates this sort of morality that creates a binary, whether we are participants or not, participants with clean hands or not. It doesn't allow for the actual identifications to really occur. So partly what I am trying to do is propose a model of complexity into the simplified receptions around these issues.[463]

Thus, Ledare's porno-graphing methodologies question on equal measure both 'normative' and 'antinormative' thinking, the latter on the grounds of its potential claims to equality, social justice or liberation, and so the work amounts, as Anastas notices, to being 'risky because it rubs against expectations for so-called critical art.'[464]

To further examine the 'dirty' subjectivities that the artist occupies in *Double Bind*, as well as their possible effects and operations, it is important to first acknowledge that for the creation of the project Ledare purposely acted on the private life of a heterosexual married couple in order to make art from it. In authoring the project, Ledare acts on the sex between the couple, altering it for the purposes of his project: he makes himself part of the sexual life between husband and wife – an intrusion that

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[463] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[464] Anastas, R 2015, p. 61.

can potentially be seen as inappropriate and exploitative. For example, it is because of Ledare's artistic initiation that the couple Ledare-Fedderly & Fedderly went on this trip, had sex in this location, resulting in Fedderly taking post-coitus and 'trophy' pictures of his wife. Ledare interprets those post-coitus pictures as partly addressed to him; that through them he is told that he doesn't have sexual access to Ledare-Fedderly anymore and that Fedderly is the one who gets to take those after-sex photographs.[465] So, through his physical distance, his non-possession, his *lack*, Ledare makes himself present in the married couple's sex. This can potentially be received as inappropriate and 'dirty' due to the very distance through which Ledare acted on this sexual dynamic, which didn't include him to begin with, not even for his own personal and private sexual pleasure but for the purpose of artistic production. Furthermore, being perfectly aware that the images of *Double Bind* would be read in relation to *Pretend* – a sexually explicit piece – the artist underlined the sexual activity in *Double Bind*. For example, he stigmatised the legitimacy of the heterosexual married couple through the 'Oedipal complex,' the 'sick' sexual dynamics that *Pretend* presented. This exemplifies how porno-graphing actions involve the 'dirtying-up' of personal dynamics that would regularly be seen as 'normal' (heterornomative for example) such as the institution of the heterosexual married couple. At the same time, this particular method of 'dirtying' isn't solely aimed at what could be considered 'normal' but to the very structures of thinking that, in their determination for order, reproduce notions of 'normality'.

Secondly, Ledare self-objectifies into the 'dirty' role of the exploiter – he exploits the subjectivities of both Ledare-Fedderly and Fedderly, as well as their marriage and his

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[465] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.

own divorce. He orchestrates their roles by anticipating how the viewer will read them. For example, further to objectifying his ex-wife as a female, a wife, an ex-wife and an 'icon'[466] and sexualising her marriage for his own artistic agenda, he strategically and knowingly frames Fedderly in the 'wrong' heteronormative position of the straight and male photographer who objectifies his female subject, as ultimately it is Fedderly who takes naked and sexualised pictures of Ledare-Fedderly.

> And despite *that*, I work out of the project with dirtier hands than Adam because I have orchestrated the loop through which I have distanced myself from the very thing that I am orchestrating. Which functions as an allegory of the viewers' own distancing from the excess that is in the project […] That is what I mean about the work working back into the discursive positions that people take in order to regard the work.[467]

So, Ledare uses the 'cynical' distance of the prostitute who 'embraces the very system that exploits her' through activating the objectification of Ledare-Fedderly by Fedderly for the purposes of his project. To do so he takes on a 'dirty' orchestrating role, becoming an exploiter of exploitation as well as of its subjects, and ultimately displaying the 'extremely alienated relationship'[468] of prostitutes to their work. The chain of those porno-graphing gestures operates so that the viewer – due to the loop the artist has created through objectifying into a 'dirty' artistic subjectivity like Ledare describes – ends up 'distancing' themselves. For example, Anastas's comment about not knowing how to take in the work/not being able to stand it, basically meaning that the viewer is not certain about how to enter the work, or in a sense

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[466] Ledare, L 2015, p. 50.
[467] Ledare, L 2014, pers. comm., 22 December.
[468] Doyle, J 2006, p. 51.

becomes unwilling to do so, is even repulsed by it perhaps ('I almost can't stand it').

Ledare also suggests that the very 'question of individuating one's self', which I

understand as referring to one's self-submission into certain roles 'involves the

destabilization of one's subjectivity, which means that it also has the potential to be

contagious to others'.[469] In this sense, the viewer potentially distances themselves in

order to hold on to their sovereignty, or they distance as a result of having been

'contaminated' with destabilisation and are already non-sovereign, not-knowing of

how to perceive the work.

In the instance of the porno-graphing actions in *Double Bind*, Ledare surrounds art-

images (images made with the purpose to be part of an art project) with porn-images

(images with the purpose to sexually stimulate) and porn-images with art-images; in

this way, he is matter-of-factly fitting Kraus's proposition that 'like pornography, art

no longer exists because it is virtually everywhere'. Kraus suggests this synonymity

between non-existence with excess of existence in order to cast the question '"what is

contemporary art?"' as 'meaningless', because 'all art now is conceptual, defined by

its stance to other art and its place in the market'.[470] It can then be considered that this

synonymity of existence and non-existence (which implies a binary between the two

as much as it implies the collapse of the notion of art's existence, art's own art-value)

links to the 'pathological' agency of the prostitute: the pathology of having no agency

and having an excess of agency. Furthermore, through Kraus' proposition,

meaningless-ness or lack of meaning becomes synonymous with the impossible – that

it is meaningless to try to define contemporary art because it is impossible to do so.

Yet, considering that meaning is dependent on and formulated through language and

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[469] Anastas, R & Ledare, L 2015, p. 60.
[470] Kraus, C 2011, p. 119.

structure (the Lacanian symbolic order) it is precisely in the nature, so to speak, of meaning to not mean as it is 'unable to close the gap in identity, the division incised by the signifier, that "meaning," despite itself, means'.[471] In this sense meaning is already linked with the impossible – its own impossibility – and manifests through excess, for example the 'gap' in identity. Works that involve porno-graphing actions suggest that to self-objectify into artistically and sexually 'dirty' positions through, for example, the embrace of structures of exploitation (e.g. Kunst's view that 'experimenting with subjectivity is at the center of capitalist production'[472]) may carry the potential to speak precisely to the 'impossibility' of art, its 'meaningless-ness' and the anxiety that it may not have inborn value outside codes decided by the market. In other words, artists using porno-graphing methodologies re-negotiate the 'impossibility' of art's value or existence outside the economy by strategically and variously doubting the value of their work. For example, they negotiate value and meaning by approaching the 'gap in identity', the excess space left once it is considered that meaning and definition don't work in the way that, for example, 'life' itself

> in some sense, *doesn't* 'work,' is structurally inimical to happiness,
> stability, or regulated functioning, and that only the repetitive working
> through of what still doesn't work in the end… constitutes the condition in
> which something like flourishing could ever happen.[473]

Works that involve porno-graphing actions invite the viewer to acknowledge their role in meaning-construction and in a sense suggest that notions of value can

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[471] Edelman, L 2004, p. 13.
[472] Kunst, B 2015, p. 21.
[473] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

'flourish' through the exchange between art and the viewing subject. Kunst suggests that 'a time might be coming when the most radical politicization of art will be its detachment from any kind of economic value in order to reveal new affective and aesthetic articulations of the community'.[474] However, it is the very 'logic of futurism on which meaning always depends'.[475] In this sense, to place a hope for value-reformulation onto the future ignores that the mechanics of futurism are the same with those of reproduction and repair, the same structures of power, oppression and exploitation that can privilege the framing of art-value as in relation to money for example. Consequently, the positivist idea that the meaning of value (of art) may change in the future can be seen as running the risk of reproducing the very notion of value it wishes to move forward from. Furthermore, such proposition regarding the future of art deliberates art-value without taking into account how notions such as value and meaning can relate to excess, the gap or void inside such notions, and the strength of this void – for example that this space of excess is where 'the potential to empathize with someone else, to undo the negations of difference floats.'[476] Through porno-graphing actions artists challenge notions attached to art's value and its meaning by challenging futurism, 'this orientation toward the future, toward something always yet to come, conceived as bestowing a value of life by way of future anterior'.[477] This questioning of futurism takes place through the particular porno-graphing methodologies of using sex and the agency of negativity, which is to say, sex 'as a site for experiencing this intensified encounter with what disorganizes accustomed ways of being', as 'nonproductive, nonteleological, and divorced from

[474] Kunst, B 2015, p. 182.
[475] Edelman, L 2004, p. 11.
[476] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 25 January.
[477] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 3.

meaning making'.[478] Furthermore, as I have demonstrated, for the creation of porno-graphing actions artists use sex in the form of 'dirty' sexual subjectivities and inducing this 'dirtiness' into their artistic subjectivities. These processes of self-objectification into roles and the use of pornographic vocabularies are employed so as to approach questions regarding value and art i.e. what is it that makes art, art?/ 'where does meaning reside inside an art-work'? Consequently, porno-graphing methodologies use the exploitative and 'dirty' agency of the prostitute to underline the relationship between the art-image and the viewer and in this way to challenge patterns of value-attribution based on financial exchange.

In underlining how sex 'undoes the subject', porno-graphing methodologies draw attention to this undoing (i.e. destabilisation, non-sovereignty), and the experience of this undoing and becoming undone through the relationships between subjects, whether sex is involved or not. Thus, it could be considered that the 'affective articulations of the community' that Kunst suggests art should attend to should it aspire to claim a value independent of money may lie in how, as subjects, we undo each other, what sort of value we attribute to each other and how we do so. In other words, porno-graphing actions suggest that a re-ascribing of value outside the market may reside in the 'flourishing' of an awareness that as subjects we find and lose our own sense of value by ascribing value and lack of value to other subjects, and the structures we use, employ and exploit in order to do so. Thus, the proposition of porno-graphing actions is that a renegotiation of art's value beside the market doesn't find its locus in a hypothetical future where relations will be repaired. Instead, that the space of value and meaning-building can be found in 'intensified encounters' between

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[478] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

art and the viewing subject, should both be willing to participate acknowledging their complicity. Such participation in 'intensified encounters' that offers the potential to an 'openness to the world'[479] runs the risk of one becoming destabilised, non-sovereign and 'experiencing the world as incoherent'[480] – such as how unthinkable a world where art's value isn't based on financial value may seem.

[479] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 64.
[480] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 65.

# Afterword

In this writing I have developed a new terminology to think about artists who act on a sexual situation to make art from it; I have called this 'porno-graphing actions'. It is important that this (sexual) situation may exist in the artists' life before their decision to make art from it; additionally, they may choose it as art material because they consider that if it is seen from an outsider position, it has the potential of being perceived as 'dirty'. This is important because it is through this potentiality, and its ambiguity, that artists form their processes of self-objectification and self-submission into sexually and artistically 'dirty' positions. Thus one way in which artists act upon sex to make art, is the strategies through which they self-objectify into such 'dirty', 'wrong' or 'sick' positions, which also involves them being open to (even inviting) their works to be seen and measured as pornography or the documentation of a pathology rather than art. A question that keeps arising is who considers or may consider someone (such as an artist) or something (such as a sexual situation) as 'dirty'. I have suggested that artists who self-objectify and self-submit into 'dirty' sexual and artistic roles do so deliberating that these roles may *potentially* be seen as 'dirty'. Therefore in a sense the viewing subject is an unidentifiable and ambiguous figure and is not for example someone necessarily attached to 'normative' nor 'antinormative' politics. Such an approach, rather than claiming differences regarding political agendas of viewership, underlines the process of viewing and of perceiving in general. For artists who use porno-graphing strategies, forms of opinion-making that can nominate these artists with 'dirtiness' can come from anywhere/anyone, including their own selves and their immediate environments. In these terms, porno-graphing actions approximate questions such as who considers what for whom, and

how do personal, professional, social and public relationships process such considerations made by one individual for another. This is not to say that sex and sexual subjectivities are not as important when it comes to porno-graphing actions. It is through sex and pornographic vocabularies that the artists whose work I have been examining 'undo' themselves in order, as I have argued, to invite the viewer to undo their perception-patterns – which Ledare calls 'clinging to order' and to 'categories'.[481]

In my mind the question of how exactly an art-work can have a particular effect on viewers is somewhat of a mystery. In this sense, the question of who considers what, who is it that attributes value and meaning, whose authority I am assuming and recalling when I speak of a subject's 'dirtiness', links to a series of other questions regarding contexts of viewing. Such were the questions I was frequently asked when I was an art student as part of my art-making training: 'who is this art for?' 'who is the audience?', 'who is your *ideal* audience?'. To me these were scary questions I couldn't and can't answer not because I don't want my work to be seen but because the 'unknowness' of the viewing subject is crucial to the type of work I make, which is work involving porno-graphing actions. This ambiguity is important because if the art works' aims were framed within the works, or strictly framed within the artist's conscious process of making these works, then they possibly wouldn't invite the viewer to search for them, and thus not know how to enter them or 'stand' them; this is how Anastas describes her experience of viewing Ledare's *Double Bind*.[482] In short, porno-graphing actions direct the viewer back to their own viewing, suggesting

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[481] Ledare, L 2015, pers. comm., 6 January.
[482] Anastas, R 2015, p. 28.

that if the viewer wants to find the value and meaning of the work they need to also look into their own meaning-making patterns.

I have suggested that the artists' own destabilisation works so as to evoke the question 'what is it that makes art, art' (or, 'where does meaning lie inside an art-work'), a question that appears within the art-works themselves. Other ways that these works evoke this question is by attending to the blurring of boundaries such as those between art/porn, private/public and work/life. This becomes particularly apparent in the ways the sexual situations pre-exist the artists' decision to use them for art. Therefore, there are several ways for porno-graphing actions to become identifiable as such. However porno-graphing actions are also 'dirty' in that there is no such thing (as far as I know) as a finalised art work which is 'pure' porno-graphing. Within the pieces of work which I chose as case-studies for this research are some works/pieces whose makers present as finalised and in this sense complete and which involve numerous porno-graphing methodologies as well as sexual explicitness; this sexual explicitness also makes the porno-graphing actions in these works more explicit. However, in a sense the more ambitious a work is in terms of its scale, that is a work which involves porno-graphing actions, the more it needs other creative mechanisms that can support its negativity. For example *Pretend You Are Actually Alive* and *Double Bind* are works which include material which in themselves are not produced following porno-graphing methodologies, such as found footage and mass-media images. These materials act as in conversation with the images produced by Ledare in a way of suggesting to the viewer that the meaning that may be promised in the sexually explicit images he produces may also be complicated if seen within the context of the interrelationships of these images. But I also believe that these works,

presented as larger units of work, involve a confidence which requires the artist to think creatively in a way which permits them to partly or transitorily separate from the negativity of their porno-graphing actions, towards their public showing. At the same time, it seems that the more aware an artist is of their self-objectifying strategies (into 'dirty' roles) the more playful and perhaps confident they may be in terms of showing the art results of these strategies. What I understand as a determined use of 'dirtiness' can enable the work (and the artist) in the way I described; however other creative methods can also support works which involve porno-graphing actions so that these may be considered, by the artist, as finished pieces. This seems necessary as the particular way that porno-graphing resists resolution would disable the finalisation of a work or body of work; or it would at least make it more difficult for the artist to decide the point of publically showing the work.

The negative and centrifugal orbit that porno-graphing follows by its nature makes porno-graphing actions often seem weak or undetermined, as I have shown through the chapter 'False Starts'. So other processes are needed: a less elusive and complicated confidence for instance, if the artist wants to produce works which are larger-scale and have more of an immediate impact on their audiences. This is not to say that porno-graphing actions are not effective; on the contrary, porno-graphing actions cannot stand as 'clean', or 'clean' versions of what they are in the way they resist resolution. One way this manifests is that they cannot (as they haven't, to my knowledge) be presented as a resolved piece of work in themselves. I don't mean to suggest that works which don't involve porno-graphing methodologies are not also or differently both open-ended and finalised. Or that porno-graphing actions are the only ones that allow irresolution. The difference is that porno-graphing actions are potent

in a way, which as Anastas describes in regards to *Double Bind*, can almost repulse the viewer.[483] As such, the artist needs to find other ways to invite the viewer to keep looking, but also to do so without apologising for the destabilisation they may have caused them. To investigate how exactly other creative processes support porno-graphing actions so that their makers consider these art works 'complete' and decide to show them, would perhaps be a different and future research project.

The *Blue Tape* has several video-clips which appear in sequence (that is why I have been referring to them as '1st sequence' etc.). Some of these video-clips are made entirely out of some of the most visible porno-graphing strategies; similarly there are video-clips which have less sexually visible porno-graphing strategies in them, but their strategy at work is this of porno-graphing. If the video-clips of the *Blue Tape*, which are made out of the most visible and direct porno-graphing strategies were to be presented each on its own, not in sequences, I would say that these are porno-graphing works of art, but they have never, to my knowledge, been presented on their own. One of these video-clips, which is made fully through porno-graphing actions, is the one where Acker is directing Sondheim's finger up and down her vagina only to never get sexually satisfied or even wet. Other video-clips of the *Blue Tape* have much less visible porno-graphing strategies in them (one of the reasons for this is that they don't include sexual images), such as the one where Sondheim sits on the floor and laughs. Also the video-clip where Acker goes through her naked body, to, I have argued, submit to the perception of the viewer, to whatever the viewer wants to project onto her. However such a video-clip wouldn't necessarily have the effect of radical passivity if it wasn't presented as a sequence, alongside the rest of the video-

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[483] Anastas, R 2015, p. 28.

clips that comprise this video as a finished work. And at the same time the fact that it is less explicitly porno-graphing supports the other porno-graphing actions in the piece. Another example is the video-clip of Quist masturbating and orgasming on his grandma's bed under the covers. The fact that he told me that he was masturbating in combination with how it was shot (long, distant, and in a sense, dry and immobile), led me to identify it as porno-graphing. If he were to choose to present it publically, the porno-graphing strategies of the piece would come in to dialogue with other creative choices he would make and therefore these porno-graphing strategies would be altered towards the piece being publically presented.

Starting research on this PhD, it took me a while to understand – and write – what porno-graphing is and how it unfolds. One of the reasons for this was that I thought that to research porno-graphing through practice would require me to be practicing it in ways which I would be confident to present. In other words, that I would need to be producing and presented porno-graphing examples which I would consider to be solid and finished works in themselves. Works which I could look at and say: this is exactly what porno-graphing is. But porno-graphing strategies operate in such a way that they resist moving forward – in the way that Edelman and Berlant suggest that sex in the context of negativity 'can suggest a stubbornly narrow gaze and refusal to move on.'[484]

Thus, in order to research beside porno-graphing actions, beside trying to practice them during writing this thesis, I also had to look at the work I made before starting this PhD. Through the first stages of writing this thesis I thought that understanding

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[484] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 63.

porno-graphing through the work I made before the PhD would be a reductive or regressive thing to do. Yet, I have realised through this research, when it comes to porno-graphing actions, it is not possible for the artist to fully escape the reduction and regression of these methodologies. I now don't consider that it is by default reductive or regressing or even negative to return to my early work in order to base my understanding of porno-graphing. What seems important is that the process of returning to my earlier work had to involve regression and reduction, and thus my own resistance to do it. In other words, to understand porno-graphing strategies, and thus to theorise them, I had to acknowledge, that porno-graphing strategies demand reduction and regression. They demand them because, for example, they point to what has destabilised the artist when making and showing the work; these elements are ones that the artist may want to forget. Artists who use porno-graphing actions, often, or during a period of time, want to forget these works and what these brought to their personal lives, as Alan Sondheim for example attests feeling 'tired' in relation to the *Blue Tape*[485]; this is what I have also examined in my first chapter when considering the exhibition *XXX,* the works of Lo Liddell, Kim Quist, as well as my own work. This destabilisation often informs how artists proceed in making other porno-graphing actions and how they use the reception of their previous works to further self-objectify to 'dirty' sexual and artistic subjectivities. This is what I have examined in my third chapter, which considers the work of Leigh Ledare.

While this research is not about how artists' minds work, porno-graphing does relate to the ways in which certain anxieties about being potentially perceived as 'dirty', 'sick' and 'improper' are processed through artists' creativity and incorporated into

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[485] Sondheim, A 2016, pers. comm., 6 January.

the work. The ways these anxieties are used are tied to the 'unknowable', or, in other words, the question 'what is it that makes art, art'; as such, this question informs the ways artists make creative choices. These choices may have to do with how, for example, artists act on sex to make art and how in acting on it they choose to use certain material and not others, how artists may put this material together and in doing so, how they approximate the void or gap in a space where answers or resolution may be expected to be found in the form of sexual satisfaction. In this thesis, and especially in the 'False Starts' chapter, I have mentioned some of the artists' anxieties regarding their works; I would also like to offer an example of my own anxiety whilst writing the chapter on the *Blue Tape*.

The *Blue Tape* was the first piece of work which I saw in a public exhibition and which I immediately identified as involving numerous porno-graphing actions, enough of them so that I could use it as a case-study. The first sequence I saw, as the video was looping on a monitor at the centre of the Cubitt Artists gallery, was the one I mention above with Acker's vagina and Sondheim's fingers. Furthermore, the scene where Sondheim recites his theory on a microphone while receiving a blowjob (which I viewed afterwards as the video was looping) was to me a fascinating work of porno-graphing actions as well as a humorous one. During this first viewing I didn't know yet about how Acker and Sondheim came to be doing this work, as how they decided to do so is also a pointer to the fact that the video involves porno-graphing actions – or, the very fact they decided to make art out of their sexual dynamic is a porno-graphing action in itself. I immediately saw the content of these two sequences (Acker's vagina-rubbing and Sondheim's blowjob) as involving porno-graphing methodologies: the artists approaching sex through literal, as in physical, sexual,

dryness. Additionally, the 'low' aesthetics of the video also contributed to me thinking that this work was comprised of porno-graphing actions. Writing about it involved looking into Acker's literary work, a large archive including interviews and critical articles by theorists on her work. It was the first piece I started writing about thinking that it would be the easiest due to the available material I mentioned. However examining the uses of child sexual subjectivity in this video, and what I came to propose as the 'dirty child' because it invites the viewer to look in 'wrong' (paedophilic) ways, was challenging to me. This was because I was anxious of using the term 'dirty' next to the word 'child' and that forming this argument, could result in coming across as if I was advocating some sort of paedophilia. This may seem absurd, and it possibly is so. But this contradiction, or silliness, is part of porno-graphing. In a sense, I had to allow myself to be scared or confused by the idea that I may be pathologised for publically arguing my thoughts – the fact that I don't know exactly how 'dirty' I come across in talking about the 'dirty child' – so that I could formulate my thoughts into a written product which deliberates porno-graphing actions.

I have claimed in this thesis destabilisation as a both a productive ground and at the same time as an effect that porno-graphing has on its' audiences; I have considered this use of subjectivity and its destabilisation as close to what Kunst describes as the artist capitalising on their subjectivity and its exhaustion.[486] Artists who create porno-graphing actions, as I have shown, use sexual situations, which they have chosen because they consider that these situations may be considered as 'dirty' and 'sick' and they also use their own non-sovereignty, their contradictions, disappointments,

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[486] Kunst, B 2015, p. 30.

anxiety and confusion, to make work. I do the same here by discussing how scary it was for me to put the word 'dirty' next to the word 'child' – which was important because the fact that I have been feeling so for a number of years (I wrote the section about the 'dirty child' last) means that I wrote my whole thesis continuously measuring how my anxiety informs it. Consequently by my mentioning this process here I claim that this fear, the cause or symptom of an almost chronic anxiety, was in a sense necessary or productive. But what I have proposed through this thesis is that artists knowingly appear to be exploiting themselves and other subjects for the sake of their art work; that artists who use porno-graphing methodologies, as I do in my work, not only 'utter what is hardest to say' and in this sense they capitalise on their subjectivities and their exhaustion, but they do so knowingly and to the point of being or appearing to be alienated by their own work (in the form of being exhausted and not-knowing their purpose) and their own bodies (in the ways they use their sexual lives and subjectivities to make work from them). Therefore, if the artist who capitalises their subjectivity (embraces structures of exploitation) is a whore (this is my interpretation, Kunst does not use terms such as whore or prostitute in her work), then the artist who does so knowingly (such as artists who use porno-graphing methodologies) may be thought of as what Bataille calls 'low prostitutes'. I have tried to prove, that in doing so, in submitting to structures of exploitation, they complicate meaning, which is to say meaning-making patterns, in various ways and thus manage to raise questions regarding art, sex and subjectivity and their values, without succumbing to futurism.

I read Doyle's 'Rhetorics of Prostitution' at the very beginning of my PhD and I put the text aside thinking, at the time, that it wasn't at all related to what I wanted to do;

it had in fact greatly annoyed me for a reason I can't recall. I re-read it, and my notes

on it almost at the end of the PhD and I am very happy I did, as I don't know how else

I would have managed to claim the kind of whoredom which I wanted to claim for

porno-graphing artists from the beginning of this PhD, despite my fears for wanting to

do such a thing – which is probably why I put the book aside in the first place. To me,

the 'dirtiness' at work in porno-graphing practices, cannot be easily contained, tamed,

or domesticated. It works a bit like anxiety (my anxiety at least): it is sneaky and takes

different shapes and faces and when one thinks one has understood it or exhausted it

(as I may have tried to do whilst writing this thesis), it comes back unpredictably and

it is more 'dirty' than before. For this reason I have not managed to know fully how

'dirtiness' works and exactly what it does, to the artist, to the art object and to the art

viewer. This 'dirtiness' drives the artist to expose themselves and to actually do so

and yet become anxious, deeply destabilised, for doing so. Through this thesis I

wanted to find out whether I am the only one who works through the tension between

the two situations (I am not) and describe it. Furthermore, I wanted to use this tension

as a productive tool in order to articulate some of the challenges that arise when

discussing this type of work. I tried to do so by drawing a parallel between it and the

pathology of displaying a lack and an excess of agency, but I have tried to do so in

such a way which wouldn't defy this tension.

Here I would like to note some artists and art works, which I have identified during

this research as involving porno-graphing methodologies but which I decided to not

document in this PhD, but which, may be of interest to future researchers of porno-

graphing actions. These are Joanna Rytel's *Once Upon A Time There Was An*

*Unfaithful Mummy* (11', video, 2013), Julia Star's *So Little* (5' 41'', music video,

2015) and the video and photography works of Sands Murray-Wassink. Looking out for porno-graphing actions inside art works in public art platforms and personal connections I have missed out somewhat of what is happening in the 'art-world' aside the works which directly interest me. What I have noticed however through these years, 2010 to the end of 2016, or what I saw by-passing me, is how the culture of self-recording and publishing one's images of one's self has grown. In 2013 'selfie' became the 'word of the year' in the Oxford English dictionary[487], showing, in my view, the tremendous impact photographing one's own self has in contemporary image-making. Also, how this sort of image making may have an impact not only in art but also in society. At the same time I have noticed how confessional YouTube videos such as people coming out as queer to their families, recording through time body changes and transformations, kids confessing to the world having maxed-out their parents' credit cards, or just speaking one's thoughts – including one's fears and aspirations – on camera, are increasing in great speed. Image-recording technologies seem to me to be more available than ever before; peeing or crying on camera and instantly publishing these images are now usual things to see on online video platforms. Porno-graphing actions often don't look like art, but like porn, and now one could maybe say that they also look like YouTube videos; thus, the question of 'what is it that makes art, art' during these times of image-production seems important. If my thesis already seems out-dated by the changes in image-making that have occurred as I have been writing it, I propose that this is a welcome thought as the anachronistic qualities of sex, as Edelman and Berlant say, is what renders it relevant to a discussion concerning the pushing of the limits 'imposed by the fantasy of the

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[487] Selfie, *Wikipedia*, wiki. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selfie. [10 December 2016].

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sovereign self'[488] and thus the limits of thought. However, I am looking forward to catching up with these changes in image-making and seeing how and whether it happens in art, and doing so without wearing the spectacles of the PhD research.

Towards the end of this PhD I started videoing on my phone. This opened new ways of recording possibilities for me as my phone is always next to me in the way that my camcorders have never been. For example I started videoing my self first thing in the morning (some footage of this can be seen in my video *Modern Family vol. 1*). This was in a way my waking up to the new technologies. 'Waking up' as a theme has existed in my work for a while; as I was starting this PhD program I spent a year photographing myself first thing every morning using a 35mm camera and a remote shutter cable. Making work from the moment one wakes up can clearly be seen as another sign of how the boundaries between non-work time and work time are vanishing. Whilst I don't ignore this symptom of contemporary life nor view it as a positive one in terms of capitalism, I don't actually see my 'waking up' work as the symptom it appears to be. Rather than recording myself waking up into a consciousness I consider that these recordings perform ways of 'undoing' the self (the idea of the self I described in my first chapter, as the milieu which forms 'me' and my understanding of me), from the moment this self wakes up and starts being itself. In other words through these recordings, the idea of the self falls in interrogation (in the form of image reflections and capturing) from the moment the self wakes up into consciousness. But rather than 'me' being interrogated, I consider that it is the very idea of consciousness that comes into question.

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[488] Berlant, L & Edelman, L 2014, p. 11.

**Appendix I**
**Images**
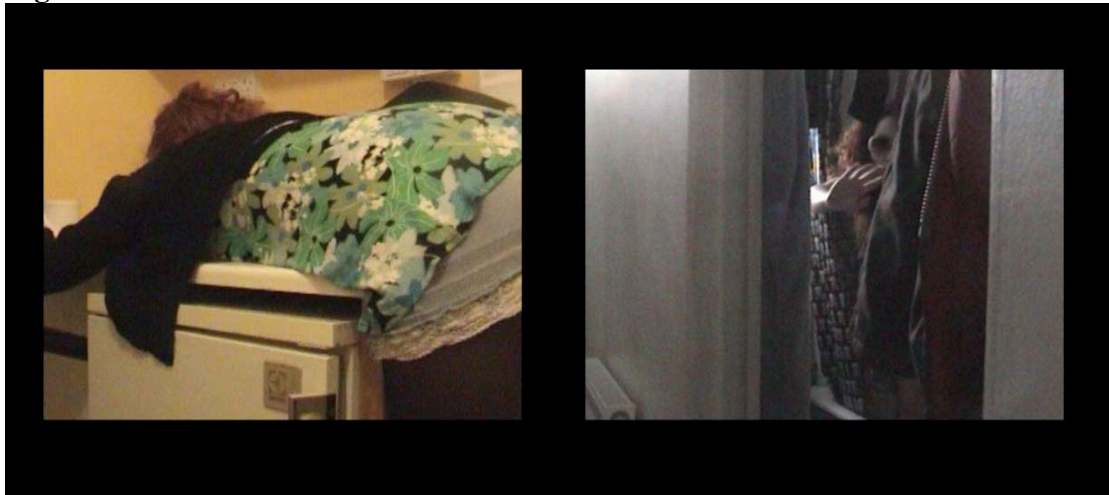
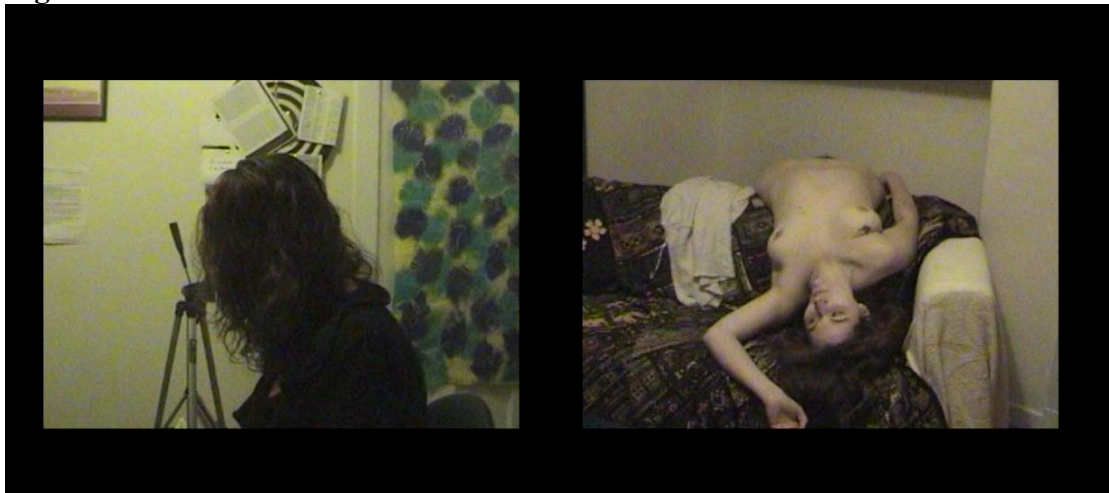**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

**Figure 5**

**Figure 6**

**Figure 7**



**Figure 8**

**Figure 9**



**Figure 10**

**Figure 11**



**Figure 12**

**Figure 13**



**Figure 14**

**Figure 15**

**Figure 16**

**Figure 17**



"I've had dancing scholarships ever since I was thirteen.
To be a good dancer, you must really give yourself to it. The thrilling,
ethereal effects of a performance are very difficult to achieve.
But to me, there are so many other important things — nature, friends,
reading, painting. I design my own clothes and breed
St. Bernard dogs too. Without all this I would feel incomplete."

TINA MC DONOUGH, 18, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON: AWARD-WINNING BALLERINA

**Figure 18**

**Figure 19**

**Appendix II**
**List of portfolio practice-works**

A portfolio, comprised by my own lens-based works, is part of this thesis. Through

my chapter 'False Starts', I explained the reasons why I consider that some of the

work I developed before starting this PhD project is part of this thesis. Developing

these works during my MA degree is what led me to seek to further examine what I

now call porno-graphing methodologies. During that time I videoed daily, creating a

large archive of over a hundred short video-performances in my domestic spaces. As

explained I lost most of that material. The videos from that period which I present as

part of my thesis are the ones I considered at the time as most resolved and thus, I

kept. Videos from this period (2007-2008) are:


1. *All the Things I Like* **(video, 3' 53'', 2007-2008)**

2. *Imitating the Sound of Sex* **(*video*, 5', 2007)**

3. *Call Dad* **(video, 4' 23", 2007),**

4. *Lying-down Masturbation* **(video extract, 2', 2007)**

5. *Wall Masturbation Performance* **(video extract, 2' 20", 2007)**



Between 2012 and 2014 I lived in 'Studio 6', where I photographed the people around

me, as well as myself, daily. To me, this is the most unresolved of all of my work and

its relationship to porno-graphing methodologies is most ambiguous. Yet, this is

significant as it feels to me that I resist to connect my photography work with the

porno-graphing actions with which I am more familiar in my video work. These

images vary in several ways; they are often shot with different cameras and for

different purposes. For example there were times I was shooting them with the aim to create a body of work similar to that of Nan Goldin or Corinne Day and at times just because a friend asked me to photograph them for their job purposes, their jobs varying from sex-workers to classical musicians. To date, my archive (over a thousand images) mixes pictures, which I myself find as aesthetically interesting with pictures which I myself find aesthetically flat, with images which friends, lovers and family sent to me, such as selfies, new-born babies and family celebrations. I present as part of this portfolio a small extract of this archive which I call *Giant Doggy* in the form of a show-reel. This video is:

**6. *Giant Doggy* (extract), (video/show-reel of still images, 2' 28', 2012-ongoing)**

Between 2012 and 2013 and while being in my PhD program I created three videos which I believe display porno-graphing methodologies. Making these videos I came to understand the role of emotional states and positions of working from porno-graphing strategies, such as Lacanian 'lack', paranoia and self-mockery. These videos are:

**7. *Suspicious of Women* (video, 5' 43", 2012)**

**8. *I'm Illegal* (video extract, 4' 8'', 2012)**

**9. *Together* (video, 2' 20" , 2013)**

As part of our collaboration, Lo Liddell and I developed a chain of video responses –
initially to be presented at the 'Kathy Acker event: Working Away' I co-organised
with Deniz Unal at Roehampton University in April 2014. These works are a
departure from my earlier use of porno-graphing methodologies, as they are made
within the particular context of my collaboration with Liddell. I consider this
collaboration as a different kind of an encounter from the ones I explored before
through my work and in this sense I regard these video-works as carrying different
expressions of porno-graphing actions. These works are:

10. *Love Call* 2014 (video, 1' 6", 2014)

11. *Good at it* (video, 1' 40", 2014)

12. *My Two Dogs* (video, 2' 19", 2014)

Beginning with the exhibition *XXX* I started to use other people in my videos. My
main focus in these works has been to relate with the people I involve in my work
through the images. More specifically I have been interested in exploring and creating
ambiguously sexual links between these people, myself, and the images of them and
me. At the same time I have started using phone-cameras and computer-cameras to
record, instead of the camcorders I was using before. In this way I experiment with
finding ways to invite the viewer to ask if what they are watching, my images, are art,
or if they are not, what could they be? These videos are:

13. **untitled video made for the show *XXX* (video extract, 2' 28", 2014)**

**14.** *The Flow – That Thing With The Audience* **(video extract,  1' 6", 2016)**

**15.** *Modern Family vol. 1* **(video, 3' 19'', 2016)**

The research for this project was submitted for ethics consideration under the reference DTP 12/ 010 in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Performance and was approved under the procedures of the University of Roehampton's Ethics Committee on 10/12/2012.

## Consent Form Sample

**University of Roehampton**
London

**ETHICS COMMITTEE**

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Research Project:** Porno-graphing: dirty subjectivities & self-objectification in contemporary lens-based art

**Brief Description of Research Project:**

Through my PhD thesis, 'Porno-graphing: dirty subjectivities & self-objectification in contemporary lens-based art', I use the term 'porno-graphing' to group together and examine artworks (video, photography, performance and writing) where the artists use as art-material sexual situations or sets of sexual dynamics present in their life independently of their art practice; I consider how artists act upon these sexual situations in order to make art out of them, the art-results they produce and their means of sharing them with audiences.

**Investigator Contact Details:**

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**Consent Statement:**

I agree to take part in this research, and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings.

Name ...... Leigh Ledare ..............

Signature ............................

Date ...... Nov 26, 2016 ..................

Please note: if you have a concern about any aspect of your participation or any other queries please raise this with the investigator. However, if you would like to contact an independent party please contact the Head of Department (or if the researcher is a student you can also contact the Director of Studies.)

**Director of Studies Contact Details:**       **Head of Department Contact Details:**

Name        Joe Kelleher               Name      Joe Kelleher
University Address     Office location : Jubilee 217  University Address: Jubilee 217

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