

They Steal Your Watch and Then Tell You the Time

I started to work for the filmmaker and photographer Richard Kern after meeting him at his retrospective at the BFI in London in 1995. I was at art school in Dundee, and was a big fan of him and the subculture he had documented – the post-Punk New York underground. His films were collaborations with interesting people, and seemed to be founded on a straightforward transaction of exhibitionism and voyeurism.

But by the time of the retrospective his models had changed; he was now shooting for porn magazines to make money, and this influenced the kind of women he chose to work with. Instead of my fantasy of connecting to that No-Wave scene, it would be a job modelling for magazines like *Barely Legal* and *Leg Show*. This posed no dilemma for me; I'd seen how artists like Annie Sprinkle, Kathy Acker and Cosey Fanni Tutti had used their experiences in the sex industry with great authority. Cosey's work especially was the clincher: the *Magazine Actions* that she had first shown at the ICA in 1976 was a work that it seemed everyone, the left and the right, men and women, all found troubling.

Even recently I've been told by a fellow artist that it's such a shame for the women who feel the need to do porn, that they must be so insecure and have such low self-esteem. Curiosity about a performer's real thoughts and motivations is not a significant factor in the contemporary consumption of porn. In the mid-nineties I was aware of the great difference in status between pornographic and fashion modelling. Then, as now, fashion modelling carried immense social prestige. Despite the escalated integration of porn and fashion aesthetics (Terry Richardson, *Purple*, *Vice* and *American Apparel*) the esteem of the job has not diminished. This is because though it appears to 'push boundaries', it is carefully orchestrated to stay within the safety zone of a legible high-fashion/art context (signified by a variety of economic markers like body type etc.) and is just spicy enough, but not too much. It is in fact a simulation of transgression, a *trompe l'oeil*, on the right side of consensus.

Modelling is always sold as an opportunity. I could not have articulated it at eighteen, but in pornographic modelling I was looking not just for that, but for experiences that would produce first-hand knowledge of things that seemed important, such as value systems and the politics of representation. It was a way into an experimental space, and the possible negative consequences seemed worth the risk. That it would breed reactions in myself was more important than the generated images themselves (though I am deeply attached to them). We did shoot after shoot, and the photos appeared in magazines, then books, then exhibitions. I had signed a waiver which meant Richard could do whatever he wanted with the photos and I would have no say in their use. I considered the abdication of control as mental material for making art with, and that was more interesting to me than the easy avenue of re-presenting the visuals as readymade content. Cosey Fanni Tutti appropriating her sex work the 1970s was not a formula that could be repeated with the expectation of a similar reception twenty years later. Instead, I devised strategies to incorporate my willing participation in pornography in less direct ways.

While it was not a surprise when the photos caused both approval and annoyance, what I did not predict was how often the images would be co-opted by male artists. Or, in consequence, how much decisions in my own art practice would be influenced by those instances of co-option. The use and misuse of appropriation – how certain subjects are mined as a natural resource, how form relates to content – now took on a personal significance, and was no longer just a conceptual exercise.

Most of my friends and colleagues in the art scene couldn't care less about the images or my actions. They neither expect me to want to know how the pictures make them feel, nor ask me to offer a clear statement of my position. But in some corners it is still an issue, and the appropriation by others capitalise on the opportunity created by the controversy, and the ambiguity of my position in relation to it. The photos of me are not visually remarkable, so their lure is not located in the image itself. Rather, it is that they appear to male artists as a kind of authentic raw material, that with the addition of some creative authority, can be shaped into art. Because one cannot simply separate mind and body, I feel a combination of sensitivity and detachment over this, but most of all I am

struck by how crudely and inexpertly the 'raw material' is taken up. The appropriators do not realise that the ambiguity of my position is a conscious construction I myself instigated. They seem to fall for the age-old pornographic trope that equates a schoolgirl's uniform with innocence and availability, not realising that Richard and I are very well aware of its potential for manipulating the male gaze. They buy the product that Richard sells - transgression - thinking they are buying fresh ingredients rather than a ready-meal.

In my experience, instrumentalisation comes in one of two forms; either as overwrought, disingenuously naive painting-collages; or as simple attempts by misogynists to bring me down a peg or two. The instances of the latter have been connected to changes in my relationship to power in the art world, and are part of the graph of sexual harassment that has fluctuated over the years according to the degree of access I have had to it. By my mid-twenties I already had the backing of supportive commercial galleries, I wasn't on the dole, and was showing regularly. I was surrounded by friends and collaborators and had the luxury of being able, if a curator or other colleague was disrespectful, not to have to work with them; I had an unusual amount of artistic independence. But before that, as a student and recent graduate, I was a target of the leers and molestation afforded those lower down the pecking order. I'd be told things like 'we've been doing etchings of your cunt' by the bad boys. Comments like this were meant to be provocative and flirtatious, pulling my pigtailed so to speak, but they felt like threats. Men seemed to think I had invited communication with them personally, because they had seen a photo of my genitalia. I was sent bestiality porn to 'get a reaction'. I had my arse grabbed more than once by a widely known sex-pest with the nickname 'Walter Grope-ius'. Our mutual friends knew he was sleeping with his students and sexually harassing women, but it was rationalised as somehow connected to Georges Bataille. What mattered was the funny stories and the lolz of that hilarious nickname. On the scene, sexist behaviour was intellectualised and romanticised through the invocation of things like Semiotext (e) or Martin Kippenberger, the way junkies cite William Burroughs.

The asymmetry of the experience I had in the kind of experimental social spaces I was drawn to as a young artist meant that if I wanted to engage, I had to resolve dilemmas my male counterparts

never faced. Was it worth, to enjoy certain freedoms and discourses, dealing with so much male insecurity and antagonism towards women? The alternative was staying 'safe' with the people who never posed awkward questions or did anything problematic, when what I wanted was a contradictive and ambiguous grey zone. And then later in the mainstream art world, I experienced that the people who need to manipulate and dominate women are also often the ones who surround themselves with women, champion their work and give them opportunities.

When I started to get recognition early in my career I had to deal with all the aggression that came with it; my pornographic past was used as a tool to express prejudice. For example, in 2001 I got together with some friends to create a fake gallery in order to get state funding to participate in an art fair in Glasgow. It was meant as a joke. But I had recently turned down an offer to work with a local commercial gallery, and on their stand, in front of a group of art world people, their gallerist commented loudly on me 'showing off my fanny' in public. I was posing as a dealer at the fair, so I was suddenly a threat to him, and because I had turned his offer down, I needed to be diminished. A friend overheard him and one of his artists discussing the circular ceiling mural I had made in a local bar/venue called Mono. 'Look, McKenzie's hole', 'we've all seen that' were their observations. I should have been embarrassed about being exposed as a slag, and they were irritated that I showed no signs of it.

When I got a job as a guest painting professor in 2011 at the Duesseldorf Kunstakademie, a student was disgruntled that he had been displaced from his studio by the creation of my class. He left, anonymously, a canvas painting collaged with Richard's photos to block our doorway. It was a typically German type of confrontation baiting, but I also saw it as part of a reaction to the broader picture, the efforts of the school to shed its image as a retrogressive and nostalgic boys-club (which my appointment was part of). Wages and prestige are higher in occupations that are predominately male. Because the students heavily identified with their professors and the image of the school, perhaps they sensed that they themselves were being devalued by the increasing presence of women on the faculty? Perhaps it was my approach to painting, which was neither expressionist or romantic, which was the threat? In any case, my dirty secret was used for the expression of their displeasure.

Did I consider appropriating the painting from the student as a counter-move? No, appropriation can and should be more than a neat illustration of hierarchy.

One of the many speculations around the suicide of Mike Kelley was about the misalignment between the reality of his life as a world-famous artist and his roots as a blue-collar underdog. In the aftermath of his death I observed how some of my fellow professors, men of Kelley's generation, seemed to have to deal with paradoxes of their own. I was told by one that he did not bow to traditional rules of society; and as an East German he had a special relationship with sexuality, which made it ok for him to fuck his students. They were unwilling to acknowledge the authority that came with their position, within the school at least.

It has been useful to compare a job in the art industry with working in the sex industry. Richard was decent and respectful, I never felt manipulated or pressured into doing something I was uncomfortable with, nor did I feel that I was being probed or tested in an intolerably furtive way. But of course, that could have been because he sensed that in contrast with some of the other women he photographed – those who were addicts, abuse victims, or disempowered in other ways – I wasn't fair game for manipulation. Unlike Terry Richardson, Richard could not coerce his models with promises of lucrative access to the fashion world. In fact he acknowledged I was good for his business. My increasing public profile, and enthusiasm for working for him, helped create a positive spin and enhanced the credibility of his work in parts of the art world that regarded him with suspicion. I found out recently that he cited me to other models whose confidence had faltered as an example of someone who 'owned' the experience and all its ramifications.

I've been included in assemblage sculptures at various times, and when asked, one of the collectives who did this said their reason was that they had heard I had been given a hard time in the art world, and it was meant as a gesture of solidarity. I couldn't see how, when they were co-opting my agency as much as any of the other more overtly hostile appropriations. When his publication *Model Release* (in which I featured and for which I wrote the foreword) was published by Taschen in 2000, my lover at the time dropped me in horror. But when my image's inclusion in the assemblage

sculptures created a vicarious association with people in his own network, he belatedly apologised for getting it so wrong. They explained and justified me to him, in the same way that I did with Richard to others.

This led me to reflect on things like taste, status and consensus, and to channel it all into my practice. I have made one work in reference to posing for Richard: an email to a curator, printed out and attached to a pin-board, all presented as a trompe l'oeil quodlibet painting. It was prompted by an episode in which a guy had tried to obtain from Richard some copies of the magazines that I had appeared in, to include in a group show called Cosey Complex at the ICA. The idea was to show them as a piece, in reference to the connection between Cosey, Richard and myself. But the connection was hardly a revelation. We had outlined it ourselves in a talk at the ICA a few years before, and I wrote to the curator pointing this out. The artist protested that our refusal to supply him the magazines was a violation of his right to free speech, claiming he was being censored. I made the trompe l'oeil painting as a self-portrait, and as part of a series harnessing the quodlibet's conservative and traditional qualities. Quodlibets are for me 'anti-collages' and 'anti-gestural'; they claim no avant-garde or bohemian credentials, and can suitably counterbalance content that is emotional, perverse or triggering. I thought about the artists who had destigmatized sex work for me in the first place, the strength of the form of that work in relation to its content, in comparison to the casual and misunderstood way I'd been co-opted by male artists over the years. I thought about the game-changers like Lee Miller, turning the camera round to be the first fashion model to photograph herself. I thought about Jean Rhys, converting her life as a nude model, mistress and prostitute into prose. Kathy Acker's work in particular traced a line to my choice of illusionistic painting. She gives us the impression we are consuming something spontaneously blown together, but she's consciously distracting us with her public personae and colourful subject matter from the reality that it is painstakingly crafted illusion. Her appropriation does not just transfer power, it dissolves it.