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After the orgy: the aesthetics of superabundance.

Abstract

Exploitation is a tactical move, made quickly within a system of exchange to intensify a productive moment in a non-systematic manner. An exploitative act appropriates a flow of energy or information in a system, most effectively in micro-management, that produces a macroscopic outcome beyond the functional productivity of the system. The exploitative manoeuvre appropriates the systemic economy of energy and mass, of electro-chemical interactions and so on, that otherwise render exchanges of force productive and reproductive. Successful exploitation of a system terminates in an exorbitantly unequal exchange: the suicide of a terrorist, for instance, in exchange for the full load of a passenger aircraft. Exploitation entails not just a productive appropriation of the resources provided in a system, but an exorbitant overproduction that depletes those resources. The system that is exploited cannot recover. Exploitation is a key concept in contemporary culture: from suicide bombers gearing their deaths to prime time or live TV coverage and stock market movements to the coordinated global release of *Harry Potter*. Exploitation is an episode of superactivity, a sudden distension in the functional organisation of an industrial system by a ravenous, lustful expropriation that exhausts itself through the extravagance of its exposure to the market forces it amplifies and, equally, consumes. Exploitation needs to be thought through in positive analytical terms (not as moral complaint or celebration). Treating exploitation as an aesthetic term allows us to describe an aspect of the new culture, as well as the new economy. I call this new culture - which we experience as global, internet, digital culture - the culture of "superabundance": beyond productivity, beyond receptivity, beyond value.

Biography

Edward Colless is Head of Art History and Theory at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne. He has published widely within Australia and internationally. An anthology of his selected essays, *The Error of My Ways* (IMA, Brisbane, 1995), was short-listed for the 1996 NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Colless has taught art history, film studies, performance, and art theory in several tertiary institutions. He has also worked as a filmmaker, theatre director and curator.

After the orgy: the aesthetics of superabundance.

We no longer buy products. We no longer buy commodities. Today, we buy lifestyles. Lifestyles are options, much like options in the share market. Lifestyles are the rights to acquire and possess that which we do not actually, physically, want to acquire or possess. We buy the right to buy commodities that we have no desire to actually buy; and we do this in order to sell on at a profit that right to buy. The commodity, as it survives in the common speech of cultural theory today, is an anachronistic fantasy of the new economy. Nobody wants it. It is a quaint, sentimental concept. It is an embarrassment. It is similar to the gold reserves that, in the older economy of production, allegedly guaranteed a state's paper currency; and which of course could only do so if there was no possibility of actually cashing that paper in. Gold only supports an economy if it cannot be exchanged for its real value. The commodity, in similar terms, is the inert and hidden guarantor of value for the free circulation of lifestyle options. But it survives – like an old god in an atheistic society – on an impossible exchange. Strictly speaking, we get nothing for our investment in life. We can only buy into the fantasy of a possible exchange, an exchange that we would like to believe produces life.

Pornography is this kind of commodity that cultural theory now deals in. Cultural theorists speak earnestly and with banal or dreary passion about the production of sexualities, but only because the sex that is represented in these articulations of desire is like gold: a natural guarantor for our transactions – our research and publications, our investment and commerce with that elusive, imaginary raw material – that can never be cashed in and never realised. This impossibility allows us to historicise pornography – anachronistically – as a humanistic enterprise: another mode of transformative labour that produces the world.

Take Gough Lewis's 1999 documentary *Sex: The Annabel Chong Story* as it struggles to humanise its subject matter: the orgiastic bachelor machine of porn-star Annabel Chong's notorious video *The World's*

Greatest Gangbang. In the *Gangbang*, Chong set herself a “record” task of having sex and also—her particular talent—orgasms (not just penetration) with two hundred and fifty men in twenty-four hours. Just as the documentary shows Chong off-camera engaged in financial disputes and family politics, before and after the making of *Gangbang*, it also depicts the margins of the gangbang’s *mise-en-scène*, recording reaction shots on faces of the cast and crew, and the comical bureaucratic complexities of event management at the venue. In its effort to demythologise Chong’s persona, by exposing the industrial conditions in which the persona is fabricated, Lewis’s documentary ironically also idealises Chong as a centralising subjectivity in the film. Chong’s sexual marathon is depicted as an “empowering”, triumphal manifestation of desire, despite the swamp of alleged sexual, industrial and economic exploitation from which it hatched.

I called this orgy a “bachelor machine”: the mechanical assemblage inducing sterile, unproductive intensities, as Michel Carrouges characterised Duchamp’s apparatus in *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*. Bachelor machines aren’t necessarily artistic creations; in fact, they are usually identified by their lack of artistry, their porous or provisional form. And these machines aren’t necessarily vibrant “open-ended” texts, richly productive of renewable readings, intransitive but endlessly unfolding their boundaries. No. A bachelor machine can be an obsessive-compulsive apparatus replicating its motions until its parts wear out, or it can be a paranoid’s letter bomb. It can be the assemblage of adolescent eyes applied to a hand, applied to an erection, applied to a poster on a bedroom wall. It can be motor comprising a woman, a camera shutter, a thermos of coffee and a dirty window. Bachelor machines often make “bad art”: they rarely exhibit a capacity for the self-censorship that regulates aesthetic form. They are pragmatic if pataphysical devices that do a job, even if that job wastes the energy put into it. Their badness is a failing of aesthetic form.

The bachelor machine of the *Gangbang* incorporates not only Annabel Chong as an instrument but also the two hundred and fifty other actors, the video production and post-production crew, and the crew of Lewis’s documentary. This sprawling, grotesque fantasia is depicted in *Sex* in the manner that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is depicted in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. The *Sex* documentary plays an almost inconsequential role in the production of *Gangbang*, but the sequences in *Sex* that deal with the explicit *Gangbang* footage displace this object of its attention to an off-camera activity. This is not simply pragmatic self-censorship or a means around copyright regulations. The gangbang is represented as a necessary but insufficient image of Chong, in need of being filled out or supplemented by the off-camera footage provided by the documentary itself. Annabel Chong in *Sex* is the complement and completion of her appearance in *World’s Greatest Gangbang*. These two images are perfect mates.

Lewis’s documentary represents itself as the objectification of this unity, a curative self-reflexivity that normalises and represents the pornographic fantasia as a psychological condition, a “passion”: the humanised passion of Annabel Chong, a psychosomatic sign unrealisable in any medium other than her body’s desires. Watching Annabel Chong reflect on her performance in the gangbang, we see her for real. She doesn’t dislike what she sees. In fact, it turns her on. Desiring what she does, she repeats that desire in her own reflection. Can one, ought one, believe this? Is it not possible she is lying to the camera, like a porn actress faking an orgasm? Or is it possible she wrongly believes she likes being the masochistic object of an army of lovers? Is she one of those women who desires their own subjugation: subject to what marxist-feminist political theory once called “false consciousness” (which was any articulation of desire in conflict with the moral ends of that political theory)? Chong’s identity in *Sex* is the identity between desire and its reflection in her body. “False consciousness” or even the opinion that she may not know her own desires, presumes a true or truly knowable counterpart to her false knowledge somewhere, perhaps hidden behind so-called “ideological” distortions or inversions of it. If so, this would require another—this time “correct”—reflection in which she would see the truth about herself and know it, presumably by yet another reflection. And so on, and so on. Left to this infinite regress—without the closure provided by some sign of identity that transcends the mirror game—Chong disappears into an endless series of inhuman, false appearances.

This is pornography. This is what Natacha Merritt’s *Digital Diary* (Taschen Books, 2000) accomplishes by its effortless evacuation of all humanist values. Merritt’s book is a collection of several hundred digital photographs she has taken of her daily life. Her sex life. When the book appeared she was twenty-two years

old, Californian, living in New York. Although not overly, arrogantly proud of it, she gives the impression that she enjoys showing her young toned body off: her pert breasts, her tight belly, her long legs. She horses around in the bathroom. She rolls on her back and spreads herself open. She dresses up in sexy lingerie and gets undressed. She gets fingered by her girlfriend in the shower. She fucks a boyfriend on a sofa; is mounted by a different man on a bed. She gives a lot of blow jobs. She watches her friends at it. She vigorously masturbates. She plays lazily with herself. She looks out the window. She points her naked butt at a mirror. The amorality and inconsequentiality of the photographs is incandescent. The shallowness of this world is fascinating. This is a sensibility at a polar opposite to that, for instance, of another grand voyeur, Diane Arbus. Merritt's "gaze" (if we can still call it by this anachronistic theoretical term) is looking for nothing. It can't recognise the deathly contract of a love that fulfils and finishes life. Instead of yearning, this sensibility coasts. It surfs. Its motions are those of the wavefronts of excitations momentarily surging across bodies that roll together or loll about in the sheets or stretch in the warm water of a bath or twitch in discomfort. Notoriety is a by-product. Compared to Arbus's desperately painful and neurotic desire to redeem humanity from within the travesties she kept encountering, Merritt's behaviour is buoyant and inhuman.

Sex is a pastime here. It is not even a professional occupation. Flicking through the pages of *Digital Diary* is much like browsing through an amateur, domestic porn site on the web. It's often difficult to tell whether the exhibitionism on those sites is for real or forged for commercial purposes. Or whether that distinction even matters. Even the most innocent looking photos of kids vacationing at a beach might be linked to a paedophile site. Jumping across hyperlinks one doesn't necessarily pass through a home page, but, even if you do, that is no guarantee of the ownership or origin of an image. Any posted jpeg you download may itself have been stolen from another site, and may have been used before on countless sites. There is no formal beginning, no conclusion, no authority, no perimeter to the array of images at your disposal. You drop in and out of sessions with the photos, liking logging on or off, and choose your own pathway through; which will be as interesting and valuable as any other pathway chosen by you or anyone else. The traffic in images on the net is borderless, indiscriminate. It is also weightless and shameless. Pure, frictionless pay-for-view consumption. There is no suspicion of prying into someone's privacy, since there is no trespass possible when the zone we find ourselves in is borderless, open in all directions, infinitely penetrable, consensual.

Merritt's photography doesn't need to imitate this new web-wide, global idiom produced through Mavicas and Sureshots and computer mounted live cams. It is fluent in the language, a native speaker. Like her digital domain, Merritt too is infinitely penetrable, offering no resistance. But this doesn't mean she is sweetly compliant, and innocent like a willing victim. Remember the 1990s "bad girl"? Indulgently provocative. Adolescent in her rebellious attitude and defiance, if not in her actual age. A creature fashioned out of slackerdom, hip hop and grunge styles as well as the post-boom degeneration of the '80s feminine power-dressed stereotype—that slick bitch with her expensive taste for corporate, cocaine nights. The bad girl was explicated across the frontier of post-feminism in manifestations from kickboxing cyberbabe to rave queen to slapper. Whether on the street or on the couch at a party, she was voracious in her appetites and bitchy with everyone. When a bad girl went professional she would become a journalist, preferably a sex columnist, rather than a stockbroker or lawyer. Merritt's pretension to shocking celebrity through the publication of her book is typical of the "bad girl". Merritt too is a type of journalist, although there is no story to tell in her work. She could be a sex columnist, but her work while garrulous is opinionless rather than opinionated. If the enterprise behind it is smart, the work itself is empty-headed. That, ironically, is its strength. Her *Diary* is a mode of exploitative exposure rather than documentation or record. It is comparable to the publicity exploitation of a reality TV program such as *Big Brother* or reality web-cam sites like jennicam.org.

Many of Merritt's photos have that distinctive d-i-y feature of amateur snapshots in which the photographer, wanting to get into the scene but not having a tripod or cable or timer release or even just the time to set those apparatuses up, holds the camera at arm's length and points the lens towards themselves. This is also a feature of household exhibitionism on the web. Merritt's photos demonstrate most of these generic aspects of amateurism. Faces or bodies that may well be the subject matter of the shot are often unintentionally and abruptly cut off, out of frame. Body parts close to the camera—noses, foreheads, the photographer's arm—are invariably distended in scale, anamorphically exaggerated and drifting out of

focus. Exposure and coloration are sensitive to accidents of lighting as much as to the photographer's incompetence. Flash flares bleach the skin and burn out details. Contours and profiles shudder in a motion blur. Sexy bodies chill into bloodless zombie corpses dyed in menthol-blue glacial tones. Warm blooms of burnt orange unexpectedly erupt like fever in the shadows. This is not an innovative move. These stylistic marks of low-tech amateurism became consolidated in the studied grunge of fashion photography at the height of "heroin chic". In the work of Corinne Day in the mid 1990s, for instance, casual compositions with skew or furtive or careless viewpoints often reduced the model and the clothing to incidental and even obscured details that were barely in the frame. In anorexic, narcotic hazes her models slumped into decrepit sofas in share-house living rooms, their spotty faces washed out by overhead fluoro strip lighting. Or they squatted awkwardly, ripped, with red rimmed panda eyes, in the poisonous litter of a backstreet shooting gallery, wearing Diesel or Gucci. Merritt's photos have all this grunge informality and carelessness, the clutter and chaos, the sense of an off-hand, effortless glimpses at a nonchalant exhibitionism; they have all that, but they are clean. No matter how dirty the action is, the digital screen decontaminates it.

And it does something else, in conjunction with this, which the analogue photograph couldn't do. In her circumstances, Merry Alpern needed a format that could cope with the demands of quick response: fast film speed, lightweight gear, stock that could economically handle a high ratio of bad to good takes. And she wouldn't know her success rate until she got into the darkroom, hours or even days later. The dirt in grunge photography and amateur voyeurism can be a veil, a camouflage. It is like the tremor that one expects when the camera is keeping up to speed with the course of events and when there is no room for artifice. For a voyeur, that dirt can be the signature of the claustrophobic hide that they occupy in order to capture the scenes in their dramatic, unrehearsed eventfulness. Natacha Merritt, however, needed neither camouflage nor a darkroom. There is nothing claustrophobic about her imagery. Her photos are instead like an open sky: limitless because they are insubstantial. Looking at them, we are in free fall. She can playback her photographs as soon as they are taken, erase the bad ones and store the good ones—by the thousands—onto a multi-gigabyte disk. These photos are technically insubstantial, and figuratively immaterial.

And, like any other amateur digital photographer, Merritt can play back the image while she is taking it. This is where that slightly distracted gaze off screen in so many of her self-portraits is aimed: to the camera's flip-out LCD screen to the side of the lens, or to a nearby computer or TV monitor linked up with it. She has a cock halfway into her mouth. She doesn't seem as aroused or overwhelmed by pleasure as a professional porn actress might act out, or perhaps an amateur who is authentically and totally into the act. On the other hand, Merritt is hardly unhappy or bored with what she's doing. But the expression on her face suggests she is concentrating on something in addition to the fellatio, something as equally important. "Haunting," says one reviewer looking at this photograph, "... the girl's expression ... is a complete mystery." [David Bowman, *The Salon* (May 6, 2000) www.salon.com; accessed July 12, 2000] She looks up and to the right of screen, to where her own image of herself sucking this cock is presumably flickering on a screen. She is watching herself do it. Do what? Suck the cock, as well as capture a digital image of herself sucking the cock. Put this way, the image is the conjunction of two objects: her gaze and the fellatio. But the fellatio is an act that has her gaze in it as well as being an act that is determined by her gaze. And that gaze itself is the conjunction of a gaze at the LCD screen and a gaze at her own performance. The LCD screen that she looks at is part of the performance, and so is no more divided off from it than the act of fellatio is divided off from its image on the screen. The LCD screen is in on the act, alongside her mouth, her hand, her eye. Everywhere we look we see two superimposed images which are identical, or one image that is doubled and "overexposed".

Merritt's photograph is composed from a series of divisions implying objectifications in the act of looking; divisions that are visible enough to generate a feeling of distraction verging on mystery, and yet divisions that are also false, since they disappear in the very process of being identified. What we might assume to be a series of partitions between inner, subjective states and the exteriorised symptoms or signs of those states is likewise not to be trusted. The articulation of either voyeurism or exhibitionism in the photos in relation to their intended objects is equally false. Thus, the reflexivity of the gaze in this photograph does not portray Merritt so much as disperse her into a series of false appearances of subjectivity. In interpreting the photograph we enumerate a sequence of component objects, composing a diagram of their connections. The camera, the cock, the screen, her mouth, her eyes, her finger, the shutter ... these are conjoined to each

other in a chain that doesn't install any particular one with priority or finality. Each is an "attachment", equally productive and consumable, manipulable, disposable or detachable. Each is an "appliance", used in the way a dildo or a tongue might be. This photo neither starts with or returns to any of these particular objects: no more the look in her eye than the cock in her mouth.

This is an instance of estrangement that is characteristic of pornography, or at least of commercially successful pornographic video and photography. The narrative themes in cinema or video porn form around not just a generalised exposure of sexual activity, but a particular condition of that activity: that it is between and for strangers. Strictly speaking, domestic pornography is a contradiction in terms. Sexual activity between domesticated lovers or between a married couple only becomes pornographic in effect when it is performed for or with or as if with strangers. As is evident with Natacha Merritt's photographs as it is with the blackmarket release of Tommy Lee and Pamela Anderson's private honeymoon videotape, pornographic scenarios enact the alienation of domesticity rather than any aura of intimacy. What curtails the pornographic imagination is the habituation—and habitation—of desire by the return of sameness, the folding of libidinal excitations back into repeated paths to form territorial and psychological identity.

Pornography doesn't need to rely on the anonymity or facelessness of junkie performers or prostitutes in order to maintain this mode of estrangement. Those nameless, homeless figures in antique black and white 16mm or Super8 stag films or snuff movies were stylistic elements of an historical trope, determined by production methods and exhibition outlets in the same way that domestic video markets in the 1980s produced professional celebrity status for porn actors. And, in the way that web-cams produced another mode of celebrity, and another mode of porn production and consumption, in the later 1990s. Familiarity with the faces, bodies or personalities of porn actors no more domesticates the sexual scenarios they perform in that does our recognition of Moe, Larry and Curly tame the violent slapstick of a *Three Stooges* sketch. What we expect from our porn actors—as we do with our slapstick comedians and action stars—is a repetition of their finite physical motions with an endless and invulnerable diversity. Their repetitions do not produce identity but the false appearance of identity. This is why porn is treated, rightly, as anti-aesthetic and contaminating. We may call pornography a genre, with generic formulae, but its repetitions generate endless viral-like chains that fantastically distend natural functions in unbounded hybrid forms rather than propagate a meaningful natural identity.

A pornographic image is thus a type of apparatus: a "device", like a grotesque or fantastic cartouche or surrealist "exquisite corpse" made from the attachments or applications of body parts (eyes, mouths, fingers, cocks etc) in unconscious or impulsive motions. The anti-aesthetic force in pornographic devices is due to the mercurial mobility between these parts. A cock in a mouth prompts a finger to move toward a camera shutter to connect the cock-mouth attachment to a lens. But these could be arranged in any sequence. The assembly of these parts is not an organised representation of desire, in which organs coalesce into a unity of intention toward the fulfilling sublimated pleasures of eroticised and totalising desire: love, for instance. Rather, this device is a diagram of affective transmissions between contiguous impulses not superintended by any single motif or organising symbol (the phallus) nor supervised by any sovereign subjectivity embodied, say, in an eye. A pornographic image is, instead, a doodle. Like a doodle it is an aimless pastime, valuable only for its decorative dexterity and shaped only by an arbitrary duration. Compared to crafted prose or poetry, pornography is a scribble. A shuffle of sockets and jacks, heads and tails conjoining, appropriating each other, forming only insatiable aggregations that never make a complete picture.

The porn doodle is a map of opportune connections, of dissolute motions that accumulate in wave fronts or impressions of force, much like the directions of unconscious propulsion experienced in cruising a scene rather than in attempting to expertly delineate it. One skims or browses the signs of the scene, rather than reading through them with a disciplined intention: the latter is a productive activity, the former is casual, superficial, sham. The porn doodle is the diagram of what we must call, in all its superficiality of usage, a lifestyle. The sort of thing we buy into, or buy a right to buy into, in Natacha Merritt's digital diary. And is this not the very promise of digital culture now, as art generally disappears into décor and ambience? Can we not say, thankfully and joyously, that the annihilating traffic in lifestyles, like the traffic in web pornography, would signal the end of one of the most enduring and humanistic of aesthetic concepts: representation? To be sure, representation (and its correlative concepts: the imaginary, ideology, mediation)

is today the embarrassing commodity-form of cultural theory; a quaint concept that cultural theory has stuck by out of sentimental attachment. Lifestyles do not represent anything, any more than does the sort of synthetic life that has been, for the past year or two, staining a Petri dish in a research laboratory in Texas. A life that represents nothing is a weightless life of superabundance.

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