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Censorship and the Radicalization of the Body in the Photography of Mapplethorpe and Serrano

KELLY MCDOWELL
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

Con el telón de fondo de las «guerras culturales» en la década de los años ochenta en Estados Unidos, se propone una mirada a la fotografía de Robert Mapplethorpe y de Andrés Serrano como formas estéticas liberadoras en un panorama cultural conservador favorable a la censura institucional. La fotografía, tanto de Mapplethorpe como de Serrano, abre el debate sobre los límites de lo permisible en el terreno artístico a través de la representación abierta de una serie de tabúes socio-culturales a los que subvierten dotándolos de un contenido político de oposición. Su trabajo pretende escandalizar y, de este modo, romper la dinámica cultural de los discursos patriarcal y heterosexual dominantes, utilizando una estrategia que difumina los límites entre arte y pornografía y articula, con sus imágenes explícitas, aunque estilizadas, del cuerpo humano, los miedos atávicos y deseos inconscientes del espectador conformando una visión crítica de la censura que recupera la voz de los colectivos marginados.

The pro-censorship position asserted by certain feminists in the debate on pornography has shifted the feminist cause from specific targets to a dangerously generalized concept of moral outrage. This has allowed frighteningly effective alliances to be formed between feminists and political and religious conservatives who seek to suppress pornography, but who also staunchly oppose women's rights and feminist agendas. Feminist anthropologist Carole Vance (in Strossen, 1995: 13) notes: «Every right-winger agrees that porn leads to women's inequality –an inequality that doesn't bother him in any other way». Rather than effectively combating sexism, the pro-censorship feminist critique has fed into a larger critique of moral deviancy which has been used by the right to mount new arguments, not only against pornographers, but also against gays, lesbians and independent artists. The overly broad language of the anti-pornography legislation written by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon[1] has allowed for attacks against individuals who are not in collusion with the sexist mainstream pornography industry.

1. In 1988, Dworkin and MacKinnon authored an amendment to the Human Rights Ordinance of Minneapolis, which sought to censor pornographic representations of women. The amendment was later judged unconstitutional and overruled, but it spawned similar amendments in the US and Canada, and sparked a highly contested debate within feminism over the issue of pornography. More information on this legislation can be found in *Feminism and Pornography* (2000), edited by Drucilla Cornell.

Pro-censorship feminists emphasize that the breadth of the legislation is a necessity. They claim that because pornography is expansive in its permeation of society, so too must be the sweep of censorship. But this expansive sweep affects not only mainstream masculinist pornographers but also women and other marginalized identities. This demonstrates the effects of censorship under a patriarchal regime. The untargeted approach is more likely to infringe on the rights of gender and sexual minorities than to affect big-business, mainstream pornography. The pro-censorship position has worked to silence marginalized identities and disallow them to engage themselves politically.

This is the climate in which the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andrés Serrano has come under attack. Probably the two most infamous names of the Culture Wars period, these artists have been repeatedly called forth as representations of the degradation of art and the dangerous potential of explicit imagery. Their work has been the target of several censorship campaigns, eliciting condemnation from conservatives and feminists alike.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano coming under fire by conservatives; it challenges the puritanical, patriarchal and heterosexist views of the dominant culture. But the type of challenge to the system invoked by the artists would seem to align with feminist causes. This reveals the difficulties inherent in the uneasy partnership between feminists and conservatives in the battle against pornography and the problematic nature of any sweeping censorship legislation. The artists who have been cited for degradation of the body (both the gendered and the sexualized body) are the very artists who complicate the simplistic binaries between genders and sexes and actually present the body as liberated. By destabilizing the distinction between the subject and the object in visual relations and subverting the heterosexual masculinist gaze, Mapplethorpe and Serrano liberate the oppressed, feminized body. This can be seen in their photographs of women and gay men (who each occupy feminized positions within society). Yet, in much of the pro-censorship feminist rhetoric, the male creator of images of the nude female (or feminized male) form automatically occupies a position of power over minorities who are always objectified through the process. An overly broad censorious view would find Mapplethorpe and Serrano «guilty» by the simple fact that they occupy the position of the male photographer.

More discussion is needed about the ways in which these artists work in support of liberation and subjectivity for marginalized identities through their exploration of the human form. A consideration of the specific cultural histories from which the artists' work emerges as well as the methods that the artists employ to empower the oppressed body will demonstrate the problematics of censorship. It will reveal the inadequacy of a simplistic relation of the male control of explicit imagery and the victimization of women and other minorities that it is said to fundamentally enact.

Pro-censorship feminist rhetoric relies on a clear hierarchical relationship between genders. It portrays human sexual relations as inherently fixed and oppositional between the two biological sexes. In this relation, women are always-already victims while men are always-already victimizers. In her essay «Against the Male Flood: Censorship, Pornography, and Equality», Andrea Dworkin (2000: 26) includes a lengthy list of the ways in which women are oppressed by pornography through claims of what it is and what it does: «It is the power men have over women [...] It is the conditioning of erection and orgasm in men to the powerlessness of women; our inferiority, humiliation, pain,

torment [...] It is women kept as a sexual underclass [...] It is what we are under male domination». The broad description of pornography negates crucial cultural inequalities and specific histories of oppression. Mapplethorpe and Serrano are indeed men; however, neither of them exists in the unquestionable position of power typically associated with men in relation to pornography. What is often forgotten in the oversimplified equation of men as victimizers is that not all men are in the position necessary to occupy the victimizer status. The artist's work must be placed within the context of existing power relations. As Richard Bolton (1992: 22) notes, in the introduction to *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*, Mapplethorpe and Serrano are still on the margins of mainstream society by virtue of their status as independent artists. Moreover, they each exist in positions of cultural marginality: Mapplethorpe is homosexual, and Serrano is Hispanic.

In pro-censorship rhetoric, Mapplethorpe is often portrayed as a victimizer who preys upon the innocent. Art Critic Hilton Kramer (in Bolton, 1992: 56) claims that Mapplethorpe's work is an attempt to force «loathsome» values upon society at large. The gay man is portrayed as a kind of public enemy, a carrier of disease and a sexual predator. In *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art*, Richard Meyer (2002: 220) discusses the ways in which Mapplethorpe's terminal illness is collapsed into the frame of his photography. «Mapplethorpe» and «AIDS» are almost synonymous; practically every time the artist's name is mentioned, his disease is mentioned too. The late self-portraits, which depict an ailing Mapplethorpe, are often published by the press to emphasize the artist's relationship to disease.

The pro-censorship camp focuses on Mapplethorpe as a disease carrier to emphasize the threat, not only of his work (for its purported encouragement of homosexuality and promiscuity), but also of the artist himself as a homosexual. Homophobia aside, we must ask, how large of a threat can a person in Mapplethorpe's position pose? As a gay man, a person with AIDS and an independent artist, Mapplethorpe occupies a position very different from men of the dominant culture.

Serrano is also often portrayed as a tyrannical victimizer in pro-censorship rhetoric. In a statement to the Senate on May 31, 1989, Senator Slade Gorton (in Bolton, 1992: 36-7) criticizes the claim that to deny NEA funding to Serrano[2] is to oppress a marginalized artist. For Gorton, Serrano is far from an oppressed individual. On the contrary, he is a victimizer of the innocent who must be stopped. He refers to Serrano's work as «tyranny» over the general public. What Gorton, of course, fails to acknowledge is that Serrano, like Mapplethorpe, in reality lacks the political power that those in the ruling class possess, Gorton himself included. The Hispanic independent artist cannot be said to occupy the position of extreme power that Gorton suggests he does. The argument highlights the implausibility of claims that the male artist indisputably occupies the position of victimizer that pro-censorship rhetoric, feminist or conservative, suggests. This demonstrates the need for the implicit power of men to be questioned. As Bolton (1992: 21) notes: «A

2. Gorton is referring to the government subsidy provided to artists such as Serrano by the National Endowment for the Arts. Serrano's work sparked controversy in the Senate when political and religious conservatives declared the work obscene, anti-Christian and anti-American. For more information on the controversy see Richard Bolton (ed.) (1992): *Culture Wars: Documents from the Recent Controversies in the Arts*.

distinction must be made [...] between the words of the powerful and those of the powerless. The demagoguery of someone like Senator Helms, a public figure and a powerful politician, is simply not the same as the demagoguery of a relatively powerless artist making a statement in the context of an art exhibition».

Neither Mapplethorpe nor Serrano resembles the typical male pornographer described in pro-censorship rhetoric. Their work is the result of specific histories of inequality and, consequently, they each represent the *disempowered male*. This refutes the pro-censorship feminist reliance on a model of absolute male power and tyranny. The female and gay male nudes created by the artists arise from a more complex network of power relations. The cases of Mapplethorpe and Serrano reveal the insufficiency of the emphasis on victimization in pro-censorship rhetoric. They refute the simplistic truism that all men are victimizers; it is ultimately hard to see Mapplethorpe or Serrano as the predatory male. In «Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe», Kobena Mercer (1994) revises his earlier critique of Mapplethorpe as an aggressor who employs the masculine gaze toward the feminized black male subject. He urges a consideration of the specific cultural inequalities out of which the artist's work arises. He feels that it is necessary to guard against the co-opting of a liberal critique by conservatives –a word to the wise for pro-censorship feminists who should be wary of making sweeping statements.

What is often negated by the broad sweep of censorship is the potential for some explicit imagery to liberate and empower marginalized identities. The work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano actually radicalizes the female or feminized male body, liberating it from the subjection it experiences elsewhere in a patriarchal, heterosexist society.

In «The Radiance of Red: Blood Works», bell hooks discusses the manner in which Serrano radicalizes the concept of female blood, which has been used to oppress women. While, in Christianity, the blood of the Father is seen as holy and pure, woman's blood is seen as unclean, a marker of her inferior status and subordination. Outlining her thesis, hooks (1995: 214) argues:

> [...] reclaiming the power of blood has become a central metaphor in the contemporary feminist movement's challenge to sexism and sexist oppression. Patriarchy can be undone only as the blood of the woman/mother regains status, is once again held in high esteem. To create a shift in cultural thinking about blood, taboos must be broken. Blood must be taken out of the shadows and made visible.
>
> When he began to use blood imagery in his work, the photographer Andrés Serrano shattered the cultural taboo that prohibits any public celebration of blood that is not an affirmation of the patriarchy. [...] the work was destined to be seen as provocative. But the truly radical aspect of Serrano's blood photographs transcends these specific elements of cultural tension; it resides in their fundamental disruption of conventional patriarchic understandings of the significance of blood in our lives. In these works blood is a subversive sign.

Serrano radicalizes the concept of blood, liberates gendered blood and allows woman to finally occupy a position of subjectivity in his art. The sign which has been used to oppress woman is subverted. In his works, *Milk, Blood* and *Blood Cross*, female blood is transformed into a thing of beauty; it is monumentalized and becomes a sacred and vital sign of life.

We cannot deny the formal beauty of these photographs; the color red spectacularly occupies the frame. In *Milk, Blood*, the white of milk and the red of blood occupy separate sections of the frame in a starkly beautiful contrast. Red, the color of impurity, contrasts white, the color of purity. Yet the line which separates the two colors blurs slightly at points; red bleeds into white and vice versa. Thus, the two colors, and the cultural qualities that they imply, become less distinct, less separate. Female blood, often associated with danger, disease and death, is juxtaposed with milk, the sign for purity, the maternal and life, and, thus, assumes a sacred status –it is rejoined with the concept of purity.

Blood Cross also presents a juxtaposition of symbols of purity and impurity. The cross, of course, symbolizes Christianity –the Christian savior, sacrifice, redemption, and all that is sacred and pure. Serrano covers the cross in blood. What is unusual and especially provocative is that he subverts the concept of the blood of Jesus, associated with forgiveness, grace and passivity, by completely drenching the cross in blood. Blood is transformed into an active agent, a functioning subject. This new, radicalized blood is aggressive and confrontational. It floods the cross, drenching the patriarchal symbol with its life-giving force. In essence, it gives new life to the symbol that, for Serrano, has lost real spiritual meaning. Flooding the sacred symbol with blood, Serrano urges a reconnection of religion and the body.

One of the most provocative works in Serrano's blood series is *Heaven and Hell.* The photograph depicts a cardinal turning away from a nude woman whose hands are bound and whose head is flung back in a startling and grotesque manner. Blood streams down her torso, streaking her neck, shoulders and chest. The most unsettling quality of the photograph is the look on the cardinal's face, which is one of sadistic, pornographic pleasure. hooks suggests that the photograph indicts the church as a primary site for the reproduction of patriarchy. The work is, simultaneously, a critique of the female nude in Western art. hooks (1995: 216) quotes art historians Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock who say:

> In art the female nude parallels the effects of the feminine stereotype in art historical discourse. Both confirm male dominance. As female nude, woman is body, is nature opposed to male culture, which, in turn, is represented by the very act of transforming nature, that is, the female model or motif, into the ordered forms and colour of a cultural artifact, a work of art.

Serrano *re-radicalizes* the deradicalized female nude, and he does so by bringing blood to the fore. The blood in the photograph represents the violation against woman by the church and patriarchy in general, and it is finally exposed; it becomes evidence of the violation. And, like the cardinal, the viewer is confronted by the violation. We cannot deny or escape that which we have previously been able to do. hooks (1995: 216) explains:

> [Serrano] exposes the violation –the assault on both the woman's psyche and the psyche of those of us who consume the images, often with pornographic glee. By showing the blood, Serrano pierces the screen of patriarchal denial and demands that we acknowledge what we are really seeing when we look at the female nude in Western art. He forces us to bear witness, whether to confront our complicity or to declare our resistance.

As viewers, we can no longer avoid defining what we see. In this acknowledgment, patriarchal power over woman is undone.

Much of Mapplethorpe's work offers a commentary on the feminized position of the gay man. In society, the gay man occupies an abject position, not completely unlike that of woman. Both identities are marginalized within a masculinist, heterosexist culture. Mapplethorpe's work responds to this oppression, and often, his gay male nudes occupy a position similar to that of woman.

His sadomasochistic photographs portray the play of sexual power and powerlessness, subverting the relations in mainstream heterosexual culture which are used in the domination of women. Mapplethorpe-as-photographer becomes a crucial concept in the theatrical staging of the power play. The position (and power) of the male photographer is called into question. This is most aptly demonstrated in *Self-Portrait*. The photograph features Mapplethorpe, in sadomasochist costume, penetrating himself with a bullwhip while turning around to confront the camera. In the photograph, Mapplethorpe assumes the objectified position of women or feminized men, relinquishing his status as the dominant male photographer. Anal penetration, a symbol of female vulnerability in heterosexual society, seems to equalize women and gay men. Yet Mapplethorpe radicalizes the concept, and his object status in the photograph, by *returning the gaze*. The fact that he unabashedly turns back to face the viewer disallows complete objectification; he becomes a subject in this act. Meyer (2002: 196) explains the importance of this action:

> The photographer inhabits both a vulnerable position (penetrated by a bullwhip and fully opened to the scrutiny of the camera) and a domineering one (outfitted in leather chaps and vest, penetrating himself, and audaciously returning the gaze of the camera). *Self-Portrait* thus complicates the central trope of sadomasochism, the division of sexual labor along a power/powerlessness axis, by simultaneously staging the roles of both mastery and subordination, both active insertion and passive reception.

This, of course, is an important critique for women as well as for gay men. Mapplethorpe's return of the gaze is a boon also for women's subjectivity, defying the tropes of the female nude who exists in a position of passivity and availability to the male viewer. Becoming a subject-object, Mapplethorpe offers a challenge to the relationship between the powerful viewer (heterosexual male) and the powerless nude (woman or gay man).

An important work with regard to the equation of the oppression of women and gay men is Mapplethorpe's *Brian Ridley and Lyle Heeter*. The photograph is a dramatic revision of a conventional marriage portrait pose: the typical heterosexual husband becomes a leather-daddy who restrains his same-sex partner with chains while holding a riding crop. The photograph is a dramatic commentary on conventional gender roles. But the acknowledged performativity of the staged scene suggests the unfixity of the revised roles: the dominant partner could easily become the submissive partner through a simple reversal of positions. Thus, through the sadomasochistic staging, roles become reversible and power becomes exchangeable. At the same time, both of the men return the gaze, staring proudly and defiantly into the lens of the camera, suggesting a response to the feminization or powerlessness of gay men in mainstream society. In the act, they reclaim a subjectivity denied to them in a heterosexist society. Thus, we see that

sadomasochistic role-play becomes an important tool for resistance in Mapplethorpe's work. It raises the issue of gender and sexual performance, which has become crucial to feminism and queer theory alike.

Mapplethorpe's gay male nudes subvert the notions of the classic female nude. Mercer discusses the substitution of the black male body for the white female body of classic art. Initially, Mercer (1994: 174-5) posits that Mapplethorpe draws on the codes of the fine art tradition and thoroughly objectifies the black male. He also calls attention to the imbalance of power between the white male photographer and his black male subject. For Mercer, Mapplethorpe enacts the masculine gaze upon the feminized black male. Of course, Mercer later revises his argument, acknowledging the cultural specificity of the work. He acknowledges the point made earlier in this paper that specific histories of oppression must always be taken into account when interpreting works of art. Mercer (1994: 191) explains:

> [...] the potentially subversive aspect of the homoerotic dimension in Mapplethorpe's substitution of the black male subject for the archetypal white female nude was underplayed or obscured in my earlier analysis, even though the racialized dynamics of power and pleasure in the gaze were placed in the foreground. As a gay male artist, whose sexual identity locates him in a subordinate relation to heterosexual masculinity, Robert Mapplethorpe is hardly representative of the hegemonic model of straight, white, bourgeois male identity privileged in Western art history as the centered subject and agent of representation.

In his revision, Mercer admits that Mapplethorpe's black male nudes can be seen as a subversive deconstruction of the feminized nude in dominant traditions of representation. We see this in the photograph *Dennis Speight*. The black male assumes a pose which appears to mimic the archetypal female nude: he stands in full view for the spectator's erotic pleasure; holding flowers, he appears to occupy a position of passivity. However, the substitution of the black male for the white female necessarily enacts a deconstruction of the dominant codes of the fine art nude. The contrast is so striking that we cannot avoid a consideration of the act of substitution and a comparison of the oppression of the white woman and the black man. The photograph also subverts the notion of anonymity associated with the classic female nude: Mapplethorpe's subject has a name, thereby claiming his subjectivity. He also returns the gaze. Thus, it is ultimately difficult to view the man as objectified; he claims a presence and a specific identity.

It is crucial for feminists to understand the liberatory aspect of artists who use the body to reclaim subjectivity and to guard against the co-option of their views by a conservative regime. The work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano demonstrate that the female (and feminized male) nude is not always-already oppressive but can actually be liberatory for women and other marginalized identities. It can actually be used to disrupt patriarchal and heterosexist power relations and empower those otherwise powerless. In what remains of this paper, I would like to look specifically at some of the female nudes of Mapplethorpe and Serrano, which exemplify this new, liberated subjecthood.

Serrano's series of photographs of women body builders exhibits a new subjectivity for women. The series was published in a book entitled *Big Women* (2000), which by the very name suggests a certain power. «Big», with its connotations of strength, vigor, force

and energy, is often associated with the masculine. Serrano revises the term in accordance with a female subjectivity. He monumentalizes the women he photographs for the series, celebrating their power. In the foreword to the book, he describes his feeling of reverence toward his subjects:

> My interest in these women is one of curiosity and amazement. I pay tribute to them, much like the Greeks who admired the male physique in search of an aesthetic ideal. I am also fascinated by the notions of «masculinity and femininity» and «power and sex» these women embody and dispel. To some, these pictures are intriguing, to others threatening. Ultimately, they reveal as much about our attitudes about sex and gender as they do about the women themselves. (Serrano, 2000: 5)

Serrano calls attention to the deconstruction of gender, sex and power that the work enacts. He proposes that the photographs are engaged in the effort to dispel myths of «masculinity» and «femininity». Putting the terms in quotes calls attention to their constructed nature. Serrano breaks down these constructs through a redistribution of power between genders. In these photographs, the qualities typically associated with «masculinity» and «femininity» become less distinct; the boundary between genders blurs, and we can no longer rest on normative associations. Serrano's radicalized female nudes subvert the notions in classical art of passivity and availability; they undo the masculine gaze. They are clearly in control of their bodies and their sexuality. The subject faces the camera, unabashedly displaying her body, her sexuality and her power. Hands are placed proudly on the hips, and eyes uncompromising (and defiantly) return the gaze. The look on the subject's face is not intended to attract or seduce the male viewer; on the contrary, it can only be described as a look of self-pride. The subject appears stoic and noble, representing, as Serrano suggests, an aesthetic ideal traditionally attributed to the male form.

This quality is also present in Serrano's *Antonio and Ulrike*. The photograph depicts an aged man who looks up toward the face of a young woman. The woman seems to be shielding the man, with her arm around him. Serrano subverts the image of the Madonna, the feminine, maternal ideal, by revising the female image. The new female subject appears strong and stoic, almost warrior-like. We get the feeling that the protection she offers the man is of a more aggressive nature than that of the Madonna. She clearly occupies the position of power in the photograph, her gaze is turned powerfully outward, rather than passively downward or demurely away from the camera.

Often lost in the midst of the sensationalism of Mapplethorpe's depictions of gay male sex and sadomasochism are his portraits of women and the female body. This work provides some of the most striking and powerful examples of counter-images of female subjectivity. His female nudes work to deconstruct gender and destabilize patriarchal order. Art critic Ingrid Sischy (in Mapplethorpe, 1988: 77-78) offers perhaps the most eloquent description of this effect:

> Sometimes Mapplethorpe's lens crosses a more guarded border and then unwraps images almost guaranteed to unnerve if not offend the categories or rules that come along in all of our lives and have kept the seen and the unseen, the genders and the races, in their respective places on one or the other side of a division so strong it might as well be a fence. There are

> groups of pictures which make people on both sides of the fence feel as if they've been robbed. Chauvinists can take his photographs of Arnold Schwarzenegger, but they are uncomfortable to see their notions of women as the weaker sex violated, mocked in the images that depict the naked bodies of women with both a classical beauty of form and so much strength that they could out-Atlas anyone. Yet these same images have received criticism from others; for example, they leave some feminists feeling burned, shouting Fire –yet another woman's body that can be viewed as a male's object of desire [...]

Sischy (in Mapplethorpe, 1988: 77-78) goes on to refute the sexist claims that she finds to be incorrectly applied to Mapplethorpe by underscoring the deconstructive and transformative potential of his work:

> Mapplethorpe finds figures –or, often, they find him– whose physical work on their own bodies asserts the break with the traditional views that have made their bodies the property of others, and who contribute to that break by letting Mapplethorpe illuminate it through his depiction of details or qualities elsewhere deemphasized, excluded altogether, or made shameful: with the women body builders the cultivation of strength and control is completely integrated into an image of beauty and grace [...]

The discomfort experienced by some viewers of Mapplethorpe's female nudes is, then, the result of the shock of the new experience of border crossing that the work enacts. It is an uncomfortable moment for some when binaries of gender, race or sexuality become unstable or collapse altogether. But this is the first necessary step toward liberation. Mapplethorpe's nudes open the door for this to occur. Thus, neither the women nor the men he depicts occupy positions of submission or subordination. On the contrary, they are liberated from social barriers and allowed to reclaim a subjectivity.

Lydia reveals this new subjectivity. It enacts a celebration of the female form. The subject poses with arms stretched upward, over the head, exhibiting her body from neck to thigh. The torso is twisted slightly so that the body faces the camera more directly. The photograph is reminiscent of the classic study of human form which traditionally focuses on the male body, but it replaces the subject with a female form.

This radical revision of the body is also apparent in the series *Lisa Lyon*, where cropping the photograph is used to display a part of the subject's chest and a single arm, which is flexed to display an impressive biceps. The contrast of the breast and the bulging biceps offers a provocative counter-image to stereotypical images of femininity. The boundary between genders is crossed. Qualities typically associated with the masculine meld into those typically associated with the feminine. The result is an image of woman which is all things at once: beautiful, graceful, strong and powerful. Through the photograph, woman claims a more complex, more complete subjectivity, one which refuses ownership. A similar reclamation is enacted throughout the series: the subject occupies a pose which is at once graceful and powerful, proudly displaying her physique from torso to feet. The muscles of the body are again highlighted. The result is an aesthetic ideal that rivals the Greek models of masculinity. The female subject appears proud, defiant, strong and beautiful.

Thus, we see that Mapplethorpe and Serrano complicate the simplistic relation of male as predator and woman as prey that the pro-censorship feminist position espouses. Neither of the artists resembles the typical male pornographer described in pro-censorship

rhetoric. Declaring them as such, as conservatives who warp feminist ideology to suit their needs do, negates the cultural complexity of their work. Women (and men, for that matter) are clearly not victimized in their work. On the contrary, these marginalized identities are liberated, empowered and allowed subjecthood. The artists refute pro-censorship feminists' sole emphasis on oppression in explicit imagery. Through their interrogation of the forces which oppress minorities, the artists demonstrate that minority identities are much more oppressed by forces such as religion, patriarchy and heterosexism than they are by explicit imagery. Actually, it is within explicit imagery that they are freed from the constraints of societal forces. Minority identities are liberated as sexual subjects, which causes a redistribution of power and an equalization between genders and sexual identities. This is perhaps the real threat posed by the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano. The depictions of vital, liberated subjects have the potential to upset the power structure. Thus, censorship directly intersects with gender and sex. It is crucial for feminists to realize this and to guard against their views being co-opted for the effort of further securing the patriarchal, heterosexist hierarchy.

The work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano opens us to the possibility that *all* explicit imagery is not degrading to women and other minorities. Certain artists work from within the dominant power structure to undo its own established norms. They appropriate the apparatuses which have been used to dominate women and other minorities and resignify them in accordance with an alternative subjectivity. This demonstrates the unfixity of power and the possibility for its re-appropriation. The disciplinary apparatuses of power automatically bring into discourse the conditions for their own subversion. As Judith Butler (1997: 100) notes: «The strategic question for Foucault is, then, how can we work the power relations by which we are worked, and in what direction?» The possibility to re-work power has been crucial to feminism and queer theory alike. It is demonstrated in the work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano through the re-appropriation and resignification of the dominant power mechanisms of religion, politics and classical art.

Because of the feminist value of this type of expression, there is a need for a complication of the feminist binary of gender difference. Linda Williams (1992: 262-3) explains this need:

> [...] it is precisely in the proliferation of different pornographies [...] that opposition to the dominant representations of pleasure can emerge. It is thus in the profusion rather than the censoring of pornographies that one important resistance can be found to what many feminists have objected to in the dominance of the heterosexual masculine pornographic imagination. For it is because moving-image pornography became legal in the USA that the once off-scene voices of women, gays, lesbians, sadomasochists and bisexuals have been heard opposing and negating the heterosexual, males-only pornography that once dominated.

The work of Mapplethorpe and Serrano demonstrates the need recognized by Williams to allow minorities access to explicit imagery for strategic political uses. An encouragement and exploration of alternative subjectivities and sexualities will allow for resistance to the masculinist heterosexist pornographic imagination. If allowed, provocative counter-images will work to complicate and dismantle patriarchal norms.

The effort of pro-censorship feminists and conservatives during the Culture Wars period galvanized a counterattack led by feminists who were interested in expanding,

rather than limiting, visual representations of women and other marginalized identities. This counterattack gave birth to the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT). FACT included those who spoke out against censorship and against the co-opting of feminist values for conservative ends. Describing this effort, Deborah Bright (1999: 33) argues:

> FACT squarely countered antiporn feminists' arguments about the implicit violence of sexuality and sexual images by showing that sexual fantasies did not respect biological difference and often featured images of male submission and vulnerability. Instead of liberating women from male oppression, FACT argued, censorship only facilitated it by ceding to dominant male-oriented commerce all expressions and definitions of sexual pleasure and power, further silencing and shaming women as sexual subjects. What was needed, FACT argued, was *more* sexual expression by and for women, not less.

A proliferation of explicit imagery by and for minorities is the strongest weapon against sexist and heterosexist imagery. The way to resist the heterosexist patriarchy is to take control of the imagery produced, rather than to cede it. We can look to artists such as Mapplethorpe and Serrano and their effort to use counter-images to resist domination. Counter-images can only be deployed through a deregulatory politics. Feminism must be willing to loosen its grasp on explicit imagery. Butler encourages a loss of control by feminism. She believes that this will allow for greater possibility for female agency and will serve as the most productive form of resistance. She explains:

> [...] it is important to risk losing control of the ways in which the categories of women and homosexuals are represented, even in legal terms, to safeguard the uncontrollability of the signified. In my view, it is in the very proliferation and deregulation of such representations –in the production of a chaotic multiplicity of representations– that the authority and prevalence of the reductive and violent imagery produced by Jesse Helms and other pornographic industries will lose their monopoly on the ontological indicator, the power to define and restrict the terms of political identity. (Butler, 2000: 504)

This effect will come through a proliferation, rather than a limitation, of images. The power, then, lies in the creation of a more chaotic visual environment, full of diverse alternative images of the body.

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