

'Art School Sluts: Authenticity and the Aesthetics of Altporn', in Darren Kerr & Claire Hines (eds.) *Hard To Swallow: Reading Pornography On Screen*. Columbia University Press. 2012. pp. 42-56.

The emergence of alternative online pornographies offers an important new focus for discussions about the current diversity of pornography as a genre and about its significance for those who produce and consume it. This chapter discusses the emergence of online altpornⁱ - 'the pornography of this decade, if not of the whole century' (Cramer & Home, 2007:164). It examines the sites' reconfiguration of the 'porn body' through retro glamour, alternative style and a contemporary ideal of sexual authenticity. This altporn aesthetic has recently been picked up and recirculated in the porn industry, most notably in the Hustler-backed 'Vivid Alt' imprint and Eon McKai's film, *Art School Sluts* (2004), acclaimed for its high production values and its 'indie' ethos.

Violet Blue, in an interview with McKai (2007), notes the association of the 'alt' aesthetic with a young, hip generation of media consumers, previously neglected by mainstream porn producers. For this generation, it has become important to see porn performers who represent their social group, 'like the girls you'd see in a coffee shop and boys at the record store posing'. The appearance of a new style of performer has been accompanied by the emergence of a group of new porn professionals - 'porn intellectuals, directors, performers and bloggers' who are 'younger, paler, decidedly less straight' than the norm. This focus on 'real people' in porn, combined with the production of a 'hip' porn aesthetic characterizes altporn generally. In this chapter I want to ask how we might interpret the significance of this new style and its particular take on sexual aesthetics.

As Katrien Jacobs (2004) has noted, alternative porn is produced in a range of cultural locations such as art performances, films and magazines, but is most often found in digital media, and especially, since the late 1990s, online. It is

generally associated with small groups of independent and ‘savvy media practitioners’ (Jacobs, 2004), and latterly with experiments in which porn becomes ‘appropriated and reinterpreted by alternative producers and activist sex workers, younger pro-porn feminists, queer porn networks, aesthetic-technical vanguards, p2p traders, radical sex/perv cultures, and free-speech activists’ (Jacobs, 2007:3). The altporn scene is documented at altporn.net, ‘a guide to altporn and subculture erotica’, which lists a variety of sites. These range from the relatively mainstream and commercial Suicide Girls - ‘the Walmart of altporn’ (in Ray, 2007a:163) to alternative fetish sites like Bella Vendetta which focuses on ‘REAL underground kink’ such as asphyxiation, age play, blood sex, body modification, clown porn, gender fucking, menstrual art, tickling and weapons and the queer ‘hot radical porn’ at No Fauxxx. Suicide Girls was launched in 2001 by ‘Spooky’ (Sean Suhl) and ‘Missy Suicide’ (Selena Mooney), No Fauxxx was launched in 2003 by Courtney Trouble and Bella Vendetta was launched by Bella Vendetta in 2004.

Although very different from one another in some respects, altporn sites share a set of characteristics; they feature ‘models who are real people’ and frequently ‘men and women of subculture’, and they are ‘considered woman-friendly and sex-positive’ (in Ray, 2007a:160). In some instances they also function as communities of one kind or another. Porn is combined with non-sexual content such as interviews and news items while the sites’ links work to locate sex in a much broader cultural context alongside music, art, counterculture and politics.

The combination of sexually explicit images with non-sexual interests and with the features of non-sexual online communities such as blogs, discussion groups and message boards, camsites and chat rooms distinguishes altporn from other more established forms of porn production. In this respect altporn can be understood as part of a broader participatory culture which is focused on social networking, self-imaging and user-generated content. It also draws on a performance ethos amongst some web users which involves a ‘sharing of porn as personal-social activities and developing mediated work and play practices’

(Jacobs, 2007:50). Here ‘media production’ is understood as a form of communication with like-minded people.

Whilst emerging from the ethos of online amateur gift economies where material is shared freely, many altporn sites, including Suicide Girls, No Fauxxx and Bella Vendetta, are now organized as pay sites. Subscription rates at the time of writing are for Suicide Girls \$4 per month, for Bella Vendetta \$8.45 per month and for No Fauxx \$13.99 per month. Altporn sites are also taste cultures where individual identity and group membership is expressed through discrimination about a range of pursuits, including sex. Aesthetically, they appear quite different to much online porn, not only in terms of their deployment of subcultural style, but because of their foregrounding of technical and artistic qualities. This is often emphasized by the site producers and reproduced in discussions of altporn. For example, *Wired* magazine contrasts mainstream sites which feature ‘ugly Web design, annoying pop-up ads, and badly lit pictures of big-haired breast-implanted blondes’ with ‘stylish subculture sites’ which have ‘artful nude photos of women who are more likely to be purple-haired, pale and pierced’ (Barron, 2002). Similarly, Eon McKai characterizes his altporn films as ‘tasteful and hip enough to leave out on the coffee table’ (in Blue, 2007).

Transgressions

The attempt to define porn has a long and frustrated history, often expressed around notions of ‘common decency’ and ‘offensiveness’ which depend on a series of judgements about aesthetics and authenticity. These judgements have been explored in a number of academic accounts. It has been argued that porn is seen as debasing because its viewing practices appear to violate the distance between subject and object (Falk, 1993:10), promoting ‘promiscuity and commodification’ (Nead, 1992:89), whilst its content violates social norms about what should be seen and what is obscene. For some, these violations - the transgressions of porn - are a claim to authenticity. Porn is a refusal of artifice; an upending of bourgeois conventions, and, like other forms of carnivalesque

low culture, overturns civilized values and celebrates the body as ‘insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal’ (Kipnis, 1996:132). From this perspective, the authenticity of porn depends on its down-to-earth lack of pretension and the challenge it offers to social norms of class, sex and gender.

An opposing view sees porn as having a ‘debased, merely instrumental role’ (Sontag, 1969:39) and an ‘inbuilt reactionary mechanism’ (Carter, 1992:11). Here, authenticity is explicitly linked to attempts at ideological subversion which is achievable only through the adoption of an artistic sensibility. For Angela Carter, the more porn ‘acquires the techniques of real literature, of real art, the more deeply subversive it is likely to be’ (Carter, 1992:19). But the emergence of obscene content in the high brow formats of literature and art can also be understood as the development of a new form of cultural capital bound up with ‘shocking the bourgeois’ (Bourdieu, 1984:47). As Mark Jancovich (2001) argues, it has become one way in which an emerging section of the bourgeoisie has distinguished itself from other class factions, in the process marking itself as cool, edgy and hedonistic - a very contemporary form of ‘real’.

Aestheticized forms of sex media can go where pornography cannot. Erotica travels much more easily and widely than hard-core video, ‘especially in a bag adorned with the face of Virginia Woolf’ (Juffer, 2005:74), and as Barbara de Genevieve notes, even content that is considered obscene - fisting, squirting, transsexuals, blindfolds and coffins - is regularly found in contemporary ‘performance, film, video, photography, painting, sculpture, and writing’. As Jane Juffer shows, discourses of aesthetic and psychological value were largely responsible for the deregulation of sexually explicit texts in the twentieth century, providing they were not, as Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, ruled, ‘utterly without redeeming social importance’ (2005:67). Their new accessibility lent them new kinds of authenticity, marking them as psychologically beneficial, socially important, aesthetically and intellectually challenging. However, this shift has also lead to charges of artificiality. The aestheticized texts that Brian McNair characterizes as ‘porno-chic’ are, from some viewpoints, less authentic than ‘proper’ porn. Where hard-core porn is

anonymous, ‘real’, sexually intense, dirty and unrefined, porno-chic texts are celebrity-led, staged and sanitized, knowing and ironic, sophisticated, glossy and technically proficient (2002:64-68). Yet although they are apparently much ‘safer’ than other porn texts, they encourage new kinds of transgression, in the literal sense of ‘going beyond’ and crossing boundaries (Juffer, 1998:234).

These kinds of transgression have had particular repercussions for women’s access to sex media. A range of cultural texts - couples pornography, erotica, sex advice, lingerie advertising and sex toys have, as a result, become much more available to women, both geographically and conceptually. Erotica can be purchased in mainstream bookstores. Ann Summers parties locate sex in the context of the home and present it in the form of a healthy and heterosexual ‘fun’ femininity (Storr, 2003). In the process sex is linked to a range of acceptable codes drawn from art, literature, health and fashion. These forms of ‘domesticated’ porn gain their authenticity from a claim to reflect their consumers’ identity, (Juffer, 1998:113), from their appeal to a feminine sensibility and from their location of sex in a recognizably female landscape. Thus, femininity, the ‘everyday and the erotic’ are reconciled through ‘a much more *located* sense of sexual practice’ than is found in the ‘sexual numbers’ of hard-core porn (Juffer, 1998:107).

As this brief survey shows, porn, aesthetics and authenticity are repeatedly linked with notions of transgression, though in quite different ways. Porn’s transgressiveness need not depend on a ‘dirty’ style; indeed, as Juffer shows, ‘domesticated’ forms of porn may cross many more boundaries than their smuttier counterparts. Nor need it be sexually explicit - the magazines that Laura Kipnis examines in her discussion of transvestite porn include many images which feature fully-clothed men who are not engaged in sexual activity. Kipnis notes that the personal ads included in these magazines can also be seen as ‘amateur self-portraits’ (1996:71), which, like the work of artist, Cindy Sherman, ‘put categories of identity into question by using the genre of the self-portrait to document an invented “self” and investigate ‘the question of

femininity and its masquerades' (1996:75). These images signify both as advert and portrait and they perform and deconstruct sexual identity.

Like the ambiguous images of Kipnis' transvestite magazines, altporn privileges the amateur self-portraits and re-presents the feminine self. It has simultaneously been claimed as art and porn and there is some ambivalence about its relation to both of these. According to altporn.net, altporn is 'perhaps an unfortunate moniker' and 'nudity or graphic sexuality are not requirements for inclusion' on the site. Some altporn sites, notably Suicide Girls, reject the 'porn' label, preferring to see themselves as producing a form of modern pin-up. Others have embraced the term, often as part of a strategy of reappropriation. This is especially true of those sites which perceive themselves as transgressive; not necessarily because of their dirty style, but, for example, because of their presentation of fetishes like bloodplay or their unsettling of straight modes of representation. This deviance in terms of sexual practice and diversity is accompanied by new claims to authenticity and quality - to be arty, revolutionary and real – and these are also part of the sites' transgressive impact. Thus, No Fauxxx's mission is to produce 'Punk Rock Porn' which is 'politically exceptional, fully inclusive, revolutionary and art-heavy', while Bella Vendetta is concerned with taking revenge on the porn industry by documenting an 'underground sexual culture' of 'sexy tattooed boys' and 'empowered women' who are 'sexy in REAL life'.

Strike a Pose

The aesthetic of altporn is best understood within the context of a broader sexualization of mainstream culture which has, on the one hand, thrown up a stylish and sophisticated model of femininity exemplified by the 'bourgeois bohemian' figures of *Sex and the City* (2003:86), and, on the other, mainstreamed a porn star look (often referred to as 'cookie-cutter' by altporn practitioners) which is plastic and genericized. Altporn also produces a version of sexy femininity derived in part from glamour and pin-up style. Like the figure of the bourgeois bohemian, and indeed, Kipnis' lonely-heart transvestite figure,

this negotiates 'a space that oscillates between portraiture and pornography' (Buszek, 2006:11), foregrounding the expression of self through image and linking glamour with the expression of 'personality'.

The use of sexiness and style to indicate personality is increasingly evident elsewhere in popular culture, most notably in the phenomenon of celebrity nudity which has taken a variety of forms such as the celebrating of some hardcore porn stars such as Jenna James and Ron Jeremy, the mainstreaming of glamour girls such as Jordan and the sexualizing of mainstream performers such as Christina Aguilera. Here, as in altporn, the recycling of representational codes associated with celebrity works to glamorize sex and to resist the charge that sexual display inevitably objectifies and depersonalizes its subjects. As Alan McKee shows (2006), contemporary porn audiences also draw on these ideas when they discuss the aesthetics of pornography, regardless of whether they prefer texts which privilege fantasy and ideal bodies, or realism and ordinary bodies. In both cases, the notion of quality porn depends on a perceived authenticity of performance demonstrated through its performers' 'real enjoyment', 'genuine interest', 'enthusiasm' and 'chemistry'.

This figuring of self through sexiness is also picked up in the practice of boudoir photography described by Ruth Barcan, whereby ordinary people imitate 'the images of perfection associated with stars' (2004:249), commissioning their own sexy and glamorous images. This idea that sexy and sophisticated image-work can be an expression of individuality is also found in altporn sites such as Suicide Girls where it is claimed that 'creativity, personality and intelligence are not incompatible with sexy, compelling entertainment'. All of these developments are part of a broader shift in which media have become increasingly central to the presentation of experiences and identities. Public and private, celebrity and ordinary, media and daily life have become blurred and everything has become 'a potential media object' (Kitzmann, 2004:81).

In some instances an engagement with sexy images can be understood as a part of the development of a form of cultural capital in which 'hipness is rendered

varyingly as authenticity, quality, creativity or individuality' (Epley, 2007:53). As Nathan Scott Epley points out, the resurgence of hipster interest in 1940s and 1950s pin-ups may represent a form of ironic and even cynical consumption, giving hipster consumers permission to consume sexist representations (2007:55). Yet cynicism is not inevitable - feminist appropriations of the pin-up are based on a more passionate relationship in which the pastiche of familiar conventions of female beauty is combined with elements taboo to dominant ideologies of gender and sexuality' (Epley, 2007:57).

This passionate form of relationship is also found in practices of alternative femininity where women mix conventionally attractive signs of femininity with other more subversive elements. Here women 'make a spectacle of themselves', yet conversely this provides them with a protective layer which allows them to 'hold the gaze' of potentially hostile observers (Holland, 2004:150). The image of active female sexuality constructed in much altporn is similarly complex, drawing on but also away from the figures of bourgeois bohemian and cookie cutter pornstar. It emphasizes youth, outsider status and subcultural membership, mixing sexual signifiers with the codes and conventions of retro and contemporary subcultural imagery. Thus, a more widespread tendency towards self-expression through sexual display and media participation is inflected by the use of styles which originate in taste and/or sexual subcultures. As Shoshana Magnet (2007) writes, even the blander sites such as Suicide Girls eroticize 'deviant' and 'cyborg' femininity, using tattoos and piercings to disrupt conventional beauty ideals. While some sites focus on quite specific sets of signs - for example, 'nerd porn' favours glasses and computers to indicate androgyny, intelligence and a passion for technology - elements such as piercings and tattoos, fishnets, knee socks and fetish shoes, short fringes and dyed hair appear across many altporn sites.

Missy Suicide, one of the founders of Suicide Girls, has described how the site was inspired by post-punk and the retro style of pin-up photographs of 1950s models like Bettie Page who she saw as 'self-confident, elegant and upbeat'

(2004:7). Missy's vision combined post-punk and retro style in order to showcase 'new Pin-Up girls, each with their own ferociously unique style and outlook' (2004:8). Page is particularly significant for altporn because of the way she combines girl-next-door appeal with mainstream glossy allure (she was a Playboy centrefold in 1955) *and* notoriety as a fetish model (she worked extensively with photographer, Irving Klaw, to produce pin-ups and film loops of bondage and domination scenarios). This combination of ordinariness, mainstream success and kinkiness makes her a particularly apt model for a cool and late-modern sexual sensibility because of the way it signifies the mundane, the spectacular and the deviant. Page's popularity might also be attributed to characteristics of her self-presentation which distance her from connotations of sleaze. For example, photographs of Page often emphasize her exuberance and happiness, and in the 'darker' images produced by Klaw, the 'hammy gusto' of her exaggerated expressions of shock or dominance work to highlight her sexual activity as a form of play and performance (Buszek, 2006:247). At the same time they appear expressive of personality rather than of the anonymity often attributed to the fragmented and interchangeable bodies of pornography. Her collaboration with the celebrated female photographer, Bunny Yeager, the various mysteries over her disappearance in 1960, her subsequent life as a recluse and the development of a Bettie Page cult in the late 1980s have all worked to elevate her further as a personalityⁱⁱ.

Maria Buszek has argued that pin-up style has been a recurring object of fascination for a range of audiences because it acts as 'a kind of visual shorthand for the desirable female', yet represents contradictory elements in which women are shown as 'self-aware, assertive, strong, and independent' (2006:8). The association of pin-ups with a sex-positive approach has assumed increasing importance in a context where sexual self-creation, self-expression and plurality are foregrounded in a range of forms, from mainstream music where performers like Madonna have encouraged women to 'construct and control their lives according to their own fantasies' (Buszek, 2006:314-327), to the lesbian porn imagery in *On Our Backs* (1984-) and subcultural media such as riot grrrl zines

which have ‘recycled and recontextualized imagery’ to construct a form girl-focused and sometimes ‘girly’ feminism (Buszek, 2006:345).

The case of riot grrrl is particularly interesting here because of the way it foregrounds ordinary women’s presentation of their bodies and sexual personae as a site of importance and complexity. Drawing on a DIY ethic of countercultural production apparent in a range of radical movements and subcultures, riot grrrl made bodily display a means of debating and reappropriating female sexuality. It ‘gave a name, a face, a sound to feminist frustration’ (Ditto in Monem, 2007:8), speaking with a ‘youth-centred voice that was felt to be missing from forms of feminism available in the 1990s’ (Downes in Monem, 2007:26). This heritage is drawn on explicitly by Missy Suicide in her discussion of the origins of Suicide Girls in the cultural milieux of Portland, Oregon ‘where everyone was an artist and everyone created something’ (2004:7). The creativity of real people expressing themselves through display is also evident at altporn sites such as No Fauxxx which is concerned with representing authenticity through the diversity of ‘normal people interested in expressing their sexualities...all sizes, all genders, all sexual orientations, all races, and from all sorts of places, doing all sorts of things’.

‘Porn that doesn’t fake it!’

The claim of No Fauxxx to produce ‘porn that doesn’t fake it!’ is more particularly a determination to go beyond a singular ‘fake’ presentation of sex, replacing this with a plurality of authentic expressions. There is a diversity of subgenres; ‘Soft core, pin up girls, black and white erotica, sensual shots’ and a range of sexual practices are depicted; ‘...masturbation, role-playing, kink, and fetish... BDSM, bondage, SM, shown as a positive thing as opposed to scary, dangerous, or perverted. And also maybe some really dark creepy stuff too....’. Sex and gender are also plural categories. The site welcomes models who are ‘Straight, lesbian, gay, queer, and bisexual couples and groups’, as well as ‘Girls, Boys, Transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, or gender-bending models’. In addition, No Fauxxx seeks ‘Models of all races, taken out of the stereotypical

context models of color are usually assigned in the sex industry', along with 'Able-bodied models as well as Not-so-abled bodies' and 'Punks, goths, emo kids, hipsters, hippies, and other "alternative" models'. Finally, the site seeks to disrupt conventional body ideals by seeking to showcase 'Fat, thin, chubby, curvaceous, zaftig, short, tall, and athletic models'. All this, for No Fauxxx, equates to 'HOT HOT HOT HOT PORN'.

Claims to the authenticity of altporn rest particularly heavily on the presentation of altporn producers and models. Altporn models are envisaged, not as the passive object of a gaze when they display their bodies, but as actors and artistic producers who are expressing what has been described as a form of 'empowered eroticism' (van der Graf, 2004). This is possible, according to Missy Suicide, because they are represented, as 'whole people' rather than 'just bodies' (in Phillips, 2005). Cultural forms which deal with the outside - the portrait or pin-up - and those that deal with the inside - diaries and other autobiographical forms - are combined to indicate this, and at No Fauxxx, the process is further emphasized through the inclusion of a 'candids' section featuring photographs of models' 'non-pornographic selves'. Here, 'the rhetoric of artificiality in classical mainstream pornography - artificial body parts, sterile studios, wooden acting' is replaced with 'a rhetoric of the authentic' which depends on 'personalization and psychologization' (Cramer, 2007:174).

The self-presentation of the founders of Suicide Girls and Bella Vendetta is also interesting in this respect. In the early 2000s Missy Suicide was probably the most visible figure to be associated with altporn. A series of struggles over the Suicide Girls site which has included claims that models are exploited has undoubtedly damaged her reputation as a spokesperson and she is much less visible now. This is underscored in her current site profile which is located amongst numerous profiles of other Suicide Girls staff, downplaying her importance as a personality and motivating force. In addition, the three headshots featured in the profile shift attention away from the altporn body as a site of deviant display, drawing on much more conventional feminine codes; in

one she sports a bow in her hair and red lipstick and in the other wears peach coloured satin and pearls.

In contrast, Bella Vendetta appears both as artist and model. Bella describes herself as 'CEO, founder, brain power, designer and Goddess' and documents a wide range of her projects in the arts, including film production, direction and performance, poetry writing and performance, perfomance art, modelling, erotic writing and zine writing and editing. Her company, MyOwnBrainProductions, also makes clothes for 'people with multiple personalities' and her multidimensionality is further highlighted in her use of different names (Kristen DeLuca for writing, Bumble DeLuca for poetry and Bumblina DeLuca for acting and poetry) and in the three quite different images of herself in the profile, used to illustrate 'Bella Herself', her work in film and modelling.

The first of these is a colour image which emphasizes her red lips and eye make up, vest top and necklace and her green Mohican hair style. Her stance - side on, head cheekily cocked, tongue poked out, eyebrows raised, coupled with 'alt' signifiers - piercings, tattoo and glasses - stress her irreverence and disdain for 'respectable' femininity. The other two are more restrained black and white images, one which reproducing a 'Cabaret' style pose with corset, trilby and stockings, and the second a more conventionally pretty close-up of her face, lit up and gamine. In her model profile, her image is different again. Bella puts both bare breasts and tattoos on show and manages an unsmiling come-on look over the top of her glasses.

The profile combines information about Bella's professional life where she is 'Godmother, model, photographer, writer, artist, fashion designer', stylist, enabler, gangsta, Lady Pimp, Hustla and overall GODDESS' with more personal details - her astrological sign, favourite bands, books, clothes, food and drink, things to do, fiancé and pets. In addition the profile details her sexual tastes - best sex toy, favourite kink ('weapons...blood, violence and cars'), turn-ons, current crush, turn-offs and guilty pleasures. Thus, taste, lifestyle, personality

and sexual identity are foregrounded while cultural production becomes a key marker of agency and self-expression.

For altporn producers such as Bella Vendetta the sexual, the personal, the cultural and the political are intimately linked. Bella's site is 'a celebration of sex' and it is also 'set up to make you question your ethics, question your ideals, question your sexuality and question what it is that turns you on.' The pleasures of sexual display are not in conflict with feminism, nor do they indicate that she is a 'slut'. The 'beautiful revenge' of the website name refers both to a revenge on the porn industry and on an individual man who cheated on her. Describing how she beat him till she broke her hand, and how the name 'Bella Vendetta' later came to her 'out of the clear blue sky', Bella shows how the personal and political are rolled into one. Her act of retaliation, her work as a model, the website itself all become her 'direct response to the world at large'. Drawing together these strands, Bella summarizes her motives for contributing to the porn industry like this;

'because if a sexual revolution is to occur then change and honesty must be taught, learned and recognized.

because it is necessary to accurately portray my sexual subculture.

because not all girls look like barbie and want cum on their face.

because I couldn't find the porn I wanted to look at so I made my own.

And because I'm a horny kinky bitch and I get off knowing than strangers are jerking off to photos of me.

because I really like the concept of making money with my cunt.'

Artist as Model

Susanna Paasonen has argued that in the 2000s, there has been a move to contrast the recycling of ‘commercial, predictable and dull’ porn online with new forms of ‘netporn’ which are characterized as ‘networked, interactive, novel, intellectually and aesthetically challenging’ (2007:164). This contrast has been useful in marking the features of production, style and distribution which some new pornographies employ. However, an overemphasis on this distinction works to erase the movement of style and content between ‘old’ and ‘new’, ‘online’ and ‘offline’ pornographies and threatens to reproduce the structure of earlier porn debates which fixated on positions ‘of either for or against’ porn. As she notes, if we are to understand the specificity of particular pornographies, ‘we need to remain dedicated to contextualization’ (2007:170).

Critiques of altporn frequently focus on the extent to which major altporn figures such as Missy Suicide can be considered radical and whether the style they purvey can be properly seen as ‘alternative’. Suicide Girls remains the target of most altporn criticism, critics arguing that the site offers a limited view of alternative practices, identities and bodies (Magnet, 2007), represents a selling out of alternative ideals for profit and encourages passive and standardized exchanges between site members (Jacobs, 2007). For Florian Cramer and Stuart Home, sites such as Suicide Girls simply represent the commercialization of alternative porn. They are ‘no different from the popular genre of industrial pseudo amateur pornography’, whilst also rapidly becoming ‘the research and development arm of the porn industry’ (2007:165). Although some of these criticisms may be justified, the danger of this kind of focus is its tendency to raise questions about how radical altporn is and whether we should be ‘either for or against’ it. This is likely to lead us away from understanding the specificity and complexity of new online pornographies.

More work is needed to tell us how altporn sites are experienced by the different groups who use them - casual browsers, altporn aficionados, community members, model-performers and webmistress/producers. However, what seems to be clear is the way that for some producers and performers at least, porn is taking on different meanings in contexts like this where performers are socially

and economically mobile and relatively autonomous and where there appears to be some equivalence between performer and audience. Altporn locates sex, sexual representation and sexual display in relation to other aspects of culture, as part of a mix of media, lifestyle and sexual practice through which the self is expressed and community is created, transgressing existing boundaries in the process.

Alternative pornographies of all kinds are now feeding back 'into the imageries of commercial pornography that they seem to subvert' (Paasonen, 2007:163), as the movement of she-male and hentai pornographies from the margins to the mainstream, and the development of the Vivid Alt imprint itself indicates. Yet the use of an altporn aesthetic - personalized and politicized, kinky and glossy - is also part of a move towards defining a particular identity and status for the 'new porn professionals' that Violet Blue describes. In this context, the altporn aesthetic and the kind of cultural and identity production it articulates is able to indicate a contemporary form of authenticity which is hip-but-real. As Audacia Ray notes of the Bella Vendetta site, many women who have worked in sectors of the commercial sex industry choose to model for free here because they perceive a match between their sexuality and the forms of self-presentation that Bella Vendetta showcases (2007a:169). There is also some overlap between these altporn models and the body modification community to which Bella Vendetta also belongs. Similarly, No Fauxxx includes a range of artists and underground heroes amongst its models - 'Madison Young, feminist art gallery owner and famous bondage model, Biscuit, incredible filmmaker, cello player, photographer, Anna Logue, internet porn star...Scream Club, Oly queer hiphop sensations!' As with Bella Vendetta, they pose as 'an expression of their personal and real sexuality' (Ray, 2007b). Ray herself, a porn director, blogger, editor of sex worker magazine, Spread, curator, critic and author, models at both sites. It is perhaps unsurprising that in these new arenas of 'porn professionalism' where the display of modified, queer and artistic bodies is celebrated, the site founders are simultaneously artists and models and that their sites are 'arty and porny without being snobby about either' (Ray, 2007b). This may be part of a more general shift in which some forms of creative labour and commercial

forms of sexuality are beginning ‘to mix in a complex way with beauty, ego and non-commercial sexuality’ (Ray, 2007a:173). How these new mixes develop remains to be seen. For now, in some altporn sites at least, art, porn, sexual self-expression and politics are being brought together in new and interesting formations.

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ⁱ I have adopted the term altporn rather than 'indieporn' which is used by other writers such as Katrien Jacobs (2007) and Florian Cramer (2007) to indicate an aesthetic which is now found in both independent and more mainstream pornography.

ⁱⁱ More recently, interest in Page has expanded beyond the particular subcultures and scenes in which retro - particularly 1950s - style has been important, producing a 'craze of Betty Page memorabilia: trading cards, dolls,

mugs, posters, T-shirts, a play, Bunny Yeager photo collectibles, and every conceivable kind of merchandising likeness of the Betty Page pinup' (Corwin, 1994:29). The Bettie Page craze has coincided with the revival of a burlesque scene which also draws heavily on retro styles of fashion and performance. The appearance of a feature film, *The Notorious Bettie Page* in 2005 (d. Mary Harron) and the rise to prominence of neo-burlesque star, Dita von Teese, marks a further stage in which retro styles circulating within subcultures are themselves mainstreamed. Media interest in von Teese, and former husband, Marilyn Manson, a performer whose stage persona draws heavily on gothic and 'satanic' imagery, neatly draws together a mainstream fascination with retro and subcultural styles, fetish imagery and an overriding concern with sexual display and performance.