

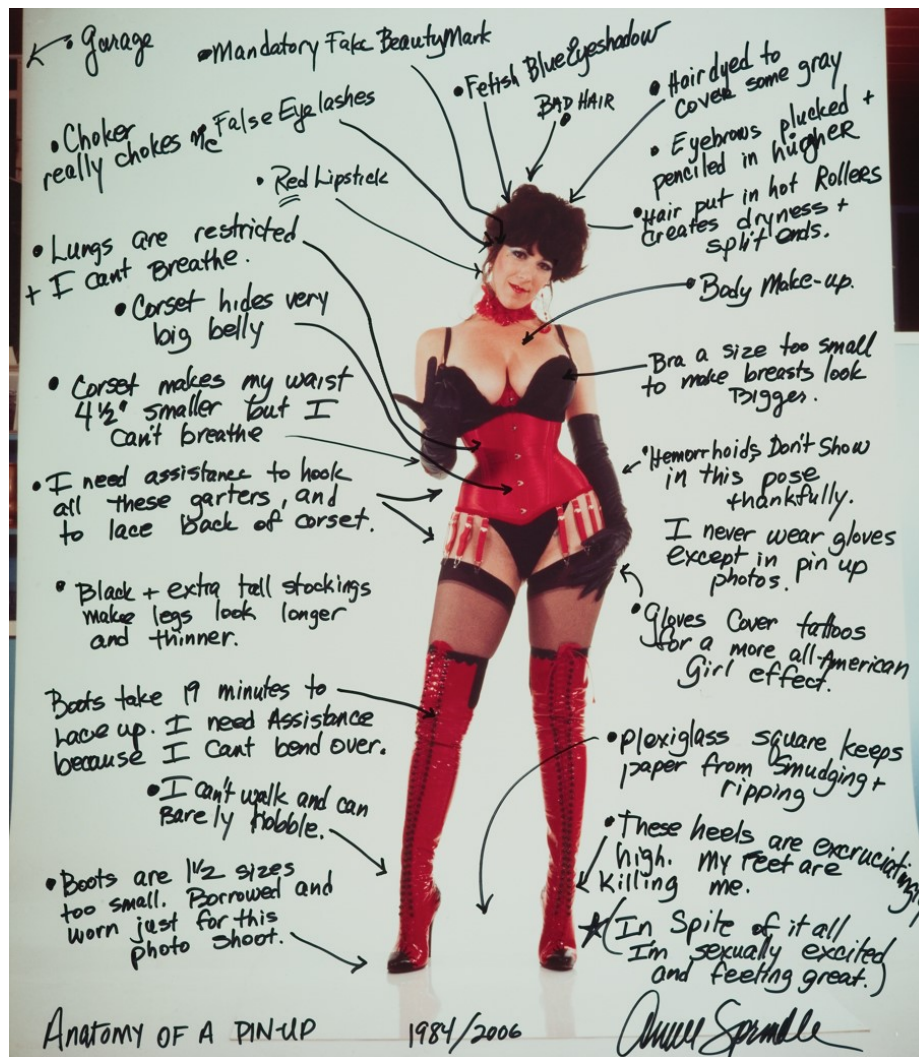
in other words

Everything you ever wanted to know about the art market but didn't know who to ask



Special Issue: America

The Collapse of America's Moral Firewall Sex in the Age of Trump



Annie Sprinkle, *Anatomy of a Pin-Up* (1984/2006). Courtesy Annie Sprinkle

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There is no exit: sex work is at the forefront of our national conversation in 2018. America has never been easy with the subject of sex—in the office, in the classroom, even in the bedroom. That is, until Donald Trump took his oath of office.

The official separation of church and state in our constitution has not prevented the founding fathers' puritanical ethos from shaping our country's collective superego. Until very recently the US has gleefully subjected its public servants and other prominent figures to a moral litmus test based on the strict Calvinist beliefs of the English and Dutch colonizers, who bestowed their own spiritual anxiety and sexual repression upon the American people.

“ Make America horny again ”

No matter the hypocrisy, the policing of sexuality has long been considered a matter of national interest; a cherished American pastime. While “family values” have been a signifier of America's unofficial theocratic ways, there has nonetheless been a gradual demographic drift towards secularism that is impacting our cultural values and public policy, from LGBTQ rights to marriage equality or abortion laws. As the country has diversified, so too have attitudes about the regulation of sexual moralities been shifting—followed by the sudden eruption of volcanic transgression occasioned by Trump's entry into politics.

From “Grab 'em by the pussy!” to “Make America horny again!” the Trump era has brazenly hastened the collapse of America's moral firewall with its unprecedented displays of vulgarity, revelations of sordid affairs and



allegations of sexual assault and harassment.

Yet it is the lawsuit filed by the unabashed sex worker, the pornographic film actor, director and producer Stephanie Clifford—better known by her stage name Stormy Daniels—that has really cracked our moral compass.



Collection of the Busy Beaver Button Museum

An unlikely hero for many, the significance of Stormy's litigation is more than the potential violation of a non-disclosure agreement about their alleged affair. The Stormy story has already led to a raft of corruption allegations which extend far beyond the bedroom.

Stormy has become an icon for some: see Richard Prince's composite portrait [18 & Stormy](#) (2018), an amalgamated headshot of the 18 women who have come forward with claims against the president of sexual harassment and subsequent intimidation. She is not only the personification of revolt against the current regime, Daniels embodies the watershed moment in which the #MeToo challenge to systemic sexual abuse is being led by a defiant, sex-positive woman.

“Call off your old tired ethics”

Stormy is no victim-feminist—indeed, her power lies in her candidness about her vocation. Her visibility on the national stage flies in the face of centuries of repression that resulted in a sordid patriarchal culture in which women are too often abused and viewed as sexual commodities, yet demonized if they exercise any sexual agency.

Could Stormy be ushering in a new dawn for American women and our culture at large? Are we at the precipice of what we might call the “COYOTE” era? In 1973 the sex worker Margo St James founded an alliance of feminists and prostitutes in San Francisco under the banner of “Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics”. Together they agitated for the end of moralizing hypocrisy, formulating a radical line of feminist discourse in which women could acknowledge their use of their sexual powers without shame, fear or stigma.

This kind of movement would oppose the current mainstream feminist narrative that posits every woman as a potential victim of sexual harassment—reinforcing the patriarchal power it supposes to critique or even dismantle. That resistance has been there since the 1970s, when the mainstream stalwarts of second-wave feminism, such as Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, could not endorse St James' claim that “to make a great distinction about being paid for an hour's sexual services or an hour's typing or an hour's acting on a stage is to make a distinction that is not there.”



Collection of the Busy Beaver Button Museum

Yet, in these complex times, our collective investment in feminist agency requires revisiting these radical dissident thinkers of the second wave—as some among us uphold Stormy Daniels as a great American patriot.

Through the decades, a powerful minority of American women artists have made work that challenged sexual mores, gender norms and the tyranny of political correctness—often running afoul of mainstream feminist orthodoxies.

In the light of current events in the American public sphere, these women's stories articulate a timely counter-narrative of women's liberation that places “sex” at the core of their “work”. Echoing the COYOTE call to action, these *agents provocateurs* have challenged the prudery of high culture and the main street, creating a space for a more complex understanding of women, sex and power.

If Stormy Daniels can engender the de-stigmatization of sex work for a mass audience, garnering a new visibility for sex-positive feminism, then it is our patriotic duty to reconsider a whole cadre of women artists who have forged an alternative conception of a feminist erotic imaginary.

Judith Bernstein, *Supercock* (1966)

The men's room provided the artistic epiphany that ignited Judith Bernstein's artistic career. Her scrawling, high-tension graphite drawings of anamorphic screws and giant penises sprang from her transgressive appropriations of the graffiti covering the men's bathroom at Yale University, where she undertook her graduate studies in the 1960s.



Judith Bernstein, *Super Cock* (1966). Courtesy Judith Bernstein

Tapping the male psyche allowed Bernstein to address that period's twin political preoccupations—protest against the Vietnam War and the emergence of radical feminism—which were entwined in Bernstein's iconic early works.

As she recounted of this period, "Aggression and humor are strongly connected in my work. This is epitomized in my piece *Supercock* (1966), a drawing of a comic superhero with huge genitals ejaculating through the world."

Dorothy Iannone, *The Story of Bern, or, Showing Colors* (1969)

Years before she explored graphic eroticism in her art, Dorothy Iannone played a direct role in challenging the strictures against freedom of sexual speech in the American legal system's definition of obscenity and the regulation of pornography.

In 1961 Iannone was a graduate student in English literature as well as a young painter in New York. Deliberately



defying American customs officials when entering the country with a contraband copy of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, Iannone was at the epicenter of the legal struggles to combat censorship of material deemed obscene or pornographic by the US government.



Dorothy Iannone, excerpt from *The Story of Bern (or) Showing Colors* (1970). Courtesy the artist and Air de Paris, Paris

With the support of the New York Civil Liberties Union, Iannone won her case—yet her legal challenge to state censorship foreshadowed her own struggles with obscenity accusations against her work during the latter part of the 1960s. Her depictions of erotic scenes were censored in 1969 at the Kunsthalle Bern—during the show “Ausstellung der Freunde” (“Exhibition of Friends”), the institution insisted she cover up representations of genitalia. Iannone responded to this act of censorship by creating her book *The Story of Bern, or, Showing Colors* (1970), which told her first-person narrative of this experience.

Betty Tompkins, *Fuck Painting #1* (1969)

“I was an accidental dissident,” says Betty Tompkins, whose erotic work was disregarded by her fellow feminist artists in the early 1970s. “Being excluded from the feminist art movement gave me a lot of freedom. I read the books and articles, but I was free to pick and choose. I wasn’t subject to any social pressure.”

Tompkins is best known for her series of “Fuck Paintings”, which she began in 1969. Inspired by her husband’s collection of illegal pornographic images which he had amassed since the 1950s, Tompkins had an epiphany about making paintings from this erotic trove in a fit of frustration after being rejected by every gallery in New York on the grounds that she was a young woman artist.



Betty Tompkins, *Fuck Painting #6* (1973). Courtesy the

She created *Fuck Painting #1* in the bathroom of her small apartment, using an airbrush and black acrylic paint to achieve a photorealist rendering of vaginal coitus with the woman on top. Removing all traces of the couple's identity, Tompkins abandoned her post-Pop student work for the most extreme form of objectification: pornographic penetration.

artist and the Brooklyn Museum

Liberated by the rejections of the gallery system, Tompkins fearlessly began to explore this iconography that became her signature preoccupation—yet was seemingly unaware of how incredibly divisive her subject matter would later become. After her work was censored in the mid-1970s, Tompkins' career was dormant until gallerist Mitchell Alpus revived interest in her work in 2002.

Anita Steckel, *Untitled (Phallic)* (c. 1970-72)

“If the erect penis is not ‘wholesome’ enough to go into museums—it should not be considered ‘wholesome’ enough to go into women!” Written by Anita Steckel, these lines are taken from the manifesto of the Fight Censorship Group, a loose collective of women artists who banded together in solidarity over their shared interest in sexually explicit subject matter as well as a rightful claim to deploy phallic imagery in their work.

Other FCG members included Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, Martha Edelheit, Eunice Golden, Juanita McNeely, Joan Semmel and Hannah Wilke among others.

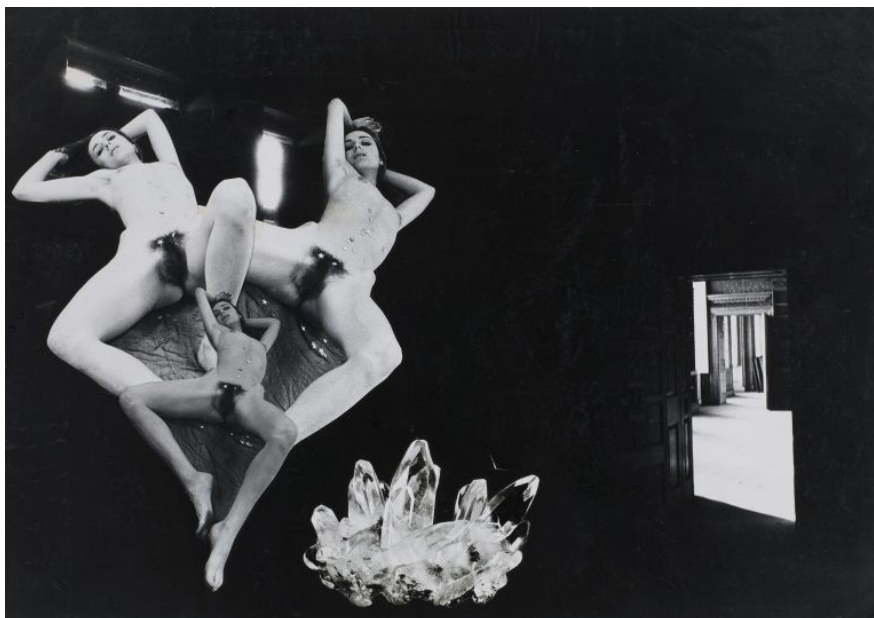
Steckel's manifesto was visually realized in her rowdy painting *Untitled (Phallic)*. Her cartoonish depiction of an erect penis becomes a daisy as its head is surrounded by “petals” composed of rotund nude women, lock-armed in a chorus line of phallic jubilation. This small work betrays the humor, desire and subversion Steckel brought to her feminism.



Anita Steckel, *Untitled (Phallic)* (c.1970-72)
© Estate of Anita Steckel, Courtesy Suzanne Geiss, New York

Penny Slinger, *Diamond Sutra* (1970-77)

“The feminist movement was more political, trying to get the same power men had whereas I was trying to look at the whole package of being a woman. I wanted to be subject as well as object. I wanted to own female sensuality and sexuality,” said Penny Slinger.



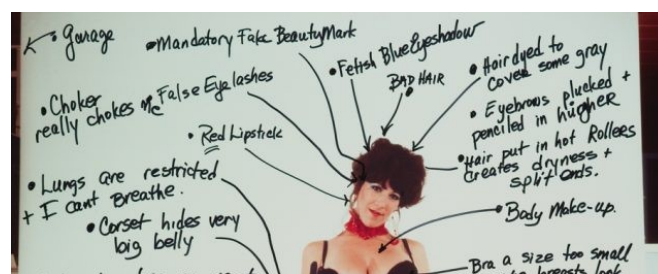
Penny Slinger, *Diamond Sutra* (1970-77), photographic collage from *An Exorcism* © Penny Slinger. Courtesy Rifleman, London

While her work can be claimed for feminism in retrospect, Slinger has had a difficult artist's trajectory as a liminal figure in the domains of both Surrealism and the women's movement. Slinger is an incongruity whose collages go beyond the socio-political discourse of quotidian feminism and delve into the subconscious. Her book *An Exorcism* (1977), is made up of a series of portraits created within an abandoned English manor. These spectral montages show the artist in both orgiastic and repentant poses, playing with iconographies of religion, sadomasochism and death.

In 1979, thousands of copies of Slinger's *Mountain Ecstasy* (1978), a book of tantric collages made in partnership with Nik Douglas, were destroyed by British customs upon entering the United Kingdom from the printer in The Netherlands. Like *An Exorcism*, these works were generated for the sake of a female spectator, providing the female viewer with a vehicle through which to ruminate on her own erotic sense and self-image.

Annie Sprinkle, *Anatomy of a Pin-Up* (1984/2006)

“I've been putting out sexually explicit images of myself for years. I know this sounds bizarre, but somehow it makes me feel safer,” says the artist and professional sex worker Annie Sprinkle.



As a prostitute in the 1970s and pornstar in the 1980s, Sprinkle straddles the roles of educator, artist and activist. Famous for her theatrical performances in which she allows the audience to look inside her vagina with a speculum, Sprinkle reclaims the objectification of her body for her own pleasure.

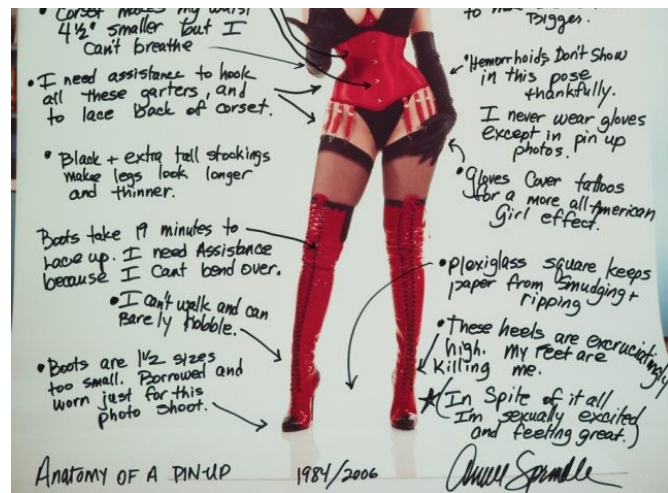
Since her self-directed film *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle* (1981) she has sought to redefine the ways in which pornography is represented and for whom it is designed. Sprinkle's oeuvre has been devoted to porn made from a woman's point of view, in which women are seen having actual orgasms. Her self-portrait series "Anatomy of a Pin Up", begun in 1984, humorously demystifies the conventions of representation of pornographic actors with hand-written texts explaining the tricks of the trade for erotic professionals.

Since 2005 Sprinkle's performative work has expanded to include a series of "ecosex workshops" and happenings, in which her and her partner Beth Stephens engage in what they call "re-eroticizing the universe" by conducting marriage ceremonies with nature. They have wed themselves to the Appalachian Mountains, the Sun, the Earth and water to endow these inanimate natural features and elements with their own sexuality and bestow on them all the legal rights that accrue to the partners in a human marriage.

In 2017 Sprinkle and her wife, the artist Beth Stephens, participated at Documenta 14 in Kassel, where they performed, lectured, and previewed their film documentary *Water Makes Us Wet: An Ecosexual Adventure*.

Penny Arcade, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* (1990-ongoing)

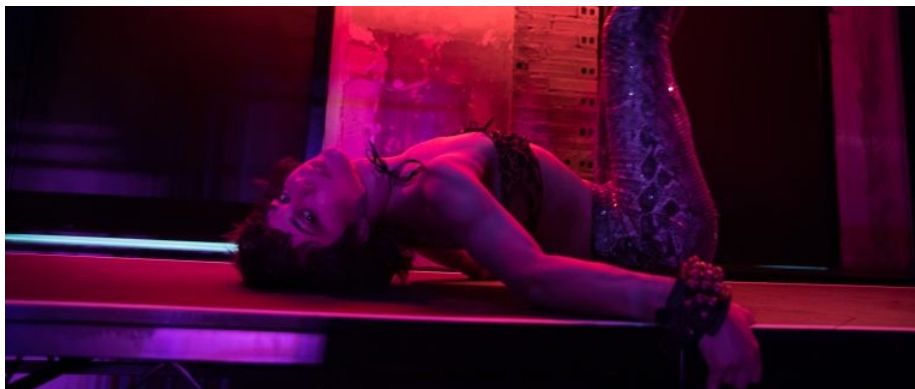
"I was queer before queer theory," says Penny Arcade, whose practice combines



Annie Sprinkle, *Anatomy of a Pin-Up* (1984/2006). Courtesy Annie Sprinkle



performance,
experimental
literature,
documentary and
political activism.
“The radical queers I
grew up with were
interested in women’s
rights, reproductive
rights, civil rights,
everything.”



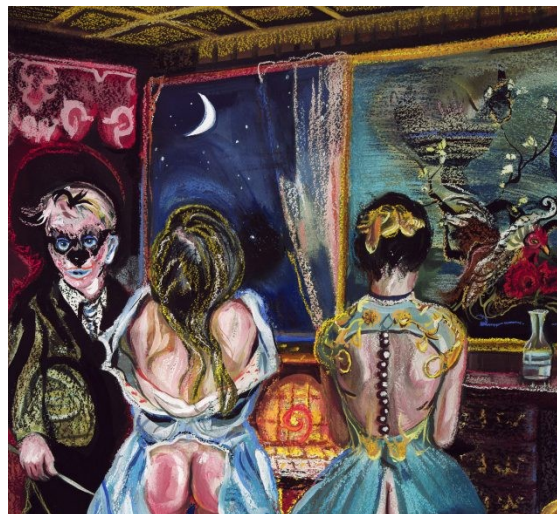
Penny Arcade, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* at Performance Space New York, March 10, 2018. Photo Credit: Julieta Cervantes

While Arcade has been part of the underground New York art scene since the late 1960s, her best well-known stage production, *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* was created in 1990 as a direct rebuttal to Senator Jesse Helms’ campaign to censure the National Endowment for the Arts for its support of “obscene art”. Arcade’s hybrid cabaret show has become an emblem of the culture wars of the 1990s as it wove together her deeply politicized autobiographic monologue, erotic dancers, role play and improvisation to address the issues of the day.

Performed every year since the show’s inception, Arcade’s work has tirelessly advocated for sex workers’ rights and sex-positive feminisms. It serves as a rallying cry for a revolutionary pornographic imaginary in our culture. Arcade’s updates to *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* also target the bugbear of “self-censorship coming from the left in the form of political correctness in today’s culture”.

Natalie Frank, “Story of O” (2017-18)

The entwinement of sex and power is the primary theme of Natalie Frank’s figurative paintings and drawings. Citing the history of the feminist “sex wars” of the 1970s as one of the conceptual catalysts for her work, Frank has taken up the sex-positive feminist mantle to craft a provocative iconography that strives to deliver a complex yet explicit depiction of women’s sexual lives.



Her most recent work takes the notorious novel *Histoire d'O* (written in 1954 by a French woman, Anne Desclos, published the book under the pseudonym Pauline Réage) as its point of departure. This series of 15 masterful pastels and gouaches on paper are executed in a hyper-theatrical figurative style. First exhibited in this year at the height of the #MeToo movement, these drawings act as a defiant manifestation of women's sexual desires as well as an exercising of their sexual powers.



Natalie Frank, *Story of O III* (2017). Courtesy Natalie Frank

Frank explained why she sees this legendary book as “good for women” at this given moment: “Ultimately, it’s not pornography where actual women are used in the making of images; it is literature, art. In the author’s intent—and in the heroine’s journey—erotic freedom is celebrated. As women, this is a right that has long been denied by us, by men and by other women.”

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