

Aesthetics Vs Ethics: Expanding Definitions of Feminist Porn

Speakers: Juno Mac (JM); Hello Rooster (HR); Misha Mayfair (MM); Lina Bembe (LB) – Sex School.

In May 2019 SWARM hosted a three day festival involving panel discussions across a wide range of topics that impact on sex workers, and that connect and intersect with sex worker rights organising and broader struggles for justice.

This recording is from that festival.

00:00:00 JM So, without further ado, I want to introduce the panellists. We have an amazing panel here today, people with experiences from different parts of the porn industry, and other kinds of sex work, I'm sure. I'm going to let everyone introduce themselves, then we're going to have a conversation for forty minutes or so about feminist porn, so-called unfeminist porn, different porn practices, working conditions—is this still working? Good. And then we'll throw out to Q&A. So, if you've got questions that you want to ask, or you think you might want to ask, you have forty minutes to go over them in your head, make sure that they're not statements. [Audience laughs] Just double check there's a question mark on the end, and double check that they are as interesting as what the panellists have to say. So, yeah, get going now. I'll let everyone introduce themselves and their pronouns, and then we'll get going. Okay? Roo, do you want to kick us off?

00:01:08 HR Hello. I'm Roo, or Rooster. They/them. And I'm a performer, filmmaker, and... yeah.

00:01:23 LB Hello, everyone, I'm Lina Benbe. I am a porn performer based in Berlin. The kind of pornography that I do mostly goes between so-called independent pornography, so-called ethical porn, so-called feminist porn, and it ranges from, let's just say, 'feminist

amateur narratives' all the way to queer post pornography. I am also a podcaster for the Ersties podcast, and I'm part of the explicit sex education platform called Sex School. And I'm also a director every now and then.

00:02:06 MM Hi, I am Misha Mayfair and I spent a few years working in the mainstream porn industry and grappling with the aesthetics and ethics of that around a 00:02:14 lot of judgement. And I've been spending a lot of time thinking about feminist porn and contrasting that with gonzo porn, and now I have my own independent practice where I make kind of fem-gonzo porn. I'm trying to... un-kind of change the narrative of what feminist porn can be, and what aesthetics and ethics are.

00:02:37 JM And I'm Juno Mac. I'm chairing it, but I have performed in porn one or two times, definitely of the so-called feminist variety, and I do full-service sex work. So, just so you're aware of where I'm coming from. So I'm going to kick off by asking anyone or everyone on the panel to tell me, when did you first become aware of the term 'feminist porn'? Was it before or after you actually you were doing porn yourself? And How do you feel that the arc of that conversation about feminist porn... how's it gone, and who's been leading that conversation? Who started it, who's been instigating it ever since, and who's that conversation playing out for, you know? For whose benefit?

00:03:29 LB Okay, starting with the question of who started it, if I give you a thoughtful approach to that. Who started that conversation, I will say people like Annie Sprinkles, people like Nina Hartley, and all those artists/activists/educators who pretty much were the first ones to change a little bit like the narratives that we can see from pornography. And I think, in my opinion that also came from a very much like... hard to say, like more... like furious, like, at the same time celebratory approach to what pornography can be and how it could take into account other bodies and other desires. I came into contact with porn—I am Mexican, I am based in Berlin—and the very first thing that I did with my free time, when I recently went to Berlin, was go to a screening from the Berlin Porn Film Festival, which is a festival that showcases a very wide variety of pornography that could be labelled in a very broad term as 'alternative'. So for me I think it got a little bit more like conflation between alternative forms of doing pornography, and then like somehow along the way it can grapple with a word like 'feminist.' And then afterwards it was a little bit more like the buzzwords of some directors who label the work and which I will say more like, marketed as feminist. And I

guess that when you are not that well informed with the discourses of pornography, you kind of put everything mixed together. And as a performer, it was a little bit like of the joy of finding something and in so many ways I feel I identified with, and then be like, “Oh! This is feminist! Oh! This is different! Oh!” But I guess that’s... at least in my particular case, again, it was like everything very much mixed. Like the possibilities of doing something different, kind of like feminist tacks here and there, and I guess that the awareness of what is feminist and what is bullshit. [Audience laughs] Let’s just call it like that! It’s a little bit... it was a little blurry for me in the beginnings.

00:05:53 MM I came in it—sorry—I came in it from a completely different stand. I started in the mainstream porn, and then found about feminist pornography. But the way that I found about it came on an axis of, “This is better than what you’re doing,” and it felt quite shaming to have this narrative among the community, and it’s perpetuated by other sex workers and stuff, that there is a certain aesthetic. You know, if you have the certain kind of grading, then it’s cool; but if you have bright studio lights, and its POV, and the camera’s moving, and it’s not a static shot, and it’s not cinematic, then it’s suddenly unethical. When I found that to be kind of confusing, because the way that I understand ethics is that it’s the way that we treat workers, and it isn’t what you do in the film, and it isn’t the lighting you use in the film. And I find this feminist porn movement to actually be antagonistic and anti-woman, because if we’re pro workers, then we should be elevating the women that you think are in the bad porn because surely you know they’re being exploited more. So why make this class definition, in my opinion, because some of these producers and stuff, they’re not... they’re coming at it from a place where they don’t have to do this to live. So they don’t have to go and film a scene, they get more choices in what they’re doing. And I don’t think it’s a good dialogue; I think it’s exclusionary, and it’s about the aesthetic rather than the ethical issues. [Audience applauds]

00:07:21 HR Hello? Yeah. Yeah, I agree with a lot of what Misha says, in terms of... yeah, even when I started performing, the majority of my work has been in feminist porn, or alternative porn, like... it’s automatically equated with ethical porn, and which I think, through my experience, I found not to be the case. I think, especially like who’s leading the conversation now, or, having done my research, you know things like what you were saying, like Nina Hartley or Candida Royalle, who are really pushing feminist porn or disinclusion of, you know, the female gaze and stuff like that, was really interesting in the late seventies and

eighties. But then, yeah, if we think about it, it came very much from—or, particularly now, where you have Erika Lust and others leading that kind of conversation, I feel, and especially with marred with aesthetics and us thinking, you know, as soon as it's very beautiful lighting and very beautiful cinematography and camerawork, we automatically think that's ethical, or everyone in those productions are getting paid well, or the labour rights are good, and I don't think that's the case based on my own experience. And what I've seen is, it's very much... yeah, there's still a lot to be interrogated in terms of feminism, in terms of you still get TERFs and SWERFs within this kind of movement, and it still very much comes from a middle-class, upper-class echelon. And a lot of people who are getting left behind, you know, are those on the margins, working-class people, and I feel that's where ethics—aesthetics comes into play, where it seems to be pleasing a lot of those people within middle class and upper class, and everything else is like, "But where are the labour rights? Where are the ethics within that?"

00:10:07 JM I think something that came up quite a lot when Molly and I were researching *Revolting Prostitutes*, was looking into the history of the sex-worker rights movements and the anti sex work movement and, seeing how the inception of anti sex work feminism began much more with porn than with prostitution. In the beginning, they were much more concerned with porn as a site of violence, porn as something that interested them in terms of their identity as feminists. And for me, I think that that never originally sprung from a concern for the worker; it was much more about looking at a porn actress on the screen—and Gloria Steinem literally said this, explicitly—it was about looking at the actress on the screen, and seeing not a worker who might need better rights on the set, but a visual representation of her and all women, like a stand-in. The way that any of us watch a Hollywood movie, and then we're like, "Oh, gosh, that could be me in *Pirates of the Caribbean*." [Audience laughs] So instead of being a whole person, the worker on the screen is actually a symbol. And in that way I think anti sex work feminism can be seen to be at times incredibly egotistical, because it's like feminist porn, if it can sometimes be understood as a kind of response to this accusation that porn is unfeminist, is really... it's like, "Feminist for who?" For the viewer? So that you can feel like the storyline creates a better world for you to live in, where somebody, you know, goes down on you first. But, it's sad for me that the feminism in the first place was about what's inside the script, rather than what's happening before and after the director says "Action!".

00:11:59 LB I think that's... when it comes to feminist porn, it's... I actually really dislike the term, because it just like comes as a static concept. And, first of all, there is not such a thing as feminist porn. There is 'feminisms', in plural, in pornography. It's like if you have a beautiful narrative, but if that feminism doesn't apply also in work standards, then you have nothing. And I have to say also considering what you were saying, it's that also nowadays this sort of labelling of feminist porn has a very big dimension in terms of shame and stigma, because in so many ways it's now labelled as this sort of feel good kind of label; it's a little bit more like, a sort of like a sugar-coated kind of pornography, so that people can admit to watch, like, "Oh, this is like the good porn that I'm watching. This is not like the dirty, mainstream thing." That could be a little bit more difficult to admit, like, "Oh, I'm this filthy, but I cannot say it. So I'm just going to say it's feminist porn, and it's all glossy and beautiful." But again, like... feminist porn can be like this super-raw, super-gross film that you shoot with an iPhone, you know, and describing whatever weird fetishes it is that you like, and that's feminist as well. And at the same time, it can be like the vanilla, heterosexual, missionary in the bed of roses thing that Erika Lust likes to film, for example, and could be again like some whatever dimension of 'feminism' at the same time? So all these things co-exist one with another, and I think that what bugs me the most about feminist porn is this sort of way of out of the stigmatising of porn as a genre. But at the same time it backfires into the rest of the people who work at it, and again it bypasses over the very elemental fact that we are dealing with sex work here. So in so many ways we... it's really crazy that, within the discourse of porn, like people still not talk about it enough as the work it is, and they're like more focused on the aesthetics of it.

00:14:30 MM I agree with some of the points, but I still think it's obfuscating it to say that there's feminisms within porn, because we're talking about feminist porn, which is a defined thing, and whilst you could say that some porn is made with a feminist praxis, which is what I'm saying, that's—the labelling, the taxonomy, of feminist porn is an aesthetic choice in and of itself. You're already making a distinction, and as soon as you've made that distinction, you've... by definition of having that distinction, you're throwing everyone else under the bus. And it's not a progressive dialogue for society, I think, as well, because it's not leading to the goal of people be accepting of sex workers or destigmatising porn. You're stigmatising the people in the mainstream porn war by shaming them and saying, "You're not a feminist." And then that leads to people not wanting to engage with organisations, and not wanting to engage with activism and politics because they feel like they're the wrong kind of sex

worker. And this is something that I encounter a lot in the European porn scene, as contrasted with the American porn scene, which has a lot of the feminism vein running through it. But the feminism vein running through Europe is really exclusionary. And it's not helping us have a dialogue, it's not helping us talk about like what's happening in Budapest, for example. I've been on panels done by feminist porn makers, and they didn't even talk about the moratorium—we had to stop shooting because of a HIV outbreak. You know, and that's something to do with ethics, and that was on a panel about ethics. And these things keep happening. It's like, you guys exist in a bubble that's adjacent to pornography, but isn't part of it, because you've made yourself that bubble to elevate yourself, and it's just slightly frustrating rhetoric. [Audience applauds]

00:16:11 JM So, in light of that—and perhaps this is something that Roo would have a comment on—do we, like, if we understand feminism, and other social justice movements, to be fundamentally about something that isn't for profit, can a work place—which is what a porn set is—truly be a site of feminist activism? Or can there just be pieces of feminism, like feminist modifications within that framework? Because, if a set is running, it's making a product for profit. We know how capitalism operates, and that kind of ends up pushing things out of the way in its wake. So is the best that we can hope for a more feminist way of doing porn, whether or not that's within the script, within the porn set, or more people paying for it? Because let's not forget that a lot of people out there are probably watching Erika Lust films on Porn tube, thinking that they're, you know, participating in a feminist act. So, does profit get in the way of feminist porn?

00:17:21 HR I think... like, if I think about profit, or capitalism, yeah, capitalism for so many reasons, I think... when you have profit at the core of any kind of business practice, at some point you're going to push aside ethics. You know, the labour rights or the working rights of the people who you're employing. At some point you're going to always choose profit as the... before anything else. And what I'm really struggling now, or like a little anecdote, is... which is like, kind of with Erika Lust. So my experience of being I think sexually assaulted on a feminist porn set, and that scene still being sold for profit, and as ethical, is to me like, where is the feminism in that? Or even not feminism; where is the ethics in that? And that is just something really hard to wrap my head around, and something that mentally I'm just continually struggling with. But... so I think, yeah, when you always centre profit, you're

always going to dismiss at some point, you know, everything else, like ethics or anything, but it's always, at the end, the end goal's always going to be profit.

00:19:19 JM It kind of... it makes me think of the rise in the last few years of t-shirts I've seen in Top Shop, or what have you, that say 'femme' completely divorced from what fem means to a lot of people, or 'feminist;' you know, like feminism as a kind of cutesy product or a way to sell more things. And it also makes me think about a story I heard recently about a pair of strip-club bosses who were specifically looking to hire... to fill their club with feminist strippers, and they even during the interview process, the audition process for the strip club, were talking to people about their feminist credentials, or their political activities, because they thought that that would make it a more spicy, engaging environment maybe for customers, you know, to have people... you know, I mean feminists are cool, right? They are like... they are... the whole Beyoncé vibe might have worked for them. But then when it came to them actually having a union, the bosses didn't actually like that quite as much. I don't know the details, but I know that it didn't... their feminism didn't continue down the line into letting them have a union. And, I kind of, I look at that sort of thing, and I think, oh my God, is it naive of us to believe that our employers, directors, bosses, and the like can really be our allies in feminism, in workers' rights, when they are in a sense fundamentally... the whole point of them is to extract as much from our labour as they can, and our whole MO is to try and get as much compensation for our labour as possible. And these kinds of... this can clash, I feel. Has this been your experience?

00:21:09 MM Yeah, yeah, completely. And I think that, at essence, this has been one of the big challenges for mainstream pornography, is that the studio model is dying, and you can no longer make a living just working from studios, because people aren't paying enough, and they have a lot of overheads. So running a studio and making a scene that way, you have to hire, you have to find a location, blah, blah, blah. That actually takes up a lot more money than you'd expect, so the returns aren't great. So they're not hiring as many people even. So even big stars aren't getting booked as much, so the response has been for individual performers to become their own producers and their own content makers. So, if you have your own website, you can get about a hundred per cent of the profit—that's fantastic. I mean, even if you're using things like OnlyFans and ManyVids, you can still get a big part of the profit, which is more than you would get filming a scene once for someone, getting a one-off payment and never getting any more money from it. Now people are

realising that they can create their own content, they own that scene for ever, and then they can continuously profit off it. So I think that porn is a really, really interesting thing to look at when we're thinking about adapting working practices to a really changing playing field, really.

00:22:19 JM Going back to what I was saying earlier about the feminist porn phenomenon or movement being a kind of response to anti prostitution, anti sex work critiques back in the Second Wave when they were saying that porn is a fundamentally unfeminist thing. With this... you know, you were saying that this feminist porn discourse further emphasises the fact that maybe there is some porn that is unfeminist, do you think that that framing has had further implications for people working in that kind of porn? Do you think the consequences of the rise of feminist porn... you know, has that made that worse? I'm thinking of Gail Dines and some particularly vicious stuff I know that she's said at conferences—not conferences anything like this one!

00:23:09 MM A hundred per cent. I think all of this feeds into a rhetoric that what people like me who've done scenes like gang-bang stuff and bukkakes, we're somehow responsible for symbolic violence against women, and this even comes from people who like feminist porn. I death threats from people. I get told that, because of me, people are being abused. And it's quite serious. And this is why... this distinction, and this is why I'm so against this distinction, because, you know, we can all have these abstracted conversations, but it's not your real life, and I have to deal with these people every day, pretty much. And it's a lot, it's a lot emotionally, especially when you're a survivor yourself, for people to tell you, "It's your fault this is happening." Well, no. At the end of the day, we can play around with porn, no matter how we want, but it's men who do these things. And we can blame porn, and we can blame sex acts that women have consented to and enjoyed, as much as we want, but the issue is still going to be men. But, you know, a lot of feminists have now obfuscated that, and now we're just attacking other women. It's really, really unhelpful. [Audience applauds]

00:24:13 JM Thinking about feminist porn, and what it's like shooting feminist porn, Lina do you feel that the demands that feminist porn maybe makes of the worker, does it add any more work to doing more traditional porn? I'm thinking of an article that I read once by a feminist porn performer who said that she felt embarrassed to admit on set that she wasn't actually having... she wasn't feeling good, she had had like period pains or cramps or

something, and felt even more pressure after the cameras had stopped rolling, to perform that extra emotional labour about enjoying it, and it being something she genuinely was into in her personal life. And she said that pressure didn't exist in her mainstream porn experiences.

00:25:05 LB Yeah. On feminist producers as empty signifiers, there is definitely this sort of belief that you are into it for the cause, you know? So it is like, you have to be passionate, you have to love it, you have to love your body, you have to love yourself to be part of this movement, for this sort of revolution. So, definitely, there are some particular companies in which they are like, "Oh my God, we want you to be at your best natural self. Be cute. Don't do anything with your hair, your body's just perfect, it's natural. But don't come with bruises, don't come with sunburns, don't come with anything that could be unflattering to your body naturally. And of course we want you to have the best time ever. But you don't... no pressure with coming, but please deliver a real orgasm." [Audience laughs] For real! So—

00:26:08 JM But you don't get paid extra for that?

00:26:11 LB No. No, no. It's like your natural self or you best self, but like... yeah. Be perfect. As natural as you are, but perfect, please. [Audience laughs] So, yeah, in so many cases it can be like that sort of... yeah, it acts like that sort of emotional pressure, that you have to perform not only like fucking for camera, but also have to perform a feminist version of yourself, like a certain correctness, a certain type of commitment to 'the cause,' a certain sense of joyfulness into what you do, but also to deliver nice smiles, still say nice things, but not to be too fierce enough. And I think that actually that's just like one bit of the extra labour, but actually the biggest burden, the biggest, biggest burden and the biggest extra labour, it's when you have to make a case whenever you have been wronged by feminist performers. I think Roo has a lot to say about that, but I also have my own stories with that thing, and it has come to a place in which so-called feminist producers, people who actually appropriate the discourse, people who have nothing to say—like, seriously, nothing, nothing to say—but just rely on the people who have things to say, and steal the work of people who have actual things to say, and actual feminist stuff to say. Being like, when you have to make a case against those people, it's like also like the extra labour, first of all like believing yourself. Second of all, having to admit that, oh my God, if these are feminist people, these are like the 'good people' versus the 'bad people' of the porn. First you have to convince yourself

that when you have been wronged; that it was actually something that you deserve to assert yourself for. And then for build a case against them, and to build a case against these sort of people. And even in my case it has been a sort of like, “Okay, if you want to settle this, and if you want to continue having to work, you have to have full endorsement of us.” So it’s... this is really terrible, I think that’s the worst part of it, that when trouble happens, this empty signifier of feminist porn, it obfuscates the very demands of basic human decency, because at some point that’s what we have... that’s what I even I had to argue for. Like, treat me like a fucking person, you know. [Audience applauds]

00:29:01 ?? [off mic] You’re not allowed to swear. [laughs][Audience laughs]

00:29:03 JM We’re going to have to beep that. [Audience laughs]

00:29:09 HR Yeah, I think what Lina says about this kind of... there’s this extra demand to be authentic as possible, which is so... yeah, that’s performative of like, “Okay, I have to be as authentic as possible, and I have to give my best.” And it’s just all this pressure. And, yeah, when things do go wrong, how do you challenge that? Like when you’re supposed to love your job, like love in a specifically... in those scenarios where it’s like... “We’re doing the best that we”—or, maybe not just that, “We’re doing the best that we can,” but “We’re feminist, we’re ethical,” and this is the... how they’ve been marketed. So when you maybe turn up and things are not great, how do you question that? Like if you’re being put in a dangerous position, but everyone’s saying, “Ah, but, feminists and ethical,” and how do you, as someone in a dangerous position, kind of be like, “Um... no, this is not really... this is not great. I don’t feel particularly safe.” So I think it’s... it causes problems sometimes, where you as a sole person feel like you’re fighting against like... if you were to call it out, or just question it, it almost seems like you’re questioning the whole movement of feminism or of ethics, and it shouldn’t be that. It should just be like, “Ah, this thing... this thing that happened is not great, and I’m not trying to attack your politics, I’m not trying to attack your whole... this whole thing that you’ve built for yourself, and I’m not trying to bring you down.” But it sometimes seems like that. And, yeah, feminist porn or ethical porn, like all of those... Erika Lust [laughs], I feel like they have to be very... open to criticism. That they’re not just like you know... they’re leading the conversations, but they’re not the only voices, and you can get... you can, and you will get assaulted, or abused, or raped, or whatever, on those kind of sets, and how do you deal with that? Because unfortunately, as sex workers, that is

the number one kind of hazard in our jobs, and how is that dealt with? But if you cover those things up, and ignore it, and just say like, yeah, ethics and feminism. That is not a solution too, and it becomes harder to then confront things like that.

00:32:33 JM I think there's something as well in there about... I think feminist porn would like to imagine that it's possible to achieve a working environment where nobody is ever going to experience a consent violation ever again. And it's for that reason that we don't in the social justice space any more say 'safe spaces'; we say 'safer spaces', because that acknowledges the fact that things are going to potentially sometimes get messy, and that's... then it's in those moments that we deal with it. But by calling something 'feminist porn,' you know maybe in the first instance we should've been calling it 'safer porn', because nothing's fully safe, nothing's fully feminist, and maybe it was a bit too quick to congratulate itself, like, 'feminist porn!', and now there's no recourse to calling it out and saying, actually, it's not that feminist on that occasion.

00:33:28 MM I think this is... again, it's a taxonomic problem, that we've decided, instead of making it about workers' rights, we've made it a feminist thing. But instead of framing it as feminist porn, it should just be framed as just ethical porn, because bringing in the feminism brings in the aesthetic issues, and then that's how ethics and aesthetics are currently conflated a lot, not just in this kind of rhetoric, but in all kinds of spaces at the moment. It's a really popular one. But I think that we should try to move away from calling porn feminist and just call it ethical, and base it around workers' rights, and aim to have unions for people, aim to unionise, aim to have support for workers, because at the moment we're just in an ideological loop and it's going nowhere, it's not supporting anyone. [Audience applauds]

00:34:14 LB And I will just add this very big, very important, single word called 'accountability'. [Audience applauds] And especially because, as you were mentioning before, there's like the porn from studios, it's like coming down. Like, everyone has to... if you want to have like something equal 00:34:36 as a career, or want to claim that you work in porn, there's like it comes with a lot of entrepreneurship, into like figuring out things on your own, figuring out what resources you want to have as an individual to continue circulating your content or making revenue for whatever it is that you decide to do. So in so many ways, like the way in which we are... in which we will probably be working in the future, it's more like not only studios but people to people, because we are performers, but in

so many cases we're also producers, we're also directors, we are also crew members on other colleagues'... productions, etcetera. So it's also not about like this only how to function and how to counter abuses within corporate structures, it's also about ourselves, about acknowledging that—exactly what you say—no space is going to be safe. That there's got to be negligence, but it's got to be like situations that are involuntary, where even within like the best attempts, and with the best intentions, things can go wrong, and we need to be ready to figure out how to fix [it] when shit happens, because it's going to happen. [Audience applauds]

00:35:54 JM And maybe the sense that I still feel is missing. Like when I shot with Erika Lust recently, and there was a performer's bill of rights, or something to that extent, kind of like a... how do you call it? Like a terms and conditions of the workplace. And I read it, and I thought it was interesting. The one thing I wish I could have added to it—and maybe, shooting on a porn set, not the moment to start getting into labour rights negotiations on that exact moment—but I kind of wanted it to say, “The fact that we bill ourselves as a feminist porn company maybe is sometimes going to make it even more likely you're going to have a bad experience on set, because of that pressure to be having a good time.” Authenticity, or the demand for authenticity, sometimes makes it harder to negotiate what you need. And that happens in prostitution as well. I think there's a sense in mainstream society that working in a brothel, seeing ten clients a day, getting cum on your face, has got to be the most degrading way to be a prostitute. And there's never this sense that, actually, maybe having to go away for twenty-four hours with a guy who thinks that you're basically his girlfriend, and that you love him, and that you're happy to have sex with him when he hasn't washed, and that you're happy for him to emotionally blackmail you, maybe that's also kind of degrading too. And it's very hard to speak back to that kind of exploitation, because you're already in the authenticity trap. And I think pretending that you're into something is kind of like the ultimate psychological domination. It's not just the workplace asking for our physical labour; it's also getting inside our minds, and I think that's where this conversation about feminist porn really needs to go, now. Or maybe, as you say, it's on the way... you know, working on a set is on its way out, and hopefully there'll be more power in the worker's hands in the future.

00:37:40 HR Yeah, if I think... so, there's two scenes that I've done with Erika Lust where I feel... where, one where I'm clearly being sexually assaulted. It's looks very beautiful

aesthetically, but there is like boundary violations and sexual assault going on. Who gets to call that ethical? Or who gets to call that... like, I'm... like my voice is kind of lost in that, because Erika Lust is leading the conversation and gets to call what is ethical porn. And I feel that's, yeah, totally wrong. Ethical porn is always about the labour rights of performers or those involved in the work, and they should be defining what is ethical, not you... the person's who's not even involved in the scene; you might be directing and producing, but I don't that gives you the power to be like dismissing whoever's been in that scene, their experience, and be like, "No. My stamp says this is ethical, regardless of what your experience was." And that's why I feel like it needs to change. Ethical porn is always about the labour rights and working conditions of the performers, and that's it. Like, centring their voices, and this kind of aesthetics and giving directors and producers leading the conversation is... it's really, I... yeah, it confuses me, like how even the public are so much like, "Yeah, that's ethical porn." And it's like, "But where are the performers, in this?"

00:39:44 JM And where are the pimp lobby accusations flying in their direction? [Audience laughs, cheers and applauds] We don't let managers come to a SWARM conference to talk about whether or not their escort agencies are ethical or feminist, you know? So it's kind of strange that porn employers are allowed to be doing that, and again only some kinds of employers. Maybe, you know, your average cis guy who runs a hardcore porn house wouldn't be allowed to say, "Actually, I pay my workers really fairly, and it's really ethical on my set." And maybe no one would believe him anyway, just because of the way this conversation's been going. I thought we'd throw out to questions now, if you're happy, unless there was anything else that you wanted to say on the back of what we were just chatting about? Yeah? Alright. We'll take, maybe, two questions at a time, and we'll go for twenty minutes before we head out to lunch, alright? This one here, and one there.

00:40:53 Q1 Hi, everyone. It's a really... you were talking a little bit about the shift away from studios to sort of the OnlyFans sites and this whole social media side of things. A little bit of what I've found with that is some people saying the working relationships between performers has changed a little bit, and I wonder how your experiences on the panel have sort of connected to that? Do you feel like there's like a community change, and maybe some of those aspects, maybe being closer to the feminism side of things? And the other little point I wanted to make was about porn projects that wanted to connect with things like

charities and stuff. I mean, does anyone have any feelings about that type of thing as another aspect of ethical?

00:41:36 JM Thanks Jason. And that one there.

00:41:42 Q2 Hi, everyone. Thanks. I just wanted to ask, how do you recommend that we as consumers identify ethical porn, in terms of labour rights, not in terms of, “Oh, that looks pretty.”

00:41:53 JM Okay.

00:41:57 MM I'll go with the OnlyFans thing first. I think that these platforms have basically decentralised a lot of power at a time when the structures that people are working with have collapsed. So, it's kind of made it a bit more like syndicalism; everyone can pick who they want to work with, how they work, and you know in general you can have more of a laugh, you don't feel like you're being surveyed by a boss or anything like that. So it creates a much more of an egalitarian and open kind of space to work with. And I think it's also given back a lot of power and independence to people who might rely on contract work, or might just rely on studios, and so more creativity in the porn that people are making. So, you were talking about, “What's ethical porn and how do I know how to buy it?” Buy directly from performers. You know, they often have websites and clip stores. That is the best way to do it, and they're getting most of the money. That is the ethical choice, I think, essentially.

00:42:59 HR Not to be devil's advocate, but... because, I think when you have like a very I guess well-established performer, I think that also then maybe blurs... you know, it creates a kind of power imbalance, too, where then it almost becomes like, okay, the same thing with like the producers and studios. So we also need to kind of question that. But I don't know, yeah, I don't know how that—you know, how we do that, too, because problems could arise from that, too, like even... yeah, when you're kind of... you're still two performers, but someone has more social capital or is more....

00:43:57 LB Yeah, I will have to add on to that, my very, very first attempt of doing this sort of like, in the work, ended up in actual sexual abuse. So, as I said before, working with others, it requires again—and I think it's like the core of what we've been saying, like this

whole panel—like, take this as work. Like demystify whatever bullshit you have in your brain, and put it as work first and foremost. And even if you're working with whoever it is, you have to have like working, like very clear working standards of how is it that you're going to collaborate. Even if you're going to shoot in your living room with an iPhone, whatever, just bear that in mind first and foremost. And regarding ethical porn, how to identify it, I think that consumers have a lot of work to do as well when it comes to ethics. The way things are, the way the market operates, the way censorship operates, demands from people to, whatever kind of porn you see that you like, do your research, follow the people who are actually doing it, and inform yourself. And that's how you get to... that's the only in which you get to untangle ethical ways of consuming it, which will be like consuming the porn the way in which the actual producer asks you do it. Like paying for it, or whatever it is it... and then like follow them on social media, like because doing porn, doing this kind of work, it's like half the time, advocacy, and there's always like very vocal what's going on within the industry dynamics, and that's when you get to eventually get to know the working standards of the people you might be interested in.

00:45:44 JM Okay. Two more.

00:45:47 Q3 Hiya. It's not really a question, but just a comment. Obviously, I also know these lot, and I've been employed as well—

00:45:55 JM You're allowed to make a comment, you're like....

00:45:56 Q3 Yeah. And I've also worked in porn, and I again started porn like ten, eleven years ago, and worked a lot with more mainstream porn companies. And I actually found that, with my experience like between the mainstream porn industry and the feminist porn industry, I actually found that a lot of more mainstream studios run by men were actually a bit more ethical [chuckles] than actually feminist porn companies. So there is this like dispar—I don't know, there's like this whole thing about, "Oh, feminist porn, it's going to be definitely better than like men shooting porn." And that's not necessarily always the case. Which isn't to say... I mean, I also experienced rape and assault on porn sets at either side, and it's just... it is hard. It's hard for the viewer, but it's also hard for the workers as well, to kind of be able to talk about it as well. Because at the end of the day, you're also like probably going to lose a fair bit of your livelihood in order talk about this and to talk about

your experiences, especially if they have such capital in the industry. Like, Erika Lust is one of the leading companies, and you know for a lot of queer and indie performers, Erika Lust is kind of like your go-to, right, because who else do you work with that has money and is able to actually pay for the performers. Yeah, and I think it's... I don't know, it like, because there is this whole idea that if the porn looks a certain way, then it must be ethical. And there is this whole respectability politics of, "Oh, look, like, this is feminist porn. It's two women being very gentle. And that's always going to be more ethical within like something like some rough BDSM scene." Do you know what I mean? And that's not always the case. And I think, often where feminist porn fails is this whole identity politics based on aesthetics, rather than actually workers' rights, you know?

00:48:18 JM Yeah. I think, you know, going back to the Second Wave, because apparently I'm obsessed with it [Audience laughs], there was this logic that still prevails today, which is just penetration itself is violence, and people who receive penetration can't possibly consent, and, you know, there's no space within that. And I find it, when I was researching for this panel, I discovered that since the James Dean allegations, and his complete lack of accountability and all of that stuff happened in 2015, the search... people searching for feminist porn, it's been at a pretty steady decline. And I don't if that's just because more people than ever are now using tube sites, or because maybe people felt disillusioned with feminist porn itself after finding out that, "Oh! A violent man? Within feminist porn sets?" And it's just like, wake up, you know, like there's nothing... there's not space where that isn't possible. It can happen on queer porn sets; it can happen on feminist porn sets.

00:49:18 MM And this is what I was... I think is really important to highlight, because when you asked the question about, "What is the most ethical?" and I answered, "Buying straight from the performers, and not having a boss around being a lot better," I think we have to remember that we are working with sex, and when we're working with sex, there's scope to be a consent violation—there just is. And you can't disembodify that. There is never going to be a porn set, a way of making porn, that is going to be a hundred per cent safe at all. But I think that in the wake of the decline of feminist porn, I think, like I said, people are moving now more to support independent producers through like Patreon, even, ManyVids even lets you have campaigns to get money to fund a studio, and OnlyFans is a great thing for people at the moment, and this is how people are decentralising it. And I think, yeah, the decline of feminist porn is a mainstream thing, it's started now to become more and more academic.

Like Erika Lust has become very academic about this, and it's an ideological campaign for her, now, as opposed to... you know... a contribution to the industry or changing in the industry. Yeah.

00:50:25 LB I will just have to add that Erika Lust is not academic at all. [Audience laughs] I will just say that she has nothing to say at all, likes she's just taking too much space, but the voices, we are the voices. That's all. [Audience applauds]

00:50:41 MM [off mic] I meant like, she's talking academically that she's [inaudible 00:50:44].

00:50:45 JM I'd quite like to see Erika Lust maybe—if you're videoing this, please don't send it to her, but [Audience laughs]—or maybe do, like—

00:50:52 MM I tweet her enough. She never replies. [laughs]

00:50:54 JM Taking this performer's bill of rights that she has created and is making quite a lot of noise about, and if she really believes in the performer's bill of rights—which I think has the power to go out and do good things—she should be working with other porn producers, mainstream porn companies all around the world, to say, "You should take this on too." Like don't just make a good thing and keep it to shore up your brand, but really put your faith in it and let other people use it, you know, like, out to the commons.

00:51:26 HR So, yeah, I think with Erika Lust, they released two documents last year, which is the model bill of rights and the ethical guidelines for guest directors. And all of this kind of... the labour and the contribution to these documents came from performers that were not credited, and performers who had experienced consent violations and sexual assault on their sets who gave their labour to creating that document. And then for Erika Lust to just take that labour and then kind of just... in a way, use it as a marketing kind of thing, is really to me... yeah, I think it speaks volumes in terms of what... what Erika Lust really cares about. And, yeah, I really feel it endangers performer safety and the core, or at the core, like ethical porn, what ethical porn should be. Which is okay when you have consent violations, or sexual assault, or sexual misconduct, or anything, addressing it, that doesn't make your production any less ethical, any less feminist, but being very open about

it, because if you're calling for other mainstream companies to be ethical or feminist, or you're calling for them to be accountable, you should also have that expectation for yourself. And that's why it's really difficult... yeah, I understand how difficult it is for maybe her peers to call her out, because she is Erika Lust, but it becomes even harder for performers or whoever has any kind of bad experience to be like, well, who do I turn to? Do I turn to the mainstream people who are 'the bad people', or...? Because I can't turn to feminist or ethical, because I, you know.... So it's a very hard kind of thing to navigate.

00:53:57 Q3 [inaudible] most of the time when they're talking about ethical porn, they fail to understand that consent and boundaries are messy. And we as sex workers know this better than anyone, right? It's not black and white, it's not clear cut. So even with this bill, it's like, that doesn't mean anything realistically, you know, because—

00:54:19 LB? It's human nature.

00:54:19 Q3 Exactly. There is always the potential for that. And if you really want to engage with survivorhood politics and accountability politics, you need to involve sex workers in that. You can't just like, as a producer, as a director, if you've not had experience, if you're not a previous sex worker, you just have no clue whatsoever. And if you're not including those voices, then you can't claim to be ethical, you know? And actually I think like my experience in the industry, it's changed a lot in the last ten to eleven years drastically. And the fact that also like sex workers are—especially in porn—are organising more, and in conversation more with each other, like that's changed a lot in these last few years. And again, even lots of mainstream porn performers are coming out and talking about consent, coming out and talking about rape and assault on set. So it's actually very common. So I don't understand how people Erika Lust are still able to keep this sort of level of respectability when they absolutely no respect for sex workers. [Audience applauds]

00:55:38 JM Any other questions?

00:55:41 Q4 There was a session at this morning that was called like, 'The Future of Work', which, people were talking about like what they thought work would be like in the future, and I'd be interested to know what the people on the panel think the future of porn will be from an ethical perspective? Because there's like one version of the future where there's

porn bosses that decided they are the arbiters of ethics, and they want you to all work for them, and that's their version of ethics—which people don't like, justifiably. There's other like versions of the future where it could be that people do like take the means of porn production into their own hands, which obviously, it could be a positive thing, could lead to people being really atomised. I'm wondering what you think the version of the future of porn that you are struggling for as porn performers is? Like, what is the thing you're going towards? If that makes sense?

00:56:33 MM I would say unionisation and more protection, and you know, some of the issues are the same issues that full-service sex workers have as well, because when something bad happens to you, the police still aren't going to take you very seriously. I had to report something to the police recently, and when I called the crime management team to follow up on it—it was a harassment case, and they were harassing me on my porn profile, but they know me in real life, so I had to mention to the police, because they were going to look on my Twitter account, that is what, you know, porn. And when I called crime management, they immediately commented, "Oh, you're an actress, are you?" and stuff like that. We need to destigmatise so much sex work to be able to get to a point where porn's going to have better representation, but I think the future is hopefully unionisation, more representation, being able to talk more openly about porn that's beyond Porn 101. And the decentralisation, basically, I think is really important, people creating their own porn, because you own that scene for ever, you can make money off that for ever; or you're just shooting one thing, and you don't own that anymore. And I think that's a really important step.

00:57:38 JM In terms of, you know, the global sex industry, it's fair to say that it's still undeniable that the vast majority of the gaze in the sex industry, and the money in the sex industry, sits with the male consumer, and like the male gaze that a lot of us perform for when we're doing any form of sex work. And hopefully that will change over time, but what are the actual changes and developments that you would like to see within porn narratives? Because, I mean, we've spent a lot of time in this panel discussing how maybe that's a red herring, and we should be thinking about working conditions, but in terms of what's actually in porn, do you have developments that you want to see?

00:58:19 LB Like, I will definitely like to see the independent scene emerging and establishing itself. I do think now like on a broad level we live in very complicated conditions. I mean we're talking about censorship, we're talking about corruption, we're talking about monopolies of pornography, and we're talking about indie filmmakers well, having everything to lose from this. So if I had to... just to put it like very roughly, like two words, like, 'diversity' and 'independent porn taking over'. Like, no empty signifiers, like those two things, and then whatever it is, and like entering into dialogue and whatever, shall not stay into that, like be defeated critically. And that's it. I don't know.

00:59:13 JM Roo, as a filmmaker, do you feel like, thinking about the creation of porn as an art form, is there places that you'd like to see it go in? Like, if we just take it as a given for a second that working conditions are going to be as sex workers would like them to be.

00:59:34 HR I think... I mean, it's very interesting who... the people who kind of, also... the number one voices in you know artistic kind of porn and stuff like that. And again, it's very... it's not as diverse and it's very middle class, and it's... there's a lot of respectability and that kind of comes into play. And I'm not sure how to... I think people recognising their place of privilege or, also, you know, that they can kind of dip in and dip out by working as sex workers or performers and, because they're very privileged or middle class or they fit a very normative like hetero kind of... that they don't get as—a lot of stigma, compared to other kind of workers. And once they kind of recognise that, and kind of start to... I don't know, address it, I think it will make things kind of better for everyone. And I know, yeah, like I think Four Chambers does like a great thing, like, Vex is like totally someone who continually does that. But I would like... I feel like Vex is the only one, [laughs] and I would like other people to also do that, because, yeah, like, there's... yeah, it's really... everyone else is like pushed to the margins, and it's just like....

01:01:19 JM And you mean within the like kind of arthouse... you know, when I said, 'porn as an art form', did I make you think of like arthouse porn, indie porn, alternative porn? I guess I meant—it's, yeah... I guess I also meant porn as a form... the form it's originally intended to be, which is to jerk off to, as well. Is there a kind of future in which you think the tastes of the porn... of the sex industry are going to reflect more diverse tastes, give more opportunity to different kinds of performers, and will we ever get there, or are we just going to have the same tired old top searches popping up on the Pornhub data results every year?

01:02:01 LB I think we will definitely get here—get there. Definitely. And I think in so many ways all the rise of independent pornography—like ClipStore content, etcetera—already add to like, this variety. I do think that also like talking about like porn and art, and as an art form, etcetera, and like me and myself like coming from doing a lot of that kind of stuff, it also entails like a little bit of privilege, in the sense like, okay, you do porn for the art, you do porn for the cause. Like many people who do that are quite precarious, but still there's like a complex set of privileges that still allows you to do like that artsy kind of pornography. And I do think that in so many ways we just need to have the space for like doing whatever the hell we want to do, whether it's like super glossy, shot with like the best camera, whatever, from like the raw, filthy, grainy, which I totally love, that it's like filthy porn. So it's... and that's like something that we haven't really talked about because that's like I think another panel that we need for, which is like the conditions. And we're talking about censorship, we're talking about like the backside of Pornhub and all like these corporations with like men in suits who at the same time can allow some people to exist on those spaces, but the moment they change their minds [clicks fingers], we're already gone. So, I do think that if we had more spaces, porn would be like ten times more the better, ten times more interesting, and the people who are trying to do things will have ten times more the chances of doing whatever we want to do, expressing whatever we want to say, and have a far more rich porn landscape, so to speak.

01:03:46 JM Yeah, I think the problem... the tragedy with most sex worker discourses is that lack of space to have all the conversations we need to have. Like, me and Molly have been accused by more people than we could possibly count of being sex negative, of like hating sex, and it's like something that we joke about now, but we obviously don't hate sex. We're just so trying hard to make sure that the conversation about sex worker rights and decrim stays on topic with the working conditions and the labour rights, that sometimes it sounds like we're trying to deprioritise discussions about, you know, sex. But I guess we want to get to that point, but first we have to have these other really heavy conversations that are in some sense more difficult and laborious. And then, once we've decriminalised sex work, then we can start talking about like tomorrow's sexual world. [Audience laughs, applauds] Thank you so much to the panellists. I think that's all we've got time for now, but go and get your lunch! Go! [Audience applauds, cheers]

DECRIMINALISED FUTURES

Aesthetics Vs Ethics: Expanding Definitions Of Feminist Porn

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