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New Perspectives in Gender Research

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2026, Volume 1

Sarah Held and Sylvia Sadzinski

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Pornotopia Revised.

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Porn as Queer(ing) Feminist Utopia

pornotopia revised

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Abstract

Shown from 31 March to 4 May 2022, the exhibition *pornotopia revised* at Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna explored the interstice of art and post-porn in its visual and material culture. The exhibition showed contemporary works that deal with desire, sexuality, and their representations and demonstrate the grey area between porn and art. Therefore, *pornotopia revised* was not limited to audiovisual explorations: contemporary sculptures, paintings, and video works in the so-called *Porno Plüsch Platzerl [Porn Plush Place]* reflected on narratives and representations of bodies and desire. The overall focus was not primarily on voyeurism or provocation through nudity or sexual acts, but on resistance and emancipation. The artistic works took up moments from porn, queered them or used them, for example, to debate the categorization, sexualization, and objectification of bodies and to question norms around sexuality and gender binary. The exhibition deliberately played with readings and aesthetics between so-called high and low culture, between trash, kitsch, and minimalism, between analogue craft and digital expression.

Keywords
Queer Feminist Curating; Queer Feminist Exhibition-Making; Sexuality; Post-Porn; Bodies; Desire; Emancipation

Porn as Queer(ing) Feminist Utopia. pornotopia revised

Unlike mainstream pornography, which addresses and imagines the heterosexual cis man, the majority of the exhibition space of *pornotopia revised* was taken up by women* and non-binary artists – not an easy task, since a gay male* gaze tends to dominate this thematic area within contemporary arts, too. Playful, humorous, figurative, or abstract, yet always emancipatory – the works on display referred to the pornographic moment through material and form. They resisted above all female* stereotyping, reflected on questions of society and taboo as

well as intimacy and subversion, and thus challenged the genre of pornography itself. The works became a tool of defense against the male* gaze and its apparent inescapability. Thus, *pornotopia revised* proved to be an actual utopia of resistance in the sense of Paul B. Preciado, where normative codes and conventions of gender, sexuality, and bodily practices were changed and new perspectives emerged, staging and enabling feminist empowerment and the appropriation of porn and art in equal measure.

Melanie Bonajo's video work *Night Soil – Economy of Love* (2015), for example, follows a central idea of the exhibition. It is part of the *Night Soil* trilogy, in which Bonajo documents activist movements that oppose capitalist and patriarchal structures. *Economy of Love* portrays a group of sex workers in Brooklyn who see their work as a way of reclaiming power in a male*-dominated field and reordering conventions and notions of intimacy. In a world where even orgasms are still unfairly distributed between men* and women*, sex is used as a tool for political and social change in relation to sex work, gender roles, and a mutual respectful understanding. Across from Bonajo's work, on the other side of the room, a textile work by Berlin-based artist Jonny Star was installed. The wall hanging and the first work from the series *Free Your Soul* looks like a pin-up tapestry. Images from gay magazines of the 1970s and 1980s are enlarged, framed by colorful floral fabrics and embroidered with Swarovski jewels. This female* gaze on gay sexuality shows how closely kitsch and porn can be interwoven.

The supporting program consisted, among other works, of the film series and lecture performance *Pimmel Porn Protest* [*Plonker Porn Protest*]. The aim of the lecture, which we have shown (inter-)nationally since 2016, is to make clear that pornography can be more than a mere tool for masturbation: a form of politics, critique, and protest. As an activist and subcultural practice and as an artistic strategy, porn can challenge social norms around sexuality and the body beyond the mainstream. Here, films were presented that negate the classic triad of flat-out erection, wild penetration close-ups, and cum shots. Films that represent a diversity of bodies and sex practices, yet without being misogynist, but pleasurable for all parties involved. Films that reflect on gender stereotypes and traditional ideas of sexuality and break with them. After screening the films together on stage, we always initiate semiotic research with a critical reading of the narration of sexuality, gender, and desire within the film; at the same time, the emancipatory character of pornography is discussed. We see ourselves as porn critics who analyze what is shown like a literary duet. For us, pornography is a cultural product that is not destined to vegetate in a filthy corner. With *Pimmel Porn Protest*, alternative forms of pornography are presented to a broader audience to enable a general confrontation with the medium as well as to free it from taboos. We want to show how versatile an artistic and alternative approach to the genre of pornography can be and whet the appetite for a self-determined as well as playful examination of sexuality and its cinematic visualization. Viewing and discussing explicit films together is an emancipatory act in itself – against shame and stigma.



Fig. 1: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 2: Sophia Süßmilch, f.l.t.r. Selbst ist die Frau, Broiler, It's a cosmic joke we got that for, 2017, oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 × 18 cm, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 3: Urara Tsuchiya, Daisy chain with a chimpanzee, 2020, glazed ceramic, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 4: Installation View, front: Zoë Claire Miller, The genitals must be deterritorialized, 2022, glazed ceramic, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 5: Installation View, Porno-Plüsch-Platzerl, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 6: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 7: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 8: Installation View, f.l.t.r. Pauline Canavesio, Memory Bust, 2020, silicone, wax, nylon, textile; Pauline Canavesio, Fire left on my skin is named after you, 2020, silicone, ceramic, textile, hair, lacquer, porcelain; Jonny Star, Free Your Soul 1, 2014, pigment print on fabric, fabric, Swarovski beads, fur; Zoë Claire Miller, The genitals must be deterritorialized, 2022, glazed ceramic; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 9: Installation View, f.l.t.r Anna Ehrenstein, Laika Tamara, 2020, sublimation print on polyester, burnt PVC fabric, metal; Melissa Steckbauer, Untitled, 2021, inkjet print on coloured paper, cut; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 10: Jonny Star, Free Your Soul 1, 2014, pigment print on fabric, fabric, Swarovski beads, fur; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 11: Installation View, f.l.t.r. Juli Schmidt, I always say one thing at a time, 2022, inkjet print; Christa Joo Hyun D'Angelo, It's complicated, 2019, 3-phase flashing neon; Antigoni Tsagkaropoulou, Clara, 2018, Plush, lacquer; Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.



Fig. 12: Installation View, Photo: Wolfgang Thaler.