

Erika Lust: European Entrepreneur, Pornographer, and Feminist

by

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***“When it comes to business, women are no different from men. . .
[A]s women, we have been crippled by this notion that we will
be rescued. . . Until women grow up and claim our power and
realize that success comes only with strength, courage, and
work, [we] will sit and wait forever for that knight in shining
armor. . . “***

Candida Royalle¹

“A More Subtle But More Powerful Way”

*“Clearly the public debate about pornography does not revolve only around
the degree of exposure and accessibility. It also concerns content. . . how it
relates to love and sexuality, gender body ideals and images, and to sexual
desire and power. . . [and] social and gender-political meanings.”*

*Sven-Axel Mansson, Lotta Lofgren-Martenson
and Susanne V. Knudsen²*

Cultural forces shape sexual beliefs, standardizing an individual’s expectations into norms that can dictate a lifetime of pleasure, frustration, or denial. American ideas on the erotic are curbed by a conservative Judeo-Christian dogma that censors sexuality in children and, by extension, adults. Suppression leads to shame, and when sexual feelings gnaw at consciousness, to humiliation and guilt. Our society is steeped in sexual negativity, as French philosopher Michel Foucault’s “cycle of prohibition” declares, a series of “thou shalt nots”—approach, touch, be gratified by—that cannot endure “except in darkness and

secrecy.”³ Pornography resides in that dark well of mystery to be feared, damned, and secretly desired by virtue of its prohibition. Those not sharing this collective proscription are regarded as apostates who demonstrate a tolerance for the intolerable. Yet American society cannot escape its fascination with sexuality’s nefarious manifestations. In truth, Americans know much of sex in the manner described by Foucault who asserts that “modern industrial societies” have not repressed the sexual so much as they have attended to “the proliferation of specific pleasures and the multiplication of disparate sexualities.”⁴ Though sexuality, explicit or otherwise, is seamlessly integrated into their daily lives, Americans stand conflicted on matters of the erotic not knowing what to do with that which arouses. The desire to look overwhelms the urge to look away. Denial and fascination conflict in a society that condemns sexual expression beyond conservatively prescribed norms and, as a result, inevitably continues hostilities with itself.

European culture is oriented in a liberal, more open, acceptance of sexuality, a heritage that goes back almost four decades with Swedes Berth Milton and Bengt Lenberg, the German Beate Uhse, and Denmark’s Theander Brothers. The 1967 Danish experiment legalizing porn began a cascade of tolerance that spread unfettered to other European societies.⁵ In America, the Swedish import *I Am Curious Yellow* (1968) followed by the Italian film *Last Tango in Paris* (1973) became cinematic bookends for the hardcore sex of *Deep Throat* in 1972. Reaction in the States to the burgeoning of “porn chic” coincided with the diatribes of New Left feminists who believed pornography degraded and humiliated women. To confront porn’s scourge a faction of the feminist movement (radical feminism) actively demonstrated to suppress and demonize smut with nationwide anti-porn campaigns in the late 1970’s. The watermarks of porn acceptance were in constant flux and social mores were re-examined and re-tested. In the states the 1973 *Miller* decision muddled the obscenity issue with its “community standards” dictum while in Europe attitudes became more cavalier as a 1975 West Germany joined other societies in the march to porn legalization.

Into a Scandinavian environment somewhat amicable to sexual explicitness and egalitarian ideas about women, Sweden's Erika Lust was born in 1977. In America a backlash against feminism and a wistful desire to return to the homogenized, sexually naïve 1950's emerged but ultimately could not endure. The "free love" mantra of the '60's counter-culture transformed America's young, making it highly unlikely that they would ever revisit the previous decade's sexual conservatism. As the years passed and Erika grew into womanhood, pornography reached levels of normality in both cultures, but the future of women and their role in its expression remained circumscribed.

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Erika Lust is the owner of an audiovisual company. Her business acumen is a dedication to detail accentuated by a creative intuition that mirrors her extroverted sassiness and confident sense of self. Growing up in the southern Swedish city of Malmö, Erika's imaginative character emerged early. By age 9 she demonstrated communication skills in the dramatic arts. "I really liked the feeling of the scenic arts," she says, and "won some awards for articles and tales" and showed "good skills as a writer." A teenaged Erika possessed a normal curiosity about sex but was not preoccupied by the erotic; rather, the political captivated her. She was fascinated by how a society and its governmental structures are defined for its people. Curious about political machinations and social history, she pursued a formal education that explored those topics. At twenty years of age she was knowledgeable in "international cooperation, human rights, and gender studies," making a commitment to support women's voices for choice and free expression. Armed with a B.A. from the University of Lund, Erika was determined to challenge injustices, especially in non-western countries where women are most oppressed. Traveling to Spain to engage the political arena she encountered a crossroad when purpose is reckoned and the future is defined.<sup>6</sup>

In 2000 Erika moved to Barcelona to work with the Forum 2004, an international event dedicated to cultural diversity, world peace, and economic

development.<sup>7</sup> Preparation for the event was unexpectedly disrupted by the 9/11 attack and the global turmoil that followed. Erika realized a career in international politics would mean another move, probably to Geneva or New York. Her decision to stay in Barcelona was a re-evaluation of purpose. “I decided to change my approach on how to change things in the world and in society.” She shifted her focus from the political “to a more subtle but more powerful way: media.” The audiovisual carried the message to the MTV generation, revealing that a conduit beyond that of a politician’s mien was required. Erika had found her mission.

Between 2002 and 2005, she studied film production, direction, and editing. She tested the filmmaking waters as a freelancer, taking on a variety of tasks from production assistant to location and production manager. In 2004 she accepted the personal challenge of starting her own company, LUST FILMS, because she noticed that the adult entertainment industry was in need of “a serious approach, and a feminist one” in its business model. Erika now embarked on the venture that would shape her legacy in film. However, Barcelona offered more than a business opportunity. Shortly after her arrival, she developed a relationship with the man who would become her life partner. Now she had two loves to nurture.

## **“We Have an Incredible Opportunity to Explain Our Sexuality”**

*“[I]f there’s a sex-positive vision for women, it’s of a new society  
where sexual feelings and actions are not feared, repressed,  
or promoted because of one’s gender.”  
Susie Bright<sup>8</sup>*

Erika Lust believes women in pornography are in the embryonic stages of transforming the business. In this “new adult film genre” she sees women making decisions as to how they want to be portrayed as she puts it, “women being women.” Erika desires to represent women like herself and her friends, “women with feelings” who are educated and engage in lifestyles that encompass the

single, married, and divorced. While some may be mothers, they are all lovers with different body shapes and sexual situations — their sexuality is not circumscribed by beauty, relationships, or gender preferences.

Erika's drive for empowerment—participating in the discussion about a woman's right to adult cinema, making artistic decisions within the genre, and taking an active part in its production—is grounded in feminism's third wave. It is a brassy approach characteristic of the 1990's Grrl Movement that encouraged young women to assert themselves in a male-oriented universe. Their DIY (Do It Yourself) attitude refuses to condemn belittling female stereotypes and embraces a woman's style of communication that is the foundation of feminist pornography. In true third wave fashion, Erika enters the male-dominated adult film universe, announcing herself and staking out a position of influence using a bold approach that defines a woman's needs, desires, and opinions about her essence, her sexuality. Yet Erika is concerned about sexual orthodoxy and how it influences women today, a tradition that is the replay of the well-worn “Madonna versus whore” disconnect that has kept women oppressed for centuries. Within the “whore” scenario Erika believes a woman's sexuality is “often expressed very powerfully” but in ways that are inimical to her. The problem is the enculturation of men who regard “only slutty women, prostitutes and lap-dancers” as sexually desirable, thus negating similar feelings their “mothers, sisters, and daughters” might possess about their own sexuality. Erika asserts that all women are sexual, to be carnally desired and fulfilled is not limited to the Jenna Jamesons of the universe. Her films challenge the old porn cliché of “bearers of the male gaze” that turn women into objects. In a Lust production women are transformed in the manner that “girl” became “grrl,” a linguistic shift from object to subject that characterizes the post-modern woman.<sup>9</sup>

In his classic study of pornography, *The Secret Museum*, Walter Kendrick explains that Victorian Europe's upper class gentlemen thought it necessary to protect women, children, and the lower classes from overt sexual depictions in both print and picture.<sup>10</sup> Erika reflects on Kendrick's thesis when she says, “our society tends to ignore porn, considering it something private that is to be kept

hidden away, not interfering with other aspects of our lives.” However, the Victorians, who gave us the term pornography in the mid-nineteenth century, are history’s relics; porn escaped its 100-year confinement almost four decades ago. Erika suggests we must realize that “porn isn’t just porn, it’s a discussion, a way to talk about sex,” and as such shapes the feminist porn message. She knows that pornography is a discourse on interpretations of masculinity and femininity; but as feminists understood in the 1970’s, the porn industry reflects society’s corporate and capitalist patriarchy, “lopsided in favor of a masculine (and often sexist) point of view.” Gonzo porn is the classic example. Originally developed by veteran porn actor Jamie Gillis and later refined by Evil Angel’s John Stagliano, gonzo POV videos (“point of view” where the viewer becomes the participant) are male-centered with the formulaic piston and money shots, facials and DPs (double penetrations). Erika laments the shortage of “female voices” among the industry moguls, pointing out that until recently little has changed in porn’s political arena and corporate boardroom. She emphasizes *recently* because changes are on the horizon and Erika is lending her vision and her film to the chorus of prominent feminist directors such as Tristan Taormino, Anna Span, Courtney Trouble, and others, all of whom owe the ultimate artistic debt to the legendary Candida Royalle.

The history of feminist porn begins with Royalle, who emerged in the industry when the “sex wars” ripped through feminism’s second wave. In the 1980’s she was a part of Club 90, the pioneers of feminist film erotica, a porn sisterhood that included industry legends Annie Sprinkle, Veronica Vera, Gloria Leonard, and Veronica Hart. When Royalle began Femme Productions, she urged her colleagues to contribute ideas about story, production, and direction.<sup>11</sup> Erika acknowledges Royalle’s significance. “For me,” Candida Royalle was the first one to step away from the mainstream male porn” and do something different. Royalle offers feminist directors and producers the lessons that are the core of feminist porn. A former industry actress, Royalle notes, “people think that, having been in porn, you have to be a super lover. But that’s not true at all. All it teaches you is technique and the mechanics, and I realized that I had to learn all over

again what sensuality was about, and I had to get . . . in touch with my sensual beginnings.” Where did this lead Royalle and those who have followed her feminist film leadership, including performers who must express their sensuality and be receptive to the seriousness of their work? Royalle asserts, “I don’t hire anyone with a bad attitude. . . I try to hire people who are really into each other.”<sup>12</sup> Erika concurs. In the manner of producer and director Tristan Taormino who believes that performers come onto the set with expectations of fair treatment,<sup>13</sup> Erika points out that her castings require individuals who are “quiet and professional.” Today, she carries out that difference by enhancing her films with real people having real sex, “actors that are as far as possible from the stereotypes. . . I try to find fresh, natural, but still good looking people.” And in scripting her movies Erika relies on her own life experiences and those of her friends, “urban, real, sensual . . . stories.” The results are extraordinary film ventures into everyday life persuading the viewer that the highly sexualized encounters could happen to them as well.

Erika appreciates Royalle’s legacy and believes the horizons are expanding for feminist porn-makers. She asserts that women need to occupy at least 20% of the “power positions” in the adult industry for true change to become a reality. Erika’s vision is not quixotic because she and other female pioneers are beginning to take their rightful place in pornography’s hierarchy, among them executives such as Joy King of Wicked Pictures and Samantha Lewis of Digital Playground and directors such as Veronica Hart.

Though challenging porn’s power structure, Erika is not anti-male. In fact she “accepts and respects” the men who have contributed to porn’s growth. She has no quarrel with magazines like *Penthouse* and *Private*, the brainchild of Swedish photographer and publisher Berth Milton, and is adamant that she is “not trying to impose any kind of feminist censorship on porn.” Her desire is a place at the table, a share in the discussion that will allow the feminist point of view to be expressed. “I vote for a porn full of a diversity of opinions,” she says, and those voices are emerging. Pockets of twenty and thirty-something men and women, such those in San Francisco’s gender/queer culture led by groundbreaking

feminists such as BDSM model and performance artist Madison Young and directors Shine Louise Houston and Courtney Trouble are exploring alternative sexual lifestyles. As they deconstruct sexuality and re-invent themselves, pornography is accommodating this post-modern phenomenon. Universities recognize the needs of its LGBT — Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered — population with workshops, conferences, and seminars in which porn is often discussed as a vehicle for change.<sup>14</sup> Film scholar Ann Sabo proclaims, “the capacity of porn to illuminate this gap between what is and what can be, as women and men reconfigure their ways of establishing and expressing their gender and sexuality, is one of the most intriguing aspects of re-visioned porn.”<sup>15</sup> Erika and other feminist pornographers are initiating these 21<sup>st</sup> century changes and they are doing it in true third wave fashion – on their own terms.

Feminist critics who voice concern over pornography and its mainstreaming in western society are not lost on Erika. “These days, whether we like it or not, we live in a ‘pornified society,’” she says. Alluding to the bygone days of the secret museum, she adds, “[p]orn has a huge presence on the internet, it has entered the mass media” and is no longer “hidden away.”<sup>16</sup> Feminist writers such as Ariel Levy (*Female Chauvinist Pigs*, 2005), and Pamela Paul in (*Pornified*, 2005) would agree.<sup>17</sup> But they deviate from Erika; where they decry, she offers solutions. Erika believes that “the values . . . shown in porn must be continuously analyzed and questioned.” Her approach is to improve porn and use it to create a voice for understanding. She avers that an open examination of the issue will encourage a dialogue. “I believe that if women participate in the discussion of pornography, we have an incredible opportunity to explain our sexuality in an explicit and graphic way. What better way do we have to help men understand something, we all know, very often, they just don’t get,” like the tenderness of a kiss or the patience to orally arouse a woman’s passions. In the final analysis, Erika revisits the old Freudian question of “what do women want?” and declares that pornography may be just where the answer lies.

The history of western civilization is replete with examples of patriarchy and sexism. In ancient Athens married women were confined within home while



sophisticated *heteri* used their social and sexual skills to entertain husbands at dinner parties; in medieval Europe the Church's oppression of women was endemic with witch trials being the most abominable occurrences. Sexist oppression continues to dominate some 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamic cultures. In the late Victorian period feminist groups engaged the battle to change attitudes, carrying the confrontation into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in what is historically identified as feminism's first wave. Despite recent gains made by second wave feminists on issues such as abortion and equality in education and income, the struggle continues. For Erika, her feminist arena is the cinematic portrayal of women. She understands sexism's legacy in the media that confronted '60's and '70's feminists. Today she expresses the same misgivings about adult film. She believes women cannot ignore visual pornography, thinking it is nothing more than a man's personal entertainment. Her reasoning is sound. She asserts that what men "see and learn from porn affects us profoundly in our daily lives as women. Many ideas of feminine sexuality, in the absence or scarcity of other influences, come from porn." For young males today, adult film may be their only introduction to sexual mechanics and, more distressingly, it may shape a man's attitudes of how women view their own sexuality. If so, the predominant male corporate pornography, and much of the amateur internet porn, illustrates a skewed view of female sexual needs, desires, and expectations. Erika sums up her concerns when she postulates that if women do not participate in the process of making porn, the male view will prevail, "as the male fantasy sees us," she explains. Erika knows that the opportunity presented to her and other feminist pornographers is to reclaim the social construct that encourages such a fantasy. Through their filmmaking they can deconstruct, rebuild, and re-energize male fantasy on their terms based on their desires and in the process create a venue for feminist porn.

In the final analysis Erika's filmmaking philosophy is also personal in another way. She became a mother in 2007 and says, "I would like to think that my daughter, when exposed to adult cinema in her adolescence, will receive positive messages about her sexuality, with feminine values and points of view represented." How different from the late film legend Marilyn Chambers who

acidly observed that the adult film industry “chews women up and spits them out. It’s a business I’d never want my daughter to be in.”<sup>18</sup> Erika Lust is working to change that perception using an emerging genre that will influence pornography and how it communicates with a post-modern society.

## **“A Woman Will Always Shoot a Different Approach to Sex”**

*“Feminist porn is porn that empowers women and men; it gives them information and ideas about sex. It teaches. It inspires fantasy and adventure. . . . It presents sex as joyful, fun, safe, and satisfying.”*  
Tristan Taormino<sup>19</sup>

Erika’s first encounter with pornographic film was not positive. She states that her initial exposure was “most definitely not love at first sight.” She admits, “I was aroused by some of the images but there was so much in it that bothered me. I didn’t identify with any of it: nothing of my lifestyle, my values or even my sexuality was represented.”<sup>20</sup> Not one to let the male interpretation reign unchallenged, Erika, with the help of a friend who provided venture capital, produced a short film called “The Good Girl” to promote her business vision. The result? *Lust Films of Barcelona* was born in 2004. Emphasizing that she takes a “serious approach, and a feminist one” to her work, Erika reminds her audiences that production methods needed for making erotica are not any “different from making any other audiovisual product: lots of work, planning” and getting the most out of limited funds.

What troubled Erika was how women were depicted in standard male-driven porn whose traditions originated in the bygone days of the stag film. She noticed that they were “just objects, used by men for the pleasure of men. I didn’t see women looking for their own pleasure.” Though women were not portrayed in appealing ways, a part of her did respond to what she saw and Erika thought, “could porn be presented in a better way, more realistically?” Her answer was an

emphatic, “yeah, it could!” and questioned why she couldn’t depict her message on film. In the end she decided to construct sex her way, ignoring porn’s accepted formulas and presenting intimacy as she experiences it.<sup>21</sup> Sexual intimacy is a negotiation. It can be a look, a caress, a conversation; it can be silent, quietly verbal, loudly demanding; it can be a nesting night at home, a steamy hotel tryst on a lazy afternoon, public sex in a park. For a woman, it is about endless possibilities and a myriad of situations, a yen for communication with her partner whether hetero or LGBT. Erika’s artistic style brings these desires into focus for a post-modernist world. Her filmmaking stresses intimacy but defines it for a new generation, avoiding the outdated romance novel stereotype popular years ago. She is the MTV generation and incorporates those film qualities into her movies. There is an upbeat pace and a hint of illicitness that the viewer can enjoy in ways that meld respectful voyeurism and cathartic participation. She confronts the myth that men are limited to visual arousal and women are primarily emotional, a biological reductionism. In fact, Erika would agree with renowned Swiss psychologist Carl Jung’s analysis of the anima and animus. We are opposites within, two halves, the anima is our female self, the animus our male self. For a man, traditional porn addresses his animus, his controlling and powerful self, and ignores his anima, his emotional sensitive half. Erika takes this paradigm and shifts it. She shows the female half of a man’s self and nurtures it into an intimacy that is evident on film. Conversely, Erika does likewise when developing a female character that will use her animus to assert her femininity to get what she wants.

When asked about influences that help shape her art, Erika unhesitatingly points to the Guerilla Girls, a group of women she discovered in 2002 that employs posters, gorilla disguises, and a comic approach to the seriousness of criticizing popular culture. Formed in 1985 to confront art galleries about the paucity of female artists, the Guerilla Girls characterize themselves as, “feminist masked avengers in the tradition of anonymous do-gooders like Robin Hood, Wonder Woman and Batman.” Their message is anti-racist and anti-sexist. In the audiovisual industry their concern is the shortage of women in influential positions. “Behind the scenes there are a few tokens, but nowhere enough

cinematographers, screenwriters, directors, camera operators, etc., who are female and of color.”<sup>22</sup> Their goal is change and Erika has become part of that process. But challenging porn’s establishment was only the first step because Erika understood she had to establish her credibility by way of her artistic talent. She credits “brave female directors” like Jane Campion, Sofia Coppola, Susan Bier and Kimberley Pierce as influential because they showed her that “feminine cinema is different, is sensible to matters that women think and feel.” Most important, women play the lead roles in their films, moving beyond the limited space given women to be “just girlfriends, mothers, or lovers.” Using mainstream film as a model, Erika believes pornography is no different from other cultural and artistic venues, it has a discourse that should honor a feminist viewpoint fairly expressed along with the traditional male-centered one.

Scholar Ann Sabo describes a Lust film as “a very fluid arrangement” that is awash in lighting and color. “The cutting and camera movement are concise and deliberate, matched with an indie-style pop-rock soundtrack . . . Each shot is composed with careful attention to framing and angles, lighting and color, shapes and forms. The tempo between shots . . . builds the tension and heat.”<sup>23</sup> As mentioned previously, Erika’s actors are physically attractive and represent the vibrant young people who inhabit urban environments worldwide. To suggest they are ordinary would be unfair but they are not the surgically modified starlets who inhabit male-driven porn. And the men appear in their entirety. They are more than “furniture,” males who secure a film role because they possess the requisite 10” and are skilled at “opening up” for the camera in its effort to capture the piston shot. Erika’s male characters are similar to those in 1980’s “couples porn” in which a storyline was integral to the hardcore numbers and a modicum of acting talent was required. To prove her artistic premise Erika believes that “a woman will ALWAYS shoot a different approach to sex.”<sup>24</sup> (emphasis in original) Her films present a mutuality of respect between the talent and the director and among the talent itself. Like her American feminist counterpart, Tristan Taormino, men and women are together as equals in Erika’s projects. Her men are not off in a corner quietly massaging their erections, popping Viagra, and waiting

their turn to use the available orifices of female talent. Her female performers go beyond making eye contact with the camera while pointing their toes nicely and enduring the double penetrations being filmed. They express real sensuality. In fact, Erika doesn't shoot DPs because they are unnatural and require the performers to have a healthy dose of athleticism to twist and frame their bodies to the camera's demands. Most women don't get excited watching multiple penetrations anyway and wouldn't consider them in their private lives . . . there's little sensuality, and certainly no intimacy. Leave the multiples to directors oriented in the male "gaze."

Film scholar Linda Williams encapsulates Erika's art, "if Erika Lust knows how to obey the laws of hard core, she also knows how to build tension around sex acts and how to construct a sex scene around a woman's needs, point of view and sense of play. Most importantly, she knows how to give variety and interest to hard-core sex that can so often feel rote."<sup>25</sup> A difficult task at best because to find talented performers required for such a filming coup is problematic. As referenced earlier, Erika agrees with Candida Royalle's implication that casting is perhaps the most complicated part of feminist filmmaking. But her recruitment efforts are successful and the feel of a Lust film is "real people in real situations [in which] we want to know why . . . people are having sex."<sup>26</sup> Nowhere is it more beautifully portrayed than in her award winning movie, *Five Hot Stories for Her*, which includes a feminist remake of the oldest of stag film plots: the delivery man. Erika's version is the original vignette "The Good Girl" that launched her business venture. Told from a woman's perspective it is a joyful experience, especially when the female protagonist has her fantasy realized and great sex ensues. The viewer roots for her delighted that she is reveling in a whimsical daydream that for most women would never become a reality. The short film turns the traditional male porn formula on its head and becomes the ultimate feminist statement.

Though Erika has a basic cinematic game plan that works from her perspective, she recognizes that other feminist directors may vary their approach. Of American filmmaker Belladonna's fetish films, Erika admires their powerful,

edgier approach to rough sex and she concedes that gonzo will be preferred by some feminist directors while others will adhere to a more sensual, erotic theme.<sup>27</sup> She films BDSM scenes, as is evident in a recent exotic short entitled “Handcuffs,” and in the playful “Married with Children” segment in *Five Hot Stories for Her*. She also offers up both gay and lesbian encounters in *Five Hot Stories* for viewers whose tastes run in that direction. The *Barcelona Sex Project* centers on three women and three men who have their masturbation fantasies visually recorded following personal narratives and visual snapshots of their daily activities. The viewer gets to know them in the manner of chatting with co-workers at the office. Erika explores “the essence of who they are”<sup>28</sup> by showing their real personalities so that viewers are reminded that these are young people who could be living in their neighborhood and going to work each morning, just as they do.

Erika believes in eliminating porn clichés. She asserts that “the character stereotypes that men in the industry have made us put up with are just plain offensive” and lists several, including horny teens, sex maniac nannies, and hot nurses, among others. Likewise with the men, she is bored with mafia types and “African-American mega sized sex machines.” Erika describes male directors armed with huge budgets as “Spielberg wannabes making porn.”<sup>29</sup> They feed this stereotypical tripe to the public, in the process reinforcing the standard porn formula of the male “gaze.” In the end, Erika’s desire is to offer an alternative to this “gaze,” produce movies that reflect a sexuality that “feels good” mixed with MTV “cool,” a porn for the modern urban scene designed for the way women have sex and populated by males who are more than buffed bodies and massively endowed. For female audiences of a Lust film a man’s intelligence and sense of humor is part of his sexuality and the way he communicates it matters.

In her review of Lust’s work, feminist pornography spokesperson and respected critic Alison Lee notes that Erika wants her audiences to know that she is particularly motivated to make film for the straight girl whose needs are neglected by mainstream porn. Peer recognition has graced LUSTFILMS when the company won Movie of the Year (2008) honors from the prestigious Feminist

Porn Awards. As previously stated, portions of *Five Hot Stories for Her* depict heterosexual fantasies as well as other diverse sexualities. Because the film explores variations of female pleasure (often heterosexual women enjoy gay male encounters as hetero men do lesbian sexuality), it is typical of Erika's artistic awareness. The series entertains "the idea that female audiences want to get to know the subjects they are watching more intimately than standard porn allows." Lee praises Erika for being actively engaged in the porn industry's "new face," understanding that "'porn and feminism must be allies'" to encourage women to look beyond the romantic reductionism that the only prescriptive sex is the neo-Victorian missionary position aimed at procreation. An active sexual woman should not be considered whorish if she wants to be "powerful and provocative."<sup>30</sup> An erotica that offers her fantasy without being phallogocentric is the essence of feminist porn and LUSTFILMS is at the forefront of its production.

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As feminist pornography moves into the 21st century, the question of erotica versus porn needs to be revisited. Pornography is an emotionally laden word that conjures various definitions, each negative in its context. Historically dimensions of pornography are bounded by the traditional "soft" and "hard" core distinction. Today male porn versus feminist erotica can be added to the mix. But these are only partial clarifications. A woman who performs in "soft" porn is considered less of an outlier than the woman in "hard" scenes and thus attempts to retain some of her virtue.³¹ Can the same be said of erotica? In society's collective consciousness, a woman who directs gynocentric film is cautiously defined as a producer of erotica, leaving the perceived "degrading and objectifying" porn to the male-occupied spaces that have long established industry standards. Likewise, "soft core" performers are viewed more favorably and are less stigmatized. For a woman director a double standard is clearly in place because she must occupy the higher ground of "respectability" that elevates her above the greasy, cigar-smoking stereotypical male pornographer that defined the business decades ago

and still occupies the public mind. She must guard her femininity, thereby permitting it, along with her creative talent, to be reserved for the ever-present conservatively driven neo-Victorian box. She abides within the boundaries established for her, the old ways and the old ideas may be slightly loosened but remain paramount. For the post-modern woman who wishes to perform in, direct, or watch pornography, these archaic distinctions should be meaningless. Though society still draws lines in the sand and some cultural pundits hold that we are “pornified” and steeped in “raunch,” the 21st century will continue to erase these out-dated limitations as women become more empowered and aroused by pornography, no matter its definition.

When discussing pornography, individuals have their own interpretations, and those whose definitions have widespread acceptance will control the discourse. The same can be said for pornification and raunch. The task of feminism going forward is not to shrink from challenges and resort to “nicer” definitions (i.e. erotica to replace pornography), but to re-interpret in their own terms offensively connoted expressions or decide to eliminate them, and thus society’s indictment based on their meanings, entirely from the lexicon. As long as a male oriented culture, the religious right or political conservatives, control the definitions, they dictate the conversation and equality will be forever elusive. In the end the burden is not on today’s female directors and producers such as Erika and others to modify the boundaries of their work or to limit their creativity. The onus is on society to change its interpretation of the product, to lose its suffocating beliefs about a woman’s right to choose, and to realize that equality is every woman’s goal in every aspect of her life.

“The Church of the Pure Feminist Porn Producers”

“Our knowledge of . . . fantasies is expanded by pornography. . . the imagination cannot and must not be policed. Pornography shows us nature’s daemonic heart, those eternal forces at work beneath and beyond social convention. Pornography cannot be separated from art; the two interpenetrate each other . . . “
Camille Paglia on “the joy of violation.”³²

The pornography business is in troubled times. According to media specialist Brian Alexander, “The sex business has become widely diffuse thanks to digital technology, pirated downloads and the ease of distribution. There are probably more producers of porn who exist outside industry organizations that try to set standards and police the business than inside them.” As more women achieve filmmaker status in the industry, the hope of bringing “new perspectives to erotica” in which performers are treated well and “the end product is less misogynistic,” is an achievable, yet still elusive goal. Economics is the determining factor. “Sensuality, seduction, plot, even good lighting can cost money,” a luxury in a consumer market that caters to male voyeurism and where stories are “simply a waste of time.”³³ Feminist pornographers are battling on two fronts, one with the industry’s fluid environment and the other with its patriarchy. Though the future remains unpredictable, Erika Lust holds to her philosophy and confidence, though critics are not unheard.

Erika notes that the industry is experiencing “a female porn war” philosophically similar to the infamous “sex wars” of the 1980’s and ‘90’s that abetted the decline of feminism’s second wave. According to Erika, the conflict is no longer “the pro-sex feminists against no-porn feminists,” it has shifted to “what is considered to be the right kind of sex for a feminist.” She dismisses the idea that “the word ‘feminist’ can be applied to sexual practices.” In a debate at the 2007 Berlin Porn Film Festival, Erika confronted the view that some sexual practices are not feminist and should be avoided in filming. Her response was that feminism is a state of mind, not a specific practice. “I consider myself a feminist

no matter my sexual activities” and “I certainly know that a woman can be a strong feminist . . . wanting to be taken strongly by a man or enjoying blowing a man’s cock or have his cum all over her face.” What annoys Erika is the resurrection of an old conflict: those who want to define the standards for everyone and condemn dissenters accordingly. Erika notes, “We have a new fundamentalist movement going on here: the Church of the Pure Feminist Porn Producers, and they are declaring that certain sexual practices that me and other women across the world happen to like, are a sin, and that we should be expelled from their pure circle.” She envisions the proverbial big tent that includes all women and empowers “our different approaches and points of view.”³⁴ The legendary adult film star and outspoken feminist Nina Hartley would agree and adds that “having a women run the show is no guarantee of . . . a different kind of product” but “[i]f being a feminist means anything at all it means judging the content of character.”³⁵ Hartley is correct, yet character should not be the sole province of women in the industry. Men can occupy the same terrain and just as they can support feminism, they can be feminist in their cinematic style. Look no further than mainstream film’s Michael Curtiz who directed the love scenes between Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman in the 1942 classic, *Casa Blanca*, in which the male and female gaze was cultivated and preserved. Should pornography reach such an elevation and discover itself redefined as erotica, it might challenge mainstream cinema for a bit of respectability and make “crossing over” easier for both performers and directors.

The underlying issue in the current “war” within feminist porn is freedom of speech. Erika proclaims, “I do not want to be part of a club that tells me what it’s ok to do in my bedroom,” and consequently to put on film, “because the last time I checked that was called censorship.”³⁶ For other feminist pornographers to criticize her film work because it violates their predetermined standards is appalling to Erika. Perhaps they are compromising their art because they want to avoid identification with male pornographers or revive the old radical feminist indictment that porn degrades women and portrays violent acts that objectify them. If so, overcompensation and a lack of courage are at work. Erika challenges

a typical scenario when she states, “a man fucked up his butt is feminist, but a women fucked up her butt is not? Come on!”³⁷ Policing sexual practices on film is to normalize accepted behaviors for everyone, reminding society of an era when Christian sexual thought prevailed women lay silent and immobile with legs spread, quick penetration was “approved,” and any pleasurable variations were condemned as sodomy. If feminist directors were to establish industry wide standards, even in the most informal manner, that narrowed the definition of feminist porn to the opinion of a few, certain erotic behaviors would surreptitiously return to the secret museum and lie concealed awaiting freedom from the next more liberal generation. Erika wants to avoid that scenario. She does not wish that feminists be forced to redefine porn in their own image or to struggle for a voice in the industry again. She demands the doors be open today so that all female whims and desires can be cinematically illustrated.³⁸

In the final analysis, being a feminist pornographer is more than producing movies for women.³⁹ The genre is also appealing to men. Not every male is a gonzo freak that wants to “get off.” There are men who can appreciate sensuality and intimacy interwoven with the hard-core, especially if the female protagonists resemble their girlfriends, wives, or co-workers and are less like street prostitutes or exotic dancers. On the flip side, there are women who prefer their action to be nastier. They are aroused by orally servicing a man (or woman), rough sex, and the choreographed BDSM that is the theater of erotic domination and submission. The central issue is female fantasy devoid of censorship whether from within the ranks of feminism or from without. If feminist ideas and film creativity are censored, women will be relegated to inferior status where decisions will be made for them, long the agenda of a patriarchal culture, and the women’s movement, however defined in the future, will be compelled to re-visit old issues of equality thought to have been resolved years ago.

“I Don’t Plan on Sitting Pretty”

“Clearly, it is a major challenge to contemporary feminism to reconcile the pressures for diversity and difference with those for integration and commonality. Fortunately, contemporary feminists do not shrink from this challenge.”

Rosemarie Putnam Tong⁴⁰

Erika is a product of post-modern feminism, a movement emphasizing a woman’s “otherness,” defined by French existentialist writer Simone de Beauvoir as not-man — she is the other, “the object whose meaning is determined for her.” However, this otherness enables her to “stand back and criticize the norms, values, and practices that the dominant culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone, including those who live on the periphery — in this case, women. Thus otherness, for all its associations with oppression and inferiority, is much more than an oppressed, inferior condition. It is also a way of being, thinking, and speaking allowing for openness, plurality, diversity, and difference.”⁴¹ To reinforce her personal “otherness,” Erika characterizes herself as anti-sexist with an urban philosophy that is inimical to racism, homophobia, and the variations of machismo that dominate male cultural attitudes. Erika’s self-definition reflects the values of post-modernism in which women, according to feminist scholar Rosemarie Putnam Tong, are seen “not as unitary selves, essences to be defined On the contrary, women are free spirits.” The end result of such an analysis is obvious, there is “no single formula for being a ‘good feminist.’”⁴²

As with some 21st century feminists, Erika also uses her “otherness” to express a worldview that mirrors multicultural and global feminism. Concerned about the plight of women whose milieu is far different from hers, Erika, and those who work for her, support efforts to combat the sexual exploitation of women. They recognize the universality of human existence and stress that women lack the same rights and opportunities as men; for Erika, being a feminist means working to change these “conditions of inequality.” As previously stated, she believes a true feminist opposes sexism and sexist expression at all levels. In both her politics and her filmmaking, Erika illustrates the philosophical

transcendence necessary to remain authentic to the pro-sex feminist message when confronting the patriarchy and other less liberal feminists. Her artistic work reflects the words of Professor Lynne Segal who asserts that women need “more sexually explicit material produced by and for women, more open and honest discussion all sexual issues, alongside the struggle against women’s general subordinate economic and social status.”⁴³

Erika, along with other female directors and producers who are in the process of altering the face of pornography, must deal with a new business perspective. When evaluating her company, Erika does not perceive herself exclusively a pornographer rather porn is a part of a larger entity that is LUSTFILMS. She describes her business venture as a portion of “the audiovisual production industry” and flatly states, “I do not consider myself a pornographer. I’m the founder of a company . . . that produces all kind[s] of audiovisual and editorial products related with sex.”⁴⁴ Today’s international companies incorporate adult products into their business model. Major American corporations, such as the Hilton and Marriott hotel chains, AT&T, and Time Warner add earnings from adult films to their net income. According to *The New York Times*, “recognizable corporate names” are reaping huge profits from “explicit sex on film and online.”⁴⁵ They have become porn vendors in their own right, much like the old days when pornographers quietly sold print and film material out the trunk of a car. Erika’s company is a part of this emerging pattern. It produces sex education programs for Spanish MTV, sponsors and organizes events and parties, and designs and produces accessories.⁴⁶ In the years to come it is quite possible that mainstream porn will be a profitable segment of larger international enterprises so that no single business will be exclusively in the pornography arena but will be a part of a vast mega-corporation.

Only in her early thirties, Erika is poised to usher LUSTFILMS into this future with unbounded energy while making a feminist statement in the process. However, the story of Erika Lust is a cautionary tale not yet fully completed. Twenty years ago in speaking of Candida Royalle’s *Femme Productions*, Linda Williams raised the possibility that “[p]ornography by women may prove only a

brief phase in the history of hard core; . . . [it] . . . could fail in the long run, being too ‘arty’ for most men and still too ‘hard core’ for most women.” But she was hopeful, “hard core has changed, . . . it is a genre more like other genres than unlike them, and that although it is still very patriarchal, it is not a patriarchal monolith.”⁴⁷ Feminist Wendy McElroy offers another perspective on the challenge. Her observations about female talent can be extended to industry women in other capacities such as directors, producers, and company owners. McElroy relates that porn’s male moguls speak of themselves in terms of their work and their accomplishments; whereas female models are “always discussed in terms of their physical assets” quickly establishing that women are only important as long they maintain their appearance. “The women are valued, they are cared for, they are protected—but I didn’t see them respected.” She adds, “As in every other endeavor—in or outside of the business world—women in porn will probably get respect only after they get power.”⁴⁸ Erika understands this comparison to female performers all too well. She respects her actors and herself, and is ready to enter the industry’s patriarchal boardroom and occupy her place. It is an arduous calling because though feminist gains in the adult business are advancing, women have yet to achieve the full recognition they deserve and their ranks remain thin. Her goals are realistic. She says, “I hope that at least future generations can choose a few titles from the market where sex is portrayed in a smart way, with no machismo and no offense to women. That is my battle.”

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In 1975, two years before Erika’s birth, the following was penned by radical feminist Susan Brownmiller: “hard-core pornography is not a celebration of sexual freedom; it is a cynical exploitation of female sexual activity through the device of making all such activity, and consequently all females, ‘dirty’ . . . females in the pornographic genre are depicted in two clearly delineated roles: as virgins who are caught and ‘banged’ or as nymphomaniacs who are never sated.”<sup>49</sup> As the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century begins, Brownmiller’s words

retain a measure of validity, especially for those who remain staunchly anti-porn. Yet modern female pornographers have challenged Brownmiller's assertions by forging a unique path that offers every woman the opportunity to decide if porn demonstrates a celebration of her sexuality and is an entertainment she can enjoy. Though still evident, the "virgin vs. whore" scenario as elucidated by Brownmiller is being liberalized by a new generation. Modern attitudes and practices have expanded sexual fluidity and erotic horizons. Feminist pornographers have successfully refuted the Brownmiller contention that "There can be no 'equality' in porn, no female equivalent, no turning of the tables in the name of bawdy fun. Pornography . . . is a male invention, designed to dehumanize women."<sup>50</sup>

In the thirty plus years between Susan Brownmiller's landmark *Against Our Will* and Erika Lust's *Five Hot Stories for Her* pornography has begun its foray into the cultural mainstream and women actively pursue careers in the business. It is increasingly common to discover female performers, directors, and producers who are formally educated and raised in middle-class homes with childhoods normal in every descriptive way. Feminist porn has discounted Brownmiller's position. Feminist pornographers demonstrate that there is equality in hard-core, the tables can be turned and that the omnipotent male view can be quieted. A place in corporate porn is achievable and within the next decade the business's male dominance may seem as quaint as Brownmiller's opinion on equality.

Erika Lust is part of what is to come, operating a growing company whose success will reward hard work with accolades well deserved. She knows barriers in the adult entertainment business are difficult to demolish, but the revolutionary fervor will continue. As she succinctly puts it, "I don't plan on sitting pretty, waiting for the porn industry to react and reevaluate their deep-rooted mistaken beliefs about feminine sexuality. If we don't do it ourselves, they certainly won't volunteer for us."

## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> Sven-Axel Mansson, et al., *Generation P?: Youth, Gender and Pornography* (Copenhagen: Danish University of Education Press, 2007), 11.
- <sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 84.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid, 49.
- <sup>5</sup> David Hebditch and Nick Anning, *Porn Gold: Inside the Pornography Business* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1988), 20-33,55.
- <sup>6</sup> All correspondences with Erika Lust come from interviews conducted via email on May 19, June 3, June 11, and July 8, 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> "Forum 2004, Barcelona." 2000 EURORESIDENTES.  
[http://www.euroresidentes.com/euroresiuk/Culture\\_Spain/Forum\\_2004\\_Barcelona.htm](http://www.euroresidentes.com/euroresiuk/Culture_Spain/Forum_2004_Barcelona.htm)  
(accessed July 1, 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> Susie Bright, *Full Exposure: Opening Up to Your Sexual Creativity and Erotic Expression* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 78.
- <sup>9</sup> Charlotte Kroklokke and Anne Scott Sorenson, *Gender Communication Theories & Analyses: From Silence to Performance*, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 78,140.
- <sup>10</sup> Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987), xii.
- <sup>11</sup> Linda Williams. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999), 249.
- <sup>12</sup> Candida Royalle, "Porn in the USA," in *Feminism and Pornography*, ed. Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 543-544.
- <sup>13</sup> Tristan Taormino. ". . . On Crossing the Line to Create Feminist Porn," in *Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography*, ed. Carly Milne (New York: Carroll & Graf 2005),95.
- <sup>14</sup> I attended such a conference at American University, Washington, D.C. in the winter of 2009 that included workshops on feminist thought and sexuality. The conference concluded with a presentation by porn legend, Ph.D., and feminist, Annie Sprinkle.
- <sup>15</sup> I attended such a conference at American University, Washington, D.C. in the winter of 2009 that included workshops on feminist thought and sexuality. The conference concluded with a presentation by porn legend, Ph.D., and feminist, Annie Sprinkle.
- <sup>16</sup> Lust, May 19, 2009.
- <sup>17</sup> Paul summarizes pornography's influence in today's culture. "(P)ornography is so seamlessly integrated into popular culture that embarrassment . . . is no longer part of the equation." (Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*, [New York: Times Books], 2005). In her view, pornography commonly referred to as "softcore" is now "part and parcel of the mainstream media. . . 'True' pornography today is confined only to the hardcore." (Ibid.5.) She furthers concludes, "pornography is not about desire and fantasy; it's about hostility and shame" (Ibid.273.) (and) . . . "(t)he sexual acts depicted in pornography are more about shame, humiliation, solitude, coldness, and degradation than they are about pleasure, intimacy, and love." (Ibid.275) Levy expresses a concern about a "new conception of raunch culture as a path to liberation rather and oppression" for women. (Levy. 2005, p.82) and a "raunch feminism" rebellion that she sees as a "garbled attempt at continuing the work of the women's movement." (Ibid.75)
- <sup>18</sup> Matt Schudel, "Marilyn Chambers, 56: 'Star of 'Green Door' Hard-Core Porn Movie,'" *The*



- Washington Post*, April 14, 2009, Obituaries, B5.
- 19 Taromino. 95.
- 20 Erika Lust, "Barcelona Sex Project: Six portraits of true intimacy, personal interviews and real orgasms," Pamphlet accompanying Pal DVD 1, 2008.
- 21 Erika Lust, "Epoca Brazil (1)." emailed document, June 11, 2009, 1.
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<http://erikalust.blogspot.com/2007/11/best-award.html>
- 26 Lust. "Epoca Brazil (1)," June 11, 2009. 1.
- 27 Erika Lust, "SBRAMLY book," emailed document. June 11, 2009. 2.
- 28 Erika Lust, "Director's Commentary," "Barcelona Sex Project: Six portraits of true intimacy, personal interviews and real orgasms," Pal DVD.1.2008.
- 29 Lust, "Barcelona Sex Project,"2008.
- 30 Alison Lee, "The New Face of Porn: A New Generation of Feminists are Reclaiming Porn, as Consumers and Producers," *This Magazine*. November-December 2008, 5,7.  
<http://thismagazine.ca/issues/2008/11/newporn.php> (accessed April 1, 2009)
- 31 From my interviews with photography models (nude and otherwise) and exotic dancers, this distinction among performers is evident and I believe carries over in the opinion of the general public.
- 32 Edward de Grazia, *Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 605.
- 33 Brian Alexander, "Women on top: Female execs rise in porn biz: Some say they're trying to instill change while others see them as traitors," December 3, 2008. 1-2.  
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/28022805/> (accessed July 20, 2009)
- 34 Lust. Blogspot November 5, 2007.
- 35 Alexander, 2.
- 36 Lust. Blogspot. November 5, 2007.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 In directing her initial educational video on anal sex, feminist pornographer Tristan Taromino decided to address her own fantasy of being anally penetrated on film. In "creating the ultimate feminist gang bang" she brought her own style and artistic vision into the video. Her work today is highly praised in the industry and she is recognized as a leading feminist adult cinematographer. (Taromino, 2005,93-94)
- 39 Erika's book, *Porn for Women*, is available in Italian and German. The English version will be projected for 2010 and will be published by Seal Press.
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- 41 Ibid. 195.
- 42 Ibid. 7,193.
- 43 Lynne Segal, "Does Pornography Cause Violence?" in *Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 9.
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- 45 Timothy Eagan, "How Technology Sent Wall Street Into Market for Pornography," *New York Times*, Oct 23, 2000, A20.

- <sup>46</sup> Lust. "Diario de Noticias," June 11, 2009. 1.
- <sup>47</sup> Linda Williams. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 1999, 269.
- <sup>48</sup> Wendy McElroy, *XXX: A Woman's Right to Pornography*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 40.
- <sup>49</sup> Susan Brownmiller, "Excerpt on Pornography from "Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape." in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 1980, 30-31.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid. 32.



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