

Playlist of Italo bangers curated by Ollino

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Ollino is a writer and resident DJ of Soho Radio. He curated the exhibition Spaghetti Disco (2016) on Italian disco, and worked as a cultural anthropologist for the movie Distant Planet: The Six Chapters of Simona (2018), on Italo Disco. He wrote a podcast for Soho Radio about terrorism and music in Italy during the 1970s and the history of the Italian queer club culture for Norlent.

09.04.2022

Cozy Franny Tutti hosted by

Text by Ollino

Julieverhoeven

Bernie Reid Julie Verhoven Ollino

A Sexy Show

Doppio Senso

Comfort And Joy, 2015 (6:55 mins) by Julie Verhoven

Let's pretend I am a bio
Let's pretend I am an artist
Let's pretend I am an illustrator
Let's pretend I am a designer
Let's pretend I am bothered.
Let's pretend I am content
Let's pretend I am polite
Let's pretend I am pretty
You pretentious twat
Let us pretend.

bernie.reid

He felt his first phallic strings whilst watching legs and Co on top of the Pops at around 7 years old and has since enjoyed the making and viewing of erotic art and illustration.

Prints, drawings and paintings by Bernie Reid

After the orgy - is erotic art still subversive?

Ollino

Eroticism and art have been best friends since the moment someone drew some boobs on a wall of a cavern during the paleolithic. From that moment onward, in virtually every continent and every society that ever existed, there has been a copious production of erotic art. Plates with painted dudes having sex? Hello Greeks! Ceramics in the shape of people masturbating? Oh hi, Peruvians! Huge, hard, juicy cocks? I am talking to you Romans' Dionysus! Why not write a handbook on every single possible sexual combination in bed? Did someone say Kama Sutra? Flying penises in medieval art? My favorites. A big, hairy fanny? Why not, Mr Coubert!
Eroticism and Art have been walking hand in hand for so long that it seems their relationship will last forever? But just like when your parents' relationship ends miserably after years of hidden problems, eroticism and art don't seem to be having the best time of their lives. Someone could argue that, no, nowadays, their union is stronger than ever, given the proliferation of images of naked people we are constantly surrounded by. We are aware that the entire internet industry gravitates around images of sexual organs and naked people, but are those images erotic? And what about the artistic side of these images? Where is the art in erotic art, and where is the erotic in it?
After centuries in which the role of art was to drag civilizations towards the future, often with a subversive, erotic take, it seems that nowadays, art (and consequently erotic art) has lost its driving force. How did this happen exactly? Before seeing why erotic art has lost its, ehm, erection, let's see what erotic art is.

A. DEFINITION

Does all art with sexual themes qualify as erotic? Can I just take a photo of two guys having sex to make it erotic? Where does one draw the line between pornography and erotic art? If we were to define erotic art, we could say that it is an art involving a representation of what individuals consider sexual. This definition, though, does not seem to be enough, as it applies to pornography as well. Perhaps, to define more precisely what erotic art is, we should analyse the paintings we consider to be erotic. For instance, Manet's "Olympia", Schiele's "Two Women", Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger" appear to have elements in common: a display of artistic skills (these paintings are gorgeous), and an object that is considered sexual by individuals of a given society (naked bodies, parts of bodies, sexual references).
There is something more to it, though. The sensuality of Schiele's women, the skin tone of Manet's Venus, and Picasso's bodies concur in shocking the audience, but in doing so, are not obscene. Where is this coming from? Unlike pornography which is purely explicit, erotic art suggests implicitly, works on a more subtle level, telling without showing. Let's consider Man Ray's photograph "The Prayer" which shows a hand and a buttock, but it is not regarded as a pornographic image. Nonetheless, it conveys sexual tension. We can add another element to our definition: erotic art tells without showing, suggests sexuality without exploiting bodies or being trivial.
So far, we have the following definitions: i) erotic art shows some artistic skills, ii) it is about sexuality, iii) it is not trivial and iv) finds eroticism in the implicit. We are still not satisfied, as something is missing here, the political aspect of erotic art. When we look at Gustave Courbet's "Origin of the World" we are looking at a political painting, because its disruptive energy can break taboos, subverting the morality of the common viewers. Ok, good, now we have a reasonable definition of erotic art. We know that it is pretty, that involves sex without being vulgar, that often works on an implicit level, and that it can be a shock for the prude middle-class of a given society.
Now, let's see what happened to eroticism in art during the centuries.

B. HISTORICAL FRAME

Analysing the subversive power of erotic art means shifting from a mere aesthetic ground to the domain of political philosophy. This is because when philosophers talk about eroticism usually they refer to power and, specifically, to a classic assumption that goes more or less like this: there was a time when people were free to enjoy sex without drama until certain institutions (namely the church and the state) began a regime of repression. The plan was to channel sexual energies - libido - into war or to suppress them for purposes of mass production, controlling them to secure an excess of cheap labour to be exploited by the managing class. In other words: Capitalism. In line with this assumption - a sexy cocktail of Freudian and Marxian ideas - freeing sexual activities constitutes a kind of rebellion in itself against the forces of repression.
This philosophical tool can be easily applied to the erotic artworks mentioned above. According to Freud, art is one of the ways libido finds its expression, a channelled erotic force that allows humanity to discharge neurosis caused by the discrepancy between what they want (fucking, killing etc) and what is considered acceptable. In the 1950s, German-born Californian philosopher Herbert Marcuse added an extra layer to this idea: art is a way humanity can free itself from the alienation of the capitalist gears. Framing Eros and art in a socio-economic structure, Marcuse first describes the capitalist society as a result of the repression of libido, then he suggests that true art can liberate humankind from the alienating economical system. They are saying that erotic art subverts the establishment, by channelling eroticism, melting neurosis and freeing humans from the evil boss. Free sex, no work, artistic representations of libido and a lot of LSD, this is exactly what happened in Monterey in 1966.

This liberating force of erotic art was way too good to be true as Michel Foucault in his 1976 "History of Sexuality" argues. The link between sex and power does not work like Freudian and Marxian accounts think. Instead of repressing what is problematic, power absorbs what it considers subversive, by normalizing it. This happens because power is a pervasive force that radiates its authority through institutions: the patriarchal family, the educational system, the capitalist work environments etc. According to this account, Eros is not repressed in a top-down process, but instead, it is watered down by a controlling society. Foucault believes that since the rise of the middle-class and the capitalist economic system, sexuality has become the object of many sciences - medicine, psychology, sociology, etc. - losing its subversive power, becoming sanitized and harmless. By wiping out the provocative energy of Eros, power has managed to keep art under control and transform erotic art into a business itself, a harmless category without its subversive mechanism that can be traded. It is like Foucault says that, yes, you think you are a subversive artist, but you are just a pawn in the big scheme of power, which is by the way soooo smart that it has absorbed you in its evil gears. The Victorian age represents the time in which institutions have started to represent sexuality as a norm, creating science around it, openly talking about it in a rigorous, scientific way, undermining the political power of eroticism.

C. CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

What mechanisms does power use to sanitise Eros and erotic art? One way power extends its domain is through the eradication of the implicit. By making everything explicit, transforming everything into mere pornography, the power manages to control the subversive energies of erotic art. In porn, nothing is left to the implicit, everything is relentlessly transparent, and obvious. With the normalisation of sanitised pornography power creates an oversaturation of sexual themes, iconography, and images, whose effect is the obliteration of eroticism in art.
Cancel culture is another way power finds its way into the control of Eros; its practice of moralisation results in reading the history of art with contemporary moral categories. The Disneyfication of eroticism produces sex phobic consequences like judging the art based on the life of its artist or seeing a painting of Venus as a consequence of the patriarchal male gaze, not taking into account the time, the context in which the artist lived and painted.
The hypertrophy of images we are constantly subjected to determines the prefiltration of art without any content or message. Similarly to those Byzantine iconoclasts that chopped the head off the statues, transforming their religious art into meaningless pieces of stone, the current established power has slid the meaning off the art, hyper-producing empty images. Given these premises, there's not much future for erotic art, because, in the words of French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, we are: "doomed to infinite retrospective(s) of what came before us" [1994]. If everything is erotic, nothing is erotic, after all.