**The Fluidity of Acceptability**

**Seduced by Art and Pornography and the Kinsey Institute Collection**

**Marina Wallace**

*"We train young men to drop fire on people. But their commanders won't allow them to write "fuck" on their airplanes because it's obscene!"*

Marlon Brando as Walter E. Kurtz in Apocalypse Now, by Francis Ford Coppola, 1979

*Discerning Sex*

Discerning between what is ‘loose, licentious’ and offensive, generally defined as ‘pornographic’, and what is acceptable or aesthetically pleasing, commonly definable also as ‘art’ (bearing in mind that art itself is not immune to censorship), is no easy matter as the meanings of both pornography and art fluctuate.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the 1990s leading art historian, Lynda Nead, wrote that “from the Seventies onwards, feminists, moral crusaders, governments and various other pressure groups have presented their views on the issue, with the result that pornography has become one of the most fiercely and publicly contested areas within contemporary *cultural* production.” (Nead, 1990) In her essay Nead places pornography firmly within the realm of ‘culture’, where art also belongs. Reflecting on the fluidity of meaning and the aesthetic value of the category ‘pornography’ leads us to consider the frequent intersections in history between pornographic representations and the category ‘art’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The fluidity of the social acceptability of images becomes relevant as we realise that the issues raised in this context are still worth revisiting and debating at different levels, as this volume proves. Such fluidity was not what American linguist and philosopher, Naom Chomsky, subscribed to himself when, in 2008, he was asked to express his own point of view on pornography by Dr Chyng Sun and Miguel Picker, the makers of the documentary *The Price of Pleasure: Pornography, Sexuality and Relationships*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Following an interview that Chomsky had given in September 2004 for the magazine *Hustler* on the subject of pornography, published with the title *The War on Real Americans*, Dr Chyng Sun sought the philosopher’s opinion for her documentary.[[4]](#footnote-4) Chomsky stated categorically that pornography is unacceptable because it degrades women, hence it should be stopped. “Pornography is humiliation and degradation of women, he said, it is a disgraceful activity. Women are degraded as vulgar sex object - that is not what human beings are.” He settled conclusively: “I don’t even see anything to discuss”. When pressed, he added that “the fact that people agree and are paid is as compelling an argument as the fact that we should be in agreement with sweat shops in China or where women are locked into a factory and work fifteen hours a day…..: they are paid and they consented, but that doesn’t make me in favour of it.” Asked how the production of pornography should be improved, Chomsky answered: ”By eliminating the degradation of women.” “Like child abuse” he held “we don’t want to make it better - we want to eliminate it. Eliminate the conditions in which women can’t get decent jobs, not permit the abusive and destructive behaviour that pornography promotes.”

*Selecting Sex*

Circa ten years ago I found myself in the position of having to speak in favour of visual material of an explicit pornographic nature. These were images depicting sexual acts between adults, some involving a person appearing to be underage, images of unrestrained sexual intercourse and of sexual practices clearly not intended for procreation. I had to defend the choice of erotic and pornographic photographs that I had selected for the exhibition *Seduced -* *Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In 2001 I suggested the theme for such an exhibition to colleagues first at the Hayward and then at the Barbican Gallery in London. I was no expert in the field then but I did, however, have the clear sense that the area of the visual representation of sex was of high importance, whilst, at the same time, hardly mainstream. It seemed that the gathering of relevant visual material from different sources would provide fertile ground for a series of challenging questions about the changing social acceptability of images in general, not restricted purely to the area of erotic representation. As a result of putting together the *Seduced* exhibition, institutional as well as personal boundaries were challenged. Our research process was varied and often thorny. The specific subject matter had never been properly codified academically as a whole. Its classification was underdeveloped and fragmented, peppered with the problems of locating its subject area neatly within existing disciplines. Original sources, illustrations and representations in various media and from various cultures had to be unveiled with patience and tact in a variety of places. ‘Contamination’ with other subjects turned out to be particularly confusing: in many museums and collections we had to wade through ‘other’ material classified covertly or overtly as *erotic*. We often had to exclude propitiatory artefacts, objects relating to phallic symbolism, images or sculptures masquerading as mythological and classical subject matters, sometimes religious themes, all subjects that we considered to be tangential to the central topic, *sex*. We found that, in spite of the fact that representations of an erotic nature have become increasingly pervasive in modern Western society, the most explicit of sexual images have been regularly subject to opprobrium and censorship. Throughout our research it became apparent that significant collections of material of overt sexual nature, however high their aesthetic level, had been censored and restricted to limited public access. Legendary is the case of the *Gabinetto Segreto* at the Archaeological Museum in Naples, Italy, subject to censorship in 1819 by Francis I, who was to become King of the two Sicilies. The conservative Bourbon prince decreed that ancient Roman fragments brought to light in the Eighteenth century during the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum as well as a large number of works of art by major painters such as Titian, were to be declared ‘obscene’ and thus removed from public view. The *Secret Cabinet* was re-opened in 1860 with the new name of *Pornographic Cabinet* (*Gabinetto Pornografico*), from the Greek *pornographos*, ‘writer of prostitutes’. The collection was subsequently granted restricted access, to coincide with the liberation and unification of Italy, at what was then the National Museum in Naples. In 2000, the year of the Papal Jubilee, public access to part of the censored collection was re-housed in a new location in a prominent section of the museum which is currently known as the Naples National Archaeological Museum.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Significant is also the censorship case of another major world museum, the British Museum in London. There, four hundred and thirty four objects, amongst them many also originating from Pompeii and Herculaneum, including some from the Italian Renaissance, were corralled in a separate collection named the *Secretum* which became the subject of censorship under the guarded eye of ‘discerning’ British gentlemen who, following the ruling of the 1857 Lord Campbell’s Obscene Publication Bill, considered the material obscene and dangerous for the *feeble minded* members of society - women, children and the working classes.[[7]](#footnote-7) The notion that unacceptable sexual images should be controlled and censored to protect designated groups of vulnerable or uninformed people – including women, children and the uneducated, who would be harmed by exposure to them - has regularly been used to create legal strictures against pornographic material.

Those were some of the historical precedents that we were up against in exhibiting a variety of material of an explicit sexual nature. In making *Seduced*, which focused on art and the visual representation of sex from antiquity to the present, my co-curators and I agreed that “we had to create a distinction between art and pornography”, and yet we also recognised that “a clear definition of pornography is elusive”. (Wallace, Kemp, Bernstein, 2007, p.15). We excluded both savagely aggressive or degrading exploitative images as well as depictions of sexual organs functioning only as symbols of procreation and renewal, and hence not intended for sexual arousal. On the one hand, we wanted to stay within the current parameters of acceptability. On the other, we had to be careful not to dilute our core subject matter, sex, by going for tangential themes, utterly acceptable but totally irrelevant. We found that we had to stay focussed on the subject of the visual representation of the sexual act, and exclude, where possible, procreation and divination. Pleasure was the name of the game. *Seduction* ultimately became our motto, derived from the Latin *se-ducere*, meaning to bring close to oneself. We arrived at *Seduced* as the final title of the exhibition after a working title of *Intimate Relations.*

In the course of the selection process (I nearly wrote here *seduction* process) we were constantly asked to bear in mind the distinction between pornography and art and to select material that had guaranteed aesthetic value. The test was harder the closer we got to more recent depictions, particularly photographic ones. For a time, during the research, I developed a special interest in early photographic images of an overt pornographic nature, some taken by amateurs and some by professional photographers. For the purpose of the exhibition I did not want the material to be *vaguely* erotic and gently sensual, I wanted it to be *obviously* erotic and intentionally arousing for the viewer. I was searching for images that were undoubtedly sexual and that portrayed the sexual act and sexual parts in uncompromising ways.

Bearing in mind the principles of our curatorial process and our concerns as historians, we explored a series of questions particularly in relation to the issue of acceptability: why were the images made, by whom, for whom and under what circumstances? What was the moral climate that governed their making and their viewing? Who had seen them over time since their making, and in what context? How had the images come down to us? What had been the public reaction, including restrictions and censorship? Where, when and why had the images of sex been hidden away from the public gaze? Were the images ‘artistic’ or ‘pornographic’ – or both? Where did the images stand in the context of an exhibition in a public art gallery in the Britain of 2007? While we were not raising all these issues in relation to every single item, the presentation of the material was constantly underpinned by these questions.

Classifying Sex

One of the places where I spent a number of days trawling through fascinating and varied visual material, the majority of which photographic and filmic, was the Kinsey Institute at the University of Indianapolis, host to one of the world’s largest and richest collections of erotica and pornographic artefacts. Most of the questions we had set out to pose relating to the context of the image-makers and image-users seemed to have been dealt with at the Kinsey Institute. No aesthetic anxiety seemed to penetrate the souls of the Kinsey Institute staff, who showed confidence in their appreciation of all items in the collection. An atmosphere of serenity reigned in the rooms that hosted the collection that Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956) amassed between 1942 and 1950 whilst working to produce his notorious Report on Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male (1948) and, later, the one on Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female (1953).

One of the tricks had been for Kinsey to keep his Collection and Institute free of any governmental funding. He knew that conditions of acceptability would change with time. It was not worth risking having his collection destroyed or closed down by some new moralising Regent. I became increasingly fascinated by the photographs I saw at the Kinsey Institute, some of the 48,000 inventoried from 1870 to the present day mainly from the United States and Europe (Britain, France, Germany and Italy, primarily). After a week of intense visual excitement, guided patiently by the Kinsey Institute staff, in particular by Catherine Johnson-Roehr, the able and helpful Curator of Art, Artefacts and Photographs, I returned to London to share with the director of the Barbican Art Gallery, Kate Bush, and my colleagues the wonders of the vast array of sexual material.

Kate Bush, a photography expert herself, grilled me one rainy afternoon about the validity of my choice, what was the artistic and formal value in them that counteracted the obscene content. We intended to stage an exhibition that would be spectacular but not gratuitously sensational, memorable but not shocking for the sake of it, that would make an important contribution to the ongoing debate on sexual representation. We had to hit the right balance: be explicit, whilst remaining careful and respectful; be manifest and bold but at the same time maintain a level of subversive subtlety; refer to history, without avoiding the present; deal with the thorny issue of the fluidity of acceptability and, at the same time, acknowledge current censorship restrictions.

Why should the Barbican accept to show the photos that I had selected at the Kinsey Institute? I remember leafing through the photocopies of the chosen images, those I had ‘liked’ the most. Where was their artistic value? What were we saying by showing these photographs in public? My colleagues at the Barbican were not trying to exercise censorship, rather, they wanted to make sure that, if asked, they could defend the images on show and confirm their artistic value. The Barbican Gallery was operating, as we all were, within the legal and moral parameters of present day Britain.

Ruling Sex

Our curatorial concerns had been very much in tune with what I had researched in terms of the development of different levels of acceptability of sexual imagery over the centuries. The terminology we often used had been codified in various legal documents in the UK, from the 1857 Obscene Publication Act, of Lord Campbell, to its modified version in 1959.[[8]](#footnote-8) Lord Campbell’s Act was further amended in 1964 and broadened to include the distribution of pornographic films in 1977 by the *Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship,* better known as the *Williams Committee*, a British Home Office committee chaired by moral philosopher Bernard Williams.

The definition of pornography of the Williams commission stated that "a pornographic representation is one that combines two features: it has a certain function or intention, to arouse its audience sexually, and also a certain content, explicit representations of sexual material (organs, postures, activity, etc).” (Williams, 1977) In that sense I was suggesting that the Barbican Art Gallery, a respectable British institution, showed pornographic material. But was I intending to show obscene material devoid of, or exempt from aesthetic value, by exposing photographs from the Kinsey collection?

On the difference between 'obscenity' and 'pornography', the Williams committee, the ruling that was closest to my time, and therefore the most likely to have been taken into consideration in the case of a dispute, found that the word 'obscene' was a subjective term referring to people’s reaction to material, and that "it principally expresses an intense or extreme version of what we have called ‘offensiveness’. It may be that it particularly emphasizes the most strongly aversive element in that notion, the idea of an object being repulsive or disgusting." (Williams, 1979)

'Pornography', on the other hand, was defined by Bernard Williams and his colleagues to be "a rather more objective expression referring to a certain kind of writing, picture etc ... Pornography will have some tendency to be obscene, but will not necessarily be so ... “ (Williams, 1979)

The Kinsey images were pornographic, sometimes tending towards the obscene, I had to admit: but did I choose those that also had artistic value? And, furthermore, was it possible to have both characteristics, the pornographic and the artistic at the same time, and would the aesthetic value of the images itself ‘save’ them, if necessary, from condemnation?

On whether art could be obscene, Williams reported that, "work ... may be experienced as offensive, and also be experienced as having aesthetic interest, but in the case of which the two experiences do not occur at the same time these will be works which are found offensive at first, or by a spectator who remains distanced from them, but which lose that character for someone involved in them.” It did however recognize that "it would be unwise to deny that ... there could be works which were, and remained, offensive, indeed intensely offensive or obscene." (Williams, 1979)

It seemed that we would have had to first open the exhibition with whatever we thought was appropriate, and, consequently, judge from the reaction of the viewers whether they were ‘experiencing’ an initial sense of being offended due to the obscene nature of the material or, conversely, a sense of delight due to the aesthetic value of the artifacts. Following this, we would have had to ‘restrict’ access to the obscene parts of the exhibition accordingly. We did not seriously consider such an unorthodox strategy, conscious also of the fact that the Obscene Publication Act is an anachronism in the internet age, but we did in the end agree that the minimum age for access to the exhibition should be 18.

In the meantime my defense of the Kinsey photographic material was suffering from the confusion instilled by the various definitions of what was pornographic and obscene and the relentless pushing of the boundaries of meaning and aesthetic acceptability that had developed in contemporary art. I found consolation in the fact that, already at the time of the formulation of the Obscene Publication Bill of 1857 Lord Lyndhurst, one of the chief opponents of the act had raised the objection that the definition of obscenity was far from clear-cut. He had asked: ‘…*.but* *what is the interpretation which is to be put upon the word ‘obscene’? I can easily conceive that two men will come to entirely different conclusions as to its meaning.*’(Kendrick, 1987, 116) Such fluidity, such uncertainty re-emerged in a notable legal case in the USA in 1964: Jacobellis vs Ohio. Nico Jacobellis, manager of the Heights Art Theatre in the Coventry Village neighborhood of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, was convicted and fined $2500 by a judge for exhibiting the French film directed Luis Malle, *Les Amants* (1958) where actress Jeanne Moreau plays the beautiful, bored and neglected wife of a rich and distracted business man, and eventually commits the *crime* of giving in to extreme passion by running away with a young lover and abandoning her stable and respectable family life. I am still unclear whether it was the challenging new role that Jeanne Moreau’s character embodied as a liberated woman in the late 1950s, or the love scene where only her head and face are in the frame, thrown back in what is presumed to be orgasmic ecstasy - in the manner of the sculpture of Saint Teresa by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1647-1652) - that scandalized the American public. Perhaps it was both. However, Jacobellis’s decision was eventually upheld by the Supreme Court of Ohio which reversed the conviction ruling that the film was not obscene and hence constitutionally protected. However, the Court could not agree as to a rationale, yielding four different opinions from the majority, with none gaining the support of more than two justices, as well as two dissenting views. The most famous opinion was that of Justice Potter Stewart’s, who held that the Constitution protected all obscenity except "hard-core pornography." Stewart said:

“*I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description ["hard-core pornography"]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that.”*

The phrase ‘*I know it when I see it’*, a colloquial expression by which a speaker attempts to categorize an observable fact or event, although the category is subjective or lacks clearly defined parameters, became famous in the ranks of the United States Supreme Court after Judge Stewart-Potter used it to describe his threshold test for obscenity in the Jacobellis v. Ohio case.

Photographing Sex

I found that I was developing an acute sense of *I know it when I see it* the more I looked at the Kinsey Institute pornographic images. Alfred Kinsey, whose aim as a former entomologist, was to maintain a rigorous objectivity in his classificatory method and not to differentiate between what is normal and what is abnormal in sex, intended also to avoid judgment of the images he came across, particularly photographic ones. Kinsey himself declared that he collected images regardless of their aesthetic value: “The values do not depend on the authorship of the material, nor upon its intrinsic worth as art, but upon the fact that the material has wide public distribution. In fact, French postcards and cheap Japanese prints may be more significant in a scientific study than the world’s finest art.” (Pearson Yamashiro, 2000, p. 175).[[9]](#footnote-9) He obtained photographs from a wide variety of cultures and across different periods of time through his contacts abroad. Photographs had, for Dr Kinsey, documentary *value*, and, according to one of the scholars at the Kinsey collection, their documentary *value* worked in two ways. “In the most straightforward sense, photographs offered evidence, inasmuch as any form of representation can, that activities like cunnilingus and group sex actually occurred. It is possible that….the amateur images may have had the most direct relationship to practice. Arguably these images offered a glimpse into the average person’s sexual experience, sharing the aim of Kinsey’s scientific project.” (Pearson Yamashiro, 2000, p. 175). The visual impact did not go unnoticed to Dr Kinsey, who, according to one of the authors of the catalogue of Kinsey photographs, was well aware of the effect that photographic framing and technique could produce.

In general early photographs employed effective – more or less conscious – visual devices such as the judicious concealing and revealing of the body, strategically placed tools like veils, viewing angles that invite to a virtual participation in the scene. The sense of viewing the ‘real’, of witnessing something that happened, that has been ‘there’, and that therefore still has a presence, places the viewer in the delicate, yet, exciting position of the voyeur *par excellence*. Early photographers employed strategies developed using the visual codes of painting to capture and involve the *voyeur*. (Wallace, 2008, pp.28-42) The images were softly lit, the backgrounds often landscapes, poses reminded of classical ones and the onlooker was invited into the scene through the illusion of an intimate space. On the other hand artists like Gustav Courbet (1819-1877) began to use photographs as one of their main visual points of reference. In spite of the fact that Kinsey believed in the function of visual imagery as raw data, he also felt that photographs helped him gain insight into issues of arousal and desire as well as class and cultural differences. It seems that Kinsey held that eroticism could be seen and documented in photographs. “The photographs were not naively or simply understood as transparent media, a window on reality. Kinsey valued these images not only for their function as records, but also for their ability to convey, stimulate, and reveal desire.”(Pearson Yamashiro, 2000, p.175).

In the volume dedicated to a thousand photographic images from the Kinsey Institute, a collection which saw its heyday between 1948 and 1950, Carol Squires notes that: “art historians such as Lynda Nead take pains to differentiate between the contemplative aims of art and the arousing aims of pornography.”(Squires, 2000) Indeed Nead, refers back to Kenneth Clark’s affirmation on the contemplative properties of the depiction of the nude in art. (Nead, 1992) According to Clark, the nude as a genre in art brought “a new concept to humanity’s contemplation of itself…”(Clark, 1956, 5-6). Clark maintains that the nude is not the subject of art, but a form of art, in part because "the body is not one of those subjects which can be made into art by direct transcription - like a tiger or a snowy landscape… We do not wish to imitate; we wish to perfect". (Clark, 1956, 12-13) [[10]](#footnote-10)

Kenneth Clark, with his strong views on the differences between the nude and the naked body was deemed qualified enough to testify for the Committee established in 1972 under the guidance of Labour Peer Lord Longford to investigate and prepare a publishable report on pornography. Clark’s testimony included the following statement: “To my mind art exists in the realm of contemplation, and is bound by some sort of imaginative transposition. The moment art becomes an incentive to action it loses its true character. This is my objection to painting with a communist programme, and it would also apply to pornography.” (Lord Longford, 1972)[[11]](#footnote-11)

With such a background of law and moral codes, I continued to select material for the exhibition, swaying between the notion of what was acceptable and what was not, as well as what made sense in terms of the overall concept we had developed, which included, at that point, the presence in the exhibition of significant collections censored in history. Whilst establishing that amateur photographs carried a wide set of meanings for scientists and classifiers of pornographic material, the question of what was pornography, and what differentiates it from erotica or from art, remained partly unanswered. Most of the Kinsey photographs I had selected were eventually included for show in the *Seduced* exhibition in 2007. Their existence as part of a scholarly collection rendered them immune to criticism. Nobody voiced any doubt about their aesthetic value, nor their standing in the context of pornography and I found that my research had led me to a number very interesting areas, as I had imagined in the beginning. The process itself of selecting and unearthing material from various collections, and the final gathering of such material in the definitive arrangement at the Barbican Art Gallery were, in themselves, notable experiences. The literature that I used as reference for writing the catalogue also became a part of the very important journey I had undertaken. I remember in particular the writing by Theodore A. Gracyk proposing a complex series of thoughts on pornography and its representation, taking into account the context of acceptability and the law. In 1987 Gracyk writes that many arguments try to establish a causal link between pornography and direct harm to women. Since such links have however been questioned some attacks on pornography simply hold that it systematically degrades women….and so pornography should be censored because ‘it is defamatory and libelous’. Gracyk continues: “Whilst I accept that much pornography is morally objectionable because it defames or degrades women…..I suggest that one should focus less on the definition of pornography and should concentrate more on the ‘pornographic attitude’. The ‘pornographic attitude’ is the real locus of the defamation argument against pornography. “ (Gracyk, 1987, 106)

On the occasion of the press opening of *Seduced* I was asked by journalists whether I was aware of the fact that some of the material in the exhibition might exhort the public to indulge in obscene and questionable activities, and whether I felt a sense of responsibility because of this. I replied, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that I was well aware of such a danger, and that, as a result of my work on the *Seduced* exhibition, I was thinking of becoming a proponent of the closure of the National Gallery of Art in London since the majority of Old Masters’ paintings in the Gallery depicted violence against women.

My subtext was that, in line with what Gracyk wrote, “…no representation, either literary or visual, is straightforwardly ‘lifelike’. Failure to acknowledge that interpretation hinges on the training and prejudices of the interpreter leads to genuine difficulties….. The attempt to define pornography in terms of specific represented content therefore carries with it various difficulties which are inherent in the nature of representation.” (Gracyk, 1987, 112) I instinctively knew this when I first conceived of the exhibition theme.

Oddly enough the Kinsey Institute provided me with the most useful parameters for maintaining the necessary balanced view to allow me to go through the intense months that succeeded the opening of Seduced, when I was prominently in the public eye, weary of potential criticism and unsolicited attack.

Whilst I remained perhaps healthily unclear about a number of issues I found myself in agreement with the opinion expressed in the context of the Kinsey Collection: “Sexuality and its depiction remain contested, which is not at all bad. Despite the evident threat from moral crusaders, sexual pictures shouldn’t be normalized as ‘art’ just so that they’ll be considered fit to view, nor should they be sorted into predetermined categories.…. Ideally, the entire realm of sexual imagery will remain ambiguous and fugitive, hard to pin down; in its fleeting refusals and taunting provocations, it will maintain substantial disruptive power.” (Squires, 2000)[[12]](#footnote-12)

The aesthetic nature of explicit sexual images might well save them from being classified as obscene. Public as well as personal views change with the times, and the principles that guide the concept and practice of acceptability ought to be put continuously to the test. *I know it when I see it* should become our motto for maintaining openness in the face of change and in recognition of our prejudices.

Seduced became the only exhibition to have ever been granted an X rating, with entry restricted to 18 and over. It created more press interest than any other exhibition at the Barbican Art Gallery in London until then, and numbers of visitors were twice as many as the most successful exhibition held there up to that point.

Marina Wallace, November, 2012

C. Mackey, Thomas, PORNOGRAPHY ON TRIAL by. Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2002. 333 pp. Cloth $55.00. ISBN: 1-57607-275-4

Ferguson, Frances, Pornography: The Theory, Critical Inquiry

Vol. 21, No. 3 (Spring, 1995), pp. 670-695, Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress)

Article Stable URL: [http://www.jstor.org/stable/134394](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343941)

Williams, Bernard (ed.) Obscenity and Film Censorship: An Abridgement of the Williams Report [Paperback] Cambridge1979- 2010 Chapter 8 obscene and Erotic ; Art

Williams, Linda, Sexual, Power, Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible (second edition 1999), which included stag films from the Kinsey Institute collection. Williams’ latest book is Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White, from Uncle Tom to O.J.Simpson (2001, Princeton).

Slade, Joseph, Pornography and Sexual Representation, A Reference Guide, Greenwood Press, 2001

Nead, Lynda, The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality, London and New York, Routledge, 1992

Nead, Lynda, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, published in Signs, Vol.15, N.2, Winter 1990, pp. 323-335, Chicago University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174488>

Clark, Kenneth, The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form. Bollingen Series 35.2. New York: Pantheon Books, 1956.

Squires, Carol, *An introduction to a book of sexual photographs*, in Peek, Photographs from the Kinsey Institute, Arena Editions, 2000

Wallace, Marina; Kemp, Martin; Bernstein, Joanne, Seduced, Art and Sex from Antiquity to Now, Merrell Publishers*,* London, 2007

Gracyk, Theodore A., *Pornography as Representation: Aesthetic Considerations*, Journal of Aesthetic Education, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter, 1987), pp. 103-121, Published by University of Illinois Press, Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3332835>

Lehman,Peter, (Ed.) Pornography, Film and Culture, Rutgers, 2006

Wallace, Marina, *Erotic Visions*, in Exit – Image and Culture, N. 29, 2008, published quarterly Olivares&Associates, Madrid.

Kendrick, Walter, 1987, The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture, New York, Viking, 1997

**Illustrations**

**Illustrations from the Kinsey archives**

1. Unknown photographer, AN HT (Anal Heterosexual, French, 1885-1990

2. Unknown Photographer, ER Facial (Orgasm Facial), undated

3. Unknown photographer, HO AN KNEEL (Homosexual Anal Sex Kneeling), c. 1945

4. Unknown photographer, AN HT (Anal Sex Heterosexual), c 1880

5. Unknown photographer, ANL HT (Anilingus Heterosexual), 1948

6. Unknown photographer, C O KNEEL VV (Coitus Female Kneeling Ventral – Ventral), c. 1900-10(?)

7. Unknown photographer, ANL HT (Anilingus Heterosexual), 1920-22

**The Fluidity of Acceptability**

**Seduced by Art and Pornography and the Kinsey Institute Collection**

**Marina Wallace**

**293 WORDS:**

In spite of the fact that representations of an erotic nature have become increasingly pervasive in modern Western society, the most explicit of sexual images have been regularly subject to opprobrium and censorship.

Discerning between what is ‘loose, licentious’ and offensive, generally defined as ‘pornographic’, and what is acceptable or aesthetically pleasing, commonly definable also as ‘art’ is no easy matter as the meanings of both pornography and art fluctuate. The fluidity of the social acceptability of images becomes relevant as we realise that the issues raised in this context are still worth revisiting and debating at different levels. The specific subject matter of the visual representation of sex has not been properly codified academically as a whole. Its classification is underdeveloped and fragmented, peppered with the problems of locating its subject area neatly within existing disciplines. Original sources, illustrations and representations in various media and from various cultures must be unveiled with patience and tact in a variety of places. ‘Contamination’ with other subjects is particularly confusing: in many museums and collections one has to wade through ‘other’ material classified covertly or overtly as *erotic*.

Despite a vivid background of censorship, of enforced law and moral codes, we continue swaying between the notion of what is acceptable and what is not. The fact that sexuality and its representation remain contested is not after all a bad thing.

The aesthetic nature of explicit sexual images might well save them from being classified as obscene. Public as well as personal views change with the times, and the principles that guide the concept and practice of acceptability ought to be put continuously to the test. The attempt to define pornography in terms of specific represented content carries various difficulties inherent to the nature of representation.

1. ‘Loose and licentious’ were the terms used to describe censurable written material in the King George III's 1787 Royal Proclamation 'For the Encouragement of Piety and Virtue, and for the Preventing and Punishing of Vice, Profaneness and Immorality', the only law against sexually explicit material until the 1857 Obscene Publication Bill. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For some useful definitions of Pornography in their relative cultural and historical contexts see Lehman, Peter, (Ed.) Pornography, Film and Culture, Rutgers, 2006 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [http://www.thepriceofpleasure.com](http://www.thepriceofpleasure.com/) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From the interview with Dr Chyng Sun, it emerged that Chomsky was unaware of the content of Hustler at the time of agreeing to speak to the journalist of the pornographic magazine in 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. I co-curated the exhibition with Joanne Bernstein and Martin Kemp for the Barbican Art Gallery, London, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Naples National Archaeological Museum is the most important Italian archaeological museum, hosting an impressive representation of sculpture and artefacts from Pompeii, Stabiae and Herculaneum, the highest quality sculptures produced in Greek, Roman and Renaissance times. Since 2000 the number of visitor have dramatically increased thanks to the reopening of the Gabinetto Segreto. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. These were described in the 19th century as including 202 ‘abominable monuments to human licentiousness’, a shameful testimony to ancient Roman life. See David Gaimster, *Sense and Sensibility*, in History Today, vol.50, September 2000, pp. 10-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The most important provisions of the 1959 amended Obscene Publication Act are four: that a person shall not be convicted if publication was “in the interests of science, literature, art or learning”; that the opinion of experts as to the literary, artistic, scientific, or other merits of the publication may be admitted as evidence; that the work is to be read as a whole, and that authors and book publishers may speak in defense of the work though they have not been summoned in the case. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Somehow a precursor of the principles of Pop Art, Kinsey might have joined in with the likes of Andy Warhol had the scientist *behaved* more like an artist, or had art been more open to welcoming scientists in its ranks at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is an idea that follows on from Aristotle that 'Art completes what Nature cannot bring to a finish.’ The artist, endowed with quasi-divine attributes, interprets and passes on knowledge of nature's unrealized ends. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lord Longford, Pornography: The Longford Report, London, Coronet, 1972, p.99-100 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Squires, Carol, *An introduction to a book of sexual photographs*, in Peek, Photographs from the Kinsey Institute, Arena Editions, 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)