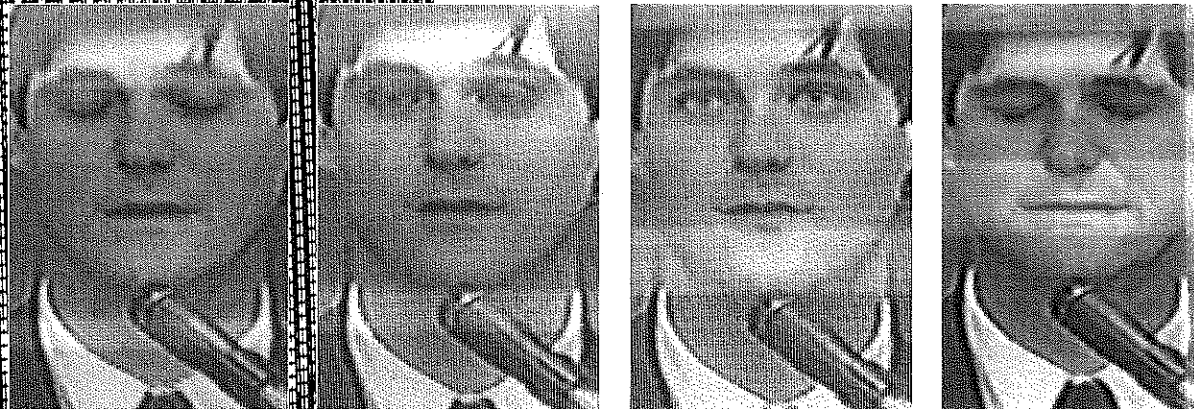


SEX WITH STRANGERS

Liz Kotz

Lutz Bacher's work inhabits a messy, ambiguous zone where pathology meets pleasure, where what we most fear is what we most desire. Like much of the most powerful art exploring sexuality and the body today, her work refuses the clarity and distance of a more avowedly critical art; indeed, her ambivalent attraction to problematic materials flies in the face of more conventional feminist approaches. Though pornography, with its highly charged narratives of subjugation and entrapment, constitutes a key site of her investigation, the strategies she em-



ploys could not be further from those of antiporn feminists. For while Bacher acknowledges that the registers of fantasy and desire she investigates are deeply troubling, she dives headlong into the moral morass in all its grotesque hilarity, insisting that this terrain should be obsessively explored rather than proscribed.

In *Sex with Strangers*, 1986, Bacher exhibits a series of photographic images with accompanying texts, lifted from '70s porn narratives thinly disguised as sociological texts. The black and white images of "rape"

Lutz Bacher, *My Penis*, 1992, color stills from videotape loop.

I'm really weird. I'm really all fucked up.



and fellatio are disturbing and eerie. Yet their effect is made all the odder by the captions, which, in their lurid accounts of female nymphomania and wayward hitchhikers, veer between voyeurism, parody, and the faux-scientific tone that lends period porn its campy tenor. Whereas in much '80s text/image art the verbiage effectively repressed the visual, in *Sex with Strangers* the preposterous, high-blown texts fail to "anchor" the images; graphic and repetitive, they spin hopelessly out of control.

For almost twenty years, Bacher has used materials ranging from the twisted texts of self-help manuals and pulp sociology tracts to the equally perverse documents of televised trials, the medical apparatus, and the art-historical canon. Obsessively exploring these sites of misogyny (all culture is a site of misogyny—porn, contra Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, has no special status), this work seems to go beyond a kind of "first stage" feminism predicated on identification with "feminine" roles and the critique of "masculine" ones, investigating the kinds of instability and ambivalence elicited when female artists invite female viewers to inhabit traditionally masculine subject positions.

Echoing the radical rereadings of psychoanalysis undertaken by "gender theorists" such as Judith Butler and Kaja Silverman, Bacher's interest in such moments of fractured psychic identification points to the inextricability of desire and identification, which renders fixed, stable, or unified gender positions problematic at best. Investigating

psychic mechanisms of obsession and repetition, these writers suggest that the very "compulsion to repeat" that seemingly structures and consolidates gender identities can perhaps be made to subvert and disperse them as well; taken seriously, these radically reconfigured theoretical models open up potentially productive, if easily misunderstood, sites for feminist artmaking, such as the female exploration of male subjectivity.

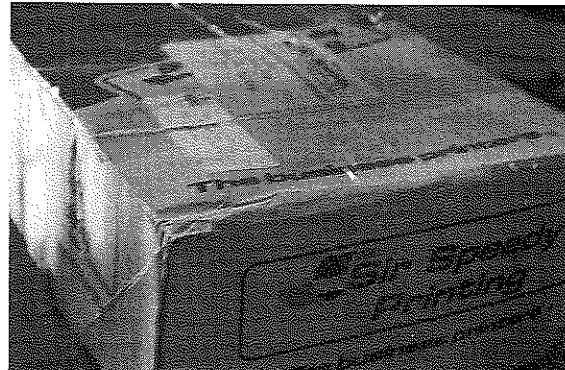
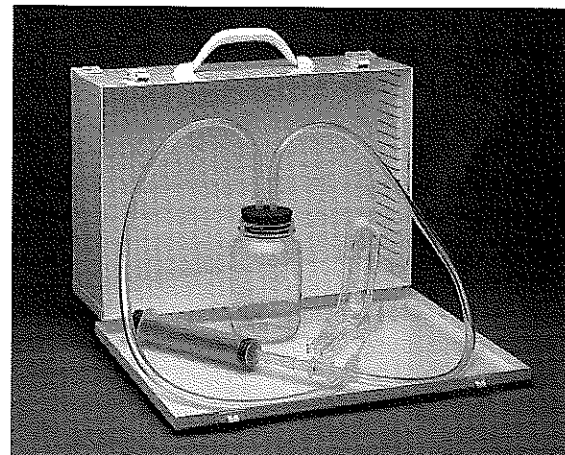
Writing on the relationship of filmmaker Liliana Cavani to her male charac-

ters, Silverman has proposed that women artists must first assume masculine identities in order to dismantle or disperse them. Butler's own project has focused on strategies of "parodic imitation" and "gender insubordination" evident in many lesbian and gay cultural practices. Her key insight that "the copy of the origin displaces the origin as origin" offers a compelling account of why female artists might choose to copy or reenact male representations, rather than romantically attempt to create their "own." Countering the feminist epithet that some women are "male-identified," Butler contends that in this symbolic system we are all to some extent "male-identified," and that the feminist pursuit of some mythic state of authentically female identification is illusory at best, and often rigidly exclusionary and regulatory in effect.

Informed by a persistent obsession with the serial presentation of messy pop materials that owes a double debt to Minimalism and Pop art, Bacher's art destabilizes fixed gender positions by repeating certain highly charged images or sequences until they effectively implode. Employing the uncanny repetitive capability of home-video technology, the video sculpture *My Penis*, 1992, a continuous tape-loop of a short fragment from William Kennedy Smith's televised trial testimony, sets up a kind of psychic instant replay, relentlessly repeating the sequence until the defendant crumbles before our eyes.

My Penis, like *Sex with Strangers*, raises the question of what it means for a female artist to inhabit the male voice so forcefully as to verge on im-

personation. In her recent *Men in Love*, 1990, a collection of confessional narratives lifted from a quasi-instructional masturbation manual and printed onto 12-inch mirrors, Bacher asks how these "language systems" themselves create and produce the very masculine desires they record and circulate. The technologies of pleasure presented in this work, which range from getting off on stacks of 45s to masturbating onto the mirrors in fancy men's rooms, are both perverse and goofy. The project recalls the kinds of "pathetic masculinities" that animated much SoHo art last year—but far more critically, since it suggests that even the impaired male subject remains the center of attention. Intuitively homing in on moments of risk and rupture, Bacher picks apart the artifices and instabilities of male subjectivity, effectively exposing heterosexuality as what Butler has termed "an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization." Though similar approaches are suddenly getting attention in the New York art world, Bacher's excavation of masculinity dates from her early photo projects, such as *Men at War*, 1975. To note that this remarkably contemporary examina-



Above left: Lutz Bacher, *Jokes (Jane)*, 1987, distressed photo mural on aluminum, 30 x 40". From the series "Jokes," 1986–87. Above, top to bottom: Lutz Bacher, *Menstrual Extraction Kit*, 1991, plastic, rubber, glass, and steel, 15 x 12 x 5". Lutz Bacher, *Corpus Delicti*, 1992, paper and wood, 3 x 3 x 3' overall. Opposite: Lutz Bacher, *Sex with Strangers*, 1986, photograph and text, variable dimensions.



A strong warning to young people of the risks involved in hitchhiking is indicated in the events of this case history.

tion of submerged homoeroticism and disguised aggression was made by a woman, in 1975, in Berkeley (!), goes against everything we have been told about feminist artmaking in the '70s.

Bacher has long gone for the gut in disturbing and darkly humorous ways. In her six-hour video installation *Huge Uterus*, 1989, the artist is subject to a grueling experimental operation for the removal of "minute and massive multiple tumors" (the tapes are standard medical videos of the procedure). A black TV monitor is upturned, flat on its back with cords strung about it like the patient, while a popular self-help audiotape designed to prepare patients for surgery drones on, its ostensibly soothing tones perversely heightening the sense of anxiety and unease. The installation is simultaneously mesmerizing and horrifying, as you watch the hand go into the cavity and the pile of little balls accumulate. Yet as an outrageous act of self-display, *Huge Uterus* is also a wickedly funny comment on feminist body art, '70s-style durational performance, and the narcissistically self-implosive acts of male luminaries such as Chris Burden and Vito Acconci.

Unlike recent activist-themed art "about" abortion and about the body, Bacher's works rely on the shocking specificity of actual objects and medical technologies to problematize the intense levels of invasion and intervention to which the female body is subjected. As in the *Menstrual Extraction Kit*, 1991, a replicated self-help abortion apparatus, *Huge Uterus* offers no trite fantasy of the "whole" body prior to technological invasion, no romanticized return to a premedical past. After all, the patient does survive and return to health, and the conventional alternative—a hysterectomy—is no less grim.

Reprising an interest in testimony and the confession—and the problematic place of the female within these paradigmatically modern forms of power—Bacher's recent *Corpus Delicti*, 1992, includes the transcribed statements of the three women who were not permitted to testify at the Kennedy Smith trial, presented on top of desks, in boxes from Sir Speedy Printers in West Palm Beach, Florida. The piece plays on the irony that, using the phone and a credit card, anyone can order these materials, which were suppressed from the hyperbolically publicized trial proceedings, thus "making public" what is already part of the public record—in this case, narratives of rape and attempted rape. Working with documents of a deeply twisted culture, Bacher immerses herself in these troubled scenarios of desire and entrapment. Speaking from these conflicted registers, her art seems to echo Jane Fonda's refrain, in an image from her series entitled "Jokes," 1986-87: "I'm really weird. I'm really all fucked up." □

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