

# FACETTES DE LA PETITE MORT

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Why would a contemporary art magazine be interested in investigating an internet pornography site? After all, pornography's supposed alliance with sexism, unscrupulousness and vulgarity would seem to preclude it from serious art criticism. As the internet continues to meet the needs of a very broad spectrum of the community and generate a large income through, in particular, pornography related sites, we'd have to be particularly blinkered not to consider some of it in relation to creative practice. *beautifulagony.com* (website) registered on the contemporary art radar partly due to its inclusion in an exhibition at CAST (Contemporary Art Services Tasmania) Gallery, Hobart, earlier this year. By being in the sights of a contemporary art audience but not of the scene as such, this artwork raises some pertinent questions about the relationship of contemporary art spaces to such web-related work. The brief of contemporary art spaces to show the work of emerging artists places them in a good position to look closely at the creative activity on the web, which has become increasingly popular and flexible to artists of various persuasions. Burgeoning internet industries afford greater access to its potential and so it follows that as a result, scrutiny of that potential is growing also.

*beautifulagony.com* is a DIY erotica/porn site in which the contributors film their own facial expressions prior to, reaching and following orgasm. No nudity is shown and the participants in effect, control the still video camera—after the editorial ground rules are followed. The lack of real erotica on the internet prompted both Richard Lawrence and Lauren Olney to create *beautifulagony* (the series) in 2003. Initially, their friends offered to activate the concept and when the website, produced by Shannon Hourigan, was up and running they quickly realised it would work commercially “without whoring itself as a porn site festooned with banner programs and fleshfests.” With almost evangelical zeal, the site informs us that their “credo is to prove the face as the sexiest part of the human by presenting excruciatingly real, personal orgasm experiences. It isn't motivated by profit. It's a passion not a profession.” *beautifulagony* is by no means alone in terms of alternative erotica/porn websites and so it's becoming increasingly irrelevant to speak of a consolidated porn industry.

In March 2006, Lauren Olney was asked by artist/curator Tristan Stowards to exhibit a grid-like arrangement of selected mpeg movies from the website, running concurrently with the exhibition *Corrupting Youth*, at CAST Gallery. *Corrupting Youth* showcased works that dealt with aspects of social repression and control encountered in childhood and adolescence, and the hypocrisy that very often accompanies its implementation. Instead of the individual videos that would be chosen and viewed by a visitor to the website, Olney chose to present a compilation of sixty-three of them as a DVD projection. In a *Bolero*-like orchestration of orgasmic noises, the wall became increasingly filled with more faces and cries, rising in a crescendo and falling in satiation, as one by one the images faded to black. As this appeared to be a rather trite formal arrangement, one had to wonder how aware Olney was of the way in which the videos change in this context, as clearly the *keyhole* view of the voyeur's encounter with an intimate scene (that would attract website visitors in their private setting) becomes the very public act of being watched. The fantasy of anonymous sexual exchange in *beautifulagony.com* between willing model and paying viewer however, evaporated within the exhibition context. Although there then seemed to be an element of carelessness on the part of Olney, such conflicting incentives could also be the result of her primary intention to promote erotica controlled by the contributors themselves, rather than focusing on the customer. If it's possible to take Olney at her word and to suspend one's scepticism as to her disingenuousness, it's important to remember that the viability of the site depends on the doers rather than the watchers.

There is a sense that the control of the image presentation of sexuality is more determined by the model. Unlike mainstream pornography that would appear to be about the imposition of fantasy upon another, the performances in *beautifulagony* are less obviously professionally constrained; the directorial control more collaborative than abusive. It explicitly reveals a process that is controlled by the participants or 'Agonees', a break from the assumption that pornography is a realm where female sexuality is spoken by men and represented by male control. Participants (in their own environment) are given the freedom to perform as they wish. Who benefits most from these downloadable movies is difficult to ascertain, but certainly from the text on the site and from the 'confession' section, (where models talk about their sexual experiences on and off camera) it appears that many of the active participants find the process of making and selling their intimate expressions cathartic. The fact that a majority of the movies submitted to the site appear to be from women, suggests that *beautifulagony* offers a welcome avenue not hitherto open to them.

The lack of professionalism adds to the somewhat hybrid nature of the site making it difficult to appraise. Caught somewhere between popular TV culture—*Big Brother* etc, pornography, contemporary art and film, therapy and documentary, evaluating its role, let alone its quality, can lead in many different directions. The documentary aspect is interesting from the point of view of the site's pretence at reality. Putting aside the pornographic function to arouse, to create a subjective fantasy for the observer, *beautifulagony* in its gauche but worthy attempt to cede control to its contributors, conveys the impression that fantasy remains locked away in their minds—at times giving an overwhelming sense of the incommensurable physical isolation we contend with as part of the human condition. The face may be the “sexiest part of the human”, but it would be hard to prove that it was due to its emotional transparency. To expect a reliable reading of its expressions simply through the screen of a computer would only show how socially estranged from each other we really are. Whatever may be claimed for the authenticity of the sexual experience being watched, perhaps *this* reality, rather than real orgasms, is the strength of the site. This sense of documentary detachment, when observing pleasure or pain that cannot be shared, brings to mind the story of Diogenes' response when asked how he dealt with the temptation of lust. The famous misanthropic ascetic evidently alleviated such thoughts by masturbating, but when scorned for such an activity he replied, “If only I could soothe my belly by rubbing it.”

Placing private expression into the public domain is always fraught with the problem of misinterpretation, even if you regard the *private* as a socially constructed notion; and therefore just the flip side of what is already *public*. The recent popularity of the reality TV genre and greater access to video production equipment, as well as to the means of distributing it, furthers the debate as to the boundaries between the two. A number of current video works shown lately deal with the perceived polarities between private and public space. The exhibition *Interlace* (2004), in which Blair French highlighted the work of Emil Goh, Shaun Gladwell and Kate Murphy, clearly demonstrated how the performative (a media infused sensibility) infiltrates the everyday. This new kind of narcissism exudes from *beautifulagony*. The facial expressions and gestures visible on the site aren't merely the trace of an internal fantasy, but are testimony to a media-savvy generation's almost unconscious ability to infuse filmic codes into their lives and relationships. It's impossible to tell whether the hair arranging, pouting, the looks or groans are real or not, or whether they are the projected echoes of a lifetime's identification with media personalities. The site takes pride in the lack of nudity within it, as if objectification will be thereby sidestepped, but it has to

be questioned what kind of respect for identity is being considered here. The contributors' relaxed position with the camera and the selling of these videos to the site suggests that they aren't concerned that their faces identify them. It's as if short-lived star status (their 'fifteen minutes of fame') exempts them from their particular histories (at least genitalia are relatively anonymous).

Creating a persona—a fusion of private and public—used to be hard work. If you consider Andy Warhol or more recently Leigh Bowery, in the context of a dialogue on contemporary identity issues, constructing a mask or an elaborate production of lies was then the way to examine truths. *beautifulagony.com* though, gives us the impression that such polarity—between truth and lie, mask and actuality—is not the overriding question; as if this kind of narcissism or persona consciousness is there by default for all of us to use or struggle with. Despite this, parallels can be made with the avant-garde films of the 1960s and '70s, with their connection to youth culture and a raw documentary style (Warhol's films in particular). A significant comparison though, in terms of the *beautifulagony* format is the film *Moment*, made around 1970 by Stephen Dwoskin. In it we see a woman lying on a bed, looking straight up into the lens of a camera that's static throughout the film. All that is seen is head and shoulders, the only narrative development being the woman's expressions, suggesting the unfolding of an erotic reverie. The narrative possibilities for the woman we see are ambiguous; is she acting for us, or are we seeing something we shouldn't be seeing? Despite the similarities, it's the striking difference between the intellectual and artistic ambitions of the two that brings about an awareness of the changing terrain of artistic practice. Dwoskin produced *Moment* in the heyday of structuralist film, when the specificity of the medium and a ridding of narrative was being deliberated upon within a relatively small group of devotees. *beautifulagony* however exists in and is created by, a much more diverse community without the critical artistic coherence (such as it might have been) at that time.

In returning to the problem of the appropriate venue for such work in the context of *beautifulagony's* placement within *Corrupting Youth*, it is worth asking—why wouldn't a contemporary art gallery audience be a priority, given the artist/producer Lauren Olney's fine arts background? Does the work's second-choice venue imply indifference to its art potential? Or is this an acknowledgement that art's intellectual domain now spills out into non-art designated arenas; an argument for artistic deregulation that puts to the test the art gallery's role? There is certainly a professed social undertaking for the producers of *beautifulagony* that is less concerned with definitions of art. Still, it encourages self-expression and is a voice critical of the porn industry, not simply in terms of its exploitative reputation, but also in terms of its aesthetic approach. Although the transference for *Corrupting Youth* of the site into the gallery was a rather awkward one, it reinforced Stoward's curatorial argument that the boundaries of art and life aren't just a topic for an art educated audience. Which then leads to the question of whether the contemporary art space needs *beautifulagony* more than *beautifulagony* needs it?



Right: Richard Lawrence and Lauren Olney, *beautifulagony* (video stills), 2003  
Photo courtesy the artists