

Who are all the women who don't come gently and don't want to; don't know yet what they like but intend to find out; are the lovers of butch or femme women; who like fucking with men; practice consensual s/m; feel more like faggots than dykes; love dildoes; penetration, costumes; like to sweat, talk dirty, see expressions of need sweep across their lover's faces; are confused and need to experiment with their own tentative ideas of passion; think gay male sex is hot; are into power? Are we creating a political movement that we can no longer belong to if we don't feel our desires fit into a model of proper feminist sex?

EXCURSIONS

It was some time last year that pop singer Madonna's image exploded on the covers of magazines everywhere. Image of exaggerated 'feminine' sexuality: Madonna sprawled out in an array of bright lace lingerie, stretchy cottons and tacky jewelry, taunting the camera with her bare navel, deviously half open eyes and lips. *Rolling Stone*, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *People*, *Time* ran cover stories as did

countless other forgettable magazines such as *Teen Beat*. Along with her overinflated found status as a pop singer was an acting role in a new film, *Desperately Seeking Susan* and an earlier film, *A Certain Sacrifice*, as well as the discovery of several series of nude black-and-white 'art' photographs she had posed for several years earlier, most notably those of American photographer, Lee Friedlander.

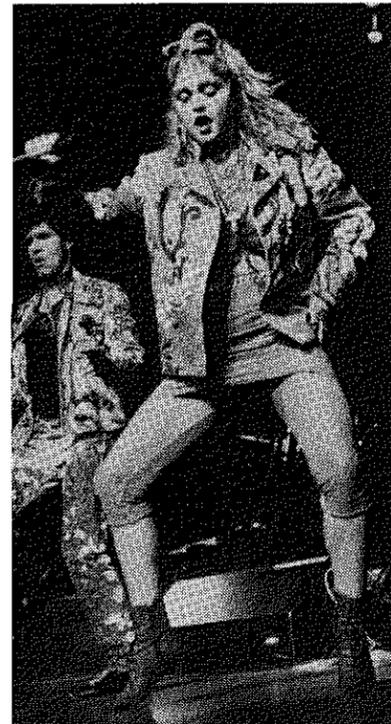
In a single year, Madonna's image occupied film and t.v. screens, magazine covers and newspapers (as she was concurrently on her 'Virgin' tour promoting her second album), while her high-pitched voice vibrated across AM airwaves in the Western world. These 'achievements' crescendoed with her private (no official media invites) marriage to *enfant-terrible* actor Sean Penn last autumn (heroically captured in photographs by *National Enquirer* journalists hovering indiscreetly overhead in helicopters) and recent gossip that she is pregnant.

The inundation and overexposure, this 'coup' of the media over a concentrated period of time, is a publicity strategy employed repeatedly in the 'rock' industry. The release date for new records and selected single cuts are accompanied, of course, by their music videos and the recording 'artist's' appearance on music video shows, at autograph sessions in record shops, etc. All to talk about the making of the video and the record and also to plug the Big Tour (Canadian, World-wide, whatever), that is just about to begin. The overall effect of this PR package is facilitated by the increasing popularity of rock video programming (incidentally, extremely low-budget programming), allowing the singer

to express her/his personal 'style,' creating or reinforcing this 'star' pose of self-importance. A phenomena such as Madonna demonstrates how this 'star' quality rests completely on a 'look,' on a visually powerful and seductive poising of the body.

In all her rock videos, Madonna adopts surprisingly different personae, a constant re-packaging that has instituted her as an appealing novelty. In "Like A Virgin" Madonna is a trembling, desirous bride (in a "Venetian decor complete with gondola," described by Barthes as a titillating and exotic backdrop for the striptease); "Crazy For You" reveals her 'sensitive' side as she mourns the pain of Romantic Love; while "Material Girl" finds her joyously imitating the campy musical performance style of Marilyn Monroe. In her two performance videos, "Holiday" and "Dress You Up" she sings and dances, completely oblivious to her supporting cast of two male dance partners thrusting away beside her in unison.

The notion of 'dress-up,' of masquerade and spectacle is integral to the construction of Madonna. The little girl dressed up in high heels and lipstick is a Madonna wearing a Boy Toy belt underneath her satin bridal gown, not a virgin, but singing "Like A Virgin." She embodies a pastiche of various dominant representations of Woman confused and re-enacted with surprising dexterity. Her own name, of course, evokes the contradictory exaltation of the Virgin Mother, simultaneously untouchable but also the penultimate object of desire. Her now 'famous' statement (quoted here from *Penthouse* and *Fan Club*) - "I like crucifixes because there's a naked man on them" - is vacuous yet perversely sacreligious. Seeing the crucifix at a very literal level, sexualizes the sacred body of Christ and implies a fuckable body, a notion that obscures delineations between the sexual and religious in a provocative and transgressive manner.



In spite of all the foreplay, we should retain a tension between Madonna's image in itself and the concerns surrounding the thrusting of her image into the highly visible and obsessive arena of rock/pop culture. For we are brought to the threshold of problems concerning the representation of feminine sexuality deployed as a saleable commodity by and through a specific mechanism in contemporary culture: the easy bed-partners - rock music (and therefore, consumerism) and the media image (read crudely here for its ideological effects). What are we to make of this squirming and lustful female performer? What is it about Madonna that both repels and attracts women to her image? Makes some men sigh in relief that 'sexy' is in again, providing boys with the substance for wet dreams like 'pin-up' girls used to?

And the idea that the fantasies of women are the same as, or merely derivative or in the service of male values, only serves to belittle our already shaky beliefs about our own sexual importance.

Bella-donna:

Madonna at a Glance and in Retrospect

It is difficult to find an equivalent to Madonna as there are so few female idols who have garnered similar public interest. Marilyn Monroe and Janis Joplin are distant comparisons, perhaps. Through popular (media) mythologizing, both women are re-presented as having been exploited and destroyed by the corruption of their fields: the tragic, helpless woman is 'punished' by overdosing on drugs in a horrifyingly lonely way. Such mythologies are in effect extensions of social control that serve to reinforce the binary reduction virgin/whore - Yes, yes show us your desire, but don't say you weren't warned, slut. Madonna represents a new breed: she pumps iron two hours a day; is into vitamins; owns a

We also must contend with her exaggerated use of the paraphernalia of fetishism: garter belts, corsettes, stockings. The overt flaunting of her sexuality in various states of undress/overdress (the padded cream silk bridal gown or the barely veiling blue satin sheet) occupies a dangerous edge between a 'liberated' sexuality and a phallic sexuality, an idea of feminine sexuality played out purely for man's desire. Women groan at the potentially dangerous implications of the popularity of a figure such as Madonna, while young girls adore and emulate her by the hundreds of thousands. While there is something highly disturbing about seeing twelve year-olds wearing gobs of make-up and lingerie they can't fill out, Madonna has released and popularized an image of women who "talk dirty" (enjoy sex and admit it?) Unfortunately, she is always veiled.

Madonna's image consists of a play of loaded cultural signifiers for feminine sexuality: being 'dumb' (the supposedly misconstrued Boy Toy belt), talking 'dirty' ("...this is my box [a ghetto blaster]...it's a very special box...it makes music if you turn it on...") and looking 'sexy' (flaunting garments that are traditionally reserved for carefully selected 'lovers'). There is a point where the excessive sexuality of her image folds back into itself, disturbing erotic tension; the masquerade of her costume surfaces precisely as a costume, a game, a controlled construction of what is popularly imagined/fantasized to represent feminine sexuality.

The point of rupture between the erotic and phallic sexuality is perhaps best thought out in relation to the publication of Madonna's nude photographs. For as Barthes has remarked, the eroticism played out by the strip-tease is the costume (the feather boa, the gloves slowly removed finger by finger), a development of particularized narrative codes of Enigma; the naked stripper exemplifies the alienation of sexuality simply because she transgresses this code by revealing her body. In considering how Madonna's naked images were anticipated to function in the context of the pornographic magazine, we can predict that they were doomed to 'fail' as pornographic images. Madonna's eroticism is predicated on the narrative of the striptease, a continual promise of unveiling that is continually withheld. By removing the lace bustier and stockings, bracelets, hair ribbons, objects upon which the fetishization of Madonna, the stripper, are pinned, the structural function of these fetish objects is destroyed, for they no longer cloak her 'lack.' Revealing the naked body and genitals of Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone, is, well, *not* pornographic. The code of pornography is to inspect (with supreme audacity) the Enigma behind the stripper's triangular g-string, not to stage nudity as a historical aestheticization of the female body (which also veils the 'lack' by fetishizing the woman's entire body). Pornography demands a voyeuristic relation wherein the sexualized woman is 'captured' masturbating and manipulating standardized bodily parts that are emphasized (within a phallic economy) to be zones of pleasure.

In Madonna's "No Comment" response to the publication of her nude photographs, there seemed to be an implicit knowledge that nothing she could say in defense or in support of these images would be as effectual or powerful as the existence of these images alone. Her refusal to speak of the images' existence was a refusal to be 'captured' and inspected by the pornographic discourse; her "No Comment" functioned effectively to reclaim these images for the codified discourse of the striptease - allowing her to re-pose (gracefully) as the Enigma. This denial of inspection, in turn, provide erotic and ambiguous gaps that can accommodate the insertion of each member's fantasy. Even Madonna seemed conscious of this circuitous path of desire and chose not to submit to inspection. She simultaneously circumvented any implication of vulnerability or exploitation by retreating behind the surface of her own public image that is/was obviously able to sustain the public's desire and their continual consumption of her quite adequately. Perhaps, Madonna best described herself when she said in an interview, "I've always wanted to become 'Madonna' [Superstar]" - a comment that both distanced her from her own public image and alluded to it as a pneumatic, (over)inflated signifier that was just waiting to be blown...

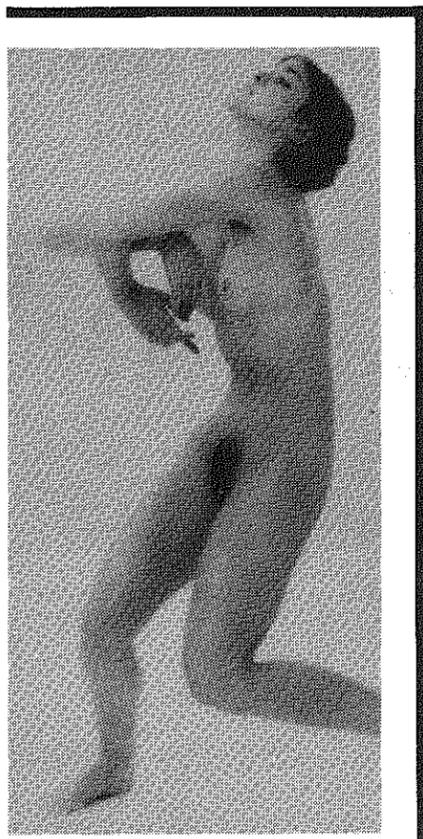
The first two quoted passages are from Amber Hollibaugh's, "Desire For The Future" in *Pleasure and Danger*, Carole Vance, ed. (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

The third quote is from Roland Barthes, "Striptease," in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Travers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972). See also his "Sade II," in *Sade / Fourier / Loyola* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976).

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Striptease - at least Parisian striptease - is based on a contradiction: Woman is desexualized at the very moment when she is stripped naked. We may therefore say that we are dealing in a sense with a spectacle based on fear, or rather on the pretence of fear, as if eroticism here went no further than a sort of delicious terror, whose ritual signs have only to be announced to evoke at once the idea of sex and its conjuration.



million dollar condominium in Manhattan; and supports popular charitable causes like Support for Africa and Greenpeace. The Madonna phenomena is, in fact, an extremely successful public relations and business venture taken on by Madonna and her record company executives.

Madonna's image has, to a small extent, forged a public space for the exhibition of women's desire in a way that a Mick Jagger or a Prince cannot quite do for women. But do we want her? For we must also contend with the substance and manifestations of her pleasure through the conventions of feminine representation: as a narcissistic object of desire and as a sex symbol.