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Pin-up Grrrls: A very brief history

von Maria Elena Buszek

Subverting stereotypical images of women, a new generation of feminist artists is remaking the pin-up. Yet, as shocking as these contemporary pin-ups are intended to be, perhaps more surprising is that the pin-up has been appropriated by women for their own empowerment since its inception more than a century ago. In this «secret history» of the feminist pin-up is the story of how women have publicly defined and represented their sexuality since the 1860s.

To many, the idea of a «feminist pin-up» is an oxymoron. However, contrary to popular belief – held by many within, outside of, and even against the movement – it is no more so than «feminist painting» or «feminist sculpture», or «feminist porn» for that matter: these are all media/genres historically used and appreciated primarily by men, about which nothing is inherently sexist, but which have all been used to create images that often inscribe, normalize, or bolster notions of women as inferior to men. While this fact has been recognized by many feminist thinkers, few would deny that the same have been and may be strategically used by women to subvert the sexism with which they have historically associated. Yet the pin-up – because of its simultaneous ubiquity and invisibility, prurient appeal and prudery, artistry and commercialism – has not been so readily granted a feminist interpretation. The genre is a slippery one: it doesn't represent sex so much as suggest it, and these politely suggestive qualities have as a result always lent it to a commercial culture of which feminists have justifiably been wary for its need to cultivate the kind of desire and dissatisfaction that lead to consumption.

But, the feminist movement itself has historically been dedicated to the cultivation of desire and dissatisfaction – in its own case, leading to dissent. As such, we should be unsurprised that both the visibility and persuasiveness of the pin-up might be used by a feminist movement that has always

sought to inspire broad cultural change. As a genre associated almost exclusively with women – due, of course, to its creation and prominence in cultures where women's rather than men's sexuality is considered acceptable for scrutiny – the pin-up has, no less than (indeed, perhaps more than) any other cultural representation of women, reflected women's roles in the cultures and subcultures in which it is created. And, because the pin-up is almost always a sexualized woman whose image is not only mass-reproduced, but mass-reproduced because intended for wide display, the genre is in interesting test-strip for Western cultural responses to women's sexuality in popular arts since the Industrial Revolution, as well as feminist responses to the same. As I argue in my book *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*,¹ when feminist history is viewed through the lens of the popular pin-up, what emerges is a picture of the myriad ways in which women have defined, politicized, and represented their own sexuality in the public eye. And when the pin-up's popularity is viewed through the lens of feminist history, what emerges is a picture of the myriad ways in which feminist thought has profoundly affected women's sexuality both within and beyond the women's movement.



Fore! The American Girl to All World (Life Magazin, 1900)

«New Women» for a new era»

The origins of the feminist pin-up can be found in origins of the pin-up genre itself, with the simultaneous emergence of a rapidly-growing middle

class and an organized feminist movement in industrialized nations during the mid-nineteenth century. This period's shifting ideals of female sexuality were literally embodied by actresses, whose ordinarily taboo expression of the sexual and professional self-awareness many contemporary feminists were promoting was viewed as acceptable in the burlesque theatricals of both Europe and the United States. These burlesque actresses utilized the new medium of photography to both invent the «pin-up girl» and imbue the genre with the same subversive, expressive sexuality that the era's feminists would increasingly associate with modern women's emancipation.

With pin-up's move toward the twentieth century the pin-up genre added the «New Woman» to a slowly-growing cast of popular images of sexualized womanhood. In illustrations from the era's popular press – such as *Life*, *Punch*, and *Le Charivari* – the New Woman, like the burlesque pin-up that preceded her, was an aggressively modern sexual ideal, but her subversive edges were tempered by her familiarity. (Fig. 1) Like the rapidly expanding feminist movement itself, the frightening openness of the New Woman was also her appeal: she might be native or immigrant, working- or upper-class, bride or «bachelor girl», occasionally even straight or lesbian. One thing that the New Woman always was, however, was white, demonstrating the limits of celebrating this era of rapidly-changing roles for women. Indeed, even white actresses – the presumed decadence of their profession thrown into high relief next to the well-scrubbed New Woman – were generally lumped into this period's «Othering» of certain female sexualities as feminism became more and more acceptably bourgeois.

From the stage to the streets to the screen

This, however, would change in the earliest decades of the twentieth century as Western feminists moved toward an unprecedented unity through the international suffrage movement. This increasingly-public and -demanding feminist movement would find it prudent to counter its radical new activist image by holding up popular female stage performers as icons of the movement. The success and independence, as well as the eccentricities and sex appeal we see in the popular pin-up imagery of actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt were held up by suffragists as models of freedom that enfranchisement would offer women, helping to make feminism fashionable with a new generation of women. Indeed, the «fashionable feminist»



Clara Bow, Paramount promotional pin-up, ca. 1928

that emerged in the 1910's would be so popular as to provide the burgeoning movie industry with a convenient symbol for the very type of modern female characters on which its fortunes would be built. Whether in the form of serial «daredevils», adventurous heiresses, or the effervescent flapper (Fig. 2), Hollywood recognized that women whose behavior pushed boundaries of traditional femininity guaranteed a box-office blitz around the Western world. Alas, by the early 1930s the growing conservatism of the West would tame her into submission, reflecting the anti-feminist backlash that followed the successes of suffrage, the global economic depression, and the rise of Fascist politics across Europe.

War and women's liberation

However, while this atmosphere would combust into World War II, in the context of the war the pin-up once again emerged to popularize a subversive model of female sexuality in Allied nations during the war. The cinematic and illustrated pin-ups of WWII exemplify the period's feminine ideals: an unprecedented combination of conventional beauty, confident sexuality, professional



Alberto Vargas, watercolor painting, in *Esquire* 1941

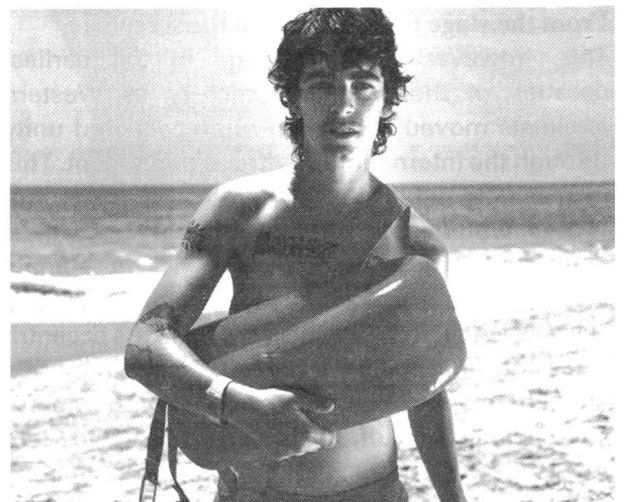
independence, and wholesome patriotism that reflected the contradictory cocktail of attributes cultivated by ordinary young women of the period. (Fig. 3) In this light, the pin-up was an icon of the sweeping changes in gender roles and sexual mores that developed during WWII. However, such developments would reverse themselves at the war's end as women – during the war, encouraged to work in professions and industry, enlist in the military, and balance these new roles with family responsibilities – were expected to quietly return to the domestic sphere as if their wartime efforts had never happened. Thus began the era of the «feminine mystique» so succinctly addressed in Betty Friedan's book of the same name, and critiqued so powerfully in Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking *The Second Sex*. However – as both authors' own lives demonstrated – many women circumvented the era's anti-feminist postwar ideals in ways that would logically evolve into the full-blown «second wave» of the women's movement in the 1960s. In popular and counter-cultural venues alike, the pin-up genre reflected these changes. Indeed, as the pin-up was analyzed by both the burgeoning civil-rights movement and the art-world avant-garde of the postwar era, the covert political meanings of the pin-up were acknowledged and amplified in sites from the popular African-American magazine *Ebony* to Pop Art paintings – imbuing the pin-up with new meanings that fit the period's heady climate of political, cultural, and sexual revolution.

This legacy would prove both influential and problematic to feminism in the late 1960s and '70s. On the one hand, the rise of a «second wave» of

feminist activism led to the women's liberation movement, which kicked open doors to sexual freedoms previously shut tight for women. On the other, many recognized that these «free» sexual practices often reflected the very power structures they had sought to overturn – the revolutionary aspect of encouraging women's sexual freedom had in reality exacerbated the oppressive, conventional demand for women's sexual availability to men. The pin-up's appropriation during this time by feminist artists as reflective of the period's rapidly-changing and -expanding second-wave discourse, when issues of sexuality were addressed with particular urgency, ultimately led to a splintering of the women's liberation movement that reached a heated crescendo in the 1980s.

The feminist pin-up today

While debates on the representation of sexuality served as a focal point, in fact the fragmentation of the feminist movement in this decade reflected the much larger tendency toward multiplicity and an identity-based activism that marked the concurrent definition and discussion of an emergent postmodern era. Embracing the postmodern concept of the potential and ownership of one's unique politics and self-expression, as well as the redefinitions of «community» that inevitably followed, feminism's current «third wave» – most visible in the activism of the international Riot Grrrl movement – also emerged from this culture to stress the multiple feminisms within the now-sprawling and truly international feminist community. As such, young feminists today have come of age internalizing and applying this proposal as a matter of course, rather than a point of violent debate.



J.D. Samson in J.D.'s Lesbian Calendar 2003

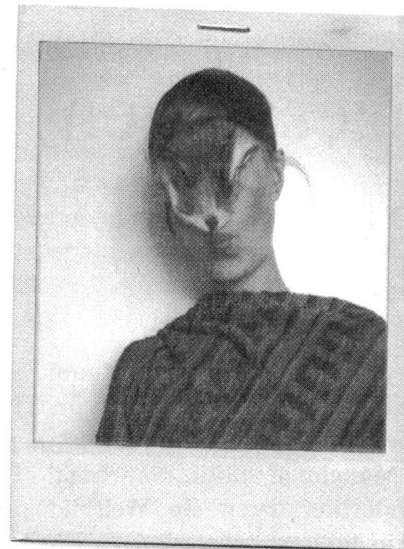
This generation uses the pin-up to simultaneously connect to and disavow earlier feminist practices, and ponders the pin-up's legacy in the midst of the intergenerational battles over the same in contemporary art criticism – leading contemporary feminist artists from porn-star-turned-performance artist Annie Sprinkle to musician-turned-lesbian-calendar-girl J.D. Samson (Fig. 5) to their ironic, yet affectionate explorations of the genre today. This pointed ambivalence reflects the particular complexities and plurality of our feminist world, even as it draws attention to the longstanding complexities and plurality of feminist history.

Anmerkungen

¹ Buszek, Maria Elena: *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*, Durham NC 2006.

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Maria Elena Buszek is a critic, curator, and professor of Modern and contemporary art at the Kansas City Art Institute. She is the author of the book *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*; essays in numerous international anthologies, exhibition catalogs, and scholarly journals; and is a regular contributor to BUST magazine.



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