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WHY HUMAN OBJECTIFICATION IS CONTROVERSIAL.

## WHY HUMAN OBJECTIFICATION IS CONTROVERSIAL.



# ESSAY TRANSCRIPT

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## Introduction

I believe Human objectification is controversial and frowned upon in the heteronormative influenced society we live in because it is abject from the 'norm' and is coherently queer. 'Part of the fascination of sexology [including objectification] undoubtedly lies in its ambition to provide a comprehensive classification of sexual behaviour. Inevitably, such an attempt could hardly hope to succeed.' (Bland and Doan, 1998) Being unable to categorise people within a culture where the symbol for a gender-neutral toilet is comprised of a 'male' and 'female' figure (as seen here in this government letter (Figure 1) (UK Government, 2018)) is seen as rather queer -Both in terms of sexuality and peculiarity.

In the UK 'Relationships education will be compulsory for all primary age pupils from September 2020. [...] The majority of the objections relate to the teaching of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) content...' (GOV.UK, 2019) The heteronormative bubble allows for a reluctance to learn and disregard outdated or incorrect information as it would undermine traditions, beliefs and ignite change for a majority. This is not exclusive to the Hetero vs the Homo but can be seen in other bubbles too. For example, the Homo vs the Trans with groups such as the LGB Alliance. As it states on their twitter page 'Asserting the right of lesbians, bisexuals and gay men to define ourselves as same-sex attracted.' (Twitter.com, 2019)

Society's invisible and inexorable capability to remain naive has trickled down from a heteronormative climate and has become universal. This 'inexonaivety' (inexorable-naivety) reinforces one's superiority, privilege and their high place in the hierarchy. Outside of a western 'inexonaive' society objectification can be very empowering. Using art work as a lens this can be seen through; sex work, as a form of recreation and art work itself.



Figure 1 UK Government, unisex toilet signs, 2018

## Recreation

In our 'inexonaive' society human objectification is traditionally seen as a negative thing. We are taught objectification is bad and can lead to many negative things like; wage gaps, a lack of opportunities, racism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, etc. "living in a culture in which women's bodies are sexually objectified socializes girls and women to treat themselves as objects," (Hill, M. S. and Fischer, A. R.,2008). This promotes negative human objectification in an inexonaive society which relies on the taught binary of gender. Heteronormatively, when John Berger writes, 'men act and women appear' (Berger et al., 2008). He refers to how woman are painted as objects. This universal view (mostly at the time) undermines 'the subject' stating they are born to be an object for others (men) to use and look at.

This can be seen in the 1969 piece 'chair' (figure 2) by Allen Jones. The sculpture is of a life size half-naked body which acts as the support for a chair cushion. Because of the time it was made it reinforces the cultural objectification of women. The use of a sheep skin rug gives a domestic air to the whole sculpture and the vulnerable sexual position of the body suggests that women are only there to offer both house work and sexual acts. The rug provides connotations with domestic farming pointing to the cultural idea of finding and capturing a woman. The use of make up on the face reinforces the idea that women are there to be beautiful and to be looked at. The closed eyes suggest no personality or humanity, which describes a lack of consent, or the ability to consent to being objectified. In this instance the objectification of a human is exploited at the cost of the person in a negative way. This is reinforced by using a strap to restrain the figure.



Figure 2 Chair, Jones, 1969 (Tate, n.d.)

However, outside of an 'inexonaive' bubble objectification can be used positively and recreationally. The main difference here is the use of consent. With the exposure and knowledge of BDSM (Bondage / Discipline / Dominance / Submission / Sadism / Masochism), kink (sexual gratification from something 'a bit different') and other fetishes (more intense acts or thoughts that can be categorised and named that usually surround a few complimenting ideas) this piece can be seen very differently. The use of black leather brings the work into a fetishized state, and it becomes more complex than just a representation of the male gaze. The chair is one out of a three-piece series including a light stand and a table, all using a body as the main structure. These three positions directly relate to Forniphilia, the fetish of being considered/acting as human furniture. And the presumed knowledge that Subjects are following a consented session with the 'Dominant' or artist. If, 'Consent is not the absence of a NO but the presence of a YES.' (Sexplanations, 2013) then the rug no longer holds connotations to animalistic behaviour and instead shows a warmth and care - not letting the 'Submissive' lie on a hard and cold surface. The rug and the outfit are justified in mutual sexual gratification between both the subject and the viewer.

This recreational link may not be apparent right away due to cultural boundaries. The laws on BDSM, fetish and the wider kink world encourages it to be kept in the dark and highly taboo. 'The offence is committed when a person intentionally or recklessly assaults another, thereby causing Actual Bodily Harm (ABH)'

(Cps.gov.uk, 2020). Because of inexperience, consent is not talked about very often legally or culturally so the use of restraints or exploring fetishes become confused with abuse. As seen in a 1996 case where a husband was prosecuted after he consensually branded his wife's buttocks with his initials because, 'Consensual activity between husband and wife, in the privacy of the matrimonial home, is not a proper matter for criminal investigation or prosecution' (Lawteacher.net, 2018). This reinforces the repression and fear of BDSM, Kink and Fetish. People who have entered kink circles educate and play by either the Safe Sane Consent (SSC) and/or Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) models (Watts the Safeword, 2015). The UK law does not acknowledge SSC and RACK, this leads to a lack of education, adding to the list of things the inexperienced society affects directly.

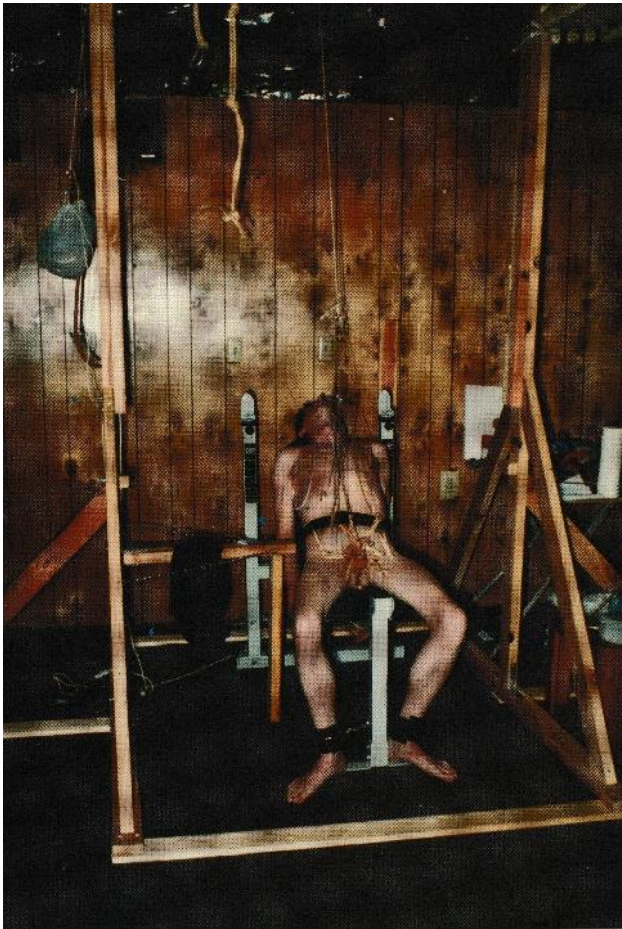


Figure 3 Flanagan, Bob on scaffold, 1989 (Phaidon, 2013)

This is an image of a performance by artist Bob Flanagan and his mistress Sheree Rose (figure 3) at the Threshold club in Los Angeles. Where they casually display CBT (Cock and Ball torture) and nipple-play amongst other things to an audience. Here he is the focal point of the art work. A literal object, for his mistress to play with though it is clear to see the use of consent through the long-term relationship between the participants and the DIY look of the frame Flanagan made for the session.

Recreational objectification can also be fun because it purposely goes against the taught nature that objectification is wrong. When asked why he is a 'super masochist' Flanagan replies, 'Because it's in my nature; because it's against nature; because it's nasty; because it's fun; because it flies in the face of all that is normal.' (Lord and Meyer, 2013). Positive objectification is human nature, to explore playfully and sexually but this goes against the perceived 'nature' of an inexperienced society. The consented unconsent, the contradiction and the separation between fantasy and reality is liberating and allows for sexual gratification through human objectification.

## Sex work

"Prostitution, often known as the world's largest profession, can be traced throughout recorded history" (Lerner, 1986). However, objectification regarding Sex work and pornography within western culture is complicated and inevitably controversial. There is the objectification of both the worker and the client but also separately the objectification of the Sexworker against society. The latter of which is usually exploited. Sex workers are used as leverage for different feminist group's agendas (like carceral feminists), both for and against the legalisation of prostitution without any input from sexworkers themselves (Smith and Mac, 2018). Sex workers are objectified by people who refuse to see anything new trapped in an inexonaive bubble.

The painting 'Boys do fall in love' was created in 1984 by artist Patrick Angus. This piece depicts a scene in a gay bar where a young man is putting on a strip show for other older gentlemen. The focal point of the painting is the young performer. The use of line guides the eye towards the figure - sharp edges of the spot light and the direction of the illuminated steps all point in his direction. The spot light directly cuts across the line where the body is no longer clothed, showing that the audience is only interested in his naked body, reinforcing that he is the object to be brought and paid for. Not only is the performer the subject of objectification of the painted audience but they are also objectified by the viewer of the work. The audience too is also objectified but as a collective as they are all in darkness with their faces hidden, separate from the performer but still a part of the situation. Both sex worker and clients equally objectify each other, the performer for a living and the clients for entertainment. The performer is there with the understanding of being watched for money and the observers understand of paying to watch them. They mutually objectify each other for their own benefit. The audience also contains other undressed men, other performers, watching the show. Showing enjoyment of acting and watching. The light on the stage and the steps to the stage also suggest this as they contrast with the rest of the scene, drawing people to walk on them to the stage.

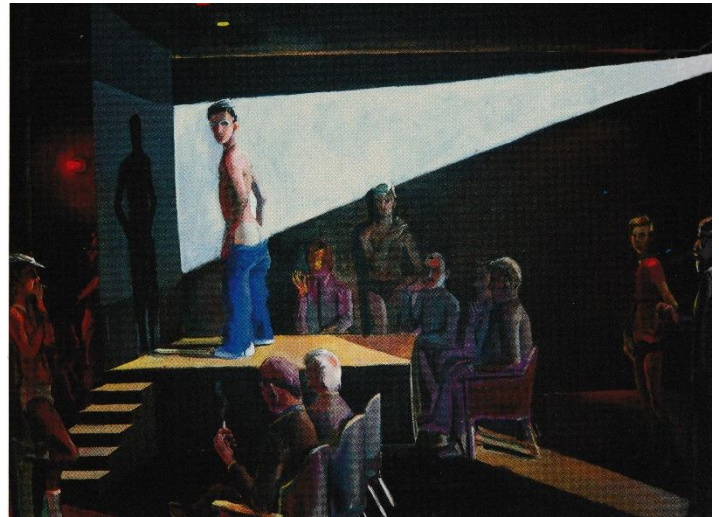


Figure 4 Boys do fall in love, angus DATE (BOOK 1984)

With the presumption of consent, all parties here are simultaneously objectified and neither in an explicitly negative way. However, on the outside as a viewer this mutual enjoyment may not be apparent because of inexonaivety. 'sex workers are associated with sex, and to be associated with sex it to be dismissible' (Smith and Mac, 2018). People are reluctant to know and learn anything that's other than the 'norm' and the depicted scene remains hidden and taboo to a majority. The artwork its self and similar paintings by Angus were not popular and he gave up on trying to exhibit his paintings. He lived an impoverished life before dying of AIDS in 1992 (Lord and Meyer, 2013).

The inexonaive have a reluctance to view any artwork (painting, sculpture, performance, porn film).

"Pornography brings the secret life of people out into the open. What the western world holds most dear – the primacy of holiness of the individual, and the primacy and holiness of (heterosexual) love, of marriage, of the family – is cast into doubt by pornography (HUGHES, 2015). To learn you have to accept that what you have been taught may not be correct.



Figure 5 Hendricks, *Family Jules: NNN (No Naked Niggahs)* 1974 (Tate, 2017)

Contrary to what is taught and spoke about, Sex work can be very casual and does not always involve money. 'They hunt for images, personas, and experiences that spark fantasy, searching for inspiration outside of themselves (Davina, 2017). For example, in this painting by Barkley L. Hendricks titled 'Family Jules: NNN (no Naked Niggahs) 1974 (figure 5) which depicts a gay man reclining on a chair with a shirt hanging off the arm of the seat. The model is the main object of this painting, their dark skin contrasts with the light chair making the figure the focal point. It could be argued that the subject is a sex worker, trading his naked body and time for weed (which he is seen smoking in the painting), company and attention from the artist.

The shirt gives the impression of a second unseen party who has also removed clothing. This, and the outward gaze of the subject could imply that the viewer is the client. This could also mirror as the artist being the

client. The painting does not show any explicit signs of abuse or negative objectification, the subject seems at eased and relaxed and the room is very clean and colourfully decorated, giving a positive atmosphere to the work. One way the relationship between the model and Hendricks can be seen as good is from the title of the piece, its political-incorrecness gives the impression of an inside joke being made during the creation of the painting and the inuendo directly points to the model's genitals. This in turn describes a lack of conformed heteronormative-derived inexoanivety from the artist, without concern about being around and objectifying gay men while identifying as straight, especially at the time the painting was made.



## Art Work

The body can be objectified in a more physical sense, especially when it is used to create a piece of artwork. This piece by Sruli Recht titled 'Forget Me Knot', for example (figure 6). The designer had an operation to remove 110mm x 10mm of skin from their stomach, which was then treated and used as an overlay for a 24carat gold ring. This kind of self-objectification is controversial because not only does it hold connotations to prostitution by selling the body but it is objectification with only one party involved. 'This is revolting on so many levels to too many senses.' (Cal, 2013). The audience or the purchaser of the ring does not explicitly objectify the skin because the designer has already labelled it an object themselves. The viewers dislike comes from the abject nature of the piece. 'What is abject...the jettisoned object' (Kristeva, 1984). Within the realm of inexactitude, the skin on the ring is abject not only from the body but what society sees as the 'norm'. The object becomes inevitably queer and therefore something 'other'. The only salvation is 'artistic licence' - 'He's a rather talented designer with a very solid following' (Raf, 2013). Being an artist gives you permission to step outside of the inexactitude bubble and still be successful.



Figure 6 Forget me knot, Sruli Recht 2013 (Dezeen 2020)



Figure 7 Carcass, Pavlensky, 2013 (The Calvert Journal 2020)

Petr Pavlensky is another artist who self objectifies and uses his body as a medium within this abject state. Pavlensky's performance piece titled 'Carcass' 2013 (figure 7) consists of his cloth-less body inside of a barbed wire cocoon laying outside of a Russian parliamentary building. This form of self-objectification is controversial for many different reasons. It could be argued that it is both more and less accepted within an inexactitude bubble because the only 'excuse' of doing such a thing is for art itself. The nude body holds connotations with vulnerability and the need for shelter and support. Which juxtaposes against the barbed wire hugging the body but also harming it too. This being in public and outside

of a parliamentary building talks a lot about the social and political climate in Russia and the rest of the world. 'Russian President Vladimir Putin has said homosexuals will be welcome... but warned them against spreading "gay propaganda"' (BBC News, 2020). This work is coherently queer, its relation to human rights campaigns, self-objectification, the public nudity and self-harm puts it in the realm of the 'other'.

However, 'All of these stereotypes are challenged by the artist who takes ownership of his regulated body through endurance-based performance work (Das, 2016). His body is vital to the work and the message because it becomes an object, the body in its sterile singularity becomes something much more – a

representation of every-body. The contradiction of important irrelevance of his physical self is what makes this work queer and therefore controversial within an inexonaive society.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I believe Human objectification is controversial because it can be viewed very differently within an inexact society compared to a more queer one.

An inexact society derives from a heteronormative society and relies on the binary of male and female or more so of 'us' and 'other'. This structure starts to break down when objectification is viewed from a queer and positive angle through recreation, sex work and art work as it does not depend on a binary interaction and can include many parties, or just one.

As a caveat could be argued that artists bridge this gap and attack the inexact bubble as 'artistic licence' permits it so. Or, does attacking this invisible structure actually outcasts the art bubble and is sequentially categorised too as an 'other'?

## Figure LIST

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