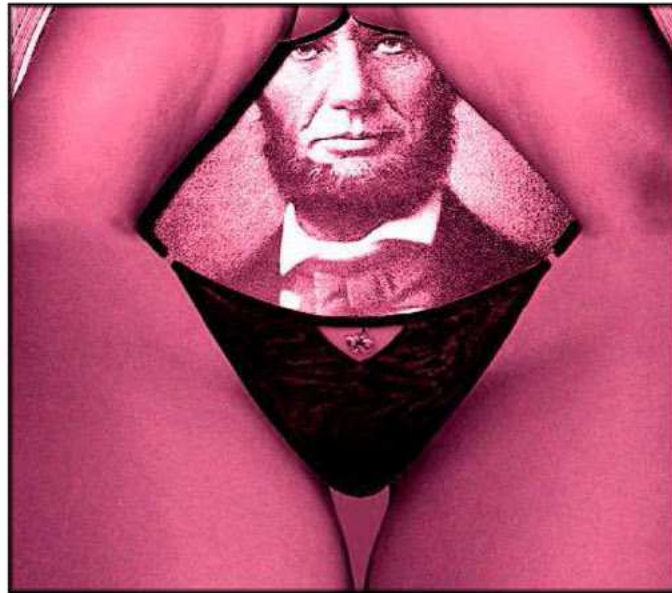


THE STORY OF PORNO

MICHAELANGELO MATOS

on two dirty books.



Collage made from photographs found in Taschen's *Big Book of Pussy*
Happy Valentine's Day

Mike Edison

Dirty! Dirty! Dirty! Of Playboys, Pigs, and Penthouse Paupers: An American Tale of Sex and Wonder

Soft Skull Press, November 2011. 320 pp.

Dian Hanson, ed.

The Big Book of Pussy

Taschen, November 2011. 372 pp.

Introducing “The Epiphany,” one of the “Etc.” pieces in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Ecstasy of Influence: Nonfictions, Etc.*, Lethem explains that selling the piece to *Playboy* amounted to “a secret victory, since I’d had several stories rejected on the basis that ‘Hef has a policy against any mention of masturbation.’ I suppose they figured he wouldn’t know what *le petit mort* meant.”

Le Petit Mort was the name of Lethem’s villain, and of Hefner’s silent business partner. “Hef told me he thought everyone who masturbated was deeply ashamed of masturbating, and so it was *Playboy’s* job to keep it ‘our little secret,’” Dian Hanson tells Mike Edison in the latter’s new newsstand-porn chronicle, *Dirty! Dirty! Dirty! Of Playboys, Pigs, and Penthouse Paupers: An American Tale of Sex and Wonder*. Hanson, the former editor of *Leg Show* and Taschen’s “sexy books editor,” with *The Big Book of Breasts*, *The Big Butt Book*, and the new *Big Book of Pussy* among her titles, took a different tack:

What they didn’t realize is that a lot of their readers felt guilty *because they really thought that no one else was masturbating to the pictures*, that they were the only ones, that it was shameful ... One of the first things I did with *Leg Show* was to acknowledge that it was for the purposes of masturbation, and that we were happy with that. It was a big part of the attitude. We said that what really turns us on is, *Look at us and masturbate*.

For both Hanson and Edison, “Look at us and masturbate” is the *sine qua non* of the adult-mag biz, which Hefner singlehandedly turned into an over-the-counter business rather than an under-the-counter one by denying, with a wink, that it was what his magazine was for. To Edison, a former *Screw* editor and *Hustler* writer, Hefner’s basic

denial of this fact — his insistence that *Playboy* was, is, or might be something other or, God forbid, *better than* good old wank fodder — is tantamount to betrayal, as it was to Edison's old bosses, *Screw* publisher Al Goldstein and *Hustler* magnate Larry Flynt.

The key to Hefner's longevity, as Edison grudgingly admits, is that he's never gone hardcore (though in the mid-seventies *Playboy*, like so much else at the time, flirted with it). His magazine has succeeded as a global icon in large part because Hefner's sexual tastes — sunny blondes with big boobs, in the main — became an American archetype. Twelve years before Brian Wilson wrote "California Girls" for the Beach Boys, Hugh Hefner had cast the video for it running through a lot of listeners' heads. Apart from blowing the door open on sexual mores in America, *Playboy's* lasting contribution may be its codification of a certain wholesome glamour — the Petty and Vargas girls crossbred with the Barbie doll — as the archetypally American sex symbol.

Edison, who has covered the downscale spectrum nicely by writing not only for porno but also for pro wrestling, refers to Hefner's robe-wearing, pipe-smoking, urbane He-Man act as a "kayfabe," a wrestling term for method acting so thoroughly that you never leave the role. That lavish lifestyle was part of the magazine's branding — maybe the most effective part, since having the publisher live the lifestyle the magazine espouses presents itself as a kind of proof that its formulas *actually work*, making Hefner spiritual godfather to both Steve Forbes and Sy "I'm also a client" Sperling of the Hair Club for Men. (In fact, some of *Playboy's* most serious latter-day competition comes not from fellow porn mags, but from the just-naked-enough likes of *Maxim* and *Stuff*, without a wrinkled old mascot to get in the way.)

Dirty! Dirty! Dirty! focuses on Hefner, Goldstein, Flynt, and the story's crucial bridging figure, Bob Guccione. A Londoner who founded the shameless *Playboy* rip-off *Penthouse* in the mid-sixties and moved it to New York in 1969, Guccione presented Hefner with his first taste (as it were) of real competition. *Penthouse* depicted pubic hair, which *Playboy* at the time didn't; from there, it was a short distance to *Deep Throat* and porno chic, and to the kind of money that laughs in the face of stagflation. *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were powerhouses, Hefner and Guccione magnates, with Flynt not far behind.

Al Goldstein, whose newspaper *Screw* was mainly distributed in New York, lived more modestly, though he wound up broke thanks to profligate spending: "[N]othing was too silly, too useless, or too expensive for a Goldstein retail binge. This was a three-hundred-pound man with bad knees who inexplicably owned a hang glider." Goldstein prided himself on utter crudeness. "Why did you have to be rich to get pussy?" he asked. "I wanted to democratize sex and make it cheap." Sometimes he got laughs, as when he reviewed *Deep Throat* ("I was never so moved by any theatrical performance since stuttering through my own bar mitzvah") or interviewed porn stars on his infamous New York late-night cable-access show, *Midnight Blue*.

But *Screw's* site-specificity hurt it in the internet age, as sex ads moved online and even into the Yellow Pages, which added escort-services to its listings: "It was one thing to be put out of business by competing pornographers and sex peddlers who had the smarts to jump on the new medium, but the fucking phone book?" Edison said. "That hurt." So did Goldstein's irascibility. "Goldstein started as an outsider, and he didn't give a shit if his behavior was unacceptable," writes Edison. "He reveled in it, which is the ultimate freedom." Well, not really: Goldstein's temper, and its consequences, grew worse with age, as he conducted public feuds with his son Jordan and wove through mental hospitals and homeless shelters. "I'm miserable," he tells Edison. "I would use a staple gun to do myself in."

Fittingly, Guccione burned through his acres of money in far more upscale fashion, sinking millions into the 1980 movie disaster *Caligula*, an incoherent orgy of sexual and violent excess that Gore Vidal took his name off of. ("Typical problem on the *Caligula* set: How could a woman insert a live eel into her vagina without having to worry about it biting her?" Solution: "tailfirst.") Later, Guccione sank a fortune into R&D for "a plan to build portable, cold-fusion nuclear reactors, which would have pushed him out of the gutter and into the stratosphere, from pornographer to energy magnate." By the end of the nineties, *Penthouse* was indulging in "Guccione's final undoing" as a publisher, "an unapologetic fetish for pissing, celebrated in the same glowing terms usually reserved for that breed of Olympic champion who has overcome a great disability to win the gold." Thirty-year *Penthouse* veteran Peter Bloch recalled:

Bob used to tell me, “Peter, when someone says I’m wrong about something, I know I’m right.” Because he remembered people who told him he was wrong about *Penthouse*. And he proceeded to forget all the times people told him he was *wrong* when he was *wrong*.

Guccione, complained Flynt, “had a God complex. That’s a bad sign. He put on his leather and his chains, and he thought he was above everyone else — me, Al Goldstein, Hefner. He should be driving trucks.” Nevertheless, *Penthouse* earned everyone’s respect in 1989 when it published a pictorial with Debra Murphree, the \$30-a-blowjob Memphis streetwalker caught with anti-porn TV preacher Jimmy Swaggart. It was, Edison says, “a masterpiece of sleaze and investigative journalism” — albeit investigative journalism illustrated with grainy, unforgiving shots of gaping labia — that had the *Screw* office, he reports, “in awe.”

The secret of Flynt’s own success is his unrepentant rep as a sleazeball: He famously had sex with a chicken as a kid, and *Hustler*’s June 1978 cover, depicting a woman’s legs sticking out of a meat grinder, remains the most infamous image in all of porn. Despite his heavy early reliance on Goldstein’s template (“If you wanted to know what was going to be in next month’s *Hustler*, all you had to do was look at last week’s *Screw*,” Edison writes, noting the two men’s friendship), Flynt wound up going the opposite direction, business-wise. Personally, he was even coarser than Goldstein, infamously censured by the Supreme Court after calling them “eight assholes and a token cunt,” characterized by Edison as “a wonderful new low.” For himself, Flynt reserved the title of Asshole of the Century, after having converted, briefly, to evangelical Christianity following his conversion by Ruth Carter Stapleton, the president’s sister (the seventies were fucking *weird*).

Flynt ended up sitting prettier than the other faces on Mount Rushporn, getting an early jump on both home video and the Web. (Edison includes what amounts to a plug for the *Hustler* website’s paywall-protected content, avowing that you can’t get porn that good online for free. Uh-huh. Yep.) He also respected the silent code of honor among his fellow pornographers:

Flynt was once given some pictures of Hugh Hefner having sex with a very attractive young woman wearing white go-go boots (the girl, that is, not Hef), and considered publishing them ... Instead, Al Goldstein brokered a sit-down between Hefner and Flynt, and Flynt handed Hef the pictures, promising not to run them. “What really impressed me,” Goldstein later remarked, “was how big Hefner’s cock was.”

The code doesn’t save Hefner from the lion’s share of Edison’s abuse, fulminating that wears quickly. Edison gives props to Hefner’s spotless record on civil rights and free speech issues — from public statements to a considerable amount of donation money — with a “Hey, I’m giving Hef his *props*, all *right*?” his anger shading too easily into townies-vs.-students for its own good. This gives the distinct feeling that Edison is, to a degree, carrying on his old paymasters’ grudges, quoting gleefully from *Hustler*’s 1976 takedown piece, “Going Down in Bunnyland”: “He was an uptight, starstruck guy ... he, not his wife, had been virginal when they married, and that rankled.”

Flynt and Goldstein, on the other hand, are valorized — not simply because they once employed Edison (of course not), but because they epitomize everything honest about cheap smut and stand against pretensions to, wait for it, *nouvelle cuisine*:

Flynt’s inspiration [to start *Hustler*] ... came from the low-down strip clubs that he ran in Ohio, the playground of blue-collar, titty-ogling lugs who could spell neither *crêpes* nor *canapés*, let alone give a flying fuck re: the subtleties and supposedly seductive qualities of the soufflé.

Ten pages later:

Flynt had always thought that the ol’ honey pot was as interesting as a woman’s face, and he knew that *real* American men felt the same way. They didn’t live in *fear* of the vagina; they lived *for* it. They also didn’t give a rat’s ass about French cooking, and especially not when they were obviously buying a magazine to jerk off to — or, if you prefer, to which to jerk off.

Edison ridicules Hefner's tastes in big-band jazz and board games and his latter-day sexual habits: gobbling Viagra, holding court over a bunch of paid "bunnies" who take turns servicing the old man on Wednesday and Friday nights as he watches gay porn. It's not the only time he hints that Hefner's not the "man's man" he makes himself out to be, and like so many things Edison takes issue with, it means bubkes outside the author's world.

If Edison had any subtlety at all, he could simply lay the evidence out and we could all watch Hefner's façade deflate together. But he's so busy pointing fingers that he misses obvious links. When Hef hires art director Art Paul and editorial director A.C. Spector in the mid-fifties, Edison gives everyone but Hefner credit for the magazine: "Eventually Spec was handling the real day-to-day editorial chores as Hef got lost in increasingly ambitious big-picture stuff and the beginning of a nasty amphetamine addiction that would keep him wide awake for years." Expanding a magazine into an empire is hardly what you'd call "getting lost," and Edison never tells us what became of that addiction — only that there were "Dexedrine days" in the sixties, and then there weren't any.

The author also seems annoyed that a milquetoast like Hefner had more cash than more honest pornographers, such as Flynt, Goldstein, or Edison's old colleague Chip Maloney, whom he interviews at the office while "a couple of guys in grey coveralls arrive to start repossessing the copy machines." (Later, they "come back for Chip's computer, but he protests, 'Hey, man, I gotta get this incest magazine out,'" and gives them some freebies.) He tries to make Hefner out to be more of a virulent woman-hater than the others, though if you're going to make a case, maybe recounting a 1959 episode of the Hefner-hosted *Playboy's Penthouse* that you watched while stoned might not be your best first course of action.

That's hardly the only lamentable piece of writing here. Edison refers to a human being as a "hemorrhoid" on page two, asks dumb rhetorical questions ("How come no one ever name-checks de Kooning while they're braying about Elvis?"), and gratuitously misreads others' quotes. "John Lennon smirked and compared [the Beatles'] first tours of the States to *Satyricon*," Edison writes. Well, no: In that 1971 *Rolling Stone* interview, Lennon added, "I don't really want to talk about it, because it will hurt Yoko. And it's not fair." Similarly, Jimmy Carter's infamous *Playboy* interview quote — "I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times" — is summed up, inaptly, as the president having "copped to being a man's man."

Those lapses are frustrating, because it's not like there's any shortage of material here. It's not coincidental or surprising that *Dirty! Dirty! Dirty!* picks up the most traction when Edison largely absents himself from the narrative. Imagine a book about Hefner, Guccione, Goldstein, and Flynt — that unofficial, pervert law association — tackled with the scope and range and pith of Dan Charnas's epic hip-hop chronicle, *The Big Payback*. The obvious referent, of course, is with Legs McNeil, Jennifer Osborne and Peter Pavia's oral history of the porn movie biz, *The Other Hollywood*, but Charnas provides a more apt model here: His book is scrupulously third-person, even when it comes to scenes he was part of, as a hip-hop A&R man for Rick Rubin's American Recordings in the mid-nineties.

Which probably means that the person best suited to writing such a book about the world of porn is Dian Hanson; except, of course, you might want to relax the no-first-person rule. A big book like that one, full of asides like the one in Hanson's intro to *The Big Book of Pussy* — about an early job with a publishing house that employed two young women who worked at "painting canned mackerel juice on panty crotches three days a week ... Inevitably it became a competition, which erupted when one disparaged the other's technique, a can opener was thrown, and a full-on hair-pulling catfight ensued" — sounds like a no-brainer to me.

It isn't simply Hanson's sense of humor that makes her a pleasure to read, though that's a big part of it. (Discussing Beverly Hills gynecologist Dr. David Matlock's "G-Shot," in which collagen is injected into the area surrounding a woman's G-spot, for \$1,200 a shot four times yearly, Hanson notes, "A costly habit, but who can put a price on vaginal orgasm? Oh, right: Dr. Matlock.") Her deep involvement in the business — in addition to *Leg Show*, Hanson helped run *Puritan*, which Edison refers to as "like a

Rolls-Royce in a demolition derby” — and keen insight are everywhere she writes, as when she deconstructs the last couple decades’ race toward shaved and waxed pubic hair on women:

Porn is the motivator, since there is no other handy atlas of pubic hairstyles, and with porn pussy growing steadily balder for the last 25 years, we now have an entire generation of ordinary young Americans who consider pubic hair dirty, offensive, aberrant, and even frightening. Would-be cunnilinguists project a horror of swallowed hairs equaled only by the idiot I dated briefly at 17 who told me he’d never eat pussy because a pubic hair could go down his throat, enter his heart, and kill him. If this were possible, cunnilingus would’ve been the leading cause of death in the ’70s ... I reject the claim that a male preference for bare pussy represents pedophilia. During my long career I’ve seen enough shaved pussy up close to state that nothing clarifies adult development of the vulva like stripping off the hair.

It’s the “would’ve” that makes it. Not “would have,” “would’ve”: so informal, and so utterly porno. (That’s “porno,” not “porn,” two words that embody different eras — the more innocent seventies gets the extra “o,” like a handlebar mustache, while the gym-hitting, harder-bodied, home-marketed eighties-and-beyond trims it off, so to speak.)

Like any good pornographer, Hanson makes no secret of her preferences. “Most of the photos in this book were taken between 1967 and 1979, and you can see the mood of the day reflected in the models’ faces,” she writes. “The women look almost giddy flashing their newly legal parts.” They do, as on page 206, where a slim, hippy brunette who is wearing what appears to be a merkin over an already full bush. She isn’t smiling, but extra curls are just adorable.

The progression of the book’s photos from the seventies to the eighties is something like moving from the Wild West (all that sagebrush) to the Disneyland version of it. Just as the heavily Jewish New Hollywood of the seventies gave way to high concept sleekness in the next decade, Me Decade porn was hairy and ethnic, while the video age’s was blonde and buxom. The paradigm shifted from Guccione’s Vaseline-smearing sensuality and eye for rich darkness back to Hef’s All-Americanness. Hospital sets began to feature shiny tile instead of nylon curtains. It was as close to “safe sex” as XXX would get in the AIDS era, since no one wanted to watch porn stars fuck protected.

Similarly, what stands out from *The Big Book of Pussy’s* “1980-1989” section is how utterly hygienic everything looks. That’s not a complaint: What good is the sexual imagination without variety? But it’s also paradoxical, because these pussies — a good many of them bare — are *groomed*, immaculately, and in a few cases specially lit, in a way the overhead sunlight in many of the book’s earlier images, in which some of the V-bends and the like are exuberant, yes, but awkward too.

When it isn’t, though, wow. One Amazon customer complained that *The Big Book of Pussy* contains too many repetitions from previous Taschen titles, and if you’re a collector that might be a point worth caring about. But really, how are you going to do this book without the Nuyorican porn legend Vanessa Del Rio, whose own Taschen book (also edited by Hanson) came out a couple years back and who possessed America’s most infamous clitoris (as famed among aficionados as Linda Lovelace’s tonsils) even before she began bodybuilding. Steroids masculinized her features: the bridge of her nose thickened, and so did her clit, big time: it’s the centerpiece of what is probably the most legendary porn scene ever filmed, Del Rio’s gang bang in the Dark Brothers’ 1986 *The Devil in Miss Jones 3: A New Beginning*, the actress’s final filmed performance. A number of stills reprinted here show the transformation. But the classic, on page 69 (yes, yes), is a lot softer and just as powerful. It’s from 1973, before Del Rio got into film, and it’s a simple, tightly framed black-and-white of her lounging naked, wrapped in a long white fur. There’s no mistaking the picture’s focus: her legs open at the bottom third of the page’s center, but even though there’s a lot to look at, the eye goes straight to it. It’s not posed like a dare or an invitation. She’s just luxuriating in what she has. If only we could all.

In addition to Del Rio, Hanson also talks to Buck Angel, “The Man with a Pussy,” and a “vaginal performance artist” from England named Mouse, among others. She gets serious props for quoting the lyrics of “I Eat the Pussy” by New Boyz, one of the biggest

groups in the “jerkin’ rap” category, at the top of the “2000-2011” section. Jerkin’, by the way, is named for a dance style, not masturbation, though it might be, considering that it’s the most cunnilingually-minded music of the last few years. Too bad she didn’t go for Clothes Off Movement’s “Better Than You,” which basically sums up the whole book: “Hey, daddy, the pussy’s magic / Got you tongue-tied like Roger Rabbit.”

✕

Michaelangelo Matos is the author of *Sign ‘O’ the Times* (Continuum, 2004) and is working on a history of American rave in the ’90s. He lives in Brooklyn.

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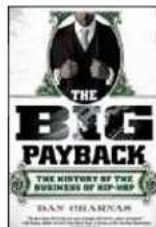
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