

Femicide

The Politics of Woman Killing

edited by
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THE RAMPAGE AGAINST *PENTHOUSE*

Melissa Farley

The December 1984 issue of *Penthouse*, continuing a history of publishing images that teach men to eroticize dead and battered women, did one other thing: it sparked my collaboration with Nikki Craft on what evolved into a two-year series of political and economic actions against pornography, femicide, and *Penthouse* in particular.

Nikki Craft, a radical feminist activist for ten years when I met her, had recently presented her antipornography slide show in several areas of the Midwest. Her slides were a combination of pornography and her own powerfully creative responses to violence against women.

In 1984 I worked at a feminist psychotherapy collective, Hera, in Iowa City. At that time I'd worked for a number of years with survivors of incest and sexual assault. I regularly heard women's accounts of the role pornography played in their sexual assaults. Psychotherapy addresses solutions on an individual level—I found that women really can and do heal from these experiences, especially when they participate in groups with other survivors. As a therapist, however, I had reached a point where I needed to take some action, outside of my office, that would strike at some of the root causes of these violent acts against women. Nikki Craft's carefully articulated feminist activism appealed to me.

The December 1984 *Penthouse* contained nine images of Asian women tied up with heavy rope, bound tightly with ropes cutting into their ankles, wrists, labias, and buttocks. Two of the images show women bound and hanging from trees, heads lolling forward, apparently dead. Another woman is masked, trussed up, and lying on a floor, appearing dead. In another image from this issue, an adolescent girl is proffered by an older female to the camera/pornographer/consumer/misogynist. The younger girl is bound harshly with heavy ropes around her neck, around her torso, which cut painfully into her labia. She has no pubic hair, so she looks quite young. The lack of pubic hair also permits the viewer to see precisely how the rope cuts tightly into her genitals. Her hands appear to be tied behind her back. The older woman, collaborator with the camera, herself has only a sheet draped around her, but with her hands on the young woman's shoulders, she seems to be pushing the resisting younger woman toward the viewer. Both women have their eyes closed, with their heads bowed slightly, in deference/sacrifice. Two of the images are of women who have been tied up and dumped onto rocky cliffs, looking limp and dead. The pornographer shoots these dead women lying on their stomachs, with their genitals viewed by the camera in a position a rapist might tie an unconscious or resisting woman in order to rape her. In only one picture do we see a woman looking into the camera, looking at her own death, standing on a cliff with her face painted white, a rope around her neck and chest. Throughout these murderous images are sprinkled "artsy" haiku quotes that exude dominance and subordination.

Our response to this issue of *Penthouse* marked the beginning of what we came to call the National Rampage against *Penthouse*. We used civil disobedience as our primary strategy, then later expanded the Rampage to include guerilla theater, consumer boycotts, and corporate confrontation. Our goal throughout all these actions was to educate the public about the pervasiveness of pornography, the way in which pornography promotes the epidemic of violence against women and children, and the urgent need for individual and collective responses to these issues.

In two years, Nikki was arrested 17 times and I was arrested 13 times in 9 different states. We traveled to many communities, and in each we invited feminists to join us in civil disobedience. When we counted all the others who were arrested with us on these different occasions, there were more than 100 individual arrests during the years of the Rampage against *Penthouse*.

I want to tell you some of the details of our modus operandi. For two years, this was essentially a two-woman organization, although we could not have carried out the Rampage without the intense commitment of feminist activists from communities throughout the United States. They helped organize the actions and helped us with media contacts and sign painting, and they were arrested and went to jail with us. We had support and creative ideas from close friends, but we worked with only a shoestring budget. My income dropped by a third for the two years because I was spending so much time on the Rampage, and I spent my own money on transportation, photocopying, and mailing costs. Nikki spent even more, often going into debt as a result of Rampage expenses. We received a few financial contributions, but basically the two years of activism were fueled only by our fury at violence against women.

After contacting local feminist groups about participating in our action, Nikki's antipornography slide show was the organizing vehicle that inspired women and men to join us the next day. For example, in December 1984 five of us burned an effigy of Bob Guccione (owner and editor of *Penthouse*) in front of a bookstore in Madison, Wisconsin, that sold the magazine. We did a brief press interview, then entered the store; each of us picked up a copy of *Penthouse* (without paying for it, of course!) and ripped it into shreds in symbolic retaliation for the distribution of images that eroticize the murders of women. We always notified the police and the press in advance, and on this occasion we were arrested twice in one day for these acts. In most other locations we were detained in jail before being released on our own recognizance, so we couldn't get to our next action until the next day. We posted bail to get out only once in two years.

We performed our acts of civil disobedience almost ceremonially. Often, those of us who are rape and incest survivors spoke publicly of our experiences as we ripped up pornography. Soon after we began the Rampage, a North Carolina man was charged with the kidnap, rape, and murder of an eight-year-old girl, Jean Kar-Har Fewel. In February 1985, two months after the December 1984 *Penthouse* images of hanged Asian women were published in *Penthouse*,

this orphaned Chinese child, in the process of being adopted, was found raped and killed, with ropes around her neck, attached to a tree. We mourned her tragic death and dedicated several of our actions to her memory.

Usually, each woman destroyed only one copy of *Penthouse* per demonstration, in keeping with our philosophy that the goal of these actions was not censorship but education. Following each action, there would be a flurry of news coverage during which reporters grappled with the issues we held up for public debate (with widely varying success). We handed out a flier that outlined our views on sexuality and censorship as well as pornography.

Our goal was first to promote public thinking about the harm done to women by pornography. Our second aim was to confront the pornography industry, which netted about \$8 billion annually by 1985, and to pressure it to take some responsibility for the harm it was doing to women. We described our approach as educative, extralegal, and civilly disobedient. Although civil disobedience has been widely used in the black civil rights movement and in the antiwar movement, amazingly enough feminist civil disobedience had not been used much in the United States since women gained voting rights. (One of the suffragists' major strategies was to illegally enter voting booths.)

Some argued against our "destruction of property" (that is, the single copy of *Penthouse* each of us ripped up in each one of our actions). We responded that since we viewed pornography as a "clear and present danger" to women's lives, we felt justified in taking some extreme actions to publicize that danger. We further noted that pornography itself has more legal protection as "speech" than do the *real women* who appear in pornography and whose injuries are trivialized. We wanted people to see how pornography threatened women's very survival.

There was one exception to our practice of destroying only a single copy of *Penthouse* in our actions. At one bookstore in Waterloo, Iowa, an employee called the owner and informed him of our destruction of a single copy of *Penthouse*. He told the employee to let us do whatever we wanted to because we were "nice girls who meant well." On that occasion, we proceeded, with the owner's blessing, to rip up copies of *Penthouse* and *Hustler* until we were literally knee-deep in pornography.

We also emphasized that we were pro-sex, pro-nudity, and pro-sensuality. At the height of the Rampage against *Penthouse*, Citizens for Decency through Law, a right-wing Christian based group, began a series of its own actions against pornography, objecting to "explicit sexual material," extramarital sex, homosexuality, sex education, and abortion. Nikki named our new organization Citizens for Media Responsibility without Law, a takeoff on the right-wing Citizens for Decency through Law. Both groups, on one bitterly subzero day in January 1985, picketed 7-11 stores in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. We carried signs expressing our opposition to *both* sexual repression in peoples' lives *and* violent pornography. We handed out a list of all the sexual acts we could think of—and said we approved of them.

Years later, liberal pro-pornography organizations and much of the media still simplistically assign us to the same camp as the right-wing antipornography fundamentalists. Women have told me that they fear ostracism from liberal feminists as prudish and "antisex" if they oppose pornography. The antipornography movement among feminists encompasses a variety of points of view, including legal approaches such as the legislation proposed by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, as well as civil disobedience and economic sanctions. Feminists who are incest survivors have begun to look at how their abuse is repeated in sadomasochistic sex. These women are not "antisex." They are "anti" abusive, injurious sex. I was thrilled to hear one woman describe herself recently as "in recovery from sadomasochism."

We found that in many communities—Lincoln, Nebraska; Iowa City, Iowa; Santa Cruz, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Madison, Wisconsin—women and men were ready to participate in civil disobedience against femicide. We wanted to include many more people in the actions against *Penthouse's* femicide-promoting images and to demand corporate responsibility from Guccione's *Penthouse* empire. The Rampage expanded to include economic boycott as well as civil disobedience. We reviewed back issues of *Penthouse* to ascertain who advertised in it—that is, which corporations provided the financial backing for dissemination of femicidal images. We could have selected many, but we chose



Feminist protesters tear up pornography, emphasizing that they are not opposed to nudity and sexuality. Photograph by Jeff Myers published in *Press Citizen*, Iowa City, Indiana, 21 December 1984.

to target for boycott five corporations that had a relatively benign public image and that we thought would not appreciate our public joining of their names with the *Penthouse* images: Panasonic, Canon, Casio, Sanyo, and Magnavox. We also appealed to several of these corporations on the grounds that they were Asian corporations sponsoring images promoting the bondage and enslavement of Asian women. We had previously targeted local distributors of pornography, but now we also focused on a bookstore chain, B. Dalton's, which sold *Penthouse*, as well as Meredith Corporation, the printer of *Penthouse*, located in Des Moines, Iowa. Soon, National Organization of Women state chapters in Wisconsin, Texas, and North Carolina endorsed our boycott. In August 1985 we received word that Magnavox had decided to stop advertising in *Penthouse*. We considered that a major victory for the Rampage. In late 1985 *Advertising Age* noted a 25 percent decrease from the previous year's level in corporate advertisers in *Penthouse*—as compared with ad pages in 1984. We were exultant about this loss of advertising income to *Penthouse*, although aware that some of the decrease may also have been due to pressure from right-wing groups.

Throughout the time of our Rampage, women came forward with their personal accounts of the killings of women for men's sexual entertainment. On International Women's Day, March 1985, Margaret Zack of Santa Cruz, California, participated in the Rampage by destroying a copy of *Penthouse*. Before her arrest she spoke to feminists and reporters about her decision to devote her life to ending violence against women. Margaret Zack's 18-year-old daughter Tania had been found raped and bludgeoned to death after having been abducted from her car.

Another phase of the Rampage was the formation of Minors against Violent Pornography. This group of six 10- to 13-year olds from Iowa City, Iowa organized its own boycott of local stores that sold *Penthouse*. They also engaged in at least one civil disobedience action with no adults present. The children made a number of public statements about sex education and discussed their own reactions of fear and disgust about violent pornography. One child spoke of her fear when she saw a friend's father reading pornography. Another spoke with concern regarding a sexually abused friend of his. A 13-year-old boy said: "We think *Penthouse* is the wrong textbook to teach anybody about sex."

Guccione continued, in 1985, to pump out images promoting the murder of women, images linking men's sexuality with violent assault on women. One piece of fiction in a January 1985 *Penthouse* included the following passage: "Hold a woman at the end of a gun and you can't tell how she'll react. Sometimes they cry. Sometimes it's quite the opposite. They want to make love to you." In May 1985 *Penthouse* printed a centerfold of a woman on her knees looking invitingly at the camera/consumer/murderer while she reads a newspaper with the headline: "Woman Found Strangled." We know that as men masturbate to these images, their sexuality is trained to violence, even to murder, of women. In March 1985 *Penthouse* published an article about the torture of

Latin-American women. While smugly spouting liberal anti-contra rhetoric, the article in fact was a home torturer's how-to manual.

At about this time we came up with a sticker that we started selling to feminist organizations. It read "Rape Manual." Once the backing was peeled off, it bonded firmly with paper. We were pleased to learn that these stickers had been used to glue shut *Penthouses*, and the covers had to then be ripped in order to see what was inside.

In late fall 1985 we decided to focus our efforts on the printer of *Penthouse*, Meredith Corporation, which proudly listed in its annual report all the publications it printed *except Penthouse*—for example, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Metropolitan Home*, *Sail*, *Seventeen*, and *Successful Farming*. In response to our demand that Meredith stop printing *Penthouse*, thereby demonstrating a degree of corporate social responsibility and accountability, one of its public relations men wrote: "No corporation should appoint itself as a conscience for society." He then proceeded to sanctimoniously defend the First Amendment. Nikki designed a glossy brochure about the Meredith/*Penthouse* connection, with captions under the *Penthouse* images such as "People might think the printers of *Penthouse* would be outcasts . . . but we're successful white businessmen, and people, too." We handed out thousands of these brochures to the people of Des Moines, Iowa. Several women purchased one share of stock each to ensure that we'd be able to enter Meredith's annual stockholders' meeting, where we planned to confront stockholders about the sources of their profits.

We formed an organization called Meredith Stockholders against *Penthouse*, which urged Meredith to divest itself of the *Penthouse* printing contract. Meredith did not permit us to hand out literature or speak, but at their annual meeting we removed our coats, revealing the *Penthouse* images of bound and dead Asian women that we had ironed onto our shirts.

Throughout the Rampage, Nikki and I wrote articles, spoke with the press, raised money, lectured, and gave legal testimony on the violent effects of pornography on men's attitudes and behavior, and consequently, the danger to women and children. The time I spent in jail and in dealing with the court system was not particularly pleasant—at one point I developed an anxiety response whenever a police car came near. By far the most stressful aspect of the Rampage, however, was the constant reading and viewing of pornography. I began to wonder what the women in the pictures had felt and what had happened to them. The pornography had a depressing, demoralizing, sexually stifling effect on me at times. I felt caged in by it. On the other hand, looking at pornography just prior to an act of civil disobedience was a spur to our rage, to action. It became—and still is—impossible for me to not see, even for a moment, the constant threat of violence that pornography poses to women in this culture.

The conviction in January 1990 of Dwaine Tinsley, creator of "Chester the Molester" cartoons, on five counts of child molestation, validated the relationship we saw between pornography and sexual assault. As Tinsley told his coworkers, "You can't write this stuff all the time if you don't experience it."

Penthouse has expanded its misogynist repertoire to articles that deal with incest (December 1989). Under the guise of concern about "shattered innocents," the *Penthouse* article graphically describes sexual assaults on children in a manner that no doubt appeals to pedophiles. The article eroticizes sexual violence against children and reads like the pornography it is: "What terror Adam must have felt . . . mixed as he grew older with the excitement of sexual arousal—long before nature intended it—an excitement that must have added to his guilt from knowing that what his grandfather was doing had been forbidden since time immemorial." I see the *Penthouse* incest article as a carefully planned propaganda piece aimed at mystifying the real causes of sexual assaults on women and children. The incest is considered by *Penthouse* to be the result of *individuals* who are "selfish, warped, emotionally disturbed, or lecherous." Socially sanctioned violence, objectification, sexism, and misogyny are, of course, not mentioned as causal factors. *Penthouse* carefully suggests to the reader that it is far more important to address *child* sexual assault than the assault, exploitation, or murder of "grown women." This is, again, cleverly divisive propaganda.

There is a lot of work left to do. I've rested now for a few years since the Rampage. Is anyone out there ready for some action?