

“Diets Suck!” and Other Tales of Women’s Bodies on the Web

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The World Wide Web’s graphical display, which allows Web site owners to represent visual images of themselves online, has special resonance for female websters. Like all women raised in cultures that objectify the female body, they understand that a female image on their site will be seen in terms of its sexual appeal. Webwomen who reject oppressive images of women—especially those who identify themselves as feminist—recognize that in life and virtually, a woman’s value is identified with her body, and thus they are especially sensitive to graphical representations of women. In this paper I will consider how these site owners depict women on Web sites they construct for a largely female audience. My conclusions are based on a study of over 250 women’s Web sites designed by and for women; while the majority of these Web sites are owned by women from the U.S., the study included several dozen sites from countries throughout the world.

Woman as Spectacle

Much of the theoretical analysis of the depiction of women’s bodies in Western media tells this story: the viewer is assumed to be a heterosexual male, and the female body is rendered as an object of sexual desire which the viewer ogles. According to art historian Carol M. Armstrong, the traditional function of the female nude in Western art is “to be present to the gaze of others” (234), while Mary Garrard describes the genre of female nudes as “legitimized voyeurism” (149). In a study of paintings depicting the Old Testament story of Susanna and the Elders—in which a chaste wife is raped by two influential men of her community—Garrard shows how artists have exploited this subject as an opportunity for

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voyeurism. Most paintings of Susanna and the Elders highlight neither the evil of the two Elders nor the distress of the rape victim, but Susanna's sensual body:

The subject was taken up with relish by artists from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries as an opportunity to display the female nude . . .with the added advantage that the nude's erotic appeal could be heightened by the presence of two lecherous old men Tintoretto offers a representative depiction of the theme in his emphasis upon Susanna's voluptuous body and upon the Elders' ingenuity in getting a closer look at it [T]he prevailing pictorial treatment of the theme typically included an erotically suggestive garden setting and a partly nude Susanna, whose body is prominent and alluring, and whose expressive range runs from protest of a largely rhetorical nature to the hint of outright acquiescence. (149-150)¹

John Berger discusses how Western artists have objectified women by making them a spectacle: in their art, "women have been seen and judged as sights" (47). Women come to internalize this view of themselves, and when they do so, they also internalize a kind of narrative in which they serve as objects. This narrative is told not just in paintings of nudes or in art generally, but in film, television, and advertising—and through it, women learn to see themselves as objects on display: men watch women, and women "watch themselves being looked at" (47). Two of the paintings Berger uses to illustrate this point, both by Tintoretto, depict the Susanna and the Elders story. In one of these paintings, Susanna watches us looking at her, as if aware of her role as spectacle: "We join the Elders to spy on Susannah taking her bath. She looks back at us looking at her" (50).

One consequence of watching others observe one's body is relentless self-scrutiny. As Foucault has argued, an individual who is subject to the power of another's gaze eventually becomes her own overseer. In fact, women are notoriously critical of their bodies. In a survey on body image run by *Glamour* magazine in 1998, only 48% of the respondents said they were happy with their bodies; more than two thirds considered themselves overweight, and 43% said they spent *more than a third of their time* trying to control their diets (Fraser 281-283).

Being regarded—and regarding oneself—as a sight causes other psychological damage. Simone de Beauvoir believes it infantilizes

women and encourages narcissism: young girls learn to see themselves as doll-like objects to be adorned and looked at—a characteristic they retain in adulthood (261). They also learn passivity, that beautiful women don't have to do anything; they have only to be. Lee Damsky describes how she thought about her beauty as a child:

Nothing seems as important or necessary as being beautiful, and I know that once I'm beautiful, I won't have to do anything else The question of who I will be when I grow up feels meaningless and irrelevant. If I'm beautiful, I won't have to be anyone. (134-135)

Susan Sontag criticizes the double bind that follows this emphasis on beauty: as objects of others' gaze, women are taught that appearance is their most important characteristic, but when they worry about their looks are ridiculed as self-absorbed and shallow (119). And Naomi Wolf argues that when a woman's identity is premised on her beauty she becomes vulnerable to outside approval, leaving "the vital sensitive organ of self-esteem exposed to the air" (14).

For it is not enough for a woman to be beautiful in her own eyes. Part of being a spectacle is that woman's beauty is determined by others, by the viewer, thus making her powerless to define her own value. Berger notes, in his analysis of paintings with 'The Judgment of Paris' theme, that women who are not *judged* beautiful are *not* beautiful (52). The Judgment of Paris story, for centuries retold in painting and poetry, serves as an archetypal narrative of how woman's beauty depends on the assessment of others. According to the story, Eris, the Greek goddess of discord, tosses an apple inscribed with the words "for the fairest" into a wedding party at which Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena are guests. Each goddess, sure of her own beauty, claims the apple as hers—but it takes an outside opinion to establish which goddess is most beautiful. Zeus appoints the mortal Paris to render this opinion.

Paris chooses Aphrodite, and in depicting the precise moment of his choice, the paintings illustrate another consequence of placing so much importance on female beauty: it pits women against one another. The scene of Paris awarding the golden apple to Aphrodite, the goddess he has deemed most beautiful—while the losers, Hera and Athena, look on—illustrates a reality for women: like it or not, they compete against one another in a giant beauty

contest. Thus, the continual judgments that women make of their beauty and the judgments others make of them not only disempower them individually, but also strain their relationships with other women.

Women on Web Sites

The focus on beauty and the objectification of the female image occur in all visual media—including web sites. The Web, dominated by male users² and male site creators, is saturated with images of young women who are held up to our gaze as beautiful objects. These images are not reserved for the openly pornographic sites; they appear throughout the Web. *Raze Innovations*, for example, a site for graphic designers, devotes a page to its “Beautiful Woman of the Week.” Below the photograph of the chosen woman is a ten-point scale for “Visitor Feedback.” “How do you rate this lady?” the page asks us, and with the “Submit Rating” button, we can rank her beauty between “worst” (1 point) and “best” (a ten). As Laura L. Sullivan points out, the Web, because it reaches such a wide audience, makes the female body increasingly a subject of voyeurism. Unlike pornographic magazines, Sullivan argues, which are viewed in private, the web showcases women’s bodies publicly and thus amplifies opportunities for women’s objectification (193).

Feminist Web designers are well aware that this is the context in which their sites will be read. They acknowledge that the Web is a male-dominated arena, where they are carving out a space for themselves and other women (Camp 114-125, Gilbert and Kile 4-5, Sherman 193-199). And they regularly publicize their anger at the spectatorial value system: their sites rant against the beauty imperative and the culture supporting it. Their articles promote love of one’s own body and criticize the diet and fashion industry: “Diets Suck!” in *The Nerve!*; “Dressing to Please Men” in *The Woman Rebel* (“Is there a separate store for ‘Women Who Eat’ somewhere that I just haven’t discovered yet?”). *Women’s Connection Online* nominated the Lane Bryant clothing catalogue for the 1996 national Lemon Awards³ for using “minus-size models to sell its plus-size clothes.” The site *About-Face* is dedicated to “combating negative and distorted images of women and promoting alternatives.” Its name is a pun: the site is about women’s faces, and its goal is a cultural about-face, an effort to reverse society’s obsessive control over women’s bodies. Its home page features a photograph of a San Francisco billboard that announces: “Sexism is hell; fashion is fraud.”

Feminist Web sites also report on events that belittle women by reducing them to their bodies. In 1996, the zine *Bitch* (later renamed *Maxi*) ranted against organizers of the Miss Universe pageant for threatening to fire Miss Universe Alicia Machado if she didn't lose 27 pounds in two weeks. *Go, Girl!* reports on its "No Go!" page an arcade game called Feed Big Bertha, a three-dimensional doll with a gaping mouth. Players try to throw a ball into Bertha's mouth, and when they succeed, their points are registered on the screen as a 'weight gain.' When they've accumulated enough points Bertha lifts up her skirt, flashing her stomach and underwear. *Women's Issues* gives a Big Hooters award to Web sites that need to "develop . . . their definition of womanhood beyond the weary 'woman as body' theme." And a reader need only visit *Amazon City's* "Body Peace Bulletin Board" or "Fashion Police" page to see how concerned web women are with women's body image.

Women's sites of all kinds—whether their principal function is sports, web site design, or small business ownership—protest degrading images and narrow beauty standards. So given that they are highly attuned to this problem, how do *they* represent women pictorially?

Symbolic Images

One way to ensure that a female image won't be sexualized is by using a non-representational icon, such as the chromosomal images that announce the site for *Double X Chromosome*, a collective devoted to stopping sexism, hatred against girls in popular culture, and violence and prejudice in general. Other sites make the female symbol their dominant visual image and often tailor it to the topic of the site.⁴ The University of Maryland's Women's Studies site shows three interlocking female symbols, suggesting a community of feminist scholars; in *Feminist Mothers at Home*, a single female symbol encircles a house with a sheltering tree; in *Feminist Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Utopia*, a group of these symbols emerges in electric blue from a star-studded galaxy. Rows of female symbols form a celebratory wallpaper background on the women's rights site *Feminist Majority Foundation*; conjoined pairs of this image suggest intimacy between women in the lesbian sites *Women Loving Women Webring* and *Girlfriends*; a single female icon creates the "o" in the title of *Feminist.com*, printed boldly on the solid trunk of a tree (see fig. 1); and in *Women's Issues*, the symbol changes shape from page to page depending on the subject—



Figure 1

a magnifying glass on the home page; a globe on the Third World countries page. There are dozens of uses of this image, but in each case, it appears prominently, a proud banner announcing that the web site is woman-centered.

Other symbolic representations of women are ironic. They take disparaging images long associated with women and invert their associations.⁵ On *Girls Can Be Anything Except Roosters*, the central female image is a hen, but its symbolism is transformed: rather than the nag who henpecks her beleaguered husband or the silly gossip at a hen party, she's a proud barnyard creature, carefree and strutting. *Women's Wire* symbolically identifies woman with an apple, but not the plump fruit that Western artists have used to signify destructive female beauty. It is neither the apple that Eve offered Adam—that led to their expulsion from the garden of Eden, and, as Milton put it, "brought death into the world and all our woe"—nor the fruit in the Judgment of Paris story that the Greek goddesses competed for and that led to the Trojan War.⁶ This apple has been gnawed almost to the core, offering an asexual and unaesthetic image that undermines the traditional sensuous one. Furthermore, the *Women's Wire* apple is not only aesthetically untempting, but it also becomes a different metaphor and thus tells a new story. Because the gnawed apple functions as a link to a page on women's health, it has life-affirming rather than destructive connotations; it offers a narrative of constructive female self-sufficiency—in which women take charge of their health and their lives—that replaces the myths of catastrophic female beauty told in the Fall and Trojan War narratives.

Cartoon Images

Other sites avoid commodifying women by depicting them in asexual cartoon images. Rather than a voluptuous Jessica Rabbit or coy Betty Boop, feminist sites give us Betty Rubble (*Feminist Mothers at Home*), a goofy Superwoman (*Cybergrrll!*), and quirky individualized characters: square-shouldered, no-nonsense tourists on the women's travel site *Journeywoman* (entirely unlike the bikini clad sunbathers in travel brochures); a gleeful figure bouncing off *Kate's Feminism Page*; four thoughtful faces, each evoking a different South Asian culture on SAWNET (*South Asian Women's Network*) (see fig. 2); another four women, serene and smiling contentedly on *Daughters of Eve*, a site about women of African descent; a grinning sow, pink bow between her ears on the Web

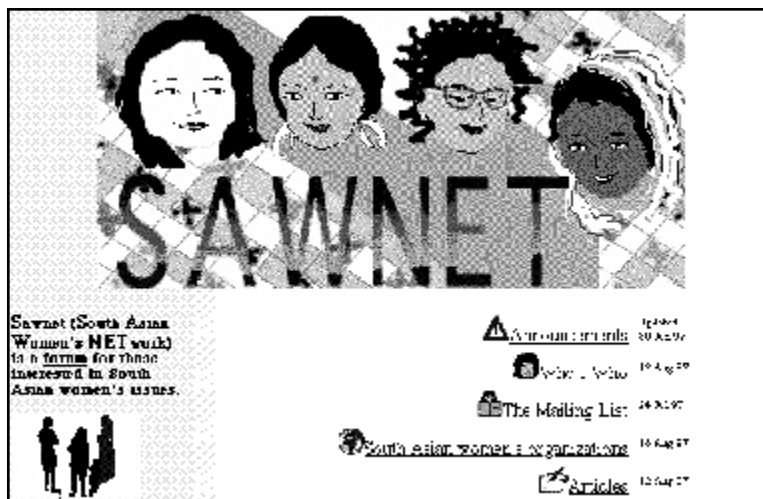


Figure 2

designer site *Spiderwoman on the Web* (SOW); the silhouettes of six activists, standing shoulder to shoulder in solidarity on the *National Council of Negro Women* home page. None of these drawings plays on stereotypes; none offers woman to the viewer as an aesthetic or sexual spectacle; each has a unique personality.

The Body as a Weapon

Newsweek was wrong when it described women's Web sites as "the softer side of cyberspace" (14). Some Web sites undercut traditional views of women by presenting the female body as a

weapon: the metal, cables, and spikes that constitute a female cyborg (*The Nerve!*); snarling (*Chickclick*) faces with scowling mouths (*gURL*) and fangs (*Guerrilla Girl*); spikes (*Riotgrrl*) or snakes (*Women's Issues*) for hair; the clenched fist of a political protester (*Making Face, Making Soul*) (see fig. 3), the fighting arms and legs of a street warrior challenging the viewer to “just try it. go ahead. exoticize my fist” (*Asian American Feminist Resources*). *b.r.i.l.l.o.*

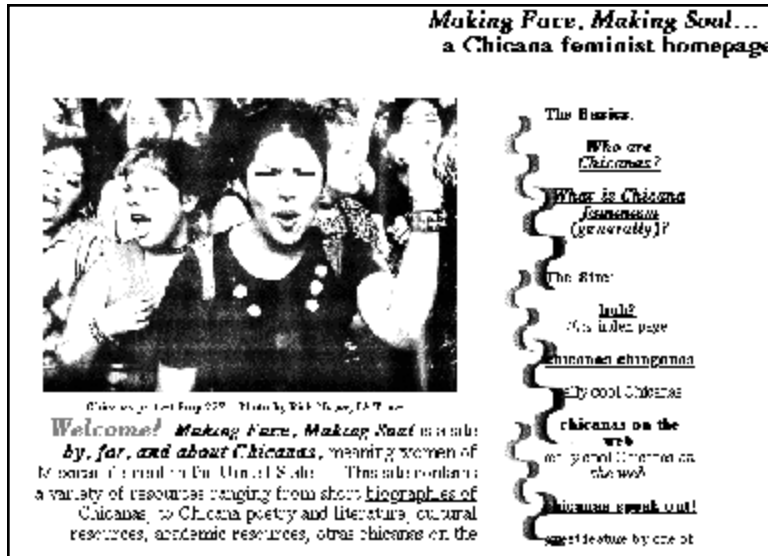


Figure 3

rates hateful Web sites with a scale composed of boxing women, their fists raised for a fight. Four boxing women are awarded to sites such as *White Aryan Resistance* that “will rot in a hell of their own creation,” three to sites such as *Politically Incorrect* for being “patently offensive,” two to sites that “make me go grrr,” and one boxing woman for sites that are merely “annoying.” Even more aggressive is the steely-eyed, gun toting woman the zine *Blue Stocking* features on its page titled “Watch Out Rush!” She’s *Blue Stocking’s* rendering of a “feminazi,” a term Rush Limbaugh coined to define radical feminists, whom he regards as an “elite corps of abortion-on-demand zealots” (209). *Blue Stocking’s* feminazi wears a military uniform; on the armband is the female symbol with a swastika inside its circle. With this photograph, the site asserts feminist power against its opponents. Images like these challenge the ‘smile and look pleasant’ expressions girls are usually trained to assume, the painted faces, artfully arranged hair, gracefully posed, manicured hands, and seductively placed legs

we see everywhere. They defy the site visitor to view woman as an object of lust; they assault rather than seduce us. Rather than seek power indirectly, through the coy manipulation considered acceptable for women, they outwardly demand it, often through hostile images. In doing so, they redefine woman as a powerful being who—rather than tolerate another's gaze—decides her own identity.

Satire

Some Web sites reject traditional views of women by satirizing them. One of the posters painted by the feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls satirizes the nude odalisque Berger saw as a prototypical 'sight' in Western art. The Guerrilla Girls' reclining nude wears their signature gorilla mask and the accompanying text explains why they feel guerrilla action is necessary:

Do women have to be naked to get into the Met[ropolitan] Museum [of Art]? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female (see fig. 4).

The Brazen Hussies on the site of that name mimic the bombshell stereotype—woman as sexual object—by pursing their lips in

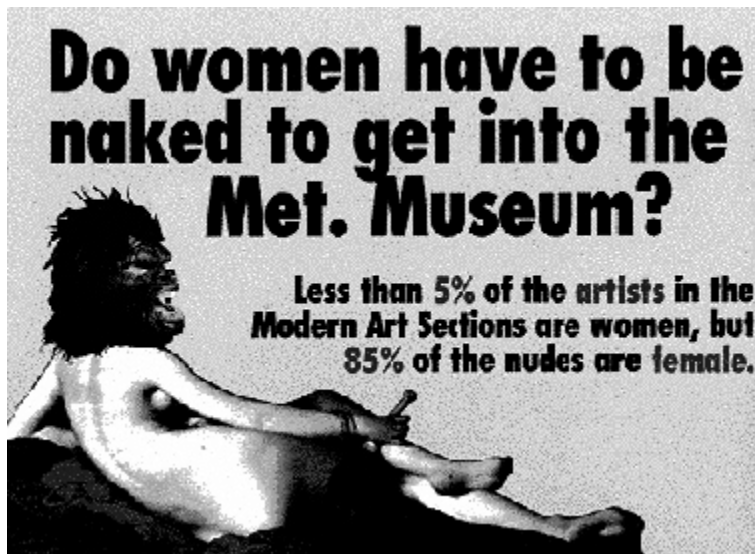


Figure 4

a mock smoochy kiss for the camera, a gesture that complements their motto: "Classy, in a tasteless, classless sort of way." *Dinner Roll Barbie* is one of many Web sites that make fun of thinness as a standard of female beauty. One of its Barbies, a plump doll in a tee shirt that reads "EAT," is meant "to show girls that voluptuousness is also beautiful." The doll comes with a "miniature basket of dinner rolls, Bucket o' Fried Chicken, tiny Entenmann's walnut ring, a brick of Sealtest ice cream, three packs of potato chips, a t-shirt reading "Only the Weak Don't Eat," and, of course, an appetite."⁷ *gURL* spoofs the beauty makeovers in women's magazines by doing its own 'virtual makeovers.' Whereas the conventional makeover is an attempt to dress and make up ordinary women to resemble the models in the fashion magazines, *gURL*'s virtual makeovers are largely transformations in identity. One young woman with an un-made up girl next door appearance is changed



Figure 5

into a trendy waitress with eggplant colored hair and a pierced nose (see fig. 5). Another loses her "Calvin Klein-ish naive quality" to become a "vampy Marilyn clone." The before and after shots of the 'victims' are framed in cameos like those that framed pictures of women's faces decades ago, as in a deodorant advertisement from a 1916 issue of *Vanity Fair* (see fig. 6). The virtual makeover spoofs an ideal of demure female beauty that has been popular for centuries.

Some Web sites satirize the way conventional depictions of women atomize their bodies by showing only one body part—legs or lips, for example—rather than the whole person. When a

MEN'S
Ruvia
THE PERFECT DEODORANT

Ruvia, the new Mennen deodorant, adds the final touch that fastidious grooming requires.
It is distinguished by features that made it dominate its field from the day of its appearance.
Snowy, soft, smooth, and creamy, it will not lump, gum, or clog the pores and interfere with respiration.
Its sweetening effect will last for hours. Ruvia destroys all bodily odors. It banishes the odor of perspiration—Ruvia is absolutely pure and safe to use.
Ruvia Boudoir jars bear no resemblance on the outside to their uses. The jar is securely fitted with metal cap that screws on, making it impossible for its contents to soil the contents of a bag or the cover of a dressing table.
Boudoir size, 25 cents; pocket size, 10 cents. Send ten cents and receive the latter postpaid—an indispensable adjunct to the handbag, operating, and at the dance.

GERHARD Mennen CHEMICAL CO.
3678 Ocean Street, Newark, New Jersey

Figure 6

woman's appearance is judged, each body part is given its own value, independent of the rest of her body. Women internalize this practice, learning to think of their bodies in segments, able to inventory and assess each feature separately from the whole—skin is smooth, arms flabby, eyes too small, hips too wide. This attitude is reflected in the *Glamour* magazine survey. One of the questions, "what do you like best/least about yourself?" all but invited readers to itemize their physical features; at least, the 27,000 respondents interpreted the question that way. What they liked best and least about their bodies was a specific body part: 70% liked their breasts; 60% were dissatisfied with their hips; 72% were unhappy about their thighs; 28% were "ashamed" of their stomachs (Fraser 283).

The satirical sites turn this tendency on its head: when they isolate portions of a woman's body, they use the isolated body part to convey

power and defiance. The kicking leg that accompanies each page of the 'unabashedly feminist' zine *Blue Stocking* describes a lack of patience for fools, not sexual availability. This feisty leg, wearing a heavy boot and thick socks, is the visual equivalent of *Blue Stocking's* opinionated essays on controversies such as toxic pollution and abortion. On *The Nerve!*, we see another isolated body part, the bare buttocks of a woman about to slide down a pole (actually an arrow leading to the site's title), which illustrate the slo-

gan “Get the Nerve to go feet-first into the future.” This playful image suits *The Nerve!*’s jaunty approach to issues such as gender conflict online (“Modem Grrls get rough and tough in electric boy-land”) and pornography for women (“women whip up their own smut”). As with the leg on *Blue Stocking*, the buttocks are less seductive than defiant: the viewer is being mooned. Similarly, the grid of 12 naked buttocks on *FAT!SO?* flaunts the Web site’s goal, to promote the acceptance of fatness: the site is “for people who don’t apologize for their size.” The image defies typical depictions of women’s buttocks by showing a range of shapes and sizes, many of which are not conventionally considered beautiful. Furthermore, it satirizes popular depictions of women that focus on this body part by absurdly framing each set of buttocks in its own square and by inviting visitors to acquire their very own copy of this image—a butt poster is for sale on the site, “a breathtaking piece of art . . . suitable for framing.” Less overtly defiant than *FAT!SO?*’s buttocks are the disembodied mouths on *Fabulous Net Women*, a site that provides links to online resources of special interest to women. While the mouths have a practical function as the links to other pages, they also parody the way billboards and other media direct the viewer’s gaze to this part of a woman’s face.

The Fabulous Net Women mouths look like those in popular media: the lips are bright red, pouty, voluptuous, and slightly parted, revealing a few perfect white teeth. But they float on the Web page on their own; they’re not attached to a face. Thus, whereas other media downplay the rest of the face, *Fabulous Net Women* satirically goes one step further; it erases the face, leaving the lips ridiculously disembodied. By exaggerating the way visual media atomize the female body, the site parodies this practice.

The sites also take an ironic stance towards fashion, particularly in the way women’s clothing has constrained women or been used to draw attention to their sexuality. *b.r.i.l.l.o.* makes fun of the ‘bullet bra,’ the uncomfortable pointy bra women wore in the 1950’s. By clicking on a bullet, the reader can find an advertisement from that period in which models, in their stiff bras and girdles, preen and dance ecstatically. *Net Chick’s Magic 8 Bra* spoofs the traditional power of women’s underwear to attract men—this talking bra does not seduce; it predicts:

Hello. I’m a Magic 8 Bra. I am wise and will tell you how to achieve your dream. Concentrate on your wish, then close the cups. CAUTION: Believe in the bra, and it will be your friend. If you scoff, the cups will know,

and will not like you. Bad bra karma is not a good thing.

The Nerve!'s Marcia Clark paper doll satirizes the notion of using clothing for professional advancement. Under the banner, "Help Marcia Clark dress for success!" are three 'image maker[s]' that will enable an attorney to manipulate a jury: a man-styled pant suit and a wig in which Clark can "blend in with the boys," suppress her sexuality ("feeling 'frigid?"), and divert attention from her physical attractiveness ("kiss those talk-show hair critiques good-bye!"); a frumpy schoolmarm dress to intimidate the jury ("reduce the jury to drooling preschoolers . . . O.J. is guilty or you all get detention!"); and a coquettish miniskirt/bra-top ensemble ("why short change 'feminine wiles?' Cosmo says go for it!"). "Beware the scales of fashion," the site cautions. The message is that for a female attorney, "justice is not blind."

Throughout the sites, content, image, and language work together to satirize the fashion industry. *Amazon City* tries and convicts fashion 'crimes,' such as stiletto heels, which are guilty on three counts: they're uncomfortable, dangerous to walk in, and bad for the feet; they assume that women want to look like strippers; and they propagate the idea that women need "girlish weapons . . . to subdue stupid men." The punishment: "ignore the fashion industry and wear whatever you want . . . !" Other sites tease us by publishing articles whose titles play on the association of woman's clothing with her sexuality. *The Nerve!*'s article "UnderWire(d)" (an allusion to the underwire bra) is not about sex or underwear, but sexism in electronic communities. *Equity's* article, "Dressing for the Tax Man," explains how female firefighters, actors, physicians, and other workers can use job-related clothing expenses as a tax deduction. The women interviewed in the article are hard-working and financially savvy, but the title suggests a more stereotyped view: a woman who seduces her way out of a dilemma (in this case a tax audit). Both titles satirize conventional views of women's clothing as ornamental and sexually inviting.

Ambivalence

Some sites show ambivalence about the use of women's bodies as objects to be gazed upon. They express this ambivalence both verbally (*gURL's* "love/hate look at beauty culture") and visually. Several sites present traditional spectatorial images of women with a mixture of satire and nostalgia. The pinup girls on such sites as

RiotGrrl, *Spiderwoman on the Web*, and *The Woman Rebel* are presented satirically; they look dated and ridiculous in the context of the contemporary feminist content of these sites. The zine *RiotGrrl*, which critiques excessive thinness as a standard of beauty (“Please feed the supermodels & you’ll win a book!”), portrays on its home page five 1950s-era women, posing flirtatiously in their bras, girdles, stockings, and spike heels—one chatting on the telephone, another primping her bouffant hairdo, all tilting their heads and torsos coyly at us (see fig. 7). *Spiderwoman on the Web* is a



Figure 7

serious site where Web site designers share professional concerns, discussing among other things, Web site security, coding, and business strategies, and which offers a list of Web development resources. In contrast to this content, is a photograph of 1940s bathing beauties, lying demurely on chaise longues, smiling at the viewer. Similarly the zine *The Woman Rebel*, whose articles are “written primarily by academics and groundbreaking feminists” and include such titles as “Why Do Women Get Paid Less for the Same Job?” and “Cheerleaders Who Kick Butt,” puts on its home page a pinup of a woman circa 1930, in a bra, feathers and chains. Another zine, *geekgirl*, publishes articles supporting women’s presence on the Internet and critiquing the ‘boys’ club atmosphere,’ but also publishes an illustration which appears to come from a 1950s magazine: a woman in bathing suit and one long, black glove sits perched on one hip, smiling invitingly at the viewer.

Surely the site owners know these are sexist images, but they seem to admire the women as well. Perhaps their admiration is most clearly expressed in the site *Bombshells.com*, whose purpose is to celebrate actresses from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, including Carmen Miranda, Betty Grable, Jean Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, and Jayne Russell:

I wanted to bring a place on the Web that was representative of the work of these amazing women. Their extreme talent, fabulous persona, and dazzling sex appeal have made each of these women legends. Each "bombshell" possessed comedic genius, and although were considered to be sex symbols they were admired by men & women alike.

Sites like *RiotGrrl* and *Spiderwoman on the Web* that feature less famous bombshells suggest a tension between the attractiveness of the pinup image—its glamour, playfulness, and its historical function as a way into a theatrical career for female actors—and its sexism, the exploitation of woman's sexuality and commodification of her body. Certainly, no woman is a more visible spectacle than the pinup girl.

This ambivalence about the pin-up girl is expressed on the site *BimBionic*, which showcases the artwork of its creator, Michiko Stehrenberger. Some of Stehrenberger's cartoon women are "innocent little sexpots out to save the world": they have powerful biceps, snarling faces, and huge stomping feet with which they crack safes and scale the Empire State Building, as well as exaggerated hourglass bodies stuffed into tiny bathing suits and extraordinarily long legs perched on stiletto heels. While these drawings reproduce the pin-up girls of the 1950s, they also parody them, a paradox revealed by the satirical juxtapositions in the text:

They can leap over tall buildings and outspeed bullets without breaking a sweat—or a nail. Based on the standard-issue 50's pin-ups and then updated for a futuristic fashion marketplace, the Girls measure a robust 36-4-36 and are able to infiltrate the enemy through superior smarts and impeccably good grooming.

The same tension is expressed differently on *gURL's* "Exhibitionist" page, which links to a gallery of women's projects

(the day I visited this page, the featured project was the text “Are You a Feminist?!” by a group of young women who call themselves “the feminists of tomorrow”). At the lower right of the page is a photograph of a group of bare-legged young women sitting on the floor behind what appears to be a dancer or pinup girl (we see her from the hips down)—a standard glamour shot from the 1930s. At the upper left is a drawing of a modern young woman, who wears a coat labeled “Exhibitionist.” She stands with her back to us, opening and closing her coat (the drawing is animated), peering over her shoulder at us. Next to her are the words, “Check me out.” The joke is that the real exhibitionists are the women in the photograph, not the flasher. The flasher, despite her open coat, looks a little insecure, not flirtatious, and her stance contrasts markedly with those of the glamour girls in the photograph. While the women in the photograph wear high-heeled shoes that flex their calves, and arrange their legs to show off their curves, the flasher stands heavily and flatfootedly in childlike red sneakers and yellow socks. The women in the photo are all curves and smiles, their hair artfully marcelled; the flasher is drawn in straight lines and looks a little worried, her hair a straggly ponytail (see fig. 8).



Figure 8

What are we to make of the juxtaposition of these images? One possibility is that the modern exhibitionist (in the ponytail) doesn't have to exhibit her body to get recognition; she can show off her accomplishments, as the women represented in the gallery do. In fact, she is the hot link to the gallery. Or the 1930s photograph

may simply be a bit of nostalgia and the flasher a simple joke. In either case, the use of the pin-up girl photograph is ambiguous here, as it is on the other sites; the women who pose flirtatiously are simultaneously admired as talented and glamorous, and regretted as exploited and somewhat ridiculous.

The tension I see in the use of these images is articulated by Stephanie Brail, owner of Spiderwoman on the Web. When visitors to her site objected to seeing bathing beauties on a Web site for computer professionals, she explained:

. . . why can I, with all my trappings of "equality," still be fascinated by glamour and makeup? Are they such bad things . . . ? Obviously, we are so much more than that . . . but playing on occasion, even in your mind, can actually be quite fun. Enjoy the site for what it is, laugh at the silly pictures, or get angry at the oppression that once was . . . or remember some of that magic, of what it was like to put on your prom dress and be queen for a day.

Sites that evince this complex attitude toward the pinup girl are most likely responding to this tension: they are attracted to the glamour, though uncomfortable knowing that women—and not just those in show business—have had to depend on physical attractiveness to achieve most forms of success.

Ownership

When a woman's body is treated as a spectacle it becomes the property of others; others judge, rate, admire, ogle it. In nineteenth-century England and America, a woman's body legally belonged to her father until she married, when it became her husband's property. In many parts of the world, this is still the case. But where women are no longer *legally* owned by others, the *cultural* control over their bodies remains intact. Woman's character is judged according to her body: if she's fat, she's perceived as undisciplined; if overly thin, she's dismissed as neurotic. In 1998, the tabloids sneeringly proclaimed actress Calista Flockhart to be anorexic. Anorexia is an illness, not a moral state; if Flockhart had had anorexia (she insisted she didn't), a reasonable response might have been compassion. Instead, she was mocked and censured, her body appropriated for judgment. Over time, standards of beauty change, but they remain imperious, making women subject to others' judgments.

Thus, it is encouraging to see what women say about their bodies on Web sites. On many of the sites I studied, they've shown a strong sense of ownership of their bodies. They write about controlling their health (*Sisterfriend's* section on nutrition; *Fabulous Net Women's* pages on menopause; *The Nerve!'s* article on the morning after pill; Oxygen's page on medical news) and about enjoying their bodies (the Nerve!'s review of sex toys). Many women's Web sites have pages on health issues, among them *FEMINIST.COM*, *Black Women in Sisterhood for Action*, *Power Surge*, *Women's Connection Online*, and *Women's Wire*. Furthermore, when women contemplate their bodies, as they do on *gURL*, they express appreciation instead of the self-deprecation that often accompanies women's inspection of their body parts. The women who contribute to *gURL's* "boob files" write about their breasts—breasts of different sizes and shapes—with humorous affection. In the same spirit, *About-Face* encourages its visitors to "love your body" and "remember that the female form, in all its sizes, adds to our strength, not our weakness." On these Web sites, women reclaim their bodies. In doing so, they not only resist the narrative that construes woman as a spectacle, but they also rewrite this narrative.

Solidarity

Women on these Web sites also write about themselves without making competitive comparisons with other women's bodies. This is a healthy attitude, given the pressure women face to measure their appearance against that of other women. The beauty contest mythologized in paintings of The Judgment of Paris story illustrates how the beauty imperative divides women from one another; compared against a rigid standard of beauty, most women will lose. The beauty contest, proclaimed the protesters of the 1968 Miss America Pageant, "creates only one winner to be 'used' and forty-nine losers who are 'useless'" ("No More Miss America!" 523). In contrast, the feminist Web sites I've studied promote supportive connections between women. The zine *HUES* (Hear Us Emerging Sisters) defines itself not just as a magazine for "women of all cultures and lifestyles," but as a forum for women of all "shapes":

See, like you, we've seen too many women's magazines suggest that we have to be 6'8" and 51 pounds in order to be beautiful *HUES* is a place where women can finally tell the world who we are, instead of being told

who to be. Whether you're a mascara maven or proudly unshaven, there's a place for every sister in HUES .

Sisterfriends, a "cyber forum for women of color," also emphasizes solidarity among women: it's "about sisterhood, community, and a way of life . . . an ongoing celebration of spirit, camaraderie"

Female solidarity is illustrated in the graphics of these sites. *HUES's* theme, that there is unity in difference, is visualized in its photographs of Asian, black, and white women, posing comfortably together as friends and co-workers. Even a site focused on women of one race, such as the *National Council of Negro Women*, suggests unity in diversity: the six women drawn on its home page, lined up shoulder to shoulder, are different heights, shapes, and shades of brown (see fig. 9).

In all these images, women stand close to one another, making physical contact. Sometimes they hold hands and dance joyfully in a circle (the career network *Advancing Women*) or a line (*Sisterfriends*); sometimes they lean affectionately against one another, as do the site owners of *Maxi*; recurring throughout *gURL's* pages are two arms stretched toward one another, clasping hands.

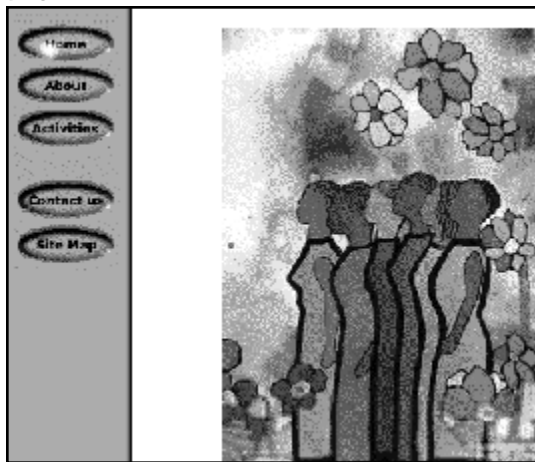


Figure 9

Sites that identify themselves as part of a world community of women sometimes superimpose images of women over a drawing of a globe, as does *Women of the World*, the site for an organization that develops women's leadership skills; the artists' site, *The*

World's Women On-Line!, and the French site *Internénettes*, which offers information on such topics as careers, food, finance, politics, and marriage. The site for the political group *The Feminist Majority Foundation* uses as its emblem a female sign with a globe inside its circle. Other sites show pairs of women sharing friendship—a photograph of two 1930s era women taking a drive in *Woman*

Motorist; a drawing of two women sharing a cup of tea in *Womenfolk*, "A Gathering Place for Women." Political activist sites show women coming together in political demonstrations: Mexican-American women protesting anti-affirmative action legislation (*Making Face, Making Soul*); a crowd of U.S. women marching behind the banner "Fight the Radical Right" (*National Organization for Women*); a crowd of Israeli and Palestinian women demonstrating for peace in their country (*Bat Shalom of the Jerusalem Link*).

Not all women's Web sites are feminist; not all reject stereotyped, especially erotic, views of women. Some reproduce them. *Game Girlz.com*, a site for women who play and design computer games, shows us characters from these games: large breasted, wasp-waisted bimbos in tight bodysuits and bikinis.⁸ *Clan Crackwhore*, another site for female gamers, provides *Playboy*-style photographs of its members, alongside information on their bust, bra cup, waist, hip, height, and weight measurements; their 'turn-ons' and 'turn-offs'; and a quote in which they respond to the prompt "Sex is" Conversely, some sites whose purpose is physical appearance offer no such views of women; *Beauty Buzz*, for example, provides graphics of cosmetics, not people. Even *Supermodel.com*, despite its traditional ad photography, focuses on career advice for aspiring models (male and female), not on their looks. Nor is concern with physical appearance unique to women; both men and women can submit a photograph to *Attractiveness.com* and have other members rate their face "for physical attractiveness and social appeal." But for women, beauty—narrowly defined to exclude most—is associated with personal value and bartered for love: "women learn early that if you are unlovely, you are unloved" (Stannard 195). For this reason feminist Web sites subvert oppressive visual depictions of women. The story they tell is the opposite of passive submission to the gaze of others: it's about the power to define oneself and to appreciate oneself and other women. Virtually and in life.

Notes

¹ Garrard contrasts these versions of the Susanna paintings, in which Susanna invites the Elders' attentions, with that of Italian artist Artemisia Gentileschi (b. 1593), herself a rape victim, whose Susanna physically resists her oppressors and who conveys "the full range of feelings of anxiety, fear and shame felt by a victimized woman faced with a choice between rape and slanderous public denouncements" (158).

² According to an April, 1998, survey by the Georgia Institute of Technology, over 66% of the users of the Web are male. It is also a young crowd: the average age of Web users is 33.

³ The Lemon Awards is sponsored by the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

⁴ Ironically, the female symbol is also the Roman symbol for Venus, goddess of spring and fruitfulness, and thus female sexuality.

⁵ The titles of many women's Web sites also perform this inversion verbally, creating a satirical disparity between the pathetic stereotype suggested by their name (e.g., *Spinsters Ink*, *Hysteria*, *Catt's Claws*) and the capable, informed, supportive personae that come across on their sites (Gerrard).

⁶ To encourage Paris to award her the apple, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each offered him bribes. Hera offered him power and all the kingdoms of Asia; Athena offered him victory in battle, beauty, and wisdom; but he chose Aphrodite's present, Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately, Helen was married to a Spartan, and Paris' abduction of Helen to Troy (according to some versions of the myth, she went willingly) caused the Trojan War. As in the narrative of the Fall, a woman's sexual attractiveness—identified with an apple—has a cataclysmic effect.

⁷ There are quite a few Barbie sites, some for serious Barbie collectors (*Totally Barbie*), and others for satire, emphasizing the doll's lack of resemblance to real women (*Gateway to Barbie Hell*). Among the alternative dolls are *Dinner Roll Barbie's Bisexual Barbie*, *Birkenstock Barbie*, a talking Homegirl Barbie with attitude to spare; and from *The Decline of Civilization Barbie Page*, *Pregnant Teen Barbie* (upgradable to Unwed mother Barbie), *Bag Lady Barbie*, and *Postal Worker Barbie* ("terrorize your friends"). Even the *Plastic Princess Page*, primarily for Barbie collectors, has a satirical *Plastic Princess Freak Circus*.

⁸ Interestingly, one of the Game Girlz, Michelle Goulet, though describing herself as "not a 'feminist,'" voiced this objection to the action character as bimbo: "Respecting the female characters is hard when they look like strippers with guns Believing that the [computer game] industry respects women in general is hard when you see ads with women tied up on beds (341).

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Photographic reproduction of acrylic painting on canvas,
"MMPlus," by Aris Kuntjara