The Pleasure Revolution:
Feminists Popularize Masturbation, Hold Conferences, Critique Freud, Write Subversive Novels, Found Magazines, Become Publishers and Open Bookstores, Demand Respect for Lesbians, Open Their Own Sex Shops, Write Sex Advice Books, Do Sex Surveys, Rehabilitate the Clitoris, Revise Androcentric Psychology, Explore BDSM, Make "Cunt" Art, Create Their Own Porn, and, in the Process, *Reinvent Sex* for Women and Their Partners!

The tectonic shift in sexuality that occurred in the 1960s is typically referred to as *the* sexual revolution, but there is another more dynamic transformation that historians of sexuality, critics, and even the architects of this revolution themselves—*feminist sexuality activists*--have missed: I call this the *Pleasure Revolution.* After a germinal moment in 1968, feminists, working individually and sometimes in groups or collectively, reformed and expanded the intercourse-focused norm that remained intact in the 1960s, to include the sexual needs, interests, problems, and preferences of women.

It's not possible to include the work of every pleasure revolutionary—that would be a book instead of an article, and still many would be left out. Here, and in a more detailed report, I have only included activists who left permanent artifacts: books, films, art projects, events or performance pieces, or concepts, and even by this criteria, many cannot be credited. I have arbitrarily ended my survey in the mid-1980s, when the projects documented here had generally made their mark.

Although the birth control pill, first marketed in 1961, *enabled* the sexual revolution of the 1960s and gave women, for the first time in human history, a sense of freedom from the fear of pregnancy, sex was still focused on penis-in-vagina intercourse. In *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution,* Susan Brownmiller quotes Naomi Weisstein, describing the meetings in Chicago of the earliest Women's Liberation group recalls, "We talked about sex…[and] our orgasms, and then we felt guilty about that." Indeed, in

1967, at the height of the sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll '60s, it *was* subversive to talk about female orgasm, and the overarching social code—*who was on top at work, at play, and in bed*—still exclusively privileged heterosexual men. "There has been no real revolution in the bedroom," journalist Anselma Dell'Olio argued in the nascent *Ms.* magazine in 1972. In particular she cited the "persistent male ignorance of female orgasm." But the code of silence regarding women's sexuality had been broken and things were about to change.

In the fertile atmosphere created by the foundation of the second wave of feminism, women began to redefine sexuality for themselves. Some reclaimed masturbation as the primary means of self-discovery and self-pleasure. Several wrote bestselling philosophical critiques of Freud, sexism, and the patriarchy. Others wrote novels, critiques, articles, columns, and sex advice books. Some wrote feminist sex advice books. They started magazines for and about women that were radical alternatives to emerging "*Cosmo* girl" publications. Lesbians asserted their right to freedom from discrimination within the new movement and inadvertently enabled heterosexual women to discover new sexual possibilities. Several developed questionnaires asking women what they wanted from sex and published revealing reports on what they discovered. Asserting women's right to pleasure on their own terms, two founded women-friendly sexuality boutiques that provided women with a safe, supportive environment in which to discover new sexual possibilities, and established, in the process, a new business model focused on consumer education. One enterprising group liberated the clitoris from the murky swamp of Freudian derogation and modern medical myopia. One psychologist opened the door for feminist sex therapy and worked to reconnect the sexuality and spirituality—the mind and the body continuum—that the '60s did nothing to address.

Some sought to broaden women's sexual choices to include power games, S/M, and other stigmatized sexual practices. Some produced provocative, even incendiary images illuminating the politics of sexuality. A number created so-called "cunt art," reclaiming women's cultural innovations and promoting genital consciousness. While acknowledging that violence and degrading images characterized a certain segment of the pornography market, some insisted that women could and did use all types of pornography/erotica (which are legally identical) for both educational, pleasurable, even voyeuristic purposes, and then they created wrote women-friendly fiction, founded magazines, did photography, and filmed erotica.

It's abundantly clear that if the women whose work is outlined here had bowed to enormous pressures to be "good" girls, and had not taken risks with their reputations, careers, and relationships, that sex today might well look more like it did in the 1960s—essentially male-defined—than it does in the still young twenty-first millennium.

The germinal moment of sexuality activism occurred at the first, and as it turned out, *only* National Women's Liberation Conference in 1968 at the Lake Villa YMCA camp outside of Chicago. At the workshop on sexuality, Ann Koedt and Ti-Grace Atkinson (1938–2008) passed out copies of Koedt's paper, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm." According to John D. Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman in *Intimate Matters: A History of Sex in America,* Koedt argued that "The recognition of clitoral orgasm would threaten the heterosexual *institution*. For it would indicate that sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men *or* women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute, but an option." A seismic shift had begun to occur.

A few months before the National Women's Liberation Conference in 1968, artist Betty Dodson had two shows in New York City featuring monumental drawings of couples having sex. One, of a single woman using a vibrator, was so transgressive of accepted intercourse-focused norms that it offended even many who identified as progressive. Dodson self-published her pamphlet, *Liberating Masturbation* later titled *Sex for One* in a mainstream edition, and started her famed BodySex workshops that focused on genital discovery, masturbation and orgasm, and established the model for experiential workshops to come. In 1974, in a similar vein, using consciousness-raising and established therapeutic techniques, Berkeley psychologist Lonnie Barbach started a program for "pre-orgasmic" women and her success was documented in her landmark book *For Yourself: The Fulfillment of Female Sexuality.* Barbach then trained therapists across the country in techniques to help women overcome anorgasma, and many other books followed.

In 1969, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective published a newsprint pamphlet demanding ethical research and treatment from doctors, and articulating, for the first time, the concept of women's ownership of their bodies—hence the indelible title of their publication, *Our Bodies, Ourselves (OBOS).* The first commercial edition of *OBOS* in 1973 contained an arresting image of a woman "owning" her genitals by looking at them with a mirror. This photo was so shocking to many and that it created a storm of controversy that lasted for more than a decade.

In 1970 a tsunami of blockbuster books put feminism on the map. First came Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, lambasting Freud's insistence that women must be satisfied with heterosexual intercourse, and detailing rampant misogyny in the works of three

literary giants, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer. "[*Sexual Politics*] jumpstarted the field of feminist literary criticism and altered millions of women's views of 'sexual emancipation' . . . [and] . . . changed the terms of the debate," feminist historian Ruth Rosen points out in *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America.* Next came *Sisterhood Is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement,* edited by Robin Morgan. The chapter on sexuality contained an article by journalist Sue Lydon on "The Politics of Orgasm," and one by psychiatrist Mary Jane Sherfey that challenged the notion of male sexual superiority and discussed women's innate ability to experience multiple orgasms. In the next incendiary bomb, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution,* movement firebrand Shulamith Firestone cited Freud's condemnation of the "polymorphous perversity" of sexuality, which was understood to mean the unregulated sexual behavior of young children, and predicted that after the liberation of women "humanity would revert to its natural 'polymorphously perverse' sexuality—all forms of sexuality would allowed and indulged." Prescient! In *The Female Eunuch,* Australian feminist Germaine Greer declared that "women must learn how to question the most basic assumptions about feminine normality in order to reopen the possibilities for development which have been successively locked off by [adverse] conditioning." Ti-Grace Atkinson, who called for lesbian separatism in *Amazon Odyssey,* also critiqued the psychoanalytic focus on vaginal orgasm. "If women did not find heterosexual intercourse pleasurable, it was because . . . sexual intercourse was not suited to fully stimulate women's (clitoral) sexuality," she argued. Yet most feminists were not putting down intercourse per se. Instead, they were seeking complementary routes to pleasure

that allowed women *and their partners* to experience the variety of sexual response that for many was not available from intercourse alone.

A flurry of feminist novels also made waves, first and most spectacularly, Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. Many young women identified with the metamorphosis of Shulman's protagonist, Sasha, from a protected child who felt psychologically trapped by the sexually oppressive atmosphere of the 1950s, but somehow sensed cracks in the cultural fabric and slipped through them to emerge as a unique, autonomous woman. Rita Mae Brown's coming-of-age, coming-out novel, *Rubyfruit Jungle* broke with lesbian novels of the past featuring heroines who were victimized or pathologized by their love for women and opened the floodgates for other lesbian fiction dealing deeply and frankly with the love of women for each other.

Once the early-1970s market in bestselling feminist books had subsided, feminists, especially lesbians, had a hard time finding publishers—but feminism abhorred a vacuum—and soon feminist publishers abounded, including Spinsters Ink., Daughters, Shameless Hussey, Kitchen Table, Bella Books, Cleis, HerBooks, the academic Feminist Press, and others. Naiad became the primary purveyor of lesbian erotica, including reprints of lesbian classics and pulp novels, new series, non-fiction, biography, and video erotica. Spinsters Ink, published a string of lesbian classics, including *Lover,* by Bertha Harris*, Curious Wine,* and the popular Kate Delafield lesbian detective series by Katherine V. Forrest, the early work of Judy Grahn on women's spirituality, and Audre Lorde's searing *Cancer Journals*. Ultimately well over 100 small women's presses arose and filled the needs of a badly underserved audience and ready distribution sites, and women's bookstores popped up across the U.S., Europe, Australia, and around the globe.

In 1973, New York NOW members Dell Williams and Judy Wenning organized the first ever conference on sexuality that included thirty workshops on subjects such as "The Right to Sexual Self-Determination," "Expanding Heterosexuality," "Teenage Sexuality," "Older Women's Sexuality," "Racism & Sex," "Sex and the Handicapped," "Lesbian Nation," and "Tantric Yoga & Sex." According to various accounts, Betty Dodson's slide show, "Creating a Female Genital Aesthetic," was one of the conference's memorable highlights resulting in cheers and tears at its close.

While heterosexual feminists were fighting for their right to clitoral orgasm, lesbians, infamously labeled "the lavender menace" by NOW founder Betty Friedan, were fighting for respect within the movement. Brown and others left NOW and started Radicalesbians, an action-oriented group. In May, 1970, dressed in home-made "Lavender Menace" tee-shirts, the group took over the stage at the Second Congress to Unite Women and read a position paper, "The Woman-Identified Woman," which defined what it meant to be a politically conscious lesbian.

Lesbians helped their heterosexual sisters discover new routes to sexual pleasure. "In some ways, lesbians are freer to push established limits and experiment with sex," Linda Grant observes in *Sexing the Millennium*. "It was lesbians who challenged the institutionalized forms of the erotic, attempting to define a female-centered sexuality in lesbian porn magazines like *On Our Backs*." In *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure,* British socialist feminist activist Lynne Segal explains how lesbian sexuality activism evolved and inadvertently expanded sex for heterosexual women: "Some lesbians, especially in California, moved towards sex radicalism . . . . They wanted to promote lesbian sex education, and the diverse routes to orgasmic pleasure…. Gay girls

were being urged to keep up with the boys… [And] …they aimed, through their self-conscious play with it, to undo or de-center hegemonic [male-focused herosexuality."

The establishment of feminist-owned, women-friendly sexuality boutiques is another groundbreaking and enduring feature of the Pleasure Revolution. Lynn Comella, Assistant Professor in the Women's Studies Department at the University of Nevada did her dissertation on the history and impact of what she calls "sex-positive retail activism and education in the United States." She points out that "Eve's Garden founder Dell Williams, and Joani Blank, who founded Good Vibrations in San Francisco… revolutionized the world of sex toy retailing in the U.S. by creating what one retailer describes as the 'alternative sex vending movement'—a retail-based model of sex education and social activism that is both a commercial enterprise and a political project." Copycat shops happily abounded until the Internet overpowered the ability of most to make a profit in bricks and mortar stores.

Until the Pleasure Revolution, sex advice was handed down by therapists whose expertise was based on studies done in the 1970s or earlier. In *Free and Female,* the first feminist sex-advice book published in 1972, Barbara Seaman (1935-2008) included the results of a questionnaire returned by 100 of her peers—middle-class professional women—who wrote openly about their sexual experiences and desires. Paralleling Seaman's survey, Karla Jay and Allen Young, early members of the New York City Gay Liberation Front, published *The Gay Report: Lesbians and Gay Men Speak out about Sexual Experiences and Lifestyles*, the first survey on lesbian and gay sexuality. Jay and Young also edited *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, an anthology of articles

by lesbians and gays touching on urgent issues including sexuality within newly visible lesbian and gay communities.

Although feminists had overwhelmingly disparaged Freud's insistence that a woman's exclusive sexual destiny was heterosexual intercourse and vaginal orgasm, New York NOW member Shere Hite was still perplexed. When members of her NOW group refused to discuss orgasms in their group, Hite did her own questionnaire, eventually receiving over 3000 replies, in which women expressed their feelings in vivid detail about the clitoris, masturbation, and other issues, especially their personal difficulties achieving vaginal orgasm. Dell published *The Hite Report on Female Sexuality,* the first volume of Hite's monumental trilogy, in 1976. This was followed by *The Hite Report on Male Sexuality* in 1981 and *Women and Love: A Cultural Revolution in Progress* in 1988.

Mary Jane Sherfey, a New York City psychiatrist, engaged in a wide-ranging study of women's sexuality and published her research in *The Nature and Evolution of Female Sexuality,* her book aimed at her professional colleagues. Interpreting Masters and Johnson's *Human Sexual Response*, she provided clear descriptions and illustrations, revealing that the penis, which was traditionally classified by anatomists as an *organ system*, and the clitoris, which was typically seen as just a tiny nub of sensitive tissue, were entirely equivalent. She even suggested that women's more extensive and complex pelvic vessel system was the reason that women take longer to become aroused than men—a topic that remains unresearched and enigmatic today.

By the mid-1970s, the Feminist Women's Health Center, an association of women-owned abortion and reproductive health care clinics based in California, decided

to include a chapter on sexuality their book on women's reproductive health, *A New View of A Woman's Body*. The chapter on sexuality was problematic, however. "None of the medical texts or scant self-help literature helped us understand our sexual response," Carol Downer, the group's founder, remembers. Following Sherfey's lead, the authors challenged the standard definition of the clitoris as a sensitive little bean and described a multi-faceted organ system that is as complex, extensive and powerful as the penis. "Thanks to Sherfey, we were able to see more than a cartoon version of the clitoris, and we finally got some insight into how women have orgasms, and why many don't," Lorraine Rothman, founder of the Orange County, CA, Feminist Women's Health Center, told me before she died in 2008. The illustrations *A New View of A Woman's Body*, by clinic staff member Suzann Gage, have been widely reproduced and have been cited as the most detailed and descriptive depiction of women's genitals available outside of anatomy texts. In 1978 I joined the Federation to edit *A New View* and the chapter on the clitoris ultimately led me to my study of the cultural history of sexuality.

The general public, and even many feminists, may be surprised to learn that the popularization of power games, bondage and discipline, sadomasochism (S/M), and the leather dyke movement, arose from pleasure activism. However, in 1978 Pat, now Patrick Califia, political theorist and activist Gayle Rubin, and others formed *Samois,* a barely underground group in San Francisco and began exploring the history and development of power and discipline. The next year Califia published *Sapphistry,* intended as a primer for lesbians just coming out or for those who wanted to expand their sexual repertories, but the 13 pages on lesbians engaging in S/M created an firestorm of controversy among various lesbian communities, and the appropriateness of these

practices was hotly debated at meetings, conferences, and in the movement media. Later, Califia published *Macho Sluts*: *Erotic Fiction*, perhaps his best known work, which is both a paean to S/M and a powerful argument for the rights of sexual minorities.

Back in 1973 when Gina Ogden was training to become a family therapist, she noticed that an overwhelming number of incoming patients mentioned problems with sex, but her program didn't provide material on the topic. "I looked at the family therapy literature in the indexes under 'S' but 'sex' wasn't there," she says. By 1976 Ogden had collected enough information to run a workshop for social workers and therapists entitled "Love and Sexuality." Incensed by the lack of information—or interest—in women's sexuality, Ogden embarked on her own research projects interviewing women about sexual pleasure, love, and relationships and how these were connected to their individual concepts of spiritually.

Over time, many people have reported experiencing "look ma, no hands" orgasms, which, when occurring in sleep would be called "wet dreams." Ogden coined the term "thinking off," and she and others have promoted this as an important component of *outercourse*—everything but intercourse—methods of experiencing pleasure. "The idea that women can have no-touch orgasms disproves the most sacred tenant of sex research: the notion that sexual pleasure is centered only in the genitals and depends on physical stimulation, especially heterosexual intercourse." Ogden observes.

Just as the feminist pornography wars erupted after 1978, lesbian sexuality began to come into its own, and this history was documented and promoted in *On Our Backs,* the premier lesbian sex zine created by activist Nan Kinney, two fledgling porn actresses, Deborah Sundahl and Myrna Elena, and Susie Bright. The name was a wickedly satirical

poke at *Off Our Backs,* the doctrinaire second-wave publication that had a reputation for being very conservative, even prudish, on sexual issues. In addition to being informative and entertaining, and titillating its intended lesbian audience, *OOB* broke significant ground in several areas, being the first magazine to carry national advertising for dildos and doing features on lesbians of color and punk butch-femme couples, and Bright's popular column, "Toys for Us," found a wider audience with its critique of sexual politics and radical sexual agendas. Many other sex zines, lesbian and otherwise, came and went, but *OOB* was so creative, adventurous, and transgressive that it flourished under Bright's editorship for a decade. Frisky women-centered porn/erotica had a home and a showcase!

In 1970, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and a group of art students founded the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College with a curriculum devoted to women's art and "female technologies," including costume, performance, and video, which they labeled "cunt art." In 1972, Chicago conceived "The Dinner Party," which opened at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1978 to the giddy delight of many, but an avalanche of derision by art critics, journalists, and even some feminists. The instillation consisted of a massive triangular table with thirty-nine place settings commemorating women whose lives and work exemplify female creativity. Critics prudishly termed the elaborate hand-painted china "butterfly plates," but they were, in fact, imaginative representations of the vulva each guest. In answer to complaints of the uselessness of the installation, *New York Times art* critic Roberta Smith opined, it "is almost as much a part of American culture as Norman Rockwell, Walt Disney, W.P.A. murals and the AIDS quilt."

Betty Dodson's drawings of nude couples having sex, Tee Corrine's ethereal photographs in *Yantras of Womanlove,* Carollee Schneemann's shocking 1975 performance piece, "Interior Scroll," in which she stood naked on a table and pulled a poem written on a long strip of rolled-up paper from her vagina, some of Barbara Kruger's photographs, work that came out of the Women's Building in Los Angeles, and numerous other venues, produced "cunt" art and erotica, highlighting the importance of women's genitals to their sexuality.

Film erotica has come a long way from the limited playbill of the 1960s and '70s. Candida Royalle, an art student, actress and porn star, became the first, and heretofore, *only* feminist to produce erotica for heterosexual couples. In 1984, Royalle formed Femme Productions to make sexy, entertaining "couples erotica," films from a woman's perspective and she clearly tapped into an unmet need for sex-positive films focused on enhancing sex within relationships. Rather than focusing on the "cum shot," these films portray partner sex realistically and include both social and emotional content.

In 1985 Deborah Sundahl and Nan Kinney started *Fatale Video,* marketing their own productions, and when Sundahl left to start her own company, Kinney and Christine Cassidy picked up with *Fatale Media*, distributing, according to Kinney, "quality videos that are explicit, authentic, and sexy, and geared to lesbians and other sexually adventurous souls."

So, with this stunning constellation of projects imagined and executed by second-wave pleasure revolutionaries, why hasn't the Pleasure Revolution been recognized even by feminist activists and scholars, as well as by historians of sexuality, to say nothing of the culture at large? "Written out of history," was the theme of "The Dinner Party," and

indeed, the history of this movement will suffer that fate if both original and new pleasure activists like those participating in Momentum, don't note that it occurred and acknowledge its significance. I have a few ideas, however, as to why this particular revolution remains invisible. First, even with its grand deficiencies— exclusive focus on male pleasure and a failure to challenge homophobia—the sexual revolution of the 1960s continues to be seen as *the* sexual revolution, and this inhibits theorizing any previous or subsequent such events. Second, I would argue, Americans' deeply embedded cultural discomfort with sexuality, especially *women's* sexuality, prevents even discussion of many of these revolutionary acts. Another is the absence of the voices of feminists and progressive sexologists on the Internet and in the mainstream media, enhanced by the endemic anti-feminism of right wing activists whose incendiary pronouncements are so favored by the media. Today, the penis has become a star of the Internet and cable TV: note its frequent appearance on the *Colbert* show! But in spite of many Internet references, "clitoris" remains a toxic term. One only has to do a Google word search to see the glaring disparity between interest in the penis and in the clitoris. In spite of the Feminist Women's Health Centers' redefinition of the clitoris, even feminists continue to refer to the sum of women's genital anatomy as "vulva," or worse, "vagina." Shame on them! Until *revolutionary* action is taken by both second and third wave feminists and their allies, whoever they are, the Pleasure Revolution will remain closeted and a missing chapter in feminist history.

I have the sense, however, that work on this project is underway. A number of committed, articulate, and yes, revolutionary younger activists who may or may not identify as third wavers, have taken up this project with passion and vigor. With Internet

blogs and interviews, films, books, articles and other outlets, they are pressing these issues forward least they get lost in the resurgence and glorification of *guy culture* that is so dominant on the Internet, in lad mags, films and on TV today. *Viva la revolución*!