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TITLE: COMMUNITIES OF SENSE: MAINTAINING “GOOD TASTE” IN AN

EROTIC ARTS CLUB

AUTHOR: HANNAH WOHL

AFFILIATION: DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY, NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

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CONTACT INFORMATION:

HANNAH WOHL
Northwestern University
Department of Sociology
1812 Chicago Avenue
Evanston, IL 60208
hannahwohl2011@u.northwestern.edu

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ABSTRACT

How do groups maintain common sense, or shared judgments of taste? Sociologists typically provide a structural account of taste, while, in contrast, aesthetic philosophers interpret taste as disconnected from the social sphere. Missing in the literature is empirical analysis of mechanisms of taste in social interactions. I advance a perspective on *social aesthetics*, which analyzes how taste is embedded in face-to-face interactions. This perspective extends sociological understandings of taste by illustrating how taste is intersubjectively negotiated in interactions. Taste is based on subjective inner senses, which, through social interactions, are discovered to be held or not held in common with others. In finding agreement or disagreement in judgments of taste, individuals form a *community of sense*. The communication of subjective tastes delimit the community of sense by identifying individuals as insiders and outsiders, based on whether they are perceived to share the common sense of the group. This is exemplified in a case study of an erotic arts club, a group predicated on achieving a shared sense of “good” and “bad” taste. Drawing from participant observation and interviews, I show taste to be both interactive and intersubjective.

KEYWORDS

Artist communities; erotic art; judgments of taste; social aesthetics; symbolic boundaries.

“One judges always as a member of a community, guided by one’s community sense, one’s sensus communis” (Arendt 1989:75).

Groups maintain shared judgments of taste that are distinct from others. In the 1870s and 1880s, The French Impressionists, a close-knit group of artists known mockingly to the public as the “Intransigents” for their radical artistic style, organized a series of exhibits in reaction to their repeated rejection by Salon juries (Farrell 2001:56). Their first group exhibition was nearly universally derided for their sketchy style and bizarre colors; however, the public’s contempt rallied the group, deepening their commitment to each other and crystalizing their shared style, as they began to adopt one another’s artistic techniques (Farrell 2001:59-60). In opposition to the public and Salon juries, the group was solidified by shared judgments of taste.

Within a group, shared judgments of taste form a “common sense” (Kant [1790] 2000). Members consider insiders those who reveal the shared common sense of the community, while they view those who are unable to demonstrate such agreement as outsiders. While taste may be defined broadly to include both judgments of consecrated cultural icons and also mundane objects, attire, language, and disposition (Bourdieu 1984), I confine my analysis of communal taste to aesthetic judgments of artwork. Following Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant [1790] 2000:89), I define taste as feelings of pleasure or displeasure in an object, and consider judgments of taste as intersubjective. Taste is subjective in that it is based on our reflections upon our perceptions, our inner senses; however, taste is only meaningful insofar as it is communicable (Kant [1790] 2000:103; Arendt 1989:75). Kant ([1790] 2000:101) views this intersubjectivity of taste to exist prior to its actual communication, as the fact that taste is shared

among individuals is only confirmed by this communication. While Kant posits common sense as universally valid, others apply his analysis of taste to local communities (Arendt 1989; Martin 2011; Zerilli 2005). Thus, I analyze Kant's common sense as it is formed through face-to-face interactions within a small group as constituting a "community of sense." Analyzing taste as intersubjective knowledge, rather than a game of distinction (Bourdieu 1984), deepens sociological understandings of how taste operates within groups.

By exploring how taste is negotiated at an erotic arts club, I examine how a group maintains common sense, or shared judgments of taste, among its members. Taste is fundamentally interactive and intersubjective. Members hold a particular erotic sense prior to their involvement in the club, which they discover to be intersubjective through their social interactions with other members; however, the common sense is also shaped and deepened through these interactions. Individuals are revealed as insiders or outsiders based on whether intersubjectivity is confirmed or refuted through these interactions. To belong to the community, individuals must not only share the group's erotic sense, but also be cognizant that their judgments of "good" and "bad" taste reflect on themselves as being insiders or outsiders. Thus, they must appreciate the common sense of the community and calibrate their interactions to fit this common sense.

Aesthetic philosophers have analyzed the intersubjectivity of taste; however, these examinations are based on logical propositions that are not buttressed by empirical research. In contrast, social scientists have typically studied judgments of taste as based on broad social categories, such as class (Bourdieu 1984; Gans 1974; Peterson and Kern 1996); however, in these studies, the mechanism of taste itself remains a "black box" (Acord 2010:451), what Taylor (2002) calls "aesthetic muteness." Alternatively, social scientists have examined how taste is embedded within social milieus by using archival data to examine the historical reception of

artworks (Baxandall 1972; Farrell 2001; Witkin 1997; Wolff 1983). These methods fail to examine how tastes are negotiated in face-to-face interactions. Thus, further exploration of judgments of taste using micro-levels of analysis is required (Benzecry 2011; Gell 1998; Zolberg 1990).

To understand the intersubjectivity of taste, I observed a sensual figure drawing session, which I call the Salon, at the Storyville Social Club,¹ a private erotic arts club, and conducted in-depth interviews with the participants. The members of the club were artists from a broad array of disciplines who shared an interest in erotic art. The Salon was termed a “sensual” figure drawing session, because as Freddy,² a stylish poet in his mid-thirties who co-owned the club with his wife, Marie, often told the members, “The difference between this and a normal figure drawing class is that here you don’t have to pretend it is not awesome that there is a beautiful naked woman standing in front of you.” Unlike conventional figure drawing sessions in which the sexual definition of the situation is rejected, an open appreciation of the model’s erotic appeal was accepted, if not encouraged.

While sensual figure drawing sessions and erotic arts clubs are not institutionalized settings, judgments of taste are not confined to either art worlds or eccentric subcultures. Although the sociology of culture downplays aesthetic choices (Wolff 1983), judgments of taste are made in

¹ This is a pseudonym, referring to the red light district in New Orleans. The actual club is named after a famous, early 20th century brothel.

² Freddy grew up in a conservative Catholic household and attended a single-sex Catholic high school. He later married and had a son while starting a rock band, where he met Marie, who was auditioning as a dancer. After his divorce, Freddy changed his first name and married Marie. Together they established Marie’s burlesque troupe and the Storyville Social Club.

all social contexts. For example, Fine (1992:1270) argues that aesthetic choices are found in every organizational environment. All groups are, to a certain extent, communities of sense.

Despite the uniqueness of the case, the Storyville Social Club is a fertile site for analyzing judgments of taste at the micro-level, as judgments of taste are observable and salient. Thus, the processes which it represents, and not the empirical details of the case, are important. While all groups maintain shared judgments of taste, these are a more discernible feature of groups that are distinct from mainstream society (Hebdige 1979). These groups must assert their distinction to maintain their boundaries from assimilation by the mainstream; conversely, the mainstream claims its distinction from these communities in an effort to maintain its moral primacy (Hebdige 1979). At the Storyville Social Club, members contrast their taste from outsiders, whom they condemn for either seeking to shock others by explicitly revealing flesh or attempting to reject the sexual by censoring nudity. In turn, the Salon is marginalized from traditional figure drawing sessions, where the sensuality of nudity is organizational erased.

While most figure drawing sessions proceed largely in silence, conversation and camaraderie are essential elements of the members' interactions at the Salon, and some members maintain that these discussions are more important than the drawing itself. As the owner tries to foster an ongoing dialogue about eroticism and art, the conversation is often directly focused on judgments of taste. Finally, the Salon extends beyond most figure drawing sessions by including art critiques and an annual art show, deepening the members' sense of community. Thus, members have a vested interest in maintaining their common sense, so that their community can continue to function. In this article, I focus on the members' art critiques and shows, as judgments of taste were discussed extensively during these events.

THEORIZING THE COMMUNITY OF SENSE

While the sociology of art has largely overlooked questions of aesthetics by reducing judgments of taste to a game of distinction, aesthetic philosophy has insufficiently dealt with the interactional context by confining aesthetics to an autonomous sphere (Fine 1995:246; but see Dickie 1974). For the former, aesthetics is merely used as a mechanism to understand extra-aesthetic concerns, such as the organizational context of production and dissemination of art objects (Becker 1982; DiMaggio 1987; Peterson and Anand 2004), while, for the latter, aesthetics is divorced from its social context (Hennion and Grenier 2000). Despite a longstanding antagonism between the two disciplines (Griswold 1987), sociologists have argued for a rapprochement that would navigate between the macrostructural theories of sociology and the microanalytic studies of the humanities (Born 2010; Wolff 1983; Zolberg 1990). In this vein, I integrate aesthetic philosophy into a sociological analysis of art to explore how judgments of taste are negotiated in group interactions.

The “new sociology of art” attempts to take into account both the specificity of the art object and its social context (De la Fuente 2007b:410). These sociologists analyze the subjective meaning of cultural objects as they emerge through interaction – the “inside” of culture (Acord and DeNora 2008:226), theorizing taste as an “activity” by examining embodied experiences of artworks (Benzecry 2011; DeNora 2003; Hennion 2004:133). As these studies access the mediations (Hennion 1997) that occur between social structure and taste (Benzecry 2011:180), they set the stage for a rapprochement between sociology of art and aesthetic philosophy, although they do not explicitly engage with the latter. Moreover, while these studies analyze judgments of taste microsociologically, they do not examine these interactions within a small

group; thus, they do not uncover how judgments of taste made through face-to-face interactions shape these groups.

In contrast to the new sociology of art, which is centrally concerned with social interactions involving artworks, “everyday aesthetics” examines the “aesthetics of the social situation” (Berleant 2005) in areas of social life not closely connected to the fine arts³ (Light and Smith 2005:30). Within this field, a “social aesthetics”⁴ applies the cognitive processes involved in aesthetic perception and sensation to social objects rather than art objects⁵ (De la Fuente 2000). While this application of a social aesthetics aims “to specify the mechanisms of integration at work in social situations with an aesthetic character” (De la Fuente 2007a:109), it has been critiqued for using the aesthetic as a “convenient residual category” to describe what appears undefined, ambiguous, or fluid in postmodern social life, while failing to interrogate the category itself (De la Fuente 2000:244). Using social aesthetics to explore how taste is negotiated in group interaction, I connect the new sociology of art, in its theorizing of the activity of taste, with everyday aesthetics, in its investigation of how subjective experience acquires social significance (De la Fuente 2007a:85).

³ Empirical examinations of the connection between the social and the aesthetic have revealed the aestheticization of everyday life under conditions of postmodernity (Harvey 1990; Jameson 1990; Scott 1998).

⁴ The terms sociological aesthetics (De la Fuente 2000) or aesthetic sociology (Gronow 1997) are alternatively used.

⁵ For example, Simmel views the aesthetic phenomena as analogous to, and the foundation of, sociability, grounding his analysis in Kant’s delineation of aesthetic judgment as disinterested and subjective (Simmel 1950).

By applying Immanuel Kant's concept of *sensus communis*⁶ and its appropriation by political philosophers to a sociological view of judgments of taste, I explore the mechanism of taste within a social context. Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* ([1790] 2000) addresses how one communicates one's subjective judgments of taste in a way that posits the agreement of others (Cohen and Guyer 1982:3). For Kant ([1790] 2000:89), judgments of taste are one's subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure in response to an object. Kant ([1790] 2000:90-96) defines "pure" judgment of taste as arising, without use of concepts, from one's reflection on one's inner sense; furthermore, true judgments of taste are "disinterested," as they must be devoid of material or social interests. In making "true" judgments of taste which are stripped of all concepts and interests, Kant ([1790] 2000:123-24) posits that everyone may make the same judgments of taste. For example, one says, "this rose is beautiful," and not, "this rose is beautiful to me," because one believes that one's judgment of taste is universally valid, and that others ought to agree (Kant ([1790] 2000:162). While Kant ([1790] 2000:160-61) does not foreclose the possibility of disagreement resolved through persuasion, as it cannot be resolved by rational arguments, he does not concern himself with whether or not people actually concur in matters of taste; instead, he posits universal validity as an *a priori* assumption.

As we expect others to agree with one's judgments of taste, we assume that taste is something that can be communicated and shared (Kant [1790] 2000:123-24). Kant ([1790]

⁶ The term *sensus communis*, defined as "common sense," was first used by Aristotle to refer to the perceptual integration of the senses within an individual (Hippocrates 1981). Italian and English philosophers later defined the term as the moral attitude and civic solidarity that bound a community (Gadamer 1975:19-27; Shaftesbury [1737] 1999; Vico [1709] 1965). Kant's use of the term marked an aesthetic turn during the German Enlightenment, as he applied the concept specifically to judgments of taste, arguing that the true sense of the community was grounded in taste.

2000:173) terms shared judgments of taste as *sensus communis*, or common sense. For Kant ([1790] 2000:173-76), when we form common sense, we reflect on the possible judgments of everyone else. In this way, the *sensus communis*, or common sense, is a communal sense (Kant [1790] 2000:175). While Kant's ([1790] 2000:176-77), *sensus communis* is fundamentally social, as he argues that one cannot find pleasure in an object unless one's feelings are communicable to others, it is disembedded from particular social milieu. For Kant ([1790] 2000:162; see Zerilli 2005:186 note), when one makes judgments of taste, one must exclude community standards as a basis for judgment, "without having to grope about by means of experience among the judgments of others." Thus, while Kant usefully attributes the *sensus communis* to judgments of taste, in emptying the concept of its social content by rejecting the community aspect, the concept loses critical significance (Gadamer 1975:24; Grassi, Azodi, and Krois 1976).

Following Kant, some social theorists have maintained this universalized, theoretical definition of *sensus communis*. Lyotard (1991:218) declares that the concept of *sensus communis* owes nothing to experience, and, thus, that "a sociological interpretation of the aesthetic community," an application of the concept to an empirical community, is to be rejected; instead, he interprets Kant's *sensus communis* as an ideal, universal community which can never be realized, a "horizon for expected consensus...nothing but a cloud of a community" (Lyotard 1988:38). Likewise, Simmel (1905:168) interprets the *sensus communis* as a possible resonance between all human beings. Gronow (1997:171) concurs with these interpretations, stating that the *sensus communis* should be defined not as communities at all, but, in accordance with Simmel, as "forms of sociation," using the concept of *sensus communis* to delineate the aestheticization of everyday life.

In contrast, other social theorists apply Kant's concept of *sensus communis* to particular communities. In accordance with Kant, Schutz (1953:7) views the social world as an "intersubjective world of culture" in that individuals are bound by shared understandings. While one knows that one does not share identical meanings for an object with anyone else, common sense prevails in that, for practical purposes, we assume that we can view objects from one another's standpoints and that we have interpreted objects sufficiently similarly (Schutz 1953:8). However, Schutz's (1953:8-9) common sense only extends to those who are themselves seen as sufficiently similar, "'everyone who belongs to us,' namely everyone whose system of relevances is substantially (sufficiently) in conformity with yours or mine." Martin (2011:202) applies this understanding of intersubjectivity to Kant's *sensus communis*, claiming: "Tastes are cultivated differently in different places and at different times. Thus, even if we follow Kant in understanding that the judgment of taste commands the assent of 'all of us,' this 'us' need not be universal." Similarly, Arendt ([1961] 2006:220) argues that while Kant states that judgment is "valid for every single judging person," this does not apply to those who do not judge or for those who are not members of the public realm where objects of judgment appear; thus, the *sensus communis* extends only to individuals within the judging person's considerations. Arendt (1989:70) describes Kant's *sensus communis* as "an extra sense...that fits us into a community," a "community sense." Thus, her definition places emphasis on the "community," which I further highlight by defining *sensus communis* as "community of sense."

Arendt ([1961] 2006:220) claims that through judgments of taste, one makes public not only one's judgments of objects, but also reveals with whom one belongs and what kind of person one is:

We all know very well how quickly people recognize each other, and how unequivocally they can feel that they belong to each other, when they discover a kinship in question of what pleases and displeases. From the viewpoint of this common experience, it is as though taste decides not only how the world is to look, but also who belongs together in it...Wherever people judge the things of the world that are common to them, there is more implied in their judgments than these things. By his manner of judging, the person discloses to an extent also himself, what kind of person he is...

For Arendt, in communicating one's tastes to others, one discloses to others one's subjectivity, making it possible for others to discover whether or not they "belong to each other" by confirming or denying intersubjectivity in judgments of taste. If one interprets Kant's ([1790] 2000:89, emphasis added) assertion that judgments of taste refer to that "in which the subject *feels itself* as it is affected by the representation," as denoting self-reflection, then this reading seems apt. Furthermore, Zerilli (2005:265) analyzes Arendt's ([1961] 2006) interpretation of Kant, positing that the differences and commonalities that are found in communicating judgments of taste are "by no means given in advance of the act itself," meaning that they emerge within interactions. These theorists provide the analytical step to examining the *sensus communis* as an empirical community by positing that the *sensus communis* arises through social interaction within particular communities; however, these assertions are based on abstract, logical propositions.

While political philosophers, such as Arendt and Zerilli, employed the *sensus communis* to theorize possibilities for political freedom, the Frankfurt school and many cultural sociologists

have commonly interpreted the *sensus communis* as an anti-democratic, elitist premise (Adorno [1970] 1997; Bourdieu and Passeron [1970] 1977; Eagleton 1990; Lukacs [1923] 1971). In particular, Bourdieu has accused Kant of being bourgeois, asserting that Kant's disinterestedness of pure judgments of taste renders the upper class' inheritance of the dominant taste both natural and meritorious (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991). In contrast, following Veblen (1899), who asserted that individuals acquire goods to display social status, Bourdieu and others view judgments of taste as a mechanism of class reproduction⁷ (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1982; Gans 1974). Bourdieu asserts that taste "classifies the classifier," delineating both the object of judgment and the person who judges to be in "good" or "bad" taste (Bourdieu 1984:6). Bourdieu views judgments of taste as a form of local competence transmitted through one's upbringing and social circumstances, an "acquired system of generative dispositions" which he terms *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977:95). Thus, Bourdieu describes the encounter with a work of art as a deciphering operation, which serves as a mechanism for social closure against those who do not possess this required competence (Bourdieu and Johnson 1993:215). However, as his theory of *habitus* is a past-oriented practice (Benzecry 2011:152), he does not examine how these distinctions emerge in interactions. Moreover, while Bourdieu's theory of distinction is useful in understanding how taste can serve as a mechanism of social closure, by reducing taste to social boundaries, he fails to theorize both the particularity of taste itself (Born 2010; Hennion 2004; Wolff 1983) and its relation to non-class distinctions (Beisel 1993:160).

⁷ For example, distinguishing between highbrow and lowbrow culture, scholars have theorized that high-status individuals have become increasingly omnivorous in their tastes, engaging in broad cultural participation (Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996; Van Eijck 2001; Warde and Martens 2000).

Lamont refines Bourdieu's analysis by distinguishing between social boundaries, which are objectified forms of difference manifested in groupings of individuals, and symbolic boundaries, which are conceptual distinctions categorizing objects, people, and practices (Lamont 1992:9; Lamont and Molnar 2002:168-69). Symbolic boundary theorists reveal various bases and processes for differentiating between "us" and "them"⁸; however, they have neglected aesthetics as a ground for distinction. Lamont (2000) and others have explored how normative boundaries are made on the basis of religious, class, and cultural differences (Beisel 1998; Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Luker 1984). Sociologists have analyzed how individuals often form symbolic communities that are not based on face-to-face interaction or categorical distinctions, such as ethnicity or gender, but instead on a common vocabulary and shared symbols (Calhoun 1991; Hunter 1974; Wuthnow 1989). Similarly, theories of subcultures (Hebdige 1979) and interpretive communities (Fish 1976) represent diffuse, symbolic communities; while, in contrast, theories of collaborative circles (Corte 2013; Farrell 2001), idioculture (Fine 1979), and "we-mode" groups (Tuomela 2010) are characterized as small groups. These theories of group culture highlight shared style, shared interpretive strategy, shared vision, and shared ethos. Like communities of sense, these concepts theorize like-mindedness as a form of social cohesion; however, the concept of communities of sense is distinctive in positing shared taste, or common sense, as the basis for like-mindedness.

⁸ For example, social identity theorists claim that people make in-group and out-group distinctions to differentiate themselves from others (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Hogg and Abrams 1988; Tajfel 1981). Social movement theorists have examined how individuals create a group identity by asserting "sameness and difference" (Reger, Meyers and Einwohner 2008), focusing on the group as a whole, in contrast to social identity theorists who examine the individual's identity in relation to the group (Benford and Snow 2000; Eyerman and Jamison 1991; Gamson 1992; for a review, see Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Erotic art, as a liminal category precariously situated between objects considered as “fine art” and those reduced to “pornography,” is an exemplary case for the study of aesthetic boundaries. By examining the aesthetic category of the female nude, questions of who draws these boundaries, how they are drawn, and for whom, are brought to the fore (Nead 1992:39). Art historians have alternatively differentiated erotic art from pornography by drawing on distinctions between complexity and simplicity (Marcus 1966:278-80), depersonalization and identification with the subject (Scruton 1986:139), and intimacy and sexual intercourse (Webb 1975:2), while feminist theorists have critiqued erotic art for privileging the male gaze, rendering women as sexual objects of male desire (Mulvey 1975:62; Snow 1989:30). However, the category of erotic art is not inherent in the object, but instead marks the limits of the sexual within legitimate culture, defining the degree of sexuality that is permissible within the category of the aesthetic (Nead 1992:103; Ellis 1980). Bourdieu (1984:6) illustrates these cultural distinctions by contrasting receptions of female nudity in high opera and a musical, which are respectively perceived as pure and obscene (Nead 1992:84-85). By extension, Beisel’s (1993) analyses of censorship of art reveal that these definitions do not merely make distinctions between cultural objects, but also between the consumers of these objects on the basis of their perceived morality. Thus, aesthetic boundaries are often conflated with and provide the basis for moral boundaries.

Taken together, these literatures lay the groundwork for theorizing “communities of sense,” groups bound by a common sense. While aesthetic philosophy has seldom been applied to sociological explorations of taste, it usefully examines the mechanism of taste itself, which has been largely overlooked in the sociology of art. Furthermore, it provides the basis for claiming common sense, or shared taste, as a cohesive force, which has been neglected in the study of

group culture. In turn, drawing on the sociology of art and symbolic boundaries allows for the claim that this common sense constitutes particular groups which use their common sense as a basis for distinction from other social groups.

Arendt's ([1961] 2006:220) theoretical claim that one discloses oneself and discovers with whom one belongs by making judgments of taste has yet to be empirically examined. Using the case of an erotic arts club, I analyze how taste is embedded in group interaction. I begin by showing how members define a shared erotic sense by positing similar judgments of taste in their social interactions. I explore how they delineate their community of sense by differentiating themselves from others who they perceived to have dissimilar judgments of taste. I then examine how members maintain their community of sense by contextualizing questionable judgments of taste to fit within the group's common sense. I demonstrate how members assert common sense by downplaying differences in taste. Finally, I show how members realize their self-concepts by actualizing group belonging. Thus, I confirm Arendt's ([1961] 2006:220) claim, establishing that by embodying the shared erotic sense within a community of sense, members communicate not only judgments of taste, but also, "who belongs together" and "what kind of person [one] is."

OBSERVING THE COMMUNITY OF SENSE

During 2012 and 2013, I conducted eighteen months of participant observation at weekly sensual figure drawing sessions at the Storyville Social Club, an erotic arts club in a large city. I arranged eleven in-depth interviews with the owners and members of the club. In addition to the sensual figure drawing class, the club hosted burlesque performances, nude literary readings, erotic book club meetings, and adult film screenings. I frequented these events with other participants of the Salon, in order to understand the broader context in which the group operated.

The club was affiliated with a burlesque troupe run by Freddy's wife, Marie, which performed at the club and provided models for the Salon. While there were eight regular attendees of the Salon, the owner estimated that there were approximately 60 members of the Storyville Social Club. Members included participants of the Salon, the burlesque troupe, and others with an interest in erotic art, ranging from young comedians to retired psychiatrists. I confined my analysis to members of the Salon, as this group was involved in sustained face-to-face interactions, while the other members of the club, with the exception of the burlesque troupe, were not always acquainted and encountered one another only sporadically.

On a typical night at the Salon, I dialed a code outside an unassuming brick building and climbed three flights of narrow stairs to enter a room reminiscent of an early 20th century high-end brothel after which it was modeled. The room was dimly lit, a subdued glow emanating from the pearlescent stained glass of two antique street lamps. Heavy crimson curtains hung over the windows facing the street, shutting out the outside world. Adorning the exposed brick walls were photographs, paintings, and drawings of nude women: burlesque dancers applying make-up, French courtesans carousing, women reclining coquettishly, and women having sex with men, women, or women and men. A black stage at the center of the room, on which the figure models pose, was floodlit with several spotlights affixed to the ceiling and backed with tall, gilded mirrors. Crimson and gold upholstered mahogany framed baroque couches and chairs formed a loose semi-circle around the stage. To the right of the stage, two low daybeds were arranged in an L-shape with long crimson curtains draped from their canopies, and a wooden island partitioned off a small bar. Left of the stage was an antique piano and a canopy bed piled high with pillows. A swing, upholstered in crimson and gold and fringed with gold tassels, hung from the ceiling on thick gold ropes.

Reclining on a couch, I chatted with the other artists while sketching the poses. The model, who rotated monthly, held a series of poses of varying length for two hours each session. She⁹ dressed in burlesque attire: nude except for meticulously painted lips and dark mascara, hair ornaments, gaudy pearl or gold jewelry, and stiletto heels. The artists treated the models with respect, claiming that there were all sexy “bombshells,” despite the models’ range in body types and age. The artists, model, and owner bantered throughout the session, including during poses. Serious discussions of artistic technique were as common as sexual puns. After the session, artists occasionally brought artwork to be critiqued; otherwise, the group continued their conversations at a nearby bar. During critiques, members would offer technical advice, such as suggestions on composition, lighting, and shading, both to improve the representational likeness of the subject and to better evoke the artists’ intention.

Of the eight regular attendees of the Salon, there were two Caucasian women and six men, of whom there were three Caucasians, two Latinos, and one Asian. Although I observed interesting gender dynamics, they are not the topic of this article. The artists were of mixed income and ranged in age from their late twenties to late fifties. The participants included professional and amateur artists, mostly working professional or doing freelance work in the arts, such as graphic design, illustration, or musical composition, although some held other occupations. At the Salon, artists used a range drawing materials, from pencils to drawing applications on computerized devices, and they varied widely in artistic style, from cartooning to realism. Although they appreciated a range of styles, most of the artists especially venerated the

⁹ Models were always female, except for one occasion in which a fully dressed male posed with several nude females, playing the role of a suitor at a brothel.

“old masters,” European painters before 1800, and found much modern and contemporary work to be pretentious and devoid of meaning.

All of the artists and models were heterosexual, and many were married or in committed relationships. Their significant others supported the members’ participation in the Storyville Social Club. Spouses were often members of the club as well, socializing with the other artists, organizing play dates among their children, and sometimes serving as figure models at the club. While the members’ participation was supported by their significant others, they sometimes found the need to “screen out” friends, co-workers, or extended family from knowledge of their participation, as they felt that these people may disapprove. The Storyville Social Club was important to the artists as it allowed them to interact with other adults who were passionate about erotic art – a mutual interest that they often found lacking in their other relationships. While the artists gathered for the figure drawing session, the Salon operated as a community of artists who interacted both inside and outside of the club.

I participated fully as an artist in the Salon by sketching the models, socializing with the other members, and contributing to critiques and the club’s art show. The Salon was open to the public when I began my participant observation, but became a private session six months later, open only to club members and their guests, due to the increasing exclusivity of the membership structure. By that time, I had already become a member of the club. The members seemed to accept my dual role as an artist and a researcher, and they treated me primarily a fellow artist. As a young female, I was an outlier in the group. However, my gender did not seem to be a significant distraction, as sexual jokes and attention tended to be focused on the nude model instead of on me or the other female artists, and the male artists did not notably censor themselves in our presence. Indeed, my gender may have facilitated my entrée into the club, as

Freddy stated that he was more eager to accept female members, as he was less concerned about them behaving with proper sexual etiquette.

After one year of participant observation, I conducted eleven in-depth interviews, including seven interviews with regular attendees of the Salon, an interview with a club member who did not attend the Salon but participated in the club's show, an interview with a club member who was expelled within two months of my observations for inappropriate sexual behavior, and interviews with Freddy and Marie. Everyone with whom I requested an interview was eager to participate, except for one artist who objected to interviewing and ethnography as legitimate scientific methods on the grounds that they were inductive. The interviews lasted around one and a half to two hours and were audio recorded. The interviewees chose the locations of the interviews, which were usually held in cafés, while the expelled member requested the interview to be held in his home for more privacy. The interviews were semi-structured, questioning the artists about their involvement in the Storyville Social Club, their participation in the Salon, their art, and their view of eroticism. Often, the artists shared their sketchbooks during the interviews.

L'ORIGINE DU MONDE AND THE COMMUNITY OF SENSE

Defining the Community of Sense: The Erotic Sense

The artists found a common erotic¹⁰ sense by sharing and discussing their artwork during the Salon, art critiques, and social gatherings. Often, they delineated their common sense in terms of what it was not, inscribing their own community of sense by differentiating themselves from others. This was exemplified during the critique leading up to the Kinsey Institute Juried Art Show, an erotic art show at Indiana University. At the critique, the artists clustered around Julie's impressionist lithographs of burlesque dancers and Degas-inspired bathing scenes which were scattered across the stage. Julie, an attractive, middle-aged printmaker, lamented that the previous Kinsey show featured erotic artwork that she found to be in bad taste: "Last year's show had a lot of what I consider gratuitous nudity that didn't tell a story – that just showed a nipple...I don't think I have a lot of edgy work." Freddy consoled her, saying, "Edgy is a shortcut. Is it edgy if I glue googly eyes to my balls [and call it art]?" Subsequently, "googly eyes on balls" art became the paradigmatic expression of the shock-seeking erotic art that the artists disparaged. In their view, this art was characterized by sexually explicit imagery that lacked emotional depth.

Freddy compared these images to *L'Origine du Monde*, a nineteenth century oil painting by Gustave Courbet, picturing the genitals and torso of a nude woman reclining spread legged, as in Figure 1. He asked the group, "What is the difference between Googling the word 'pussy' and *L'Origine du Monde*? The painting is not a shortcut. It is shocking, but there is a difference from, 'I'm going to paint a pussy.'" He deemed the former images as solely intended to sexually arouse or shock the viewer, while he found the latter to exhibit an emotional sensitivity that

¹⁰ Some members preferred the words "sexy" or "sensual" to "erotic," believing that the term "erotic" conveyed a more physical arousal than they experienced. However, their usage of "sexy" and "sensual" was akin to the other members' usage of "erotic." Thus, I use "erotic" as inclusive of these other descriptors.

engages the viewer's imagination. In an interview, Freddy elaborated on the distinction: "The thing about [*L'Origine du Monde*] to me that makes it infinitely more sexual than a photograph is the sheer amount of time spent on the details, and the time spent in the room with the model – the unabashed peering into this woman's vagina for however many hours and days." For Freddy, concurrent with Webb's (1975) characterization of erotic art as rendering intimacy, the detail with which the pubic hair was depicted revealed an intimacy between the artist and the model, while the Googled "pussy" images failed to be erotic because they exposed only naked flesh.

Figure 1: *L'Origine du Monde*

The artists were opposed not only to artists that used sexually explicit images to shock viewers, but also to those who devalued all sexually explicit art on the basis of its explicitness alone. Evan, a graphic designer in his mid-thirties, said, "What bums me out is that there are four square inches of the human body, where if you show it, you cross a line and it is perceived to have less value" (Field notes). The artists deemed the boundary of good taste not to be determined by what was portrayed, but by how it was portrayed. Nick, a professional photographer, elucidated this point further in an interview: "What matters is the whole essence of the woman...if [showing the vagina] is the only thing that made it erotic, then the rest of the shot failed." When discussing their artworks, the artists were as likely to consider the shadows falling across the model's feet as they were to remark on her pubic hair. For them, eroticism was not determined by the sexual explicitness of the image, but by whether the image had an emotional undercurrent of intimacy.

During the critique, the artists offered advice on artistic techniques and imagery, such as color, compositions, and symbols that would guide the viewer to interpret the work in accordance with the artist's intention; however, they also wanted the viewer to form his or her own interpretation of the work. Marc, a retired composer, stated, "When a viewer can interpret a work, that's fine art." Evan replied, "You have to be able to create your own relationship with it." As Wolff (2008:60-63) claims, "allusive realism," devoid of iconic imagery, is more likely to engage the viewer, as the viewer must form their own narrative about the piece, while complete abstraction risks communicating no meaning to the viewer. The artists believed that effective art struck a balance between maintaining implicitness of meaning while offering some visual cues to guide the viewer's interpretation.

The artwork strewn across the stage at the critique displayed a wide variety of artistic styles, ranging from representational oil paintings to comic strips; however, the artists viewed their common sense to be built not on a shared artistic style, but on a shared sense of eroticism. This sense relied on allusive realism to convey emotional intimacy through a variety of artistic styles. The artists' viewed their work in association, considering their submission as a group. For example, Julie wondered if she should submit a print of a model sitting in a hoop, derived from a sketch she did at the Salon. Brad, a professional oil painter, was submitting a painting using a similar pose, and she did not want to compete with his work. Brad encouraged her, saying: "It might spark their interest more...I think we have a strong submission as a group." For Brad, their pieces were strengthened by being viewed in association, as he believed that this made their shared erotic sense more compelling.

The artists crystallized their community of sense by differentiating themselves from other communities of sense. The artists most vehemently distinguished themselves from the "googly

eyes on balls” erotic artists, the kind of artists that they expected to pervade the Kinsey show. Deeming the jury to privilege a different community of sense, they hoped that their work would provide a welcome contrast to the erotic art they considered to be shock-seeking. At the critique, Freddy said:

If they turn us down, it will be more proof that we are doing something we should do...It will be a gauge of how important what we are doing in this room is...Erotic art has become shorthand for, “Come see my show. It’s shit.’ But then you’ve got people who are doing the same subject matter, but their execution elevates it. You get a lot of mileage out of misrepresenting things that I hold dear: art and sexuality and their combination.

Brad replied, “But we are different. We are here to do the whole thing.” Marie shouted triumphantly, “We have to fight them from the inside!” The artists’ submission as a group was a subversive act intended to establish their own community of sense by placing it in sharp juxtaposition with another community of sense. As Farrell (2001:279) notes, collaborative circles form by crystallizing their collective vision in relation to a shared target of contempt, promoting group solidarity.

The artists differentiated themselves from both those who were too overtly sexual and those who neglected sexuality. They considered their work collectively to reflect their community of sense, signaling to outsiders that they did not belong. Looking over their work, Brad commented to Freddy, “I think this speaks to everything that you and Marie have built over the last ten years. There is a reason that there aren’t ten guys in trench coats sitting in this room.” For Brad, “guys in trench coats” signified those who might come to the club seeking sexual interactions,

mistaking the club for a “sex club” or “swingers club.” Additionally, the artists also distinguished themselves from those who wholly neglected sexuality. During an interview, Evan said:

This place kind of saved my life. All of my friends from high school wear sweatpants and go to Costco on the weekends. They’ve given up. And they think I’m nuts and I think they’re nuts for wanting to move back to the suburbs and shop at the same [grocery store] my parents shopped at when I was in high school...[my wife and I] have an interest in things that would fall under that category of sexy or erotic or that sort of thing...I just want [my daughter] to know that being an adult and being a parent doesn’t mean it is all over now, I am just going to go home and watch America’s Funniest Home Videos and eat frozen chicken.

For Evan, people who spend their leisure time in sweatpants at discount grocery stores represent those who have abandoned sensuality for apathetic comfort in the mundane. The “googly eyes on balls” artists, the “guys in trench coats,” and the Costco shoppers were outsiders because they failed to appreciate the erotic sense. To the artists, the “googly eyes on balls” artists have subsumed sensuality with explicit sexuality, the “guys in trench coats” have conflated sensuality and explicit sexuality, and the Costco shoppers have neglected both. In all three cases, the artists viewed these people as disregarding eroticism; in contrast, the artists sought to reflect their sense of lived eroticism by rendering a *soft sensuality* in their art. By differentiating themselves from several kinds of outsiders, the artists inscribed their community of sense.

While the artists found a shared erotic sense, they differed in other ways. For example, Brad and Freddy had opposing philosophical, social, and political viewpoints. Freddy explained:

Brad and I disagree, I love him and I break his balls all the time, and we literally disagree philosophically on almost every point ... He gives me space and I give him space for those things, because there is a lot we agree on. We agree that sexy is better than not sexy. We agree that talent and execution are better than not talent and bad execution, artistically. And he wants more than anything for art to be great, and I want more than anything for art to be great. So those are pretty important things, and I think everything else maybe [is] arguable for us, and we argue a lot...I think with he and I, part of it is we both think we can get to the other person. (Interview)

Freddy and Brad continued to interact despite their disagreements, because they found common ground in their shared sense of eroticism. This common sense allowed them to identify each other as belonging to the same erotic community of sense, providing a basis for their communicability. They discovered this intersubjective understanding through their interactions. They mutually valued these social interactions because they both believed that that they were the same kind of person in terms of their erotic sense. As the community of sense was predicated on a shared erotic perspective, they could disagree on other matters of taste while the community of sense remained intact. The Storyville Social Club allowed members to discover their judgments of taste to be intersubjectively shared through their social interactions.

Delineating the Community of Sense: Insiders and Outsiders

While the artists believed that a work should afford the viewer his or her own interpretation, they found those who interpreted their work in accordance with their intentions and created work with similar intentions to be insiders in their community of sense; in contrast, those who did not appreciate the erotic interpretation or created work with a different intentions were deemed to belong to different communities of sense. This was illustrated by the members' reaction to the Kinsey show. Out of the members of the Storyville Social Club who submitted to the Kinsey show, only Freddy's piece, *Eternity's Sunrise*, a photogram picturing a nude woman on a swing, as in Figure 2, was accepted.

Figure 2: *Eternity's Sunrise*

Freddy and Marie drove four and a half hours to the show, believing, as Freddy claimed, that “even if there had been one interesting piece, it would have been worth it.” They were sorely disappointed. After twenty minutes, they left in disgust. At the Salon the following week, Freddy stated that they were “furious” about the show, which he described as “horrific.” Freddy mocked the show, exclaiming, “It was like, here is a giant dick with a light switch, and it says, *Light Switch for the Vatican*. I get it: priests like dicks.” Marie derided a work that consisted of crocheted cervixes as “stupid” and described a photograph of a nude elderly man with an erection, saying, “I don’t want to see a 70-year-old with a hard dick.” During an interview, Marie further explained that she disliked the artwork because it lacked multiple layers of meaning. Instead, she felt that the artists had feigned interpretive depth by shocking the viewer with explicit images and providing long written descriptions of their artistic intentions. Marie claimed that these works revealed the artists’ lack of courage, as the artists had politicizing sex in a way

that “takes the sex out of sex,” rather than render themselves vulnerable to their audience by displaying what they felt to be erotic. For Freddy and Marie, the artwork at the show revealed both a different artistic sensibility and moral integrity, proving that they belonged to a different community of sense.

Freddy stated that when he saw the show, he became “offended” that his work was accepted, because he did not want to be misrepresented as sharing their common sense which espoused sexually explicit, “shock-value” art. He plaintively asked the Salon members, “What does that say about [my artwork]?” By being accepted to a show that represented an incompatible community of sense, he felt as though he was misinterpreted as an adherent to that community of sense, instead of one who was “fighting it from the inside.” Since there were no other artworks representative of his own community of sense, it seemed that the selection committee had judged his submission to be of the “googly-eyes-on-balls” quality. However, he was able to reconcile his participation in the show when he saw that the other attendees did not appreciate his work:

When we went to the show, I was like, ‘No one is even looking at it.’ It was awesome. And I felt weird and angry and bad and also kind of vindicated, because I hated all of the other pieces in there. If I had liked every other piece of art and people didn’t care about mine, I would have been really, really mad, but since I didn’t like anything else, it was like, OK, it is cool that no one really liked my stuff ... I like to think that is special and it comes from a different approach, especially to the erotic stuff. And feeling like a complete outlier or outsider at that show, made me go, “OK, cool, yeah.” (Interview)

Because the members of the community of sense to which he was opposed failed to show interest in the work, he was able to vindicate himself as not a member of their community of sense after all, as their senses were not aroused by his work. In an interview, he stated, “If the wrong person doesn’t like it or doesn’t get it, it doesn’t mean you are doing something wrong.” Freddy argued that when the “wrong” kind of person makes an unfavorable judgment of taste, it does not necessarily make the object of taste the wrong type of object, as the right kind of person may take pleasure in the object; thus, the object may only be valued within the right community of sense. The Kinsey show became an “inverted group flag” (Farrell 2001:53) which further crystallized the group’s common sense.

The piece, *Eternity’s Sunrise*, a black-and-white photogram created by superimposing exposed objects on photographic paper, pictured a nude woman on a swing from a vantage point beneath the swing. While the vagina is featured prominently at the center of the composition, it is abstractly rendered by a curling insignia. The work referred to the eighteenth century oil painting by Jean-Honore Fragonard, *The Swing*, illustrating an elderly man pushing his wife on a swing, swathed in the layers of her gowns, while a younger man illicitly watched, ensconced in the bushes, supposedly enjoying a sight to which the viewer is not privy, as in Figure 3. During an interview, Freddy explained, “If you understand [the Fragonard] reference, then you realize, ‘Oh, that’s a swing,’ and then the picture starts to form” (Interview). One familiar with the Fragonard painting might recognize the vertical bar in Freddy’s composition as a swing and the curling emblem above it as a vagina; however, one unfamiliar with this piece may conclude that these shapes are mere abstractions.

Figure 3: *The Swing*

Through the non-representational imagery and the use of metaphors, Freddy communicated a sense of eroticism to those within this community of sense, while communicating something else to those outside of this community of sense. Fish (1976:485) describes the act of interpreting a written text similarly:

The very existence of the ‘marks’ [meaning-making strategies] is a function of the interpretive community, for they will be recognized (that is, made) only by its members. Those outside the community will be deploying a different set of interpretive strategies (interpretation cannot be withheld) and will therefore be making different marks.

Freddy’s claimed to use “motifs made not obvious” (Field notes), subtle symbols that can be interpreted in different ways. Brad praised the work during the critique, saying, “What is neat about it is that if you were a person that would object to lascivious imagery, on what grounds could you object to this?” As Freddy explained to the other artists, this flexibility in interpretation allowed Freddy to leave *Eternity’s Sunrise* hanging on the wall in their home when Marie’s mother, a devout Christian, visited, as she was unaware that she was looking at a depiction of her daughter’s vagina. As one who did not view the world with this sense, she missed the erotic interpretation. By not interpreting the artwork in terms of Freddy’s intentions, she revealed herself to be foreign to the community of sense to which he belonged. In this case, intersubjectivity failed to be confirmed between Freddy and his mother-in-law, as there was a disconnect between the intention and reception of the image.

While the other artists understood Marie's mother to be an outsider, they asserted themselves to be insiders. When Freddy presented his piece, they claimed that they "saw [the vagina] right away" and laughed (Field notes). Familiar with the Fragonard reference, they perceived the inside joke – the vagina that was only visible to some. Whether intentional or not, the implicitness of the imagery acted as a shibboleth that allowed those within the community of sense to communicate with each other, while remaining opaque to outsiders. Thus, as Bourdieu (1984:3) describes, the encounter with a work of art is a decoding operation, which serves as a mechanism for social closure against those who do not possess that particular code.

Maintaining the Community of Sense: Negotiating the Boundaries from Within

Members managed to present artwork that tested the boundaries of the group's common sense while maintaining their impression as insiders by contextualizing the work to fit within the group's common sense. This was exemplified during the critique prior to the members' show at the Storyville Social Club. In the aftermath of the Kinsey show, Freddy decided to host his own erotic art show, which Evan jokingly claimed should be entitled, "Too Hot for Kinsey" (Field notes). Freddy contrasted this show to the Kinsey show, explaining to the members, "It is a similar language, different execution." While he initially planned to hold the show in another gallery and elicit an open call for artwork, he feared that this would result in receiving "200 penis submissions" (Field notes) similar to the artwork at the Kinsey show. Thus, Freddy allowed only members of the club to submit to the show and exhibited the artwork at the club in conjunction with the club's second anniversary party. Freddy chose the theme "vulnerability," intending this to be interpreted in ways that were "empowering," instead of "victimizing," to the subject portrayed as vulnerable. He encouraged the artists to communicate the theme through allusive realism, using visual cues that guided the viewer but were not explicit:

There is a difference between explaining something outright and allowing someone to understand something that might be a little oblique. I am not opposed at all to a little handholding, because I don't think we should be just like 'fuck the audience,' because then what does it matter what we do? (Field notes)

Nathan, a freelance illustrator in his late twenties, quietly vetted a small ink and watercolor sketch of his intended piece to Evan and me prior to the formal critique of participants' submissions. The sketch pictured a woman's face, looking backward with a fearful expression, a pair of pink, lace-trimmed underwear stuffed in her mouth and a locked collar strapped around her neck, as in Figure 4. As Nathan later explained in an interview, he had gotten the idea for the piece from his girlfriend, who suggested that they enact that particular scene during BDSM¹¹ sex play. Evan, looking slightly uncomfortable, probed Nathan, "So you want her boundaries to be pushed but not violated?" Nathan said, "Yeah." I offered that he could clarify this intention by using a warmer color scheme and widening the woman's eyes so that she appeared more conscious. When I asked if this was helpful, he said, "Yeah, just seeing your reaction was helpful, just that you weren't totally freaked out by it...I was trying to hit that sweet spot where it was vulnerable, but not over the line." Nathan used Evan's and my affective reactions to gauge whether he was within the boundaries of the group's common sense, eliciting an emotional reaction in the viewer, the "sweet spot," without crossing "over the line" of good taste by making the woman look like she was being sexually violated.

¹¹ BDSM refers to a broader range of practices involving bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism, of which S/M (sadomasochism) is a part.

Figure 4: Nathan's sketch

The following week at the critique, Nathan presented the nearly completed piece, a large watercolor painting, as in Figure 5. The content of the image was similar, but he had added a pink flush to her cheeks and widened the eyes. The artists, seated in a semi-circle on the baroque couches, fell silent when Freddy balanced the large watercolor on a chair in front of the group. Brad asked, "What's in her mouth?" Nathan replied nervously, shifting his feet, "It's, uh, a pair of panties." Brad stared at the painting speechlessly, his mouth hanging open. Nathan gave a stuttering explanation of the painting, "So, where do I start on this. I wanted a complexity of emotion. A mix of uncertainty and fear. It's an S/M [sadism and masochism], top/bottom thing." Silence fell again, which Freddy broke by joking, "A lot of people don't realize that Evan modeled for this." The room erupted in laughter as if a pressure valve had been released. Nathan tried to calibrate the reception: "Do any of you feel like I am way off base on this one?" Tim, a suburban videogame designer in his forties, replied, "It is definitely disturbing. If you didn't describe it, I would not know that she is a willing participant...I think there is room on her back for a tattoo." Nathan asked him what it would say, and Tim replied, "I don't know, I love BDSM?" prompting another round of cathartic laughter. Freddy said, "Well...I am not very aware of BDSM culture, but to me the collar says that she is a willing participant." Evan agreed, "I definitely got that." Brad demanded, "What about this tells the viewer that it is not someone being completely victimized?" Nathan stated, "That was the challenge. I tried to do that with the collar and [the expression in] the eyes. In my sketch, I had her eyes more closed and then when I added the blue, I was like, 'Oh my god, she looks like a corpse.'" Brad continued to stare at the painting with his mouth open, shaking his head and shrugging as if unconvinced by the image.

Tanya, a real-estate agent in her fifties, stated, “There’s an edge to it.” Nathan replied, “Well, I wanted to keep some of that.” Freddy said, “[Permissiveness] is something we try to do in this room, give people permission to have fun, to enjoy themselves sexually. It is a subtle balance. I am uncomfortable here, because the permissiveness is not at the forefront. Even if she had the slightest grin...” He trailed off, and Marc broke the silence, joking, “You could add a Twister board in the background,” eliciting more laughter. Again, Nathan resisted politely, “I don’t want to soften it too much.” Freddy replied, “All you need is one brushstroke [on the lips].” Nathan thanked everyone for their comments, saying, “I kind of felt safe presenting it in this space because you all know me.” The following week, Nathan submitted the piece, unaltered, to the show. Freddy put his arm around Nathan’s shoulder, looking at the piece contemplatively. He questioned Nathan’s decision not to change the mouth, asking, “It didn’t feel right?” Nathan replied, “No, It didn’t.” Freddy nods, “All right, man,” he said, seeming to accept this explanation.

Figure 5: Nathan’s completed work

Nathan’s piece tested the boundaries of the group’s common sense. While Freddy stated that BDSM was not really “our thing,” the group was not opposed to BDSM, and some members, including Nathan, were practitioners. Thus, the BDSM sex scene was not in itself seen to be in bad taste; instead, the image was outside the boundaries of good taste for members who did not interpret the sexual interaction in the image as definitively consensual. For the members, consensual sex was a requirement for both erotic art and erotic sex; thus, sexual images had to be interpreted as consensual to be in good taste. Members who were familiar with BDSM culture

interpreted the visual cues of the collar and the facial expression as consensual sex play; however, members unfamiliar with BDSM culture interpreted the image as a woman potentially being sexually violated.

The artists, uncomfortable with the potential interpretation of nonconsensual sex, offered suggestions for “softening” the image. These included jokes, such as adding a tattoo or a Twister board, as well as more serious stylistic suggestions, such as using a warmer color scheme and rendering the subject’s lips in a slight smile of consent. As the work was not unequivocally rejected, Nathan ultimately chose not to further soften the image. By explaining the BDSM context to the group, he hoped to remain just within the boundaries of good taste, while consciously pushing the theme of vulnerability to the edge of this boundary by leaving open the question of consent within the image itself.

The following week, as we hung our work for the show, Tim entered without a piece. When I asked him where it was, he sheepishly explained, “I’m going to sit this one out. I couldn’t get it ready in time.” Later, during an interview, he confessed the overriding reason for his nonparticipation: “To me, Nathan’s image looked like a person being raped, and it made me uncomfortable to the point that I did not want to be a part of [the show].” Tim, who had little exposure to BDSM culture, explained that he “totally missed that intended message.” However, even after Nathan’s explanation, the piece troubled him, as he thought that others that attended the show may also interpret the image as a rape scene. He chose not to participate in the show, because he did not want his work to be associated with work that could be seen as promoting violence against women.

Tim concealed this reason for his nonparticipation, because he did not want to offend Nathan. While for Tim, the image fell outside of these boundaries of good taste, Nathan managed to remain within these boundaries. During an interview, he explained, “I like the artist, and I don’t think the artist meant anything mean or evil, but that was the impression I had. It surprised me when I saw it...It didn’t communicate to me the message that was intended. I think if I didn’t know the artist, it would be like, ‘What jerk made this?’” Because Tim already considered Nathan to belong to the community of sense, he deemed Nathan’s piece, but not Nathan’s person, to be in bad taste. In turn, Nathan stated that he felt “safe” presenting the piece to the group, because the artists knew him personally. He was confident that his personhood would remain intact, even if the image was deemed in bad taste. Nathan maintained the common sense by conveying good intentions through an acceptable narrative context for the image, and repeatedly elicited responses from the other members to see if he was “over the line” or “way off base.” The artists’ mutual belief in their common sense allowed Nathan to play with boundaries of good taste without feeling threatened by exclusion.

Affirming the Community of Sense: Backstage and Front Stage Challenges

The reception of another piece at the critique further illustrates the interactional work required to maintain the group’s common sense, showing how members managed differences in common sense both inside and outside of the club. After Nathan presented his piece, Nick, who was participating in the show although he rarely attended the Salon, stated: “I feel a little better showing some of my stuff because it is along the same lines.” He laid three large black-and-white photographs flat on the stage, and the artists gathered around the works. The first two

photographs pictured a shapely nude woman in stilettos holding a cloudy plastic pane through which her blurred body was visible, one of which can be seen in Figure 6. The third photograph portrayed a different nude woman lying spread-legged in a wooden box, her slender body encased in a transparent shower curtain, as in Figure 7.

Figure 6: Photograph of nude woman holding transparency

Figure 7: Photograph of nude woman wrapped in shower curtain

Freddy pointed to the third photograph, saying, “Well, I’ve seen a lot of your work, and that’s the one. This is the clear winner, with her eye pressed against the sheet.” Nick replied, “The inclusion of the other two were because I hadn’t seen the other work here, so if I came [to the Salon] and I thought it was more about sexiness, then here you go.” He gestured towards the first two photographs. “Hedging your bet,” Freddy said with a grin. After Nathan had presented a riskier piece without outright sanction, Nick felt confident that his piece would be accepted within the group’s common sense. However, he still exhibited the first two photographs alongside the third, as the first two photographs portrayed a softer eroticism, tempering the third photograph.

He further attenuated the third photograph by describing the context in which the photo was taken and his artistic intention. Nick describes the scene to the members: “It was a very sexually charged day. The room was 96 degrees. We were sweating. That shower curtain had been in the trunk of my car for three years, and I had just been waiting for a model to choose it and want to

play with it.” Freddy jokes, “He had to unroll the dead body first,” eliciting a round of laughter. Nick explains his intention, “She is holding the plastic in place, not against her will. What I always want to do in my work, especially with female figures, is to empower them.” He explains that he was toying with the concept of voyeurism in the piece: “In the one sense, you think, who is being exposed? Is it the model or the viewer?” Nick intended to render the model as a voyeur, as she brazenly stares back at the camera through the sheet which partially obscures her body.

The other artists read his intention of empowerment similarly. At the critique, Evan said, “She seems very powerful.” Nathan interjected, “It is super hardcore.” Freddy stated, “It is very sensual to me. It is raw, but sexy.” Following the artists’ suggestions, Nick ultimately decided to exhibit the third photograph alone in the show. Later, when discussing this decision, he stated that although he identified the third photograph as the strongest piece, he wanted to gauge the group’s reaction to see whether he was “missing something” (Field notes). After Nick identified that his taste was held in common with the group, he used the group consensus to verify his erotic sense. As Collingwood (1938:314) notes in explaining the artist’s relationship to his or her audience as an expression of the community’s shared emotion, “Unless [the artist] sees his own proclamation, ‘This is good’, echoed in the faces of the audience – ‘Yes, this is good’ – he wonders whether he was speaking the truth or not.” Because Nick believed that he shared a common sense with the group, their judgments of taste were significant to him.

While the artists seemed to concur that the third photograph was in good taste during the critique, one artist, Tanya, later confessed being disturbed by the piece. During an interview, she told me:

It bothered me the whole way home and when I was trying to go to sleep, primarily because I felt like I didn't even get a chance to talk about it because of the dynamics that night in the group. It looked to me like the figure was being violated in some way, and it looked like that figure was being held captive ... The fact that figure also looked to me very young, like an adolescent, was very violating to me... And no one else was addressing that or seemed to care. Like no one else even acknowledged that, and I was like, "What's going on? Why am I having this strong reaction to that and no one else is?"

While Tanya was troubled by the image itself, she was also distressed that the other artists had not shared this sense of uneasiness, as this made her feel as if she belonged to a different community of sense. Furthermore, she had felt unable to communicate her discomfort. When I probed as to why the group's "dynamics" did not allow her voice her concerns during the critique, she stated, "I thought that [Freddy] had already made it clear that he loved this, and it was the best out of the three works there" (Interview). Freddy, as the owner of the club, acted as the group's gate-keeper (Farrell 2001:85). For Tanya, Freddy's affirmation represented the legitimated viewpoint of the group; thus, she was hesitant to contest his judgment of taste, as this would place her in opposition to the group's common sense.

The next week at the Salon, Tanya leaned over to Nick, whispering, "I have to tell you, I was really disturbed by this. After I saw it last week, it bothered me the whole car ride home. It was just that she looked so young to me, almost childlike, and I have two girls at home." Nick replied, "Oh, OK, well she wasn't actually young. She is very athletic, she's a dancer, so that's why you have those slim lines." He also explained that the model was kneeling with her legs

tucked under her, making her appear shorter. Tanya nodded, explaining that that was evident now that she was able to view the photograph more closely. She said, “And now I am noticing her tattoo, so I know that she is not actually a child.” Nick asked Tanya if she could tell that the model is holding the sheet, rather than being bound in it, and Tanya nodded again. Later, Nick told me that he was glad that Tanya gave him “negative feedback,” explaining that “taking the edge off and kind of talking about the story behind it made her accept it” (Field notes). When I asked Tanya how she felt about the image after confronting Nick, she stated that she was no longer disturbed by the image after viewing it more closely. While reconsidering the piece in a certain context may have produced a different interpretation, forming an interpretation that conformed to the group’s consensus may have also alleviated the anxiety of feeling like an outsider.

During the Salon and critiques, artists were hesitant to assert perceived differences in their erotic sense, preferring to praise each other’s artwork and provide gentle technical suggestions. When distinctions were made, it was during interviews and one-on-one conversations outside of the club. For example, during an interview, Evan differentiated his artwork from that of the representational artists at the Salon:

It is kind of interesting to me when I see the other artists’ [work], and I kind of feel like they have done unflattering drawings, because that’s what they saw, and I see those things too, I am like, ‘Oh yeah, I saw that roll,’ but, that is not really what I am trying to capture. Then again, that is my aesthetic. I mean, I am not critical of what they were doing...I guess when you talk about idealizing, it kind of goes back to that idea of cartooning ... the definition of cartooning is that with an economy of line [the artist is] boiling down something.

Julie noted the same distinction: “I probably am a little more clinical. I think I am probably a little less flattering in my depictions of the models, and I don’t know whether that’s because some of the artists are illustrators, but they generally make the models look pretty” (Interview). In a car ride with Julie after the Salon, she elaborated on this difference by comparing Evan’s and Nick’s erotic photography. She explained that she deemed Nick’s photography to be sexier than Evan’s, because she felt that Nick worked more collaboratively with the models to capture their essence, while Evan’s photographs evoked clichéd sexiness by portraying what he, instead of the model, found to be sexy. However, she quickly explained that as an amateur photographer, Evan had not had the same opportunities and time as Nick to develop his skills, asserting that she was not trying to “degrade” his art. She expressed her appreciation the club for affording her social interactions with like-minded people. She asked me not to repeat our conversation, as she did not want to cause conflict in the group

While both Julie and Evan recognized differences in their expression of eroticism, they only broached this topic outside of the club in what Goffman (1959:111-12) would call the “backstage,” avoiding confronting these differences in the “front region” of the club. As Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003:772) note, groups may have a dominant style that members will try to maintain, but they may also have submerged styles that emerge backstage. Sustaining front stage agreement allows social interaction run more smoothly (Goffman 1967:28-29). Julie requested that her confession be kept private so as to avoid front stage conflict. Collaborative circles must foster open, critical communication, while keeping dissent within acceptable bounds (Farrell 2001:296). Thus, the community of sense involves a community of silence, requiring participants to have a sense of what not to say.

However, even backstage, the members worked to sustain their common sense. Both Evan and Julie were quick to assert that they were not criticizing one another, and they downplayed their differences by attributing them to variations in artistic style, not erotic sense. Marie reflected on the group's varied artistic styles, stating, "You might all have the same feelings about things, but your talent contributes to how well you can express your idea, and it is going to come out differently for everybody, and what their strong suit is. Evan does illustration, that's his strong suit, so [his artwork] came out like a comic strip" (Interview). She asserted that the artists' wide-ranging artistic styles were rooted in a shared erotic sense. As the members saw each other as the few that "got it" in a world that largely failed to share their common sense, they found relief and pleasure in interacting with those they mutually perceived to share their erotic sense. Thus, affirming their common sense in their social interactions both within and outside of the group confirmed their belonging in a community of sense.

Actualizing the Community of Sense: Self-Realization

On the night of the show, fringed curtains partitioned one corner of the room, and the artists' work hung on the walls and curtains in the interior space, dubbed "the opium den." The gallery area was illuminated with spotlights, while the rest of the room remained dim. Throughout the night, burlesque dancers took turns gyrating on the bar in lingerie, while artistic pieces, such as erotic video art, were exhibited intermittently on the stage. The show was open to the public with over 100 attendees, most of whom were members of the club or accompanying members. The crowd was an eclectic mix of formally attired middle-aged professionals and stylish hipsters in their 30s and 40s. Men wore suits while women dressed in everything from evening gowns to corsets, some exposing their breasts through the sheer fabric of their elaborate costumes. Couples engaged in lengthy kisses and caresses as people filtered in and out of the gallery, shouting to be

heard over the blaring house music. The artists clustered in the gallery with their significant others, while the other guests passed through intermittently, exhibiting mild interest and polite commendations as they briefly paused over each work. Tim attended, spending most of the night in the gallery talking to the other artists, his hands bunched stiffly in the pockets of his beige overcoat.

In reflecting on the show during the following weeks, the artists had mixed feelings. While they reported to have enjoyed themselves, they complained that the dim lighting and loud room was not conducive to viewing their art. Moreover, in the excitement of the party, the artists felt that the other attendees had largely overlooked their artwork. However, while the show was not exactly what they had envisioned, they were pleased to have participated. For Evan, being part of the show allowed him to see himself belonging to a community of sense which he esteemed. He explained, “Friday night [at the show], I was thinking: growing up, if I saw the artists in this room, I would have wanted to be them, and now I am” (Field notes). In reflecting on himself as belonging among those whom he wished to become, Evan confirmed, not only to other people, but also to himself, that he had realized his aspirations. In locating themselves within a community of sense at the Storyville Social Club, the artists’ erotic sense became a shared social reality.

REFLECTING ON THE COMMUNITY OF SENSE

The members of the Storyville Social Club confirmed a shared erotic sense through their social interactions. In differentiating themselves from other communities of sense, they defined their community of sense, deeming those who communicated similar judgments of taste as insiders and those who did not as outsiders. Through their social interactions, members

maintained their impression as insiders, playing with, but within, these boundaries by contextualizing their artwork in accordance with the group's common sense. The members managed differences in common sense by broaching these distinctions backstage and affirming their overriding common sense. In asserting an intersubjective common sense within the group, the members not only actualized their judgments of taste confirmed in a shared social reality, but also validated themselves. Thus, sharing common sense is predicated not on merely displaying similar judgments of erotic art, but also on showing that one embodied the shared erotic sense. By situating themselves within a community of sense, individuals not only communicated their taste, but also, as Arendt ([1961] 2006:220) would say, "who belongs together" and "what kind of person [one] is."

In presenting their work to each other and other audiences, the artists were aware of their audiences' expectations. Through their interactions with various audiences, they consciously situated themselves within a community of sense. During the critique for the Kinsey show, the members collectively refused to conform to what they believed their audience's inclinations to be, as they perceived the audience to belong to a different community of sense. In attending the show, Freddy's failure to conform to the audience's taste was proven by the audience's disinterest, confirming him, to his relief, as a member of a different community of sense. During the critique for the Storyville show, the members contextualized their artwork to fit within the group's common sense. In attending the show, the members, though disappointed by the audience's inattention, were satisfied in being the artists at that kind of show, as it proved them to be part of a community of sense they espoused. In communicating with various audiences by exhibiting and discussing their work, the artists located themselves in the community of sense which represented the kind of people they viewed themselves as and wished to be.

While sociologists have extensively researched judgments of taste, they tend to reduce taste to a mechanism of distinctions between classes. In this conception, taste itself remains a “black box” (Acord 2010:451). In contrast, aesthetic philosophy has thoroughly theorized the characteristics of taste; however, in their analyses, taste tends to be disembodied from social interactions. Thus, I apply Kant’s ([1790] 2000) notion of intersubjectivity to Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of distinctions in taste; however, I examine intersubjectivity within the context of a small group, viewing the group as a “community of sense.” I propose a perspective of “social aesthetics,” which examines how taste is negotiated in face-to-face interactions. This perspective allows for a socially embedded exploration of the mechanisms of taste.

Applying a socially embedded interpretation of Kant’s ([1790] 2000) concept of *sensus communis* to a microsociological study of social interaction allows for a richer understanding of how taste operates within groups. Through social interaction, individuals communicate their judgments of taste to others, finding their judgments of taste to be in concord or discord with one another. When individuals find their subjective tastes to be shared, a common sense is confirmed. This common sense provides the basis for the community of sense to be formed and maintained. As Hennion (2004:6) notes, “Taste is a most efficient ‘group-maker.’” Belonging to the group is predicated on communicating that one shares the group’s common sense and actively calibrating one’s common sense in relation to the community of sense.

In positing taste as *a priori* to interaction, Kant ([1790] 2000) argues for the disinterestedness of taste, claiming that taste is segregated from social interests. In contrast, I illustrate that an individual cannot be indifferent when making judgments of taste; instead, one must be aware that when one’s judgments are made public through their communication, one will be judged for one’s taste. Here, it is useful to apply the sociology of taste to understand taste

as a form of social competence. As Bourdieu (1984) claims, “Taste classifies the classifier” (p. 6); thus, judgments of taste make distinctions between both objects and the individuals who judge them as in “good” or “bad” taste. However, these classifications are not reducible to class. In communicating their judgments of works of art, individuals find themselves judged as insiders or outsiders in communities of sense, bound by perceived common sense. Thus, social competence requires awareness that oneself is being judged in the communication of one’s subjective taste. As Hennion (2004:135) argues in the case of amateur music listeners, subjects are not engaging in the passive play of cultural dopes (see Garfinkel 1967), but instead display an “elaborate competence” in their self-awareness of their use of taste itself as a form of distinction.

To understand how taste operates in social interactions within groups, it is critical to draw from both aesthetic philosophy and the sociology of taste. Taste operates intersubjectively, in that subjective, *a priori* judgments of taste are found to be intersubjective through social interaction. However, taste also operates as a game of social competence, in that the individual must appreciate that his or her subjective tastes become a self-reflection once communicated, with the social consequence of positioning the individual as an insider or outsider. Therefore, achieving belonging in a group requires already having the social competence to interact in that community of sense, as the participants believe themselves to be the kind of people who “get it” prior to their interactions, and achieving social competence in interaction, as they calibrate their actions in different circumstances to fit the group’s common sense. As Gronow (1997) claims, interpreting Gadamer (1975:12), “Good taste, thus, was both an indicator of belonging to ‘good society’, and the main criterion of entry into it.” Taste operates in face-to-face interactions both intersubjectively and as a game of social competence.

However, in conceptualizing taste as a cultural game (Bourdieu 1984:498), I do not invalidate the principle of pleasure by reducing taste to a mere game of distinction. While distinction is an essential process by which individuals position themselves and are positioned inside and outside of groups, there is a pleasure in the activity of taste itself. At the Storyville Social Club, distinction did not always benefit the members, as the marginalized status of its judgment of taste often required the members to conceal their membership or risk enduring the vitriol of those who may disapprove. If it were not for the pleasure in both their erotic sense and in sharing these judgments of taste within a group, it is unlikely they would undergo such social hazards. While this pleasure cannot be separated from the social sphere, with all of its purposes, neither can it be reduced to the motive of distinction. My results call for analyzing the sociological exploration of pleasure through the perspective of social aesthetics.

While cultural sociology has neglected to examine how mechanisms of taste operate in face-to-face interactions, aesthetic philosophy has largely overlooked group boundaries and a shared social strategy for distinction in constituting aesthetic experience. Sociologists must uncloak the intersubjectivity of taste. Intersubjectivity provides a lens to see how taste creates warm and tight webs of affiliation. It is this that for sociologists creates *L'Origine du Monde*.

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FIGURES

Figure 1: *L'Origine du Monde*

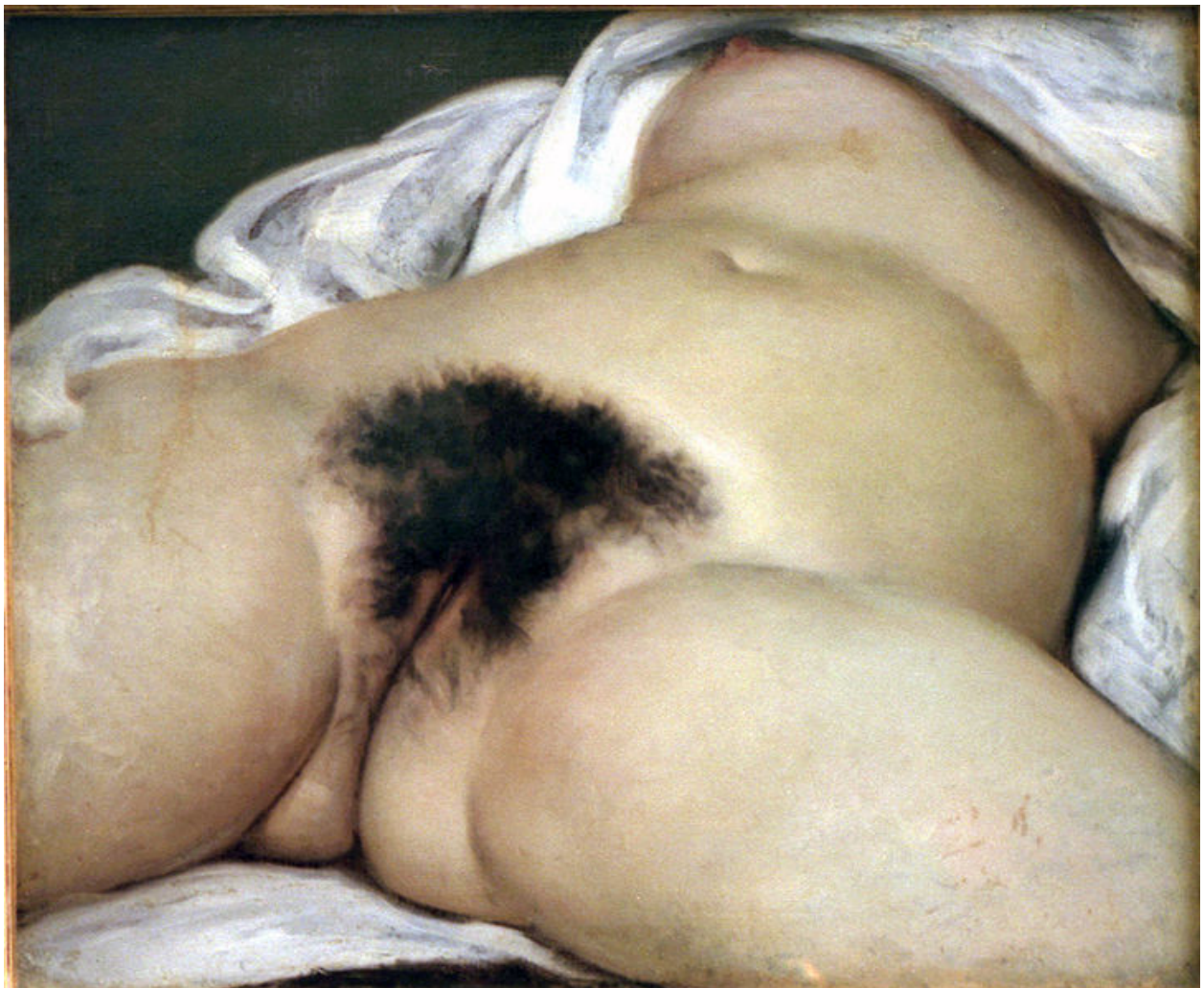


Figure 2: *Eternity's Sunrise*



Figure 3: *The Swing*



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Figure 4: Nathan's sketch

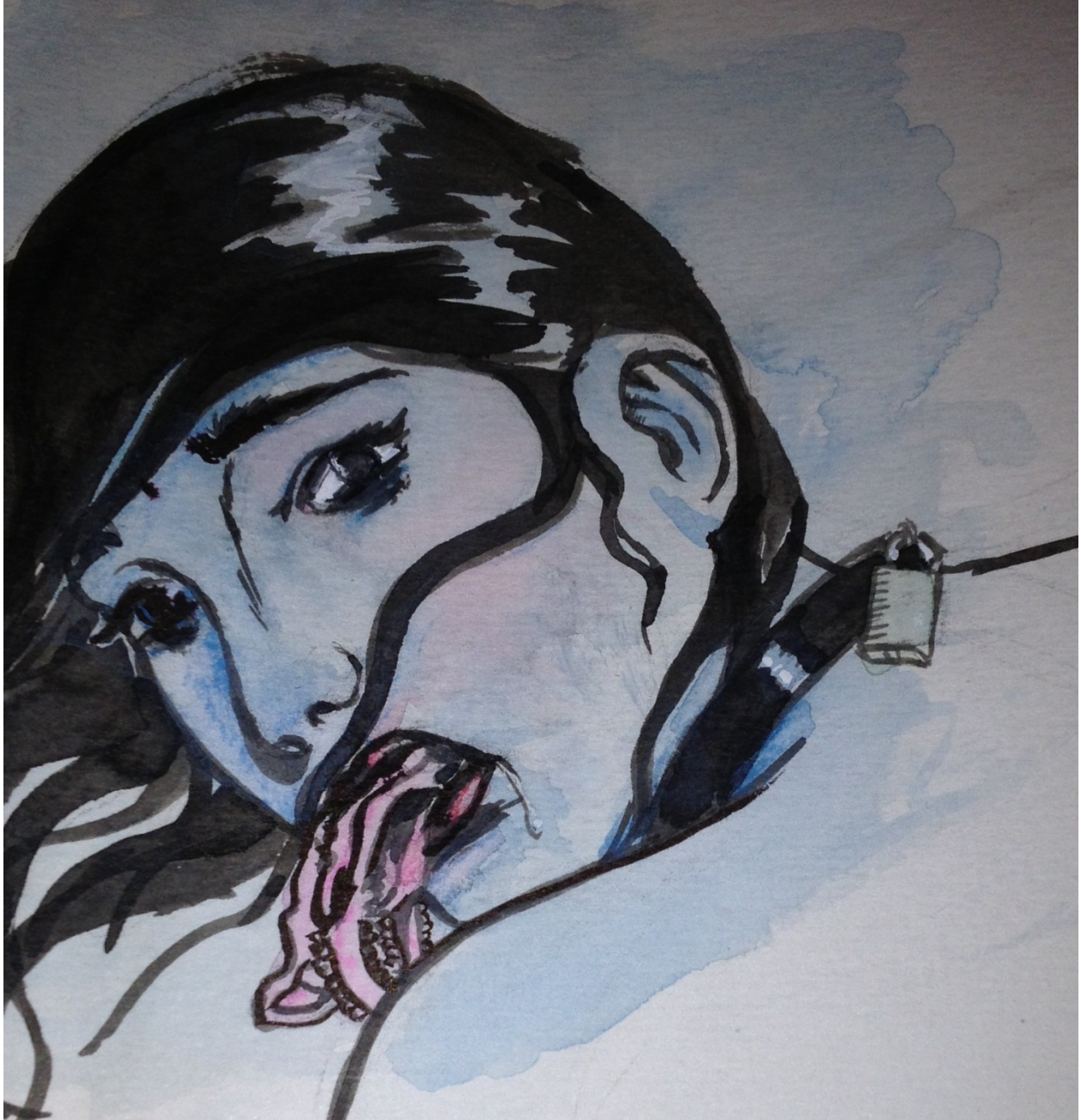


Figure 5: Nathan's completed work



Figure 6: Nick's "sexy" photograph



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Figure 7: Nick's "edgy" photograph

