

*Reproduced from Femicide: The Politics of Woman Killing.
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THE INCREDIBLE CASE OF THE STACK O' WHEAT PRINTS

Nikki Craft

The print shown in the breakfast setting was reproduced from a collection of 10 photographs in the University of California Santa Cruz Special Collections Library called *The Incredible Case of the Stack o' Wheat Murders*. In each print, a woman appears to have been murdered. She is attractive, nude—and in the words of the accompanying informational pamphlet, "the postures are far less telling of struggle than of surrender, provocativeness, and sensuality."

Streaming from her body and swirling onto the floor are enormous quantities of what seems to be blood. The reviewer comments, "Of course the epitome of the series' humor resides in all the Hershey's chocolate used." Beside the victim in each photograph is a stack of pancakes. Purchasers of these 14" by 17" prints (at a cost of \$450) also receive 8 ozs. of Hershey's Chocolate syrup and "enough pancake mix to make one complete Stack o' Wheats."

Presumably, the prints have been kept in Special Collections for their re-deeming artistic/intellectual qualities. But the choice of the model, her poses, and the use of coke bottles, half-eaten bananas, etc., as props, make it difficult to view them as anything more than violent pornography. No matter what the artist's intent, the erotic language used to market them destroys any justification for them to remain in the sanctuary of the UCSC Library. For example, the reviewer observes that "There is a chance that discrete pleasure will be received from the portrayed transgression of another body—a profound ecstasy. . . ." He also notes that the "blood" "did little to hide the body's harmonious lines, but rather gave it new beauty." He refers to "utterly exquisite corpses." The inclusion of the pancake mix is the final insult to all womankind, the implication being that the purchaser can construct his own scene—create his own victim.

Violent pornography is an expression of something profoundly real in male psychology. Violent pornography is the theory; rape is the practice. To expect women to tolerate the protection of this sadistic chic in their school library is

Nikki Craft's Stack o' Wheat prints press release (31 March 1980) and speech "In Defense of Disobedience" (written Spring 1980) have been merged and edited for this volume by Diana E. H. Russell, with Craft's permission.

unreasonable. Blacks would not tolerate the "humorous" prints of Klan lynchings. Jews would not tolerate the satirical depiction of Jews in baking ovens. To ask women to be good civil libertarians at a time when we are being mutilated, raped, and murdered in massive numbers is to ask us to passively accept our own victimization.

The day after I viewed these prints, I read on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* of the murder of Barbara Schwartz, who was stabbed to death while jogging on Mount Tamalpais. She was described as "curled in the fetal position, the front of her blouse drenched in blood as she lay in the shadows under the redwoods—her dog's nose pressed against her lifeless arm."

I was reminded of another *Chronicle* story about another San Francisco area jogger, Mary Bennet, 23 years old, who died after a violent struggle defending herself against a "frenzied killer" rapist. She was stabbed 25 times, with multiple stab wounds on her face, neck, and chest. Golfers stated that they heard her "long, agonized screams," but did not investigate because they saw a police car in the area. Her body was discovered "much later by a party of hikers when they followed a trail of blood and saw one of the woman's feet protruding from a shallow grave of leaves."

As I continued reading the grisly account of Barbara Schwartz's death, I remembered the satirical pamphlet I had seen in the University library the day before—how "the epitome of the series' humor" resides in all the chocolate syrup used as blood.

In the same *Chronicle* article the chairman of the San Francisco Council on Physical Fitness warned all women of the "extreme danger of jogging in any city during the day . . ." and advised all women to jog in groups, preferably on specified jogging tracks.

When I went jogging that day, I wondered what beach I should go to—which one was safe. As I jogged I was wrenched by the image of Barbara Schwartz curled in a fetal position. I felt Mary Bennet's long, agonized screams that went unanswered to be the screams of all women everywhere.

It was then that I decided to destroy the Stack o' Wheat prints in the McHenry library. The Stack o' Wheat prints were destroyed as they were born: with chocolate syrup poured on torn pieces. Les Krims has taken the torn pieces of all womankind, poured chocolate syrup on them, and served them on a platter to reinforce the preconceptions of a violent, woman-hating society. I have taken torn pieces of Les Krims' work, poured chocolate syrup over them, and served them to make an artistic statement, to bring some very vital issues into focus, and to try to change the circumstances of women's and men's lives.

I destroyed these woman-hating prints in the name of all women who must live moment by moment with awareness of possibly becoming the next statistic on some police file; for all women who must live as if in a war zone, constantly on guard. I did this with the understanding that destroying violent pornography will not solve the problem of how men think and feel about us, but that assertive, direct actions such as this will affect the way we think and feel our-

selves; and with the understanding that our very lives rest on our commitment to refuse to collaborate in our own destruction.

What I have done has been referred to as "censorship." But there is a distinction between official censorship and a moral decision by one individual to destroy a publicity packet that violates all of humanity. And my insistence that such illustrations of the mutilation of a woman's body and spirit are not art does not mean that I feel it should be subject to government censorship.

Official censorship is dangerous—it can be used against all of us. And my own action, without the educational process that accompanied it, would have been inexcusable. I am not opposed to the use of these prints for educational purposes: they were shown at the Forum at my insistence, and I have displayed them at tables I have set up on campus. In fact, I have requested their public display in the lobby of the library. But as they were in Special Collections, they were without a context other than the accompanying promotional pamphlet. In this light, their presence is inappropriate and offensive, itself an instance of violence against women.

Although I continue to object to official censorship, I support illegal actions such as this one, undertaken by individual women and groups of women and men who commit themselves to these acts—not taking them lightly, but evaluating creatively their responsibility to other women and men, to their communities, to the world, and to themselves. Those who choose these kinds of actions must consider every possible consequence they may incur, personally and politically, long-term and immediate. It is of utmost importance that we be willing to take moral responsibility for our actions, whether publicly as I have done, or privately, as some will choose to do.

I support the actions of Red Zora in West Germany, who stole \$50,000 worth of merchandise from sex shops, leaving a leaflet signed, "avenger of the oppressed"; I support the Bluebird Five who spray-painted and pasted leaflets on a local porn shop—as I support all women who realize the urgency of our circumstances and take responsibility for dealing with the sexual violence that is pervading our lives. These efforts, our energy, our time, our money, and our lives, we give to change the course of history. We do this so that our children and their children will not be forced to live with the same fear that women of past generations have grown to accept.

If I have learned anything in my years of volunteer social service work in this area, it is that stopping the rape, mutilation, and murder of women rests in our hands. Even after reading the grisly headlines, society in general, and, perhaps, men in particular, may have uttered a dutiful "how terrible"; but little active interest has been shown in the battle against this violence and its climate of fear. And until stopping this violence becomes a societal priority, we are left with the enormous task of finding a solution. Our desperate attempts may be controversial and at times illegal. However, no matter how we choose to deal with this monstrous burden, until drastic changes occur in attitudes and the way we are forced to live our lives each day, we have little to lose.

I refuse to align myself with any individual or group whose goal is sexual repression. I will work to defend freedom of access to any information or expression of any ideas concerning honest sexuality or erotica of any kind. Explicit sexual material has its place in literature, art, science, and education, and most of all in the public domain. What I do think is that we need a new definition of obscenity that focuses on violence, not sex—on the intent to degrade and dehumanize the female body for sexual stimulation. What I am unalterably opposed to is the female body being stripped, bound, raped, tortured, mutilated, and murdered in the name of entertainment and free speech.

As long as we read of women murdered by misogynist men—women like Karen Mondic, Diane Wilder, Laura Collins, Yolanda Washington, Judith Ann Miller, Lisa Theresa Kastin, Kitty Genovese, Jill Barcomb, Kathleen Robinson, Kristina Weckler, Mary Vincent, Sonja Johnson, Dolores Cepeda, Mary Bennet, Jane Evelyn King, Laura Rae Wagner, Kimberly Diane Martin, Cindy Lee Hudspeth, Edda Kane, Barbara Schwartz, Andrea Joy Hall, Jackie Doris Gilliam, Jacqueline Leah Lamp, Lucinda Schaefer, Shirley Linett Ledford, Mary Ann Pesce, Anita Luchessa, Aiko Koo, Cynthia Schall, Rosalind Thorpe, Alice Liu, Clarnell Strandberg, Sara Hallett, and Diane Steffy—we must examine the portrayal, by all forms of media, of women as unwilling victims.

It is not just a matter of our personal distaste for this material. It is a matter of our very lives resting on the false conceptions about women that Les Krims has perpetuated in his series. Even though there is a debate as to whether there is in fact a direct correlation between violent acts and pornography—and I happen to believe there is—women cannot afford to wait until definitive results come in. No matter how pornography affects men, in order to maintain our self-respect, we must refuse to allow *anyone* to portray us as victims in the manner Les Krims did. And we must attack all others who financially profit at our expense from this type of degradation.

I agree that censorship is a deadly menace. It silences us and destroys our spirit. When it is enforced, people live in fear of expression themselves. But violence against women is the ultimate silencer—it destroys women's lives. It makes us afraid, not only of expressing ourselves, but of being ourselves. And when night closes in, it comes like a prison.

THE EVIDENCE OF PAIN

D. A. Clarke

On March 31, 1980, long-time feminist activist and ceramicist Nikki Craft walked into the Special Collections room of the University of California library at Santa Cruz and tore up a set of photographic reproductions; she then poured

Hershey's syrup over the shreds. She claimed, in a public statement, that the prints' unquestioned presence in the protected collection was an insult and a threat to all women.

Craft was arrested, as was professional photographer Bill Reynolds, who documented the event. They were both charged with felony conspiracy, questioned, and released. Later, the arresting officer was to add his signature to many others recommending Craft for a Chancellor's Award for "significant contribution to campus understanding of ethical principles."

Controversy raged on the small campus, some individuals going so far as to call Craft a "censor" and a "fascist." Heated correspondence was printed in the student newspaper; many members of the Aesthetic Studies department were outraged at the destruction of "art" and demanded punitive action against Craft.

It saddens me deeply that this campus has been in more turmoil over the symbolic destruction of a \$3 set of prints than over the murder of Diane Steffy last November. Diane Steffy was a student at our university and she was silenced forever.

I agree that censorship is a deadly menace to the human spirit—it silences—it destroys our spirit. When it is enforced, people live in fear of expressing themselves. But violence against women is the ultimate silencer—it destroys women's lives. It makes us afraid, not only of expressing ourselves, but of being ourselves. And when night closes in, it comes like a prison.

—Nikki Craft

The photographs were part of a boxed packet by New York photographer Les Krims, *The Incredible Case of the Stack o' Wheat Murders* (published in 1972). Each sepia-toned print shows a woman, stripped either from the waist down or completely, lying in what appear to be pools of her own blood. Apparently dead, she is usually gagged and bound, sometimes her entire head is wrapped in a bag or cloth; in several prints she bears realistic knife wounds. She is always in a mundane, familiar setting, and near her in every picture is a stack of whole wheat pancakes.

Curator Robert Sobieszek, whose critique accompanies the prints, finds the series a "humorous" treatment of what are often called *signature murders*: murders in which the victims are subjected to a characteristic mutilation, or in which some idiosyncratic object, symbol, or message is left at the scene. Sobieszek writes, "Of course, the epitome of the series' humor resides in all the chocolate syrup used as blood."

In every picture, the woman's partial or complete nudity, as well as the photographer's penchant for posing her with spread legs, strongly intimate that she has been raped either prior to or after her death. In the kitchen scene, there is an upright Coke bottle left standing between her thighs, a clear allusion to the horribly common device of rape with an object (Coke bottles, as well as guns, are particularly favored by real-life rapists.)

Police and concerned citizens are aware that the incidence of rape in the United States is approximately one "successful" rape every four and a half minutes. The molestation of girl-children occurs about once every ten minutes; both types of assault are accompanied by varying degrees of additional brutality, up to and including mutilation and murder. Sobieszek, however, did not find Krims' imagery evocative of the terror and torment inflicted hourly upon the women and children of America by American men.

No police file contains . . . such an array of utterly exquisite corpses. . . . By meticulous design the streams of blood . . . did little to hide the body's harmonious lines but rather gave it a new beauty . . . despite the somewhat romantic exaggeration.

—Robert Sobieszek

Sobieszek managed to find the image of a raped and butchered woman "exquisite," "harmonious," even "romantic"; indeed, possessed of "a new beauty" in disfigurement and death. Granted, he knew that the blood was really chocolate; he knew the model, said to be Krims' wife, was the same in all the prints. But surely he also knew, as anyone must who reads the paper, that there was no exaggeration, that these scenes, and worse, are enacted daily—not in "artistic" sepiatone, it is true, but often photographed by their perpetrators.

There is no exaggeration. What there is is an insidious and perilously selective understatement, a glossy dishonesty. The Stack o' Wheats, in essence, is a lie about women and about violence.

As Sobieszek notes, "the postures are far less telling of struggle than of surrender, provocativeness, and sensuality." Let us leave aside, for the moment, the familiar and vile conception that women somehow provoke the violence men commit upon them, and also the weighty question of whose sensuality is gratified by the mutilation and degradation of the female body and soul. The simplest lie is the first one: *there is no struggle*.

There are no bruises on the model's exquisite shaven skin—presumably they were not sensual enough for the artist's purpose. There is no sign that she fought, as women have and do and will, for her dignity and her life. She is shown as the docile victim of every femicidal fantasy, who gracefully accepts her place as object and target and sacrifice to male hatred, who obediently abnegates her own humanity and goes smiling to the slaughter. She has never existed, except in the misogynist imagination.

We are not meant to identify with the victim; the prints are designed to prevent us from doing so. Her face is obscured by a gag or entirely hidden; she is only a female body. We cannot see her eyes—through which she might look back at her rapist, her murderer, or the omnipotent photographer. We cannot see her mouth—through which she might communicate her agony and anger, requiring our response. Like shaven-headed and uniformed concentration-camp victims, she is reduced forcibly to anonymity, deprived of individual personality.

Furthermore we see her from above, looking down, from the vantage of the murderer as he looks back on his work. This technique of viewpoint has become more and more prevalent in films about anti-woman violence of late, deceiving the viewer into an identification with the invisible male protagonist as he rapes and kills.

On the other hand, though Krims' work stands out by its inhumanity and offensiveness, his basic aesthetic is simply an exaggeration of that prevalent throughout traditional, male-dominated art. It is essentially a political aesthetic, its prime premise being the humanity of men and the non-humanity of women—a male supremacist aesthetic. In photographic shops one still comes upon those "how to" books for the amateur: *Photographing Flowers, Landscape Photography*, . . . and of course, *Photographing Women*.

The imposition of a male-invented standard of beauty for women, which traditionally requires the imitation of the child in manner and appearance, doubly diminishes the individuality of the anonymous female model. When all women photographed by an artist are selected according to the same narrow criteria, they become more and more standardized, aesthetic *things* to be placed in attractive settings—still lifes.

The beauty standard, moreover, since it requires that women look other than they are, necessitates the alteration of the female form, its variations over time only changing the manner and degree of alteration and not the fact. Woman-as-world becomes not merely part of the landscape to be stared at, but raw material to be *made into art*. The practices of "beautification" imposed by the arbitrary standard range from time-consuming inconveniences (painting, plucking, shaving) to minor health hazards (corseting, high heels) to agonizing mutilation (clitoridectomy, binding)—but these practices all have two things in common.

One is that all are employed to convert the "raw material" of the natural female body into an aesthetic object for the pleasure and approval (and occasional purchase) of a male or males. There is very little pretense that women would endure these painful rituals for themselves or each other—judgment comes from the male "artist." The second common point is that all, in their particular time, have gone from being optional adornment to being cosmetic and necessary. In the end, all have been seen as required repairs to the flawed or unartistic female person; and the normal adult female body and personality, un mutilated, have been perceived by men as ugly.

Il faut souffrir pour etre belle.

—Old French saying

We note that the person referred to in the saying is always female; she is made *belle* not *beau*, by her suffering. The premise is intrinsic to a culture where female beauty is perceived only as the imposition of artifice, in short as Art. In fact, where all the details of female appearance which are perceived as beautiful are the evidence of inconvenience and pain, it is but one short step to the premise that *the evidence of pain is what is beautiful in women*.

This in fact appears to be Sobieszek's interpretation of the Stack o' Wheats—that blood, simulated knife-wounds, torn clothing, all the evidence of pain and defeat, are what make Krims' model so very "exquisite." Perhaps the most important aspect of the Krims/Sobieszek work is that it is the logical extension of an aesthetic which eulogizes and perpetuates male supremacy. It is central to the hostility with which the female artist is often received by critics and so-called (male) colleagues; it is central to the atrocities daily perpetrated upon women, and to the lies told about those atrocities.

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—Nikki Craft

Les Krims offered, to anyone who bought the full size (14" x 17") Stack o' Wheat print set, one can of Hershey's syrup and enough pancake mix to make one stack of wheats. Sobieszek found this another facet of the work's "humor." Perhaps it was the do-it-yourself offer which spurred Craft to drastic, if symbolic, action (symbolic, because at her own expense she provided the library with a replacement set of prints).

All the visual arts communicate. Les Krims' art communicates, in this case, an adherence to the use of woman as aesthetic object, and a profound callousness and disregard concerning the fear and pain of real women; it further communicates a constant identification with the rapist/murderer, adopting his violent hatred as the *artistic viewpoint*.

Nikki Craft's art communicates, in this case, an urgent rage and grief—grief, for thousands of raped and butchered women who will never again live unafraid *or who will never again live*; rage, that anyone can carefully produce and market lies about those women and their pain, that anyone can deliberately mythologize and identify with their murderers and rapists, and call the killer's handwork aesthetic. Craft's art attempts to educate, to educate men to the depths of female desperation and thirst for freedom, to educate women to our own power as artists, as shapers of the world.

Les Krims' art tells the viewer that women are helpless, unresisting victims who look and act like the pornographic fantasies of male invention; that we die faceless and mute; that our murderers can pause to consider our "harmonious" corpses, leave ludicrous clues, and get away with it—to kill and kill again. Nikki Craft's art tells the audience/reader/viewer that women are not helpless, that we can defend ourselves and the truth, that we can indeed take apart the products of a male supremacist art, and with its pieces build an essay in anger and courage. Her message is one of faith: that we can confront and defeat the violence which threatens any moment to overwhelm us.

It is this grief and rage and confirmation which form the basis for a feminist aesthetic, a women's art which does not merely imitate more and more skillfully the male supremacist style. It is the aesthetic of struggle, shaped in part by the hostility of a surrounding culture.

A feminist art recognizes and cherishes the individuality of all women—with both gravity and satire, it describes the reality of female experience and its diversity. A feminist art draws upon a deep and constant anger, and a deep and constant love, for the courage to assert the truth about women's lives.