Irony and honesty combine in the work of the late Ellen Cantor

I want to be both pathetic and admirable, I want to be at the same time a child and an adult.
Roland Barthes, A Lover’s Discourse (1977)

There is a sense as an adult, why is this happening? There is no way to get away from it – everywhere around you is perpetual violence, and it’s on a personal level also. Still retaining this vision you grow up with as a child – that there is goodness, honour, love – how do you reconcile this?
Ellen Cantor, My Perversion Is the Belief in True Love (1999)

This autumn, four galleries in New York – Foxy Production, Participant Inc., New York University’s 80WSE Gallery and Maccarone – are collectively offering a major retrospective of works by the late artist Ellen Cantor (1961–2013),
following shows at San Francisco’s CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art and Künstlerhaus Stuttgart earlier this year. It is fitting that this survey should be scattered across the city. Cantor’s art cannot be summed up in one encounter, much less one curatorial narrative. By training, she was a painter. Yet, as these exhibitions make plain, her most memorable work is in the fields of drawing, video art, film and writing. In these pieces, Cantor draws on lachrymose and hackneyed types – Disney films, classic American movies, French new wave cinema – as well as horror tropes (such as the ‘final girl’: the only one to survive a killer), to tell stories about the female self. Her works are often violent and explicitly sexual, but not sad or angry; they have an adolescent attention span (and sense of melodrama), but they are not diffident or irreverent. Cantor is a postmodern raconteur, who uses irony both to destabilize narratives about love and innocence and to revel in their utopian possibility.

Cantor’s longest film work is Pinochet Porn (2008-16), which premieres on Halloween at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, though segments of it are on display, along with the series of drawings upon which it is based, at 80WSE Gallery. Begun in 2008, and posthumously finished this year, Pinochet Porn is difficult to summarize. Cantor herself described it as a soap opera about the lives of five Chilean children growing up under the Pinochet regime. But Pinochet is hardly the film’s epicentre. It opens with a blurry close-up of the dictator, which is merged
with archival footage of soldiers, people running in the street and military tanks. After this montage, an animated sequence about two children growing up in a mansion in Santiago bleeds into footage of a hedonistic party cued to mid-1990s evangelical mega-church music as well as a recording of the mystic guru Osho. All this takes place within the first 15 minutes. The film ends with an enigmatic question posed by the narrator: ‘Is tragedy a choice?’

*Pinochet Porn* is both grotesquely comic and intensely serious. This blend is typical of Cantor’s emotional approach. She is interested in suffering, but knows that there is no proper voice for it. In the early 1990s, she saw herself as part of a new generation of feminist artists aiming to disrupt patriarchal art history by bringing their personal lives to bear on the art world. Much of Cantor’s early work depicts women in various fantasy scenarios or as ancient feminine power figures. Some of these works are on display at Participant Inc., in the show ‘Lovely Girl’s Emotions’, organized by Lia Gangitano (who is also brilliant as the dictator’s spoiled twin daughters in *Pinochet Porn*). Among them is a painted wood sculpture of naked female bodies arranged like a pinwheel. Some have blackened eyes or ruddy lips; others have their arms extended overhead or brace themselves triumphantly over an animal. An eye-like vagina is the focal point of the piece. The whole thing explodes with a desire and pleasure that is at once deeply allegorical and cruelly homespun.

Cantor offers a grand and personal meditation on love, the most clichéd of experiences, fully aware of the limits of communication.

Like her peer Tracy Emin, Cantor challenges divisions between private and public life, but with a key difference: Emin’s most infamous installations (*Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, 1995, and *My Bed*, 1998) reject the shame so often projected onto the female body by exposing its stains, fluids and intimacies to public view. Cantor’s work, however, especially the video she began pursuing from the mid-1990s, is too knowingly melodramatic – too grandly operatic and orchestrated – for confessional art. Cantor also approaches intimacy as a problem. In the video *Within Heaven and Hell* (1996), for example, she narrates bits from her diary about the end of a love affair to an edited montage of footage from Robert Wise’s *The Sound of Music* (1965) and Tobe Hooper’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). If Cantor really believes in the ‘divine love’ of her narration she takes no pains to convince her audience. There is an understanding in her work that private experience and feelings are not always received with the same force as they are felt by their protagonists. From an outside perspective, personal tragedy is always, to a certain degree, bathetic. ‘You sound like a movie,’ her lover replies to her suggestion that ‘they are like two rivers brought together to form one lake’.

Around 1999, after moving from New York to London, she began to turn the focus of her work inside out. By her own account, she moved to a society less explicitly – or less optimistically – sexual. In a 2009 interview in MAP Magazine, she recalled ‘walking through Tenerife wearing a hand-drawn clown mask, nearly mad from grief, I realized I could no longer safely draw on love for inspiration’. While her 1990s work bears the heavy imprint of the confessional artists of the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s (concerned with issues from ‘woman’s role in society, the AIDS crisis, to gender evaluations, to love’), the work of the London years (which includes *Pinochet Porn*) is more politically arch. In the video *Bambi’s Beastly Buddies* (2005), for example, Cantor operates a sinister puppet show in front of the animated Disney film. The juxtaposition brings the violence of everyday adult life to bear on the propagandistic innocence of the child. After hearing that Nick Berg, an American telecommunications contractor,
had been filmed being beheaded by Islamic militants, Cantor added a scene in which she ceremoniously set Bambi on fire to a refrain from Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9: Ode to Joy (1824), an act that both declared the death of innocence and turned the volume up against death itself.
Later in life, Cantor would realize that her art was not so much a radical resistance to Western art history as a different way of approaching its preoccupation with tragedy. In 2008, she recalled going as a child with her father to the Detroit Institute of Arts. Every Sunday, they would look at paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Vincent van Gogh, Frans Hals and Rembrandt van Rijn. They always viewed the same works. ‘Now I realize,’ Cantor reflected in an interview, ‘this tour is the basis for my art making – which is largely political in intent, figurative, highly detailed, dramatic, emotional and contains adult subject matter.’ Cantor was keen to dispel assumptions about the informality of her work. Her drawings, for example, may appear slapdash (like doodles from a bored teenager’s school notebook), but they are self-consciously so. As in the painting *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (c.1558), attributed to Bruegel, where Icarus’s crash into the sea is a barely perceptible detail in a scene otherwise
preoccupied with the spring harvest, Cantor’s art is about the scale of tragedy. In her work, the end of a love affair or a memory about learning to ride a unicycle assume epic proportions, while the cruelty of political dictatorship is played out in the bedroom.

Classically, tragedy is a genre about proportion – it is about crimes and sufferings that are deep and heavy enough to warrant ‘pity and terror’. In figuratively (and literally) blowing tragedy out of proportion (there is a ten minute blow-job scene in Pinochet Porn), Cantor’s work does not seek an authentic or unspun confession of the self – as in much feminist autobiographical art. Instead, her art belongs with the likes of Chris Kraus’s cult classic I Love Dick (1997) or Maggie Nelson’s The Argonauts (2015), as well as the philosophical autobiographies of Roland Barthes and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Like these authors, Cantor offers a grand and personal meditation on love, the most clichéd of experiences, fully aware of the limits of communication. She is especially close to Kraus in not being afraid to risk corniness in her pursuit of suffering, and she shares with Nelson a deep understanding of how language and culture shape gendered identity. Perhaps this is why her work feels so newly relevant today. It expresses the fictional idealizations by which we survive or ignore our own suffering and the suffering of others. It is about the ignorance of utopian fantasy. Cantor has said: ‘This is a vision I grew up with, a sense of innocence and possibilities in the world.’ It is a vision she maintained, even as she unmade it.


Lead image: Ellen Cantor, Pinochet Porn, 2008-16, film still (detail)

STEPHANIE DEGOOYER
SCENE STEALER

JONATHAN BERGER TALKS TO JOHANNA FATEMAN
ABOUT THE ART OF ELLEN CANTOR

Ellen Cantor, Snow White, 1996, pencil, felt-tip pen, ballpoint pen, and watercolor on paper, 20 x 15".

This page and opposite: Three stills from Ellen Cantor’s Pinochet Porn, 2006–16, Super 8 transferred to video, black-and-white and color, sound, 122 minutes. Far right: The Maid (Ellen Cantor).
IN HER DRAWINGS, paintings, sculptures, and moving-image works, feminist artist Ellen Cantor demonstrated a singularly transgressive vision. Borrowing characters from pop culture and footage from iconic cinematic works, Cantor constructed powerful, dreamlike, and often sexually explicit narratives that blur autobiography and allegory. When she died of lung cancer in 2013, at the age of 51, she was immersed in the production of her most ambitious project, the feature-length Pinochet Porn, a melancholic and campy meditation on life under military dictatorship that Cantor had been working on since 2008. Intercutting flickering archival footage and animated interludes with scripted scenes shot by artist-filmmaker John Brattin on Super 8, and elucidating a tangled narrative via voice-over narration, Pinochet Porn is a no-budget labor of love featuring a cast of friends. Wooster Group actor Jim Fletcher plays the Dictator; Participant Inc director Lia Gangitano stars as his twin daughters; Cantor herself is the maid. After her death, the film was painstakingly completed according to the artist’s wishes by Brattin along with art director Jay Kinney. On October 31, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Pinochet Porn will premiere at long last.

Its debut is in fact the culmination of a series of concurrent shows and events spanning no fewer than seven New York venues, each concentrating on a facet of Cantor’s innovative multimedia practice. In addition to the premiere at MOMA, this constellation includes a program of Cantor’s videos at Electronic Arts Intermix and, at Foxy Production, an installation of the multichannel video installation Be My Baby, 1999. Exhibitions at Participant and at NYU’s 80WSE Gallery focus primarily on Cantor’s object production—early paintings and sculptures at the former space; drawings, book works, marionettes, and a video at the latter—and Skowhegan Space is hosting a series of five panel discussions. Last but not least, “Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women,” a group show Cantor organized in 1993, has been restaged at Maccarone. This past month, I spoke with artist Jonathan Berger—one of Cantor’s closest friends and the curator of the 80WSE show—about this invaluable multiverse survey and the passionate, exacting work that it comprises.

—Johanna Fateman
JONATHAN BERGER: I met Ellen in 2006 at Participant Inc, when the gallery was still on Rivington Street. I was having a meeting with Lia Gangitano, the founder and director of the space, and, as friends frequently do at Participant, Ellen stopped by. I remember, vividly, that when Lia introduced me to her, Ellen pulled back rather dramatically and blinked in an exaggerated way. It's a move that female Disney characters make, I realized later. It was completely sincere, but also startling in how she could instantly fully embody that kind of stylized behavior.

JOHANNA FATEMAN: And this is a major theme of Ellen's work—the appropriation of heroines, or protagonists, from pop culture and from Disney stories in particular. . .

JB: Yes. This is the current that runs through Ellen's work, across multiple mediums, that I've included in the show “Are You Ready for Love?” at 80WSE. All of the works in the show recast preexisting characters within highly personal narratives. We're showing the storyboards for her film *Pinochet Porn*; nine rarely seen, meticulously hand-drawn book works, which are often structured like fairy tales; and also monumental wall-size works on canvas comprising overlapping micronarratives.

Some of them, amazingly, incorporate maybe eight different styles—from life drawing to Disney-ish porn cartoons—each mode representing a different voice or element.

JB: And how do figures such as Snow White or Cinderella function in these pieces? We've talked before about how Ellen's appropriation of them isn't necessarily critical, at least not in a straightforward way.

JF: She had a complex relationship to those characters. She celebrated them as they were depicted—hyperfeminine, with their huge, doe-like eyes—and, at the same time, she experienced them as the women that she believed they actually were, which departed altogether from their creator's intent. Rather than discard them as caricatures, she added to them, gave them dimension. For her, that was a powerful, feminist practice.

JB: Well, at 80WSE we're showing Ellen's video *Within Heaven and Hell*, which she made in 1996. The video is emblematic of a format she pioneered, editing together two iconic works of cinema—in this case *The Sound of Music* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, leaving some of the original sound but adding her
own voice-over. As she recounts tumultuous love affairs, the footage of the films' female protagonists corresponds to her narration in provocative ways. There's often a muddying or merging of multiple stories in her work, not only in video but in drawing as well. That's certainly the case in Pinochet Porn, though I don't know if I would use the word appropriation to describe her development of its characters. While she does incorporate found footage into the film, the story itself is told through actors in scripted scenes, and it loosely chronicles people in her life—their stories. And, of course, her ensemble cast is composed of close friends. So the film is effectively her life performing her life.

**JF:** Pinochet Porn is hard to describe. How do you explain what it is, what it's about?

**JB:** There are five chapters, each of which corresponds to a character. Ellen talked about it as the intertwining stories of these five characters’ lives. They each grew up experiencing, either directly or residually, the political and cultural effects of the Pinochet regime and 1973 coup in Chile through their relationships. Ellen was interested in how power structures—more specifically, how fascist governments and the people at the top of the ladder—influence and destroy the lives of normal people in their everyday lives, through multiple generations. Toward this end, the film makes radical connections across time and place. She refers in the film’s trailer to historical truths, such as the fact that Pinochet received support from the United States and the papacy, while also making compelling associations. For example, she juxtaposes an image of the archetypal fairy-tale witch (played by Mindy Vale, artist Danny McDonald's alter ego) with the sound of Hitler's voice to make a sobering parallel. She wanted to understand how trauma and violence permeate our experience of life and subsequently how we re-create them in our personal relationships. The central question that she poses with Pinochet Porn—"Is tragedy a choice?"—gets at this. What is the limit of our agency?

**JF:** It's interesting to think about this next to Within Heaven and Hell. What immediately struck me about that film when I first saw it was the way that she used

*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* to inject horror—however campy—into *The Sound of Music*, which, though its plot concerns Hitler's encroachment into Austria, obviously doesn't portray the horrors of Nazism. Ellen's voice-over connects both plots and their respective imagery to intensely personal situations. Romance, trauma, sex, horror, family, fascism—these are the themes of Pinochet Porn, too.

**JF:** I hesitate to address the subject of trauma in Ellen's work because I feel like that discussion can veer into a stereotypical way of thinking about feminist art. Yet I do think she fought in complex ways to reclaim power through her artistic practice and to overcome the effects of trauma. She hoped to find agency somehow within oppressive situations.

Throughout our friendship, one of the things Ellen and I often talked about—it seemed to come up a lot—was the censorship she experienced in 1995, when her work was supposed to be shown alongside Sabina Baumann's and Ugo Rondinone's in an exhibition called "Oh Pain, Oh Life" at Helmhauz Zürich. The show was shut down—actually, it never opened at all—because the mayor of Zurich decided Ellen's work was pornographic. It was a big deal, and there was a lot of press coverage. And, as is often the case with incidents of censorship, there were many inaccurate characterizations of the work. People wrote about Ellen without having seen her art. The experience was incredibly traumatic for her, especially since her career was just beginning. I remember something that the artist Julie Tolentino recently said that captured for me how difficult it is to be a younger artist facing censorship: Suddenly, you're in the position of justifying your work, of proving that you're not wrong. The assumption that you're a kind of mindless provocateur is confounding when, in fact, you're taking what you're doing extremely seriously, trying to figure out how to make the most meaningful work possible about urgent issues. Julie—who's co-organizing the restaging of "Coming to Power" with Pati Hertling—was in the thick of the '90s culture-war battles over NEA funding, because of her collaborations with performance artist Ron Athey, a major target of Jesse Helms et al. So she speaks from firsthand knowledge.

**JF:** She was also involved with the 1993 version of "Coming to Power," right?

**JB:** Yes. The original "Coming to Power" came out of Ellen's desire to put her work in dialogue with that of other women artists dealing with sexually explicit imagery and content. I think she felt a need to identify a lineage for herself. That said, the show, though it was intergenerational, didn't point to any conventional art-historical trajectory. There was work by Louise Bourgeois, Yoko Ono,
Lorraine O’Grady, Nicole Eisenman, Zoe Leonard—Ellen drew from many dramatically different sensibilities and communities. It was important to her to use the gallery—David Zwirner’s old SoHo space—in a way that allowed women artists to claim it in an active way. So Julie essentially moved the Clit Club, the legendary queer women’s night that she founded and curated, into the venue for a night of programming. Ellen had great stories about Zwirner coming in the next morning, sweeping and picking up beer cans. She saw the Clit Club as creative and democratized, a non-elite space, and she wanted to bring that energy into conversation with the formal and often hierarchical ways in which visual art is presented. It was a political gesture. I love that Julie and Pati are bringing another generation of feminist artists—niv Acosta, FlucT, and Narcissister, among others—into their restaging at Maccarone.

JF: An important thing to note about this major presentation of Ellen’s work is that, remarkably, all of the organizers, across all of the venues, are somehow personally connected to her and her practice. I think that’s quite a testament to the kind of person she was, to her practice and the social context she created for her work’s exhibition. And to bring the conversation back to *Pinochet Porn*—because its premiere is really the centerpiece of these efforts—the film is also the product of a close-knit group of friends functioning as both cast and crew. It operates on a whole other level, as a document of a time and a portrait of a milieu, because of this really scrappy approach to production.

JB: I tried to talk to Ellen about this, and she really never wanted to have the conversation or reflect on this aspect of her process, which I understand, because for her it made sense as the only way to do it. She knew that in order to make the kind of film she wanted to make, it had to be made out of the relationships that she had—both in terms of artistic collaborators and in terms of the sincerity and personal significance embedded in the performances. *Pinochet Porn* was the logical next step for Ellen artistically. She drew on everything she’d done previously. She employed her established radical strategies of appropriation and editing, but now she was also a director, making a feature-length film with actors. So, as you said, I think the film is remarkable as a document of a milieu but also as a testament to trying to accomplish something that you truly don’t know if you can pull off or not.

There was a moment where the film moved to another level, in terms of how much work she had done, how many people were involved, the complexity of all the moving parts; there was a moment where she knew that what she was making was greater than her and all of those involved, and that she was in uncharted territory.

Even before Ellen was diagnosed with cancer, and in the year that followed, up until her death, she referred to *Pinochet Porn* as “our film,” when talking to John [Bratton] and Jay [Kinney], who worked with her intimately, shooting and editing from the beginning. And so, consciously or unconsciously, Ellen had set up the whole thing in such a way that they were prepared to complete the film after she passed away. The three of them had become a sort of fluid unit. I think that’s significant, too. It’s a profound creative act, to intuitively plan for that situation—to ensure that the film would be finished and to reach a level of collaboration that verges on psychic communication, where your collaborators can almost channel you. This is a hokey way to say it, perhaps, but there’s a way that the question “Is tragedy a choice?” came into play under the circumstances in which Ellen found herself, facing death with her most ambitious and complex work unfinished. The film concludes that, in fact, tragedy is a choice, and I think that says a lot about the way she lived her life.□

“Ellen Cantor: Are You Ready For Love?” is on view at New York University’s 80WSE Gallery through Nov. 12. Electronic Arts Intermix, New York, will screen a program of Cantor’s moving-image works on Oct. 5; “Coming to Power” is on view at Maccarone, New York, through Oct. 16; “Ellen Cantor” is on view at Foxy Production, New York, through Oct. 25; “Ellen Cantor: Lovely Girl’s Emotions” is on view at Participant Inc, New York, through Oct. 30; *Pinochet Porn* will premiere at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, on Oct. 31; and Skowhegan Space, New York, hosts a series of public programs on Cantor’s work through November.
Film: Pornography of Power

by David Everitt Howe

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 1970, PepsiCo president Donald Kendall made two urgent phone calls to the company’s former lawyer, President Richard Nixon. Kendall was alarmed about the results of the recent presidential elections in Chile, where Salvador Allende had become the first unabashed Marxist to be democratically elected in a Latin American country. Much was at stake for American corporations, which since the Kennedy administration had maintained a presence and fostered influence in Chile by investing in about 85 percent of the country’s industries. A few days later, with Kendall’s help, national security adviser Henry Kissinger met with Agustin Edwards, the owner of PepsiCo’s Chilean bottling operation and publisher of Chile’s leading newspaper, El Mercurio, which did everything it could to undermine the new president.¹

Media manipulation was part of the CIA’s plan to instigate a coup. While the junta led by General Augusto Pinochet decided on its own to rebel, it did so with the tacit approval of the United States.² The missiles used to bomb La Moneda, the presidential palace in Santiago, on September 11, 1973, were allegedly secured by the US Defense Intelligence Agency.³

Using a rifle given to him by Fidel Castro, Allende committed suicide that day in La Moneda, right after delivering a final radio address. Dramatic footage of the palace’s stone facade crumbling amid smoke and flame appears early in Ellen Cantor’s film Pinochet Porn, providing the sociopolitical backdrop for the work. Filmed in Super 8mm, Pinochet Porn is undoubtedly the defining achievement of Cantor’s career. A fixture on the Lower East Side scene,
Cantor (1961–2013) is just now receiving wider attention for her diaristic drawings and videos that appropriate cinematic sources—from _The Texas Chainsaw Massacre_ and _Carrie to The Sound of Music_ and Disney cartoons. By splicing, montaging, and superimposing this found footage in her videos, she combined genres in ways both intensely personal and more broadly critical of the topology of “types” put forward by popular culture: the nuclear family, hysterical females, and other personifications of gender and class conventions.

All of this came to a head with _Pinochet Porn_, a labor of love Cantor worked on consistently for eight years until her death from lung cancer in 2013, at the age of fifty-one. While Cantor had already edited most of the film—along with her coeditors, artists John Brattin and Jay Kinney—the process had to be completed posthumously according to her directives. Finally finished over the summer, _Pinochet Porn_ premieres at the Museum of Modern Art on October 31, the culmination of an extensive multi-venue retrospective of Cantor’s work that opened at 80WSE Gallery, Foxy Productions, and Participant Inc last month.

_Pinochet Porn_ originated as a series of eighty-two drawings called _Circus Lives from Hell_ (2004), which use thin pencil lines and collage to portray the fantastical, intertwined lives of five children growing up under the Pinochet regime or indirectly affected by it: Manuelo, Paloma, Jaimi, Guillermo, and Cantor herself. Their stories are loosely based on the biographies of real friends and acquaintances of the artist. The drawings were first shown, in 2008, at New York nonprofit Participant Inc, where Cantor and Participant director Lia Gangitano decided to project animated versions of some of them onto the gallery wall.

One of these drawings opens each of the five chapters of _Pinochet Porn_. The chapters are loosely connected over the film’s two-hour run time, and portray the characters falling in and out of love, doing drugs, partying, traveling, getting married, and otherwise living their lives. Fiction and history are liberally conflated by means of found footage interspersed throughout. The film was shot in fits and starts around New York City (with one sequence filmed in Cantor’s London flat), with the help of a close-knit group of collaborators, including Gangitano—who plays Pinochet’s (fictional) twin daughters, Paloma and Pipa—and a rotating cast of artists and art workers from the Lower East Side.

Cantor called the film a “soap opera,” though that hardly does it justice. It doesn’t just detail the characters’ lives and preoccupations. It offers a psychoanalytic reading of sexuality and desire that gets to the heart of how interpersonal power is leveraged institutionally—by sovereign nations, the market, the media. If anything, _Pinochet Porn_ foregrounds the everyday fascism of our relationships to others, and the fact that love—that aspirational, cinematic ideal—is such a tempestuous, hard-to-pin-down thing.

The beginning of the film is devoted to Manuelo. After being abandoned by his mother and father (as Cantor notes in the voiceover), Manuelo starts wearing a clown costume and eating nothing but M&Ms. The film jumps ahead in time to show Manuelo, played by actor and filmmaker Patrick Blumer, as a young man now enlightened by Osho, the Indian “sex guru” (played, in the buff, by artist Cerith Wyn Evans). In a long, lively simulated
orgy set in a rollicking ashram, a coterie of emancipated types dote on the
good-looking Manuolo, now largely unclad. They dance and loll around,
feeding each other grapes and doing other ridiculously stereotypical “free
love” things. Shot dazzingly by Chris Hughes, Derek Jarman’s director of
photography, the scene offers rich coloring, vibrant textures, tasteful nudity,
and frequent improvisation among gender-bending subjects, and resembles a
cross between Jarman’s Super 8 works and Jack Smith’s Flaming Creatures
(1963).

The one scene with actual sex in it is about Pinochet subjugating his maid.
While it explores the dark, violent, and disruptive potential of sexual desire, its
kitschy, tongue-in-cheek staging offers some hilarious comical reprieve. The
scene begins in black-and-white, dubbed with the speech that Pinochet
delivered on the day of the coup. Jim Fletcher, a professional actor who works
mostly in experimental downtown theater, plays Pinochet in an official-
looking military getup with shiny star-shaped medals. Cantor rented the
costume, customizing it to resemble certain South American military uniforms
(modeled in turn after those of Nazi officers). The role of the maid is played
by Cantor in a kinky servant’s outfit, complete with a sheer thong that she lets
slip to her knees.

The pairing of Cantor and Fletcher was something of an accident. Most of the
artists involved were squeamish about having sex on camera. Cantor found
Fletcher at the last minute. He was willing to do things “real or fake.” Cantor
asked him to recruit a woman to play opposite him as the maid, but he
couldn’t, so she did it herself.

In the scene, Pinochet fingers the maid, then inserts a wooden spoon into her
vagina, tasting her as if she were a bowl of soup. He calls her a slut, and
intones breathily: “I will teach you how to be subordinate.” Servicing him,
either bent over or on her knees, the maid continues to dust as if her life
depended on it, though calling her actions dusting is generous. The feather
duster barely moves, shoved in the corner of the counter while she’s slumped
over getting spanked, her arm outstretched awkwardly. Continuing to “clean”
against all odds, she steals the scene. The comical exaggeration of
stereotypical gender roles—the woman who cleans, the man who fucks her for
his own pleasure while not at war—tidily illustrates the unequal power
dynamics between men and women, governments and citizens, capital and
consumer. By folding it all into one scene, Cantor foregrounds the intrinsic
interconnections among these relationships. She reminds us that pornography
is about power—the fantasy of having power and using it to subjugate.

DURING PINOCHET’S seventeen-year dictatorship, at least 2,279 leftists and
other dissidents were killed, and about 28,000 were tortured. This occurred
with the blessing and funding of corporations—an acute grievance for Cantor.
Pepsi figures prominently in Pinochet Porn, most notably in another powerful
scene, in which a first-person voiceover recounts the experiences of Luz de las
Nieves Ayress, who worked underground to resist Pinochet while a graduate
student in Santiago. She was arrested and tortured repeatedly over the course
of four years, first at the National Soccer Stadium, which had been turned into
a holding pen with torture chambers, then later at detention camps, where she
was the guinea pig for experiments in gauging just how far torture could go
shy of murder. The nauseating testimony is read aloud in full, and Cantor
juxtaposes it with a montage of Pepsi lifestyle ads. Young, attractive white
couples enjoy leisurely sports: jet skiing over azure waters, biking in the
desert, swimming in a pool. A young man’s athletic frame is silhouetted as he
swings from a rope over a lake in slow motion. All these scenes are intercut
with refreshing pauses for Pepsi, its logo cradled in ice. There’s something
redolent of Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will (1935) in these
commercials’ blatant fetishism of athletic bodies and sport. We might be
conditioned to think this propaganda isn’t fascist, but Cantor persuades us that
it is. While appropriation artists have critiqued corporate culture and
advertising incisively since the 1980s, it’s hard to think of an indictment more
pointed and damning than Cantor’s.

Pinochet Porn finds fascism in all areas of personal life. Cantor was raised in
Detroit, and the city makes a long, bittersweet cameo in the second chapter of
the film. In a voiceover, Cantor talks about playing with childhood friends and
encountering anti-Semitism (Cantor was Jewish and her family’s rabbi was
murdered in his own synagogue). The city’s notorious institutionalized racism
is portrayed through news footage of armored tanks rolling through the city’s
streets on July 24, 1967, during one of the worst race riots in American
history. Fifteen hundred National Guardsman were called in to control
widespread looting and fires that destroyed nearly seven hundred buildings
citywide and accelerated white flight to the suburbs. These tensions were
simmering while Cantor was growing up; the blissful obliviousness of a small-
town-style parade seen in this sequence feels ominous. So does the absurd
footage of the Pontiac Unicycle Club, its men riding down a street on
exaggeratedly heightened seatposts. Cantor herself joined a unicycle club, and
the inclusion of the latter clip is a bit of goofy autobiographical recollection.

Heartfelt and vulnerable, Pinochet Porn is as much about Cantor as it is about
the institutionalized inequities that involve and affect everyone. In the film’s
last chapter, Cantor cries in her apartment at the news of a former flame’s
engagement, then kisses and makes love to Guillermo, “a magic boy [who]
came from a land far away. He had the power to transform the world around
him,” as she notes in voiceover. A musician, he was able to play rock-and-roll
music in Chile despite Pinochet’s ban on the genre (interestingly, only pop
songs and disco were sanctioned by the dictator). As we see blurry shots of
sexual trysts with close-ups of flowers encircled by pollinating bees, Cantor
repeats the matter-of-fact admission that “we made love for fourteen days and
fourteen nights, it was amazing,” as if it were a mantra. Maybe it was, and
maybe it should be, as a small means to resist untold horrors—the Pinochet
regime, race riots, the September 11 attacks on New York (which makes a
brief appearance in the film), and so on—that seem to appear and recur with
the inevitability of clockwork. Where else would one want to escape to but the
throes of love?

“Ellen Cantor: Are You Ready for Love?,” at 80WSE Gallery, New York,
through Nov. 12, 2016; “Ellen Cantor,” at Foxy Production, New York,
David Everitt Howe is a New York–based critic and curator and an editor at *BOMB* magazine.

6. . As told to the author by Lia Gangitano during a preliminary screening of the film on May 15, 2016.
RADICAL 90'S FEMINIST ARTIST ELLEN CANTOR IS FINALLY GETTING HER DUE

Three years after her death, a once-polarizing artist is still setting the New York art world on fire with four simultaneous exhibitions and the premiere of her magnum opus film tonight at MoMA.

by Stephanie Eckardt

October 31, 2016 3:30 pm
Many artists would be pleased with just one slot in the packed schedule of openings this fall in New York, when most gallerists tend to bring out their headliners. This season, though, Ellen Cantor has now had three solo exhibitions — at 80WSE Gallery, Participant Inc., and Foxy Production — and a restaging of a now-seminal show she’d curated over two decades before at Maccarone. (That’s not even including a series of panels dedicated to her at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and the premiere of her magnum opus, a film named *Pinochet Porn*, tonight at MoMA.)

It’s an impressive feat for any artist, especially for one who died in 2013. A feminist multimedia artist and curator renowned in her circles in 90’s and early aughts New York, Cantor passed away from lung cancer three years ago at 55, prompting many in her close-knit crew of artists, writers, gallerists, and other art-world types to come together to carry out her legacy. “Coming to Power,” the expansive, explicit exhibition Cantor curated in 1993 at David Zwirner gallery, was the logical starting point. Lynda Benglis, Louise Bourgeois, Nicole Eisenman, Nan Goldin, Alice Neel, Cindy Sherman, Yoko Ono, and Marilyn Minter were just some of the artists featured; Minter recently recalled Cantor’s initial visit to her studio as “the first time I saw women curators celebrating pro-sex feminist artists.”

“It was a really exciting time,” Minter said of the era, when political and social fury were just starting to displace the male-dominated art world of the 80’s. Cantor’s mixed coterie – up-and-comers like Sherman, along with older stalwarts like Bourgeois – proved an ideal embodiment of the new attitude: “We all found each other in this show,” Minter said, adding that the group became a social and artistic support system that lasted for years.

"Coming to Power" paved the way for intergenerational feminism to enter into institutions, too, like the notorious “Bad Girls” show at the New Museum the following year. And while “Bad Girls,” which also featured male artists and more chastely sourced footage from “The Simpsons,” was still bold for its time, “Coming to Power” was
unapologetic. Representation after representation of genitalia, graphic films on topics like female ejaculation, and programming from the Clit Club — a diverse, queer collective of chiefly women of color helmed by Julie Tolentino, who co-curated the current restaging at Maccarone with Pati Hertling — filled the walls of the Zwirner gallery. The white men in the scene of the time didn’t know what to think, exactly.

A LOOK BACK AT "COMING TO POWER," ONE OF NEW YORK'S MOST EXPLICIT EXHIBITS
“It was about diversity and sexuality and empowerment, and it was a very conscious commentary not just about women’s artwork, but the gallery train,” said Lia Gangitano, the founder Participant Inc. and a close friend of Cantor’s who is now managing her estate. “It was risky in every way.”

At the same time that she was collecting Ono’s birth control sculptures and Goldin’s explicit selfies, Cantor was also busy making her own art, veering away from painting and sculpture toward an abandonment of object-making by drawing on walls directly. Primarily, though, she was immersed in video. She would go on to be a pioneer in appropriating footage from known or cult feature films in her own films — splicing gory scenes from *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with mountaintop serenades in *The Sound of Music*, for example, and narrating them according to her own invented storylines.

By far, her most ambitious, and unsettling, project was *Pinochet Porn*, a two-hour long epic shot on Super-8 film that Cantor started in 2008 and worked on, Hertling said, “until she stopped breathing.” Finally finished this month, just shy of its premiere tonight at MoMA, it follows five children into adulthood. It’s an alternately tragic and comic soap opera, which mirrors the story behind the making of the film.

“There definitely was a point, I think, for many of those of us involved where we were like, 'Okay, my life is disappearing — it’s all in this movie,’” said Gangitano, one of the scores of Cantor’s peers who worked on the film. And while many of them appear in it, too, Cantor also stuck with her usual practice of incorporating found footage — this time from tragedies such as the Holocaust and 9/11, and video testimony from a torture victim of Augusto Pinochet’s brutal reign in Santiago, Chile.
It wasn't for the sake of shock value. “It was more [because] this is part of our lives, and we have to look at it,” Gangitano explained, noting that Cantor grew up in suburban Detroit watching films like Shoah, the nearly nine-hour BBC documentary on the Holocaust. “She was unwavering in the inclusion of this material because it was pornographic to her, and she didn’t shy away from making analogies between these horrors in the world and people’s lives,” Gangitano said. “She was very motivated not only to tell stories of herself and her friends, but to show how larger historical tragedies create the sort of microcosm of your own life.”

Still, it’s the kind of gesture that can leave some cold. “She was a polarizing figure,” Gangitano acknowledged — not just within the general public, but among feminists as well, who at the time were decidedly split over whether or not pornography could be empowering. “She wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea, but I think that’s part of the reason she was respected as an artist,” Gangitano added.

“Perhaps Ellen's story could be defined through her gender," added Tolentino, "But it's very much the story of a prolific artist." And the story will continue to be told. There is still the rest of Cantor's unexhibited oeuvre, including 400 paintings that, for the moment, await in storage.
How X-Rated Feminist Art Came Into Power (NSFW)

Pioneering artists Carolee Schneemann and Marilyn Minter share their stories.

*Warning: This article contains explicit imagery. If you don’t like it, leave!*

Priscilla Frank, Huffington Post, 09/14/2014
The year was 1993. Artist Ellen Cantor, then 32 years old, curated the
exhibition “Coming to Power,” made up entirely of sexually explicit feminist work made by women artists, which was on view at David Zwirner Gallery.

Slick, drooping phallic forms by Louise Bourgeois hung from the ceilings, while Joan Semmel’s psychedelic-colored sex paintings were mounted on the walls. Wads of rolled-up gum arranged by Hannah Wilke resembled disembodied vaginas, while Nancy Fried’s sculpted scenes of erotically charged lesbian domesticity, upon closer look, revealed themselves to be carved out of bread.

Visitors left the exhibition riled and confused. “The show opened and I was excoriated,” contributing artist Marilyn Minter explained in an interview with The Huffington Post. “The worst nightmare for an artist. Many of the other women in the show had already been thrown out of the art world.”

Minter, now 68 years old, creates lush, decadent paintings that ooze with lubed-up glamour. Her style, which has been referred to as “realism in drag,” exaggerates textures with a contagious hunger, bringing the fuzzy surface of a tongue or sticky strings of semen into sharp detail that supersedes real life.
In 1993, the reviews of her work were terrible. “It was a nightmare,” she said. “I was feeling pretty beat up." Yet in 2017, a retrospective spanning 40 years of Minter’s work is heading to the Brooklyn Museum for a massive show called “Pretty/Dirty.”

Radical feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann had a similar recollection of the 1993 show. “Some women [who] were upset by the art walked out, saying it was pornography,” she said in an email to HuffPost. “[The response] was varied, uncertain, but also excited. The work on view was on this threshold of context. It didn’t have an art historical shape around it yet. And this was 1993 — which was relatively late.”
It does seem pretty late, especially for an artist like Schneemann, who had been making body-centric work since the ‘60s. Her 1964 video “Meat Joy” is a writhing and raw celebration of flesh, a tangled mass of men, women, chicken legs, paint, sausages and fish. In her 1975 performance “Interior Scroll,” she crouches atop a table, her body painted in mud, reading a feminist scroll pulled from her vagina.

And yet, nearly 20 years post-scroll, sexually explicit work like Schneemann’s was still way out on the margins, even compared to the mainstream feminist dialogue. In the ‘90s, feminist ideology was dominated by individuals like Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who believed that pornography was unequivocal sex discrimination and should be banned completely.
“It was the pinnacle of political correctness,” Minter said. “It was traitorous, according to them, for women to recapture images from an abusive history and try to own them. It made me crazy. Why don’t we own our bodies? Why can’t we make sexual images for our own production? It’s a way to own power.”

Minter was staunchly committed to creating images purely designated for women’s pleasure, taking control of her own sexual agency in the process. At the time, she didn’t realize just how alone she was in her mission. “I thought everyone thought like me,” she laughed. “Like, nobody has politically correct fantasies. I thought I was part of a larger segment of the population, I didn’t realize I was an outlier.”

Twenty three years have passed since “Coming to Power” made its contentious New York debut, and Minter is an outlier no more. On Sept. 9, a re-staging of Ellen Cantor’s monumental 1993 exhibition opened at Maccarone Gallery. The show features the work of the same 25 feminist artists, many of whose names have shifted from the fringes of art world fame to their rightful spots as rebel goddesses.

For Schneemann, the most striking element of the exhibition’s reprisal was the choice to paint the massive gallery space entirely black. “It was almost like entering a forbidden cave, or a coven,” she said. Or perhaps a pornographic theater. “That became a metaphor for me, about how before, the work was in a darker place that didn’t belong in the definitive art culture, one that was male, heroicized. Like we were off in some kind of a cave. But the work is now being appreciated and illuminated.”
This current iteration of “Coming to Power” exists in a far less controversial climate than its predecessor. Over the past 13 years, sex positivity has become a widespread pillar of contemporary feminism. As Minter would put it: “My side won.” The art world reflects this glorious shift.

Artists like Narcissister, Leah Schrager and La Chica Boom incorporate their bodies — naked, sexual and in control — into their photographs and performances, earning money, power and prestige through their own manipulated image. Others like Rebecca Goyette, Faith Holland and Leah Emery explore the boundaries of porn, re-imagining pornographic imagery by and for women. And then there are photographers like Petra Collins, Olivia Bee and Sandy Kim, documenting femininity from the perspective of the female gaze.

“I’m a big supporter of those girls,” Minter says, in reference to Collins and
Kim. “They’re doing this post-punk backlash, I love it. They’re going against all the robotic images — the bikini lasering and face contouring — who has time for this shit? What are you, crazy?”

In part, Minter credits the internet with the recent rise of sex-positive femininity. To an extent, Schneemann agreed. “It’s oceanic,” she said. “It spreads information like crazy, so radical impulses can become more popular. It’s not as hierarchical as art history has intended itself to be.”

Courtesy the artist
However, context is the major factor Schneemann deemed necessary for the rise and acceptance of erotic, feminist art. “In the ‘60s, we had no context,” she expressed. “How brave it was to build one. Ellen Cantor did that as a young artist who was not part of any authoritative realm. And now, the influence of the female gaze has transposed the traditional male gaze, which was assumed to be authenticating what we should look at and think about.”

When it debuted in 1993, “Coming to Power” was something of a battle cry, gathering up the few women artists speaking a similar language in an attempt to sway the overwhelmingly male perspective of the art world establishment and larger society surrounding it. Today, the exhibition operates more as a living history lesson, commemorating the pioneering artists that changed the trajectory of contemporary art. Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Table” and feminist group exhibitions like “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” were also central to creating historical precedents and frames of reference where none existed before.

That’s not to say, however, that the mission offered up in 1993 is fully accomplished. If anything, the progress made is currently under siege. “I was thinking that political correctness was over, but it came back this year!” Minter said. “Everything is based on policing women’s bodies — politics, advertising, religion. There’s this huge backlash trying to stop the progress. If we start owning our own sexual agency, we have all the power. Keep us innocent and we’ll get plucked like little flower virgins, we get controlled by the patriarchy.”

Schneemann, whose practice currently revolves around the atrocities taking place in Syria, hopes that feminist strides yield integrated results, penetrating other issues like ecology and militarism instead of merely, as she described, pleasurable junk. “Complicated things have become commercialized and commodified,” Schneemann said. “There is so much of everything that the sense of purposeful rigor is lost, and the more
challenging issues are swamped. We’ve got to get strict and formulate a community to protect aesthetic values as they have a potentiality to contribute socially.”

If “Coming to Power” were to be exhibited again in the future, say, in another 15 years, that is the world Schneemann hopes it would inhabit. As for Minter, the future is looking pretty damn sweet. “We’ll look like geniuses then!” she laughed. “Yesterday’s smut is today’s erotica.”

“Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art By Women” is on view until Oct. 16, 2016 at Maccarone New York.

![Judith Bernstein, “Fucked by Number,” 1966, Charcoal and mixed media on paper](Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery New York)
Courtesy the artist

Nancy Fried, “Her Home,” 1980, Flour, salt, acrylic
Doris Kloster, “Bullwhipping,” 1993, Gelatin silver print
Estate of Alice Neel

Alice Neel, “Nadya Nude,” 1933, oil on canvas
Copyright Judith Bernstein Courtesy Mary Boone Gallery New York

Courtesy of the artist

Nancy Fried, “If You Go Away,” 1976, Flour salt acrylic
David and Monica Zwirner New York

Patricia Cronin, "boys," 1993, 24 color polaroids mounted on board
Doris Kloster, “Sodomy,” 1993, Gelatin silver print
David and Monica Zwirner New York

Patricia Cronin, “girls,” 1993, 24 color polaroids mounted on board
Monica Majoli, “Untitled Bathtub Orgy,” 1990, Oil on panel
Lorraine OGrady, “Body Ground The Clearing or Cortez and La Malinche Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings N and Me,” 1991, Silver gelatin print Photomontage
Maccarone Gallery

Installation shot.

Also on HuffPost

Art History’s Most Erotic Artworks
Amid a resurgence of interest in the New York art scene of the 1990s, the recent reappraisal of the work of feminist artist Ellen Cantor feels particularly timely. Born in 1961 in Detroit, Cantor studied at Brandeis University and Skowhegan before becoming immersed in the art worlds of London and New York. She first gained critical attention—and notoriety—in the early '90s, deftly combining pornography with politics and pop culture with the handmade in her paintings, drawings, sculptures, videos, and films. Exhibitions at 80WSE Gallery, Foxy Production, and Participant Inc, along with a restaging at Maccarone of “Coming to Power: 25 Years of Sexually X-Plicit Art by Women,” a 1993 group exhibition she organized, and a series of screenings and public programs, coalesce in a sort of city-wide retrospective of Cantor’s work that culminates in the premiere of her film _Pinochet Porn_ at the Museum of Modern Art on October 31.

“Ellen Cantor: Are You Ready For Love?” at 80WSE Gallery (through Nov. 12), the most expansive and museumlike of the current exhibitions, includes work from the early 1990s through Cantor’s death, from lung cancer, in 2013. The show opens with a series of large pencil drawings on canvas, all from 1996, depicting elaborate arrays of nude figures floating and fucking, overlaid with little hearts, birds, and bits of text. They evoke the fairy tales (all three are subtitled _Snow White_) that served as an abiding influence on Cantor’s practice: archetypal depictions of female sexuality and love, with
their obvious shortcomings and persistent allure. Elsewhere, smaller drawings, often sexually explicit and occasionally paired with a handwritten folktale, are displayed in racks of double-sided wooden frames, which viewers can flip through as though reading a book. Even more so than the drawings on canvas, these feel at once offhand and studiously romantic, like sketches penciled in the margins of a school notebook. Cantor employs folkloric narratives, and those we tell about our own lives, for their capacity to represent as well as shape desire. One series, *Lovely Girl’s Emotions* (c. 1997), centers around the purity of a young woman who becomes a queen: pages dense with text alternate delicate sketches of the woman—her eyes and hands—and explicit depictions of sex. In Cantor’s rendering, the heroine becomes both an empowered, sexual agent and a cipher for the artist’s own experiences.

The exhibition also includes a selection of film works and a small number of objects and works by other artists intended to elucidate Cantor’s influences. Her video *Within Heaven and Hell* (1996) adeptly montages scenes from *The Sound of Music* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—in one memorable sequence, Leatherface brandishes a chainsaw in an open field as “The Hills are Alive” plays cheerily in the background—with a voiceover of Cantor recounting a failed love affair. The intimate disclosure of Cantor’s narration makes the film’s violence and pastoral beauty oddly personal, even as it seems to situate love along a continuum of cruelty. In the last gallery, each of the five chapters that comprise Cantor’s final, seminal film *Pinochet Porn* (2008–16) are displayed in individual projections that play sequentially. It’s not an ideal installation to view the entire film, but it contextualizes the work with an exhibition catalogue from Cantor’s collection, *Masterpieces from the Royal Museums of Fine Arts Belgium*, which is opened to a reproduction of Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The painting served as a reference for the film’s depictions of personal tragedy and the unnoticed suffering of others. A series of eighty-one mixed media drawings, entitled “Circus Lives from Hell” (2004), which wrap around three of the gallery walls beneath the video projections, foreground more of Cantor’s delicate pencil sketches. They deploy handwritten text to drive a loose narrative of coming of age under a dictatorship, based on her best friend’s childhood in South America, from which the plot of *Pinochet Porn* developed.

At Foxy Production, the multichannel installation *Be My Baby* (1999), on view through October 23, offers another significant example of Cantor’s video work. Like *Within Heaven and Hell*, *Be
My Baby comprises montaged film clips and pop music: scenes from classic Hollywood movies—a cowboy kisses a woman in slow motion, a man slaps a woman as they fight in bed—are intercut with footage of an astronaut in space as the R&B standard “Stand by Me” plays. The vast freedom of the universe confronts the focused intensity of affective experiences; scenes and bits of dialogue are sometimes repeated or slowed down, complicating the materials’ emotional pull. Several photo collages (1995-96), also on view, juxtapose stills from popular cinema and pornography in gridded arrangements. They evidence Cantor’s interest in how media representations of intimacy affect our understanding of it. As a whole, these works leave the impression that Cantor was above all interested in love—in sex and desire, but also a love of the world, even in its violence, in its constant admixture of pleasure and pain, personal feeling and political valence.

“Ellen Cantor, Lovely Girls Emotions,” on view through October 30 at Participant Inc, features Cantor’s early works, primarily paintings and painted sculptural objects made between 1982 and 1994. Motifs recur throughout the show: vicious animals, two women touching tongues, a blonde woman intimately paired with a dark-skinned figure. Some of this imagery reappears in the exhibitions of later work as well, marking Cantor’s continued concerns with female sexuality and the narration of desire. A selection of small paintings is displayed along the gallery’s two long walls, depicting scenes of explicit intimacy, psychosexual violence, and everyday horror (rats on a kitchen stove, for example). Crushed Budweiser cans form a frame around the largest of these works, which suggests a hedonistic game—playing cards, dice, and a roulette wheel intermingle with shadowy nude bodies—in thickly applied pink and gray paint.

Long, narrow paintings on freestanding wooden boards hang on the far back wall. These totemic works mostly depict bodies; some are decorated with feathers, sequins, pompoms, and, in one instance, Pepsi cans—alluding, perhaps, to the role of PepsiCo in the rise of the US-backed Pinochet regime in Chile, which Cantor later elaborates in Pinochet Porn. Installed together, they evoke a set of queer, craft-bin Brancusi sculptures.

Cantor’s low-culture references and artful use of cheap or discarded materials link her to a ’90s aesthetic sensibility finding renewed currency today. Likewise, her mobilization of sexual, even pornographic, imagery toward feminist ends feels strikingly relevant in a moment of simplistic visibility politics. Rather than assuming
that visibility alone will do the work of liberation, Cantor framed her investigations of desire in their social and, as in the case of *Pinochet Porn*, geopolitical contexts. This commitment is reinforced by a display of ephemera in the gallery’s back room: photos, invitation cards, and German newspaper articles (accompanied by printed translations) written in response to the 1995 group exhibition “Oh Pain Oh Life” at Helmhaus Zurich, which was censored by the mayor in response to Cantor’s ostensibly pornographic work. Of course, as explicit as Cantor’s work is, its purpose is never solely, or even primarily, to titillate. Her work makes clear that sex and love are always entangled with politics, and vice versa; sex can be many things, but it is never not political.

**Related Articles**

**MAGAZINE**

**Film: Pornography of Power**
by David Everitt Howe

ON SEPTEMBER 12, 1970, PepsiCo president Donald Kendall made two urgent phone calls to the company’s former lawyer, President Richard Nixon. Kendall was alarmed about the results of the recent... [READ MORE](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/pleasure-pain-and-politics-ellen-cantor-in-new-york/)

**NEWS**

**Lookout Highlights of 2015**
by A.i.A. Editors


**PREVIEWS**

**The Agenda: This Week in New York**

A.i.A. editors suggest a few of the myriad events taking place in New York this weekend: a screening of Larry Clark’s latest flick at Lincoln Center; a NYPAC-hosted performance by Cecilia Corrigan... [READ MORE](http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/pleasure-pain-and-politics-ellen-cantor-in-new-york/)
Ellen Cantor. *Pinochet Porn*. 2008–16. Super 8mm film transferred to video (black and white and color, sound), 123 min (Courtesy the estate of Ellen Cantor)

It’s quite a surprise that a film titled *Pinochet Porn* depicts a tender portrait of friendship. Granted, Ellen Cantor’s final film buries that theme under a shocking mélange of spank-heavy sex scenes, depressed clowns, descriptions
of rape and torture over vintage Pepsi ads and disturbing archival footage of the Pinochet dictatorship, Hitler and September 11th. But looking beyond its violent and erotic imagery, the film is a celebration of a close-knit avant-garde community.

This became clear at the film’s premiere at MoMA on Monday night, part of the museum’s Modern Mondays film program. Playing to a sold-out theater, the screening also featured a post-film discussion between the Museum’s Chief Curator of Media and Performance Art Stuart Comer, Participant Inc.’s founding director Lia Gangitano, who appears in the film, and filmmaker John Brattin, who acted as Director of Photography. While this is common with MoMA’s screenings, it seemed particularly important on Monday. Firsthand accounts of the film’s production and posthumous completion, provided here by Gangitano and Brattin, seem irrevocably intertwined with any analysis or enjoyment of the film itself.

Started in 2008, the film was inspired by Cantor’s series of drawings entitled Circus Lives From Hell. Using these narrative drawings as an ad hoc script, the film progressed in bits and pieces until 2013 when Cantor passed away mid-production. According to Brattin, Cantor left her collaborators with “a pretty elaborate puzzle” of footage to put together. The film was finally finished this year after eight years of production.

Pinochet Porn feels like the culmination of Cantor’s creative life. It hits on almost all of her career-long interests including the intersection of love and violence, obsession, pop cultural references, dark humor and confusion between personal narrative and fiction. Because of this, MoMA’s premiere provided an apt cap on this fall’s multi-venue revival of the late artist’s work, which saw exhibitions and screenings at several institutions including Foxy Production, Participant Inc., Maccarone, Electronic Arts Intermix and 80 Washington Square East Galleries (which is the only exhibitions still on view...
until November 12, 2016).

Making sense of the narrative isn’t easy. The pseudo-soap opera loosely follows five characters as they grow to adulthood under Pinochet’s regime. Each protagonist is devoted a chapter of the film, delineated by an animated introduction mirroring Cantor’s intricate and whimsical pencil drawings. But as with a lot of art films, any semblance of this plot is muddied by layers upon layers of seemingly random images and narratives. I still feel like I need several more viewings to fully get my head around Cantor’s mixture of historical and personal trauma.

Taking a step back, though, the film gains merit as a record of a specific circle of artists and other creative who gathered around Cantor. The credits alone read like a Who’s Who of Lower Manhattan and London where Cantor lived for most of her life. Artists Spencer Sweeney and Michel Auder make appearances as Paloma (Gangitano)’s husbands (Auder even reportedly dons the suit he wore to marry Cindy Sherman). The film’s orgiastic opening scene, which is worthy of a Jack Smith film, includes notorious English DJ and nightlife personae Princess Julia and London-based artist Cerith Wyth Evans as a guru. Actor Jim Fletcher plays the Pinochet-like dictator and curator Pablo Leon de la Barra provides voiceovers throughout the film.
Much of the casting decisions can be attributed to the freewheeling nature of the film’s production, which relied heavily on happenstance and the availability of friends. For example, during the talk, Brattin recalled Gangitano became one of the main actors because “people didn’t show up.” Gangitano also remembered accosting Jay Kinney with Cantor on Houston Street to ask him to be the film’s Art Director. She reflected how the film “started in a modest way...just getting friends together.” “We didn’t know what we were getting into,” she quipped.

Pinochet Porn’s recognizable cast overpowers their onscreen characters, preventing audiences from fully suspending disbelief. But it also created some
unexpectedly poignant moments in the film. Take, for example, a scene midway through the third chapter, which focuses on Paloma—one of the twin daughters played by Gangitano. After leaving another husband, Paloma finds Cantor and they dance. The duo smile, goof off and twirl together under colored lights while Cantor, in voiceover, explains how Paloma became her “best friend” and “husband.” Even though this moment seems insignificant to the film’s plot, it’s a moving depiction of both a real and fictional friendship between the two women.

Cantor herself recognized the importance of friendship to the film. Introducing the screening, Gangitano quoted a passage from an article Cantor wrote in 2009 for Map Magazine about the film in process. She recited, “Walking through Tenerife wearing a hand drawn clown mask, nearly mad from grief, I realized I could no longer safely draw on love for inspiration...I tried to think what else interested me enough to engulf my life—perhaps my friendships.”

If the population of Monday night’s screening is any indication, these engulfing friendships remained even after Cantor’s death. Comer, at one point in the evening, asked anyone who was involved in the film to stand up and about fifteen people did, cheered on by their own friends. By witnessing the film’s communal power both onscreen and off, these continued connections between those involved in the film become an unanticipated but essential part of its—and Cantor’s—enduring legacy.

Tagged as: 80 Washington Square East Galleries, Cerith Wyth Evans, electronic arts intermix, Ellen Cantor, Foxy Production, Jay Kinney, Jim Fletcher, John Brattin, Lia Gangitano, Maccarone, Michel Auder, moma, Museum of Modern Art, Pablo Leon de la Barra, Participant Inc, Pinochet Porn, Princess Julia, Spencer Sweeney, Stuart Comer