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Firenze University Press
www.fupress.com/bsfm-lea

Citation: Chase R. Thomson, Issra M. Martin (2024) The Fine Line of Gendered Queer "Obscenities". A Modern Exploration of Kiss & Tell Collective's Drawing the Line. *Lea* 13: pp. 161-167. doi: https://doi.org/10.36253/LEA-1824-484x-15302.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

The Fine Line of Gendered Queer "Obscenities" A Modern Exploration of Kiss & Tell Collective's *Drawing the Line**

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Introduction

What makes content obscene? Furthermore, if content is found to be obscene, who has the right to define when it should be censored? In 1992, the Supreme Court of Canada sought to answer these questions with the *R v. Butler* case; Donald Butler had been convicted on several counts of the possession and distribution of obscene materials. The materials in question had come from Butler's Manitoba video store, where he sold pornographic videotapes, magazines, and paraphernalia (Bell and Cossman 1997, 3). This is an imperative moment in Canadian history as it marks the first instance where the Supreme Court of Canada had been required to revisit s. 163, otherwise known as Canada's obscenity laws. More specifically, this is an imperative moment in queer Canadian history, as the conviction had enabled the state to crackdown on content they deemed obscene; the state's attacks on obscene materials specifically targeted queer literature and pornography (Bell and Cossman 1997).

Prior to the *R v. Butler* case, the debate on pornography and censorship had been running rampant amongst lesbian feminist collectives. The debate allowed no room for inconclusive opinions – either you were anti-pornography, or you weren't a feminist. Two years prior to *R v. Butler*, Kiss & Tell Collective's 1990 interactive photography exhibit, *Drawing the Line*, had sought to nuance these stances by displaying 100 photographs on a blank wall. The content of the images ranged from mild and suggestive sexual content to more intense, BDSM-related acts. Through this exhibit, one that would go on to travel the world after its debut in Vancouver, Persimmon Blackbridge, Lizard Jones, and Susan Stewart had sought to probe audiences to decipher where individuals draw the line in regard to sexually explicit material. Quite literally, the female participants had been instructed to draw a line where they felt the content had become too obscene for them, where they figured it needed some form of censorship – male participants eventually asked the same question had been designated to document their opinions in a book rather than on the wall. However, rather than simply drawing a line, many female participants flooded the walls with comments expressing an array of strong emotions: joy, pleasure, anger, disgust, to name a few.

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ISSN 1824-484X (online) | DOI: 10.36253/LEA-1824-484x-15302

In this modern exploration of *Drawing the Line*'s archival materials, I seek to engage in a close reading and analysis of a selection of these comments in tandem with photographs from the *Drawing the Line* exhibit. I will consider the obscenity laws of 1990 and how they acted as a homophobic, state-sanctioned censorship, as well as how Kiss & Tell Collective acted as a necessary act of female queer rebellion before and after *R v. Butler*. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, I seek to understand how an exhibit such as *Drawing the Line* could exist in 2024, why it would be necessary, and how the mechanics of it would shift or be complicated by a modern gaze. In a time where the Internet has made sexual liberty both validating and terrifying, I wonder if there's still even a line to draw.

1. Feminist Division amidst the Canadian Sex Wars

Before exploring the content and themes of the *Drawing the Line* exhibit, it is imperative to establish the contextual framework of the late twentieth century when it comes to the sex wars. As Brenda Cossman and Shannon Bell make clear, "Canada has had a long and illustrious history of regulating and repressing sexual images" (1997, 7). While these obscenity and censorship laws have operated under the guise of protecting children, they disproportionately affect queer content and queer individuals. One only has to look at the effect *R v. Butler* had on queer individuals, collectives, and content in the years following to see the blatant state targeting of queer culture. Gay and lesbian magazines had been seized in large quantities at the border, different art groups had funding threatened or revoked entirely (including one that Kiss & Tell Collective had performed at in Banff, Alberta), and libraries and schools had been given the sole responsibility to make decisions about how certain content would be circulated (5-6). The aftermath of *R v. Butler* had led to a state-sanctioned homophobic attack on the queer imaginary. As Cossman and Bell make clear, this decision had been widely considered a victory in feminist circles. However, as many queer feminists articulate, the divide amongst feminist circles in regard to pornography and censorship had been anything but simple.

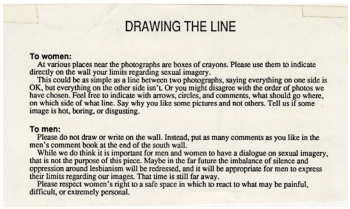
As Lizard Jones explains in *Her Tongue on my Theory*, there had been a strong divide amongst sex radicals and anti-pornography feminists long before 1992: "by the late eighties, the split was there, the sex radicals vs. the feminists, the male-identified vs. the prudes" (1994, 10). Ironically, Jones and her future fellow Kiss & Tell members – Persimmon Blackbridge and Susan Stewart – had been active in anti-pornography campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s: "we were all three anti-porn activists at one time or another. We picketed porn shops by day, and spray-painted them with anti-porn slogans by night" (*ibidem*). The contradictions of participating in anti-pornography dominated feminist groups while also being anti-censorship is not lost on any of the Kiss & Tell members. In fact, Blackbridge makes it clear that the feminist movement both saved her and made her feel as though she were still in an oppressive space: "the feminist movement gave me […] hope, pride, work, a place to stand. But sometimes it seemed no different from where I grew up. You had to pretend and not notice you were pretending" (7). Existing in this limbo between the ideologies of sex-positive queers and anti-pornography feminists had been a difficult space to navigate for all three Kiss & Tell members. Blackbridge, Jones, and Stewart express being torn between two subsections of their community when they write:

> part of our community is fighting *for* state censorship of sexual imagery, in the form of anti-porn legislation, and part of our community is struggling *against* homophobic suppression of gay and lesbian sex. Sometimes both parts are in the same person. (10)

Stewart also admits that she had been leading anti-pornography rallies while secretly enjoying and creating pornography herself (13). Through these testimonies, it begins to become clear why these three artists became drawn to one another, and how their mission for *Drawing the Line* was born.

2. The Birth of Drawing the Line

Inspired by the outrage at a set of lesbian sexual photographs printed in Vancouver's gay, lesbian, and bisexual journal, Kiss & Tell Collective began work on their first collaborative exhibit, *Drawing the Line.* Infatuated with the range of comments from feminist collectives in response to these sexual photographs, Kiss & Tell began to ask questions that would inspire the motive for their own exhibit: "which woman was right about the meaning of the photo? Is it possible to honour both the one woman's joy and the other woman's fear?" (17). Stewart had acted as the photographer, and Jones and Blackbridge as the models. Collectively, they created 100 photographs ranging from suggestive sexual encounters, often in nature, to more kink-focused depictions: bondage and voyeurism


DRAWING THE LINE

To women:
At various places near the photographs are boxes of crayons. Please use them to indicate directly on the wall your limits regarding sexual imagery.
This could be as simple as a line between two photographs, saying everything on one side is OK, but everything on the other side isn't. Or you might disagree with the order of photos we have chosen. Feel free to indicate with arrows, circles, and comments, what should go where, on which side of what line. Say why you like some pictures and not others. Tell us if some image is hot, boring, or disgusting.

To men:
Please do not draw or write on the wall. Instead, put as many comments as you like in the men's comment book at the end of the south wall.
While we do think it is important for men and women to have a dialogue on sexual imagery, that is not the purpose of this piece. Maybe in the far future the imbalance of silence and oppression around lesbianism will be redressed, and it will be appropriate for men to express their limits regarding our images. That time is still far away.
Please respect women's right to a safe space in which to react to what may be painful, difficult, or extremely personal.

Fig. 1 – Instruction for the exhibit

being some of the most extreme. The instructions would vary depending on whether the participants were male or female (fig. 1).
Women had been asked to indicate their "limits" regarding the acts in the images – drawing a line or writing comments as a means to express their feelings, both positive and negative. Men, on the other hand, had been requested to write their comments in a separate book. As noted in Figure 1, the reasoning for this distinction had rested on the principle that female, lesbian specifically, related issues had often been silenced or ignored. Because of this, the exhibit did not seek to amplify the male gaze of lesbian sex, but rather to allow the room for women to autonomously express their own feelings. On a recent trip to Simon Fraser University's archives to analyze their Kiss & Tell fonds, I found that the comments themselves are what intrigue me the most. In the sections that follow, I separate and analyze the comments through a gendered framework to better understand how they materialize a gendered, feminist, and sexual divide among both male and female participants.

3. Where Do Women Draw the Line?

Though the female participants had been tasked with writing their own feelings on the wall in response to the photographs, what emerged on the blank walls of *Drawing the Line* became more of an ongoing conversation amongst a divided collective of women. On certain images, mosaics of arrows, underlines, and exclamation marks clamour the walls in a display that shows the multileveled reality of sexual imagery during this time. However, the more suggestive images had also sparked divide and conversation, and I see them as a fitting starting point for this exploration.

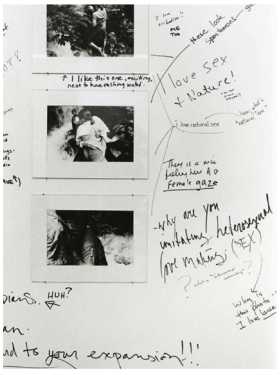


Fig. 2

In figure 2, there is a set of three images depicting the subtle suggestion of forthcoming sex; the comments on these images show the type of interactions happening on the walls of the exhibit. One participant writes, "I love sex + nature!", while another writes, "why are you imitating heterosexual love making (sex)". These comments, even on some of the earlier, more tame photographs in the exhibit, display the complex relationship happening between individual participants. The former comment can be read as one of innocent joy – a proclamation perhaps stemming from personal relation to the material. The latter comment, however, is a distinct and intense feminist stance.

One of the hallmarks of the anti-pornography revolution, especially for lesbian feminists, had been the idea that heterosexual pornography reinstates and strengthens toxic power dynamics evident in a patriarchal society (see Comella 2015). Because of this, many lesbian feminists of the time, even if not anti-pornography, would have rejected any relation or reference to heterosexual sex as a rejection of the patriarchy as a whole. In "Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars", Lynn Comella provides context to understanding why heterosexuality had been a strong trigger for many second-wave feminists:

> […] there was another development that would greatly influence the anti-pornography movement: a political analysis of het[e]rosexuality that encompassed a growing awareness of male power and violence, including rape and battering. As women […] shared intimate details about their personal lives and relationships, many women opened up […] about their experiences with sexual assault, rape, and coercion. The stories were widespread and prompted feminist responses […] (443)

Within this important sociopolitical contextual framework, it becomes clear why an image of two women engaging in a rather straightforward sexual encounter would cause some women to have visceral reactions. While what that participant identified as heterosexual is unclear, her sentiments toward the recreation of the power dynamic within heterosexual pornography are an important factor to consider when analyzing the rest of the exhibit.

As Comella (2015) notes, many feminist individuals and collectives had operated on a completely anti-male ideological

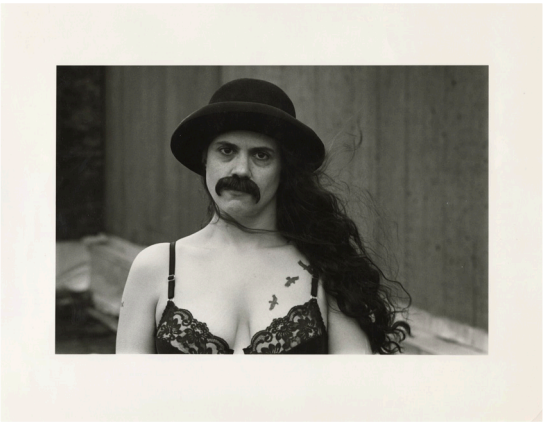


Fig. 3 – Lizard Jones wearing a bra, bowler hat and moustache

platform during the late twentieth century. This rejection of male presence and embodiment becomes clear through the comments on two images, in particular from *Drawing the Line*. In figure 3, Jones stands in a lacy, socially-deemed feminine bra while wearing a bowler hat and a fake moustache – items socially-deemed masculine. As she stares directly into the camera, the photograph takes the viewer on a genderqueer journey that speaks decades before its time. However, the comments on the photograph reinforce the ideologies of anti-male as anti-patriarchy ripe within feminist circles. In Sydney, one participant writes, "I like the playfulness of this gender-fuck", while another participant responds, "No, too scary. This is a real turn-off to me" (Kiss & Tell, "On the Wall", n.p.). The relationship between these two comments stands as an example of the relationship between many feminists and men.

Through a modern gaze, the anti-male feminists present throughout the *Drawing the Line* exhibits seem narrow-minded; their refusal to realize that the full social exclusion of men does not serve their mission of female equality is glaring from a 2023 perspective. However, at the time, the rejection of men from the conversations regarding society, culture, art, and resistance had been imperative – especially for lesbians. As Kiss & Tell notes, "for lesbians, invisibility has been our safety and our trap" (1994, 12). Lesbian content in the late twentieth century had been few and far between; often, work revolved around stereotypes, misconceptions, or prejudice against lesbian individuals and collectives (see Comella 2015). In producing and showcasing an image such as figure 3, Kiss & Tell subverts the stereotyped image of a lesbian. One participant writes on this image, "Butch or femme? You decide" (Kiss & Tell, "On the Wall", n.p.). However, this image is rejecting that decision entirely; there is no need to decide, as there is no singular image of what it means to be a lesbian. In rejecting the "feminine" stereotypes of a femme and the "masculine" expectations of a butch, Kiss & Tell is presenting a modern lesbian image that extends beyond this heteronormative gendered binary, an image that the participant's comments prove is decades ahead of its time.

The sexual dynamics and oppression of women becomes clear in many of the comments from *Drawing the Line*. Reference to sexual assault from the participants in *Drawing the Line* comes up frequently; unsurprisingly, these comments speak to the overarching problems facing women inhabiting a patriarchal society. In particular, the images in the exhibit that contain more graphic or sexually suggestive photographs have brought on more responses referencing sexual trauma. Comella makes clear that it was "the issue of violence, not sex, in the media, that initially galvanized feminists into action" (2015, 445). However, what about sadomasochism – the combination of violence and sex? One of the most polarizing sets of photographs that I discovered at the SFU archives was this set of four photographs depicting suggestively shameful, potentially coercive, and violently kinky interactions between the two women (fig. 4).

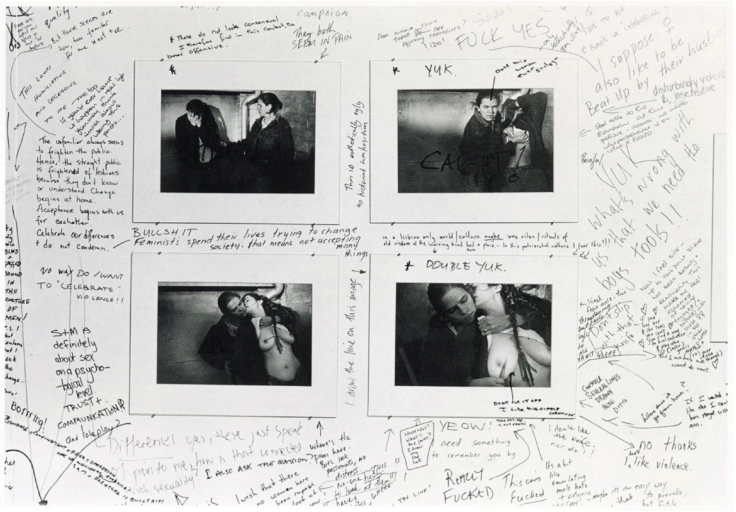


Fig. 4 – A set of images, involving polarizing acts of sex

Figure 4, from which the city of origin is unknown, has one of the largest counts of comments surrounding it – participants marked up the walls so extensively that they began to write over the images themselves. Comments on these images range from simple "double yuck" or "really fucked", to more philosophical, with one participant writing: "unfamiliar always seems to frighten the public, hence the straight public is frightened

of lesbians because they don't know or understand […] Acceptance begins with us for each other. Celebrate our differences and do not condemn". The response to this philosophical and seemingly well-intentioned stance had been "BULLSHIT! Feminists spend their lives trying to change society. That means not accepting many things". I am deeply intrigued by the duality of the comments on this set of images. Initially, I had been taken aback by the content of these photographs; in particular, I had been struck by the fourth image depicting a woman with a knife placed at someone's nipple. However, upon further reflection and the privilege of inhabiting a more sexually positive modern culture, I found myself relating more to the philosophical comment regarding judgement and acceptance. Nonetheless, of the female comments I have analyzed for this project, the conversations being had on this set of images most starkly reveal the divide within lesbian and feminist communities during this time.

4. Should Men Be Able to Draw the Line?

When outlining my intentions for this archival exploration, I had gone back and forth about including a subsection regarding the male participant's comments. Much of the space at the Kiss & Tell fonds at SFU had been taken up by the male comments; however, in the spirit of this exhibit, I struggle with the concept of taking up too much space to amplify male voices. That being said, I would find this project unjust and unfinished should I not touch on some of the social and cultural implications present within the men's *Drawing the Line* comments.

Interestingly, the male comments from *Drawing the Line* display a similarly polarized view of the exhibit. One Toronto participant writes, "I'm delighted to see such positive sexual images from, by and of women" (Kiss & Tell Fonds, MsC 161.1). Another participant from the same show writes, "You people are sick. This is NOT art" (Kiss & Tell Fonds, MsC 160.9). In these comments alone, there is a clear divide amongst men that echoes the divide amongst women. However, there are distinctly vitriolic patriarchal responses from the male participants that are not evident in the female ones – for obvious reasons.

One common theme that comes up in the transcribed male comments is the idea of "penis envy" (Kiss & Tell Fonds, MsC 160.8). Men seem to believe that the women depicting male images in the style of figure 3 are trying to become men, trying to erase men, or trying to mock men. However, this focus completely reinforces the reasoning for excluding men from writing on the walls in the first place. The book with the men's comments contains fetishization, degradation, and mockery of the images from both self-identifying gay and straight men. While I don't intend to highlight or platform these comments, as I have found them incredibly unsettling, I seek to point them out in order to prove the need for *Drawing the Line* in the first place. The comments left by the male participants show a lack of understanding into both queer issues, gender privilege, and intersectional identities. One of the male participants puts my feelings of these comments perfectly, as he writes, "I'm amazed at how frightening this show was to a lot of men. We've got a long way to go, fellas" (Kiss & Tell Fonds, MsC 160.4).

5. Drawing the Line *in 2023*

From a modern and personal perspective, I struggle to understand *why* the sexual kinks or avenues of pleasure explored by another would cause such disdain from those witnessing it. However, I also am privileged to inhabit a world in which technology and the Internet have made sexuality more accessible – a development that brings both positive and negative repercussions. One of the positive developments, I argue, is the evolution of thought regarding the importance of consent. I mention this in light of the sentiments expressed by participants at figure 4 in the previous section – in particular, I wonder how the general cultural conception of BDSM, S&M, and consent has evolved since *Drawing the Line*'s time.

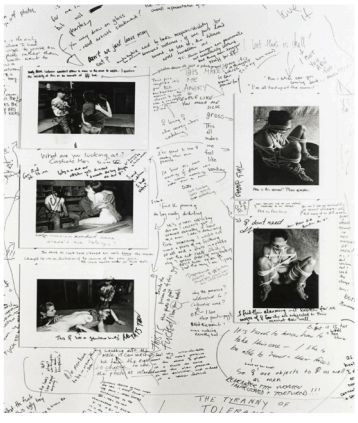


Fig. 5 – BDSM rope-play

As Robin Bauer notes in his study on queer BDSM practices, "consent has gained the status of dogma in the BDSM community" (2014, 75). Bauer makes clear that lesbian feminists had begun the conversation around consent in the 1970s, but that its ideas in the BDSM community had not been fully realized until the 1990s – and, I would argue, BDSM consent continues to be stigmatized in heteronormative, and homonormative, societies (76). While *Drawing the Line* makes clear in their artist statement that all of the artists involved have known each other for years and the acts are all consensual, I wonder how participants would react to the BDSM photographs in modern day. Would the photographs

in figure 4 or figure 5 still receive such strong and vitriolic reactions? As seen in figure 5, the comments read from "poor girl" to "how is this sexual?". Though consent had been established by the collective at the beginning of the exhibit, there is a continued bias toward BDSM practices that prevent the participants from even being able to fathom them as consensual. Kink-shaming, as noted by Bauer, is a consistent experience for those involved in BDSM or other sexual kinks; however, it intrigues me that a queer community that wants to deviate away from the hegemonic and heteronormative would reject alternative techniques of pleasure. While we do remain within a patriarchal and heteronormative society, the advent of the Internet has made the ideas of consent and sexual liberty expand to a general knowledge among progressive individuals. Therefore, I am not entirely confident that these images would receive as much pushback now as they did then.

One of my interests in exploring *Drawing the Line*'s limitations within a modern framework came from the realization that only two models had been used for the exhibit. Kiss & Tell explains their reasoning for only using two recurring bodies in their artist statement:

> we had several reasons for deciding to use only two models. Since we were asking the audience to make judgements and to write them in a public space, we wanted the judgements to be about sexual representation, not about whether viewers find a particular size, shape or colour of woman attractive. (Kiss & Tell, "On the Wall", n.p.)

While I understand that Kiss & Tell did not want to have the exhibit muddled with racial bias, fatphobia, and other politics surrounding identity, there is a definite lack of inclusive practices within *Drawing the Line*. From a modern gaze, the inclusion of identity into the conversational pulse of the exhibit would perhaps even bolster the messaging of censorship and obscenity: what types of bodies would be seen more often as obscene?

One participant during the original *Drawing the Line* exhibit seemed to have shared my sentiments of disappointment at only two white, socially-deemed beautiful models when they wrote on the walls: "STILL NO FAT DYKES", accompanied by a drawing of a plus-size body (fig. 6). A nearby comment echoes the acknowledgment of one singular identity by writing, "ALL I SEE IS WHITE". The revolution of body positivity and the need for racial equity in media is relatively new in the modern cultural conversation – fat and racialized bodies have often been censored or viewed as obscene and disgusting for years (Friedman, Rice, Rinaldi 2019). Through a modern gaze, this stands out as one of the largest limitations to Kiss & Tell's exhibit and overarching mission – one that the collective appears to be cognizant of in their reflections on the exhibit, as they write, "before long it became very clear that the notion of any single, unified account of what a lesbian body was or could be was an utter impossibility" (1994, 18). Indeed, the ability to depict every possible representation of lesbian, or feminist, identity in the exhibit is impossible – even more so in a modern context. However, that reality does not discredit the need for an expansion of intersectional representation that *Drawing the Line* does not utilize; while not *all* lesbian identities can be represented, surely we can represent more than two.

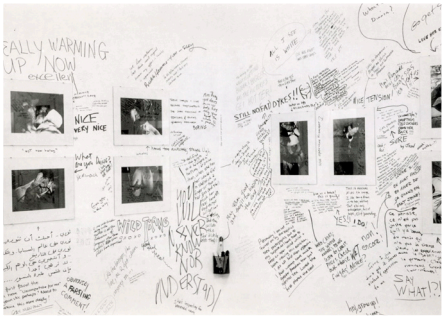


Fig. 6

6. Is There Still a Line to Draw?

Part of my inspiration for exploring the Kiss & Tell fonds at SFU stems from a class interview of Lizard Jones and Susan Stewart at McMaster University in 2021. In the interview, Stewart reflects upon a question about how an exhibit such as *Drawing the Line* could exist in the modern scope:

> I don't know what is going to work right now […] but what I do know is that we need activism. The need has not gone away […] I think it has gotten even more complicated around things like sexual imagery with the Internet and also the dynamics of being a young woman, a young scholar, a young activist right now [are] so complex given the online environment. (Kiss & Tell, Interview, 25:04)

As I continue to ponder the question of what *Drawing the Line* would look like in 2024, I remain perplexed at how the relationship of the Internet would play an imperative or debilitating role. The best answer that I can ascertain through my research is that the Internet would work to both bolster and hinder an exhibit like

Drawing the Line. In the age of oversharing and nonstop access, sexual liberty has taken on new, revolutionary, and terrifying forms. As Angela Jones notes in her exploration of plus-size cam girls (digital sex workers), she displays the liberating and self-sufficient power and autonomy that can come from engaging in sex work at your own discretion (2019, 280). Sexual representation in the media has come a long way from the late twentieth century; however, many representations still curate and distribute stereotypes about plus-size, racialized, and queer bodies (Friedman, Rice, Rinaldi 2019). Additionally, there is the added nuance of online trolling and harassment to consider when securing consent of models to participate in an exhibit that exposes them on such vulnerable levels. Through my archival exploration and research, it is clear that an exhibit such as *Drawing the Line* has the potential to push the needle of social understanding forward and expose the dark ideologies of many intersectional individuals; although, in 2023, perhaps the line is too blurry to draw in the first place.

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