

# Adonis Mirror



4/22/2005

## Nude for Peace: Internet Pornography and the War

By Richard Leader

barely a week before US troops began their procession towards Baghdad a small website was unveiled at *Nudeforpeace.org*. Capitalizing on previous examples of anti-war activists gaining media attention through nudity, the Australian website invited visitors to submit their own nude images to the project. The vast majority of the existing pictures were of young women—some very so—who were photographed in a peculiarly clinical way, despite the juvenile nature of the sayings written on their bodies. One woman stood as a statue, staring blankly, as she held a razor to her pubic bone, pointing her other hand to the words “No Bush” scrawled in makeup across her abdomen. Two men were also photographed, though both appeared older and were demurely shot from the waist up. Strangely, of the first dozen or so images, five women, claiming to be from nearly as many nations across the globe, were each shown standing before the same painted-brick wall.

News of *Nudeforpeace.org* spread quickly across the Internet. Few seemed to notice the more curious aspects of the website as untold numbers of visitors descended upon it, rushing back to their own forums and web logs to share their opinion of what they saw. The immense traffic momentarily put *Nudeforpeace.org* out of commission, leading many to theorize that the site was hacked by pro-war activists, though most eventually conceded that it was likely just experiencing technical difficulties. Despite the austere “server bandwidth exceeded” message that was displayed on the front page of the

website, many secondary pages and images were still available to viewers: something that should have again indicated to the technical-savvy that all was not as it seemed.

The site stayed dead for several weeks and was not missed by the general public as the anti-war movement faded into the murky green backdrop of night vision and bunker-busters. Yet almost a month later, something surprising happened: visitors to the presumed-defunct *Nudeforpeace.org* were automatically redirected to *AbbyWinters.com*, an Australian website that specializes in “amateur” porn, a designation that has more to do with stylistic considerations than financial. Some of the same models present at the old site could now be seen in even more explicit terms, including the woman who previously held the razor to her groin. This redirection was only in place for a short period of time before visitors were forwarded to yet another location, to a much darker *Ishotmyself.com*, a single-page placeholder for a future website, registered to one Richard Lawrence. Of the so-called “post-modern pinup” variety, the genre revels in the detached and morbid, while supplying male viewers with the traditional fare of young, thin females that they have come to expect, only with the imposition of various youth subcultures as a twist. The violent double meaning of the chosen domain name echoes one of the more popular sites in the genre, the Portland, Oregon based *Suicidegirls.com*, demonstrating that the idea of violence against women—if only on a hypothetical level—is still sexy amongst men who oppose the bloodshed of conventional war. This, too, lasted only briefly.

*Nudeforpeace.org* stayed dead for months while *Ishotmyself.com* was idling with only a placeholder graphic. In July of 2003, the latter went live, featuring a gimmick startling-

ly reminiscent of the first: all the images on the site are self portraits submitted by women—who must have one hand on their camera at all times, a nod to the name of the website—who are paid if the proprietor is satisfied with their physical aesthetics and chooses to commission more shots from them. For a short period of time their photographs are visible to all visitors on the site, keeping a constant rotation of fresh images on the front pages to draw traffic, while only paid subscribers are permitted to view older galleries in the archives. Coinciding with it going live, *Nudeforpeace.org* received a makeover as well, albeit a strangely genteel one: it was transformed into a tribute page to the Australian cartoonist Michael Leunig. Lawrence already possessed such a tribute page at *Curlyflat.net* and the new content at *Nudeforpeace.org* (the only of the above domains that Network Solutions does not list Lawrence as proprietor, as it is registered anonymously) is an exact mirror of it, possessing no further utility other than to perhaps mask what had already transpired.

The exact specifics of these events remain unknown and are largely irrelevant. Whether those involved with the website were perpetrating an elaborate hoax or were genuine activists who fell victim to opportunism—given their line of work—it seems unnecessary to grant them yet another editorial platform given their behavior in either case. Pornographers are certainly entitled to hold anti-war views and there is certainly nothing novel about them doing so: reading *Playboy* for the articles is a longstanding cliché and, to this day, many male liberals defend its sexism by citing its anti-war stance during the Vietnam era. Whether the initial models of *Nudeforpeace.org* were activist volunteers or paid employees is certainly a cause for feminist concern, as is the exploitation of those who freely

submitted their own images to the project, not knowing that it was conducted by those who routinely profit from such imagery. However, such ethical lapses on the part of pornographers are to be expected; more disappointing is how easily they were able to both deceive and exploit the male progressive community who eagerly accepted the website at face value.

The popularity of *Nudeforpeace.org* was fueled by derision, largely by men who have embraced the brand of neo-libertarianism espoused by magazines such as *Maxim*; the glossy combination of capitalism and sexism complementing their meteoric ascensions within the Information Technology industry and the rewards that have come with it. Given their aptitudes and free time during working hours, they often set the pace for the Internet at large. *Fark.com*, one such news portal for the demographic, brought roughly 89,000 “click-through” sessions to *Nudeforpeace.org* within just a few days. Although many of those were surely duplicate visitors, it was not the only large site linking to it and a good portion of its participants maintain their own smaller web pages and journals, making the news of the project proliferate quite rapidly amongst those who were opposed to it politically—much more quickly than it filtered through the far more rudimentary channels employed by activists. Among the men responding to the website, most were quite vociferous in both their pro-war stances and in their attacks upon the models, whom they deemed undesirable in the most rabid of terms. *Nudeforpeace.org* symbolized everything that they had to come to expect from liberals: trivial actions, futile in significance. The method in this case, female nudity, only served to bolster their misogyny, giving them the opportunity to insult the

women both in body and in mind.

Beyond the basic irony that many men, not at all unlike those above, continue to pay a fair amount of money to view those same women in more flattering images, it would appear that the bland photography and the painted-brick wall each served their purpose well, disguising the true agents behind the project. Many anti-war activists who had submitted pictures to *Nudeforpeace.org* felt dejected after the website imploded—unhappy that their participation was in vain—and quickly began to organize themselves to pick up where the defunct organization left off. They created a small online community using popular journaling software for the express purpose of posting of similar imagery. The overwhelming majority of such pictures were far more sexualized than their progenitors. This, of course, is to be expected to a great extent: no one wishes to be seen in unflattering terms and aping the conventions of popular media, from the advertising industry to pornography, is largely unavoidable. Indeed, none of these contributors would have had cause to actively work towards not looking like a porn star. Although *Nudeforpeace.org* was never picked up by the mainstream media in any significant fashion, given its late introduction and early demise, the work of these people has made what was likely a short-lived hoax into a historical reality, working to solidify public perception of the anti-war effort. While the number of protestors in conventional demonstrations was routinely downplayed by the press, the millions of Europeans taking to the streets ignored by the American media, nudity based activism received a disproportionate amount of attention.

Prior to the advent of the war in Iraq, a press release by *Nudeforpeace.org* had been eagerly reposted on many activist

websites, giving a statement by one Anna Van Riel, who otherwise had no online public record as an activist. Perhaps the first appearance of the statement was at *Indymedia.org*, which allows its users to submit articles of interest. Posted by Richard Lawrence (whose *Ishotmyself.com* currently displays an advertisement for *Indymedia.org*), a nude photo of a woman draped across a bed was displayed with the text. From there, news of the website was transmitted through the activist media, landing its way onto sites such as *Protest.net*, though most had the sense to dispose of the picture that accompanied the original.

The text of the statement exhorted people to “donate their modesty” by volunteering their own images to the project, arguing that street-protests and demonstrations are a way of “making noise” but have no lasting effect, indicating that nudity-based activism would have more profound consequences. Such claims are fairly absurd as female nudity was co-opted long before male Art-Historians began their pointlessly protracted discussions on the merits of “naked versus nude.” The response of the Dixie Chicks to their detractors in the wake of an anti-Bush comment, posing undressed on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, was scripted millennia before they were born. As soon as the cover was unveiled and released on the Internet, legions of men who use “Photoshop” as both a noun and as a verb had *de facto* ownership of it, creating countless parodies of the trio by sectioning the women’s bodies into labeled cuts of meat or by turning it into a “Saddam’s Angels” poster, placing their silhouettes against a backdrop of flame. Some even replaced their images on the cover with a bulbous, Frankenstein-like nude, representing writer and filmmaker, Michael Moore. Nudity is a completely

untenable device for achieving social justice in Western society and forever will be: even if stripped of both its capitalist and gendered associations (female indicating vulnerability, male being synonymous with aggression or humor), it would then lack any significant meaning whatsoever, making comparisons to actions within other cultures unfounded.

As sordid as the events surrounding *Nudeforpeace.org* were, the most regrettable aspect was in how it was not at all dissimilar from its more legitimate contemporaries: after all, its very congruence is what allowed its veracity to never be called into question. The first example of nudity-based activism in response to the question of Iraq took place on November 12, 2002, in Marin County, California. Organized by Donna Sheehan, who hoped to emulate the actions of Nigerian women who had used the threat of nudity as a traditional shaming device in their interactions with ChevronTexaco, nearly fifty women disrobed on a California field, spelling out the word “peace” with their bodies. Sheehan sees her movement, based at *Baringwitness.org*, as a revival of the spiritual power of the feminine, not at all wary of being termed an essentialist. Despite this, her advice to would-be activists is immensely practical: the bulk of it describing how to interact with photographers and to procure a copyright condition that reflects the concerns of the demonstrators. In nudity-based activism—just as in pornography—no matter how many women are in front of the lens, it is men who are most often behind the camera and who will receive the bulk of the protection from the legal system. While activists donate their modesty, none seem willing to contribute their skill as photographers, demanding credit, copyright, and even the ability to

profit from derivative items, such as prints, apparel, and even refrigerator magnets.

Men have also not been shy about stepping up as spokesmen for the movement. Mike Grenville, a UK man in his late fifties, organized his own “nude spelling bee” in his local area of East Sussex on January 12, 2003. While he did claim inspiration from Sheehan’s organization—as well as the Rolling Stones, both of which he thanked in an interview with the *Guardian Unlimited*—Grenville began his own webpage at *Barewitness.org*, perhaps hoping to take advantage of confusion between the name of his own site and that of the established movement, as Sheehan claims that he often borrows photographs from her page for his own. Admittedly out of the activism arena for many years, he makes several mistakes such as referring to Bristol University students as “girls” rather than women and is not shy about selling branded clothing or even linking to traditional nudist sites such as *Bodyfreedom.org*. Indeed, those among the naturist movement have been quick to jump on the bandwagon when it comes to the nascent form of protest, hoping to guide its actions toward their own ends. When longtime naturist T.A. Wyner wished to choreograph a protest event consisting of herself and other nude women—though it would be videotaped by one George T. Simon—at a Florida public park, the debate landed in court where the duo were defended by the American Civil Liberties Union. Although U.S. District Judge Donald M. Middlebrook granted that the speech in question was overtly political, and thus protected, many nudists declared it a victory for their own movement as well.

While such specious reasoning will not likely serve to promote nudist goals in the long run, as naturist organizers

generally depend upon a sense of insularity to establish hierarchies amongst the male participants, their association with the recent anti-war movement is abundantly damaging to the credibility of those—mostly women—who already lack any measure of political authority under the current regime. A general sense of naivety pervades as the novelty of obtaining media attention consistently overrides any consideration of the quality of that attention. Nudity based activism allows conservative reporters to hide their own biases behind cheeky headlines and humorous copy, permitting their own political statements to lurk quietly in the background in texts that most readers will accept as neutral: something that progressives can ill afford.

*Nudeforpeace.org* was not the first hoax to dupe both the young activist community and the mainstream press that enjoys making them look foolish. Ironically, the precedent was set by an allegedly anti-porn website, *Getsomereal.com*, created by the Swedish magazine, *Darling*, with the help of Moonwalk, a Stockholm based advertising agency. *Getsomereal.com* was intended to share the message that “porn is fake, girls are real” (even Richard Lawrence claims a feminist intent for *Ishotmyself.com*, allegedly working to “satirise internet trafficking of the female nude”) and allowed its users to play a game where they could place censoring stickers over the breasts and genitalia of a variety of fetish models. However, the site also promised its users that they were making fake porn web pages—which they were, after a fashion—that would be submitted to Internet search engines across the world, misdirecting would-be porn viewers to the message. It never accomplished any such thing: to do so would be violating the terms of service set by many of those very search engines, making

*Darling* liable, something a for-profit magazine would be wise to avoid. Not only did the general public accept the site at face value, so did the supposedly most technically-savvy of the media, the Internet-focused magazine, *Wired*. Their reporter covering the story merely linked to a dictionary definition of “cloaking technology” rather than testing the validity of whether or not it was actually occurring—just as no one bothered to ask for credentials from *Nudeforpeace.org*.

*Wired's* recounting of the story was overtly political, beginning with an assertion that, “anti-porn folks spew a lot of hot air,” linking to a Harvard website on the feminist writer Catharine MacKinnon, continuing on with the allegation that *Darling's* solution is the first valid one to ever be suggested: a construction that is very much a parallel of *Nudeforpeace.org's* statement that street protests only “make noise.” In sum, the reporter firmly and deliberately placed a man who works in the advertising industry, Calle Sjönell, at the forefront of feminist activism, allowing his words to trump those of a woman who is a respected lawyer and has dedicated her entire life to the movement. Given the political sensibility of the author behind the article, it seems fairly evident why the validity of *Getsomereal.com's* claims were never tested: expediency. Taking them at face value offered a readybuilt straw-argument against progressives, one that could not be reasonably rejected by those it would advantage, all while maintaining a façade of fair and balanced journalism. *Darling's* anti-porn campaign only served to generate publicity for itself and to give yet another weapon to those who would attack the reputation of those who truly work to end the exploitation of women.

There is certainly nothing new about the advertising

industry co-opting the words of revolution, even on the Internet. For years, film companies and recording houses have paid professional web developers to create amateurish looking sites, hoping their spark would fan the flames of a grass roots fan base. There is also nothing novel about those in power creating minority mouthpieces to reflect the concerns of the status quo. However, given the ease at which such ruses are perpetrated in the online realm, exploiting high levels of anonymity with only a token financial investment, the danger of the voices of true activists being displaced has grown exponentially. While the so-called urban legend has been pronounced dead, a victim of instantaneous mass communication, the dynamic has become much more insidious as deceptions can now become public reality, in every sense of the word, given enough audience belief and participation. This makes it far too easy for the media to focus on imposters.

Although the left is behind in both numbers and in the technology race, they have been presented with an opportunity: As the conservative power base is increasingly reliant upon a generation of staunch libertarians, who are not at all apologetic about their love of pornography, male liberals are now faced with the chance to finally turn away from the sex industry and its money—often supplied to Democratic candidates as an investment in “free speech”—not only because it is the right thing to do, but because it will take away the last and only remaining moral trump card illegitimately held by the Grand Old Party.

Originally Published 6/20/2003 by *Feminista!*