

**A brief report about
FRAMING THE VULVA:
GENITAL COSMETIC SURGERY AND GENITAL DIVERSITY
Third New View Campaign Conference
Las Vegas, Nevada
September 26, 2010**

Table of Contents

Introduction: A COUNTER-conference.....	1
Putting together the planning team.....	2
Using the web and social networking	3
THE CONFERENCE:	
Venue and activism.....	4
Plenary lectures.....	4
Workshops.....	6
Raffle and evening at the Erotic Museum.....	7
Conclusion and what's next.....	9

Introduction: A COUNTER-conference!

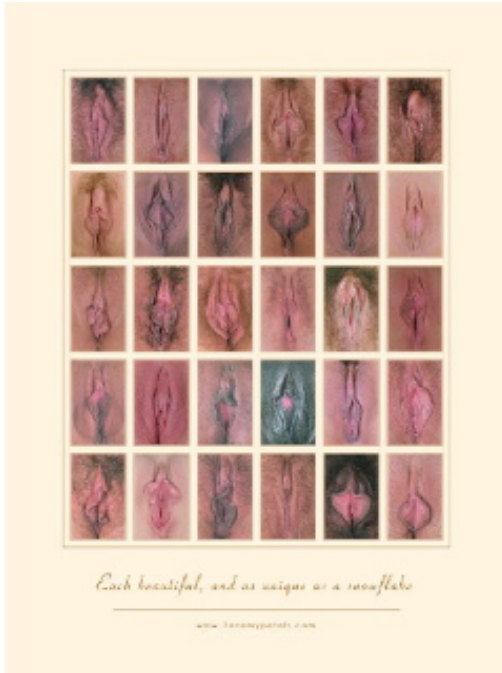
The New View Campaign, a scholar-activist project focused on the medicalization of sex since 1999, began to look at “female cosmetic genital surgery” (FGCS) in 2006 (Tiefer, 2010). We held a [street demonstration](#) outside a surgeon’s office in 2008, organized a two-day art-and-activism-intervention called “[Vulvagraphics](#)” in 2009, and have contributed lectures and academic essays analyzing the economic, ethical, feminist, and discursive elements of this new phenomenon, e.g., an essay in [Radical Psychology](#), 2010.

In January of 2010, the surgeons most active in promoting female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS) held their first professional conference in Orlando, Florida, an event that was reported in [Cosmopolitan](#) magazine as shocking, “self-incriminating,” and full of slick, “profit-hungry” doctors (Triffin, 2010). When they announced a second even larger professional conference to be held in Las Vegas in September, 2010 (see below), it seemed that the New View ought to do something that would talk back to their growing professionalization and outreach .



The appropriate choice was to hold a “**counter-conference**,” an opportunity to explore complex and contested issues characterized by the involvement of stakeholders with different, often opposing perspectives and competing agendas. That seemed to describe the FGCS situation to a T.

Coincidentally, Leonore Tiefer met Nick and Sayaka Karras, creators of the Petals Project, at a sex education conference in Canada in June, 2010. The [Petals Project](#) consists of a documentary film and book of photographs illustrating women's genital diversity. Their poster (below), book, and film are the kind of materials we promoted at Vulvagraphics in 2009 - too bad we didn't know about them then.



Nick said he would be in Las Vegas in September to display his genital photographs at the Erotic Heritage museum. It seemed like karma. Nick could reserve the museum for an evening event if we held some sort of conference or demonstration during the day.

Meanwhile, New View member Ginny Braun (University of Auckland, NZ), who had attended the cosmetic genital surgeons' meeting in Florida, was invited to speak at the Las Vegas meeting. The organizers knew that her work was critical, but invited her as part of their new more open-minded, more scientific, more professional attitude.

Ginny, Leonore, and New View grad student assistant Rachel Liebert held a long Skype conversation in June and decided that a conference - a **COUNTER-CONFERENCE** - in Las Vegas the same weekend as the surgeons' meeting could create the ideal intellectual and activist event. That gave us a very short 3 months planning time.

Putting together a planning team

The Women's Studies Department at UNLV was approached about co-sponsorship. Professor Lynn Comella, whose own work focussed on women sexuality entrepreneurs in the 1970s and 1980s, was enthusiastic about joining a planning team and obtained a UNLV lecture hall and breakout rooms. Others who joined Nick, Sayaka, Leonore, Ginny, Lynn and Rachel on the planning team included Vanessa Schick of Indiana University, Breanne Fahs of Arizona State University, Marta Meana and Larry Ashley of UNLV, Thea Cacchioni of Simon Fraser U. in Vancouver, and Tash Wong, Amber Hui, Elise Schuster and Michelle Leve in New York. Beginning in August when most people were back in town, we held weekly meetings in Leonore's New York apartment (see photo right), using Skype technology to speak with distant committee members, tho not all team members were able to Skype. With only 10



weeks to plan the event, and most of that in summer, there was no time to raise money or solicit co-sponsors, as we had for our 2005 Montreal conference.



Because this conference was an activist opportunity to speak back to the surgeons, we kept expenses and registration fees low. It wasn't easy to recruit speakers with our short, summer time frame and no budget! We would have liked to have had speakers address broad issues of genital normalizing surgeries, analyze cunt art and censorship, discuss feminist theory and individualistic notions of choice, review sex education issues with regard to genital imagery information, overview genital activism, and offer international

perspectives on female cosmetic genital surgery, but those topics didn't work out. Nevertheless, an excellent program gradually came together including presentations and richly diverse workshops.

We arranged a block of rooms at the Tuscany Resort, an inexpensive venue close to the university (see photo above).

Using the Web and Social Networking

We had learned much about using Facebook and Twitter in May-June, 2010 (during

our successful [campaign to challenge flibanserin](#), the new central nervous system drug for women's low sexual desire - since discontinued by the manufacturer!), and we put that knowledge to work with a Facebook page for the conference, a sticker campaign (see photo left) using images from the International Vulva Knitting Circle initiated by Rachel Liebert in 2008, and lots of sexuality and feminist blogging. The brief conference planning period precluded many options. Longer planning permits advance registration, more out-of-town registrants, a relationship with a hotel, estimates for workshop attendance, etc.



THE CONFERENCE - September 26, 2010

Venue and Activism

UNLV is a young university with new and up-to-date facilities for a conference. On Sundays it is pretty deserted.

We set up the registration table and our main activist project, "Talk Back to the

Surgeons,” in the lobby area outside the auditorium. That project featured 5 posters with photos and quotes from FGCS surgeons’ websites. Viewers were encouraged to write comments about the posters and place them in envelopes to be sent to the surgeons (see photo above). The posters attracted a lot of interest and we will be continuing the project online in the months to come.

Plenary lectures

I. Straight from the horse’s mouth: A critical review of the field of ‘cosmetic gynecology’ --Virginia Braun, PhD



Ginny reported on the cosmetogynecology conference held just the day before in the huge Las Vegas Venetian Resort. Although feeling like she was in the lions’ den, she was clothed in a new power dress and was buoyed by the silent support of legions of critics, journalists and academic analysts.

Ginny reported that while many of the presentations were boring repeats of the Florida

meeting, the surgeons (about 120 were at the Venetian) were now actively debating the need for some kind of scientific evidence to bolster their claims, were uncertain about preferred nomenclature for their procedures, and were conflicted about how to navigate their role as gynecologists on the one hand and retail-oriented cosmetic surgeons on the other. The surgeons seem to feel under attack as a result of the July 2010 *Cosmopolitan* magazine article (see cover photo right) and described their need to be savvy about the media. They stressed the need to “educate the market” in order to protect their “brand” and dismissed the critics of FGCS as uninformed and not speaking for women.

II. Female genital cosmetic surgery (FGCS): How the franchise business model met ‘the body project’ - Leonore Tiefer, PhD



Leonore presented the story of David Matlock (photo left), promoter and franchiser of FGCS, as a case study of how contemporary biopolitics involves ‘retail medicine,’ gendered technologies of the self, and upstream governmental enabling such as court decisions and agency regulations. She reviewed how a consumerist medical model (surveillance, enhancement, optimization, direct-to-consumer advertising) has emerged to permit and even encourage entrepreneurial medical businesses like FGCS.



Matlock's scores of franchisees use his trademarked materials and brand names worldwide and have piggy-backed on the popularity he has acquired through endless news and reality show TV appearances.

III. Erasing female genital diversity through the practices of 'female genital mutilation' and 'FGCS' - Fiona Green, PhD

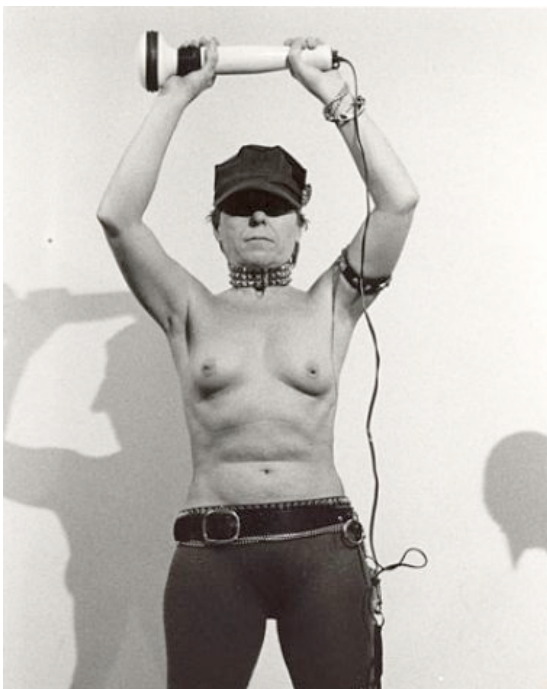
Fiona, a women's studies professor from the University of Winnipeg, reviewed the types and cultural contexts for female genital cutting (FGC). She emphasized the normative and beauty-oriented themes of both FGC and FGCS despite claims that women "choose" FGCS and are "forced into" FGC. To the surprise of some Western theorists, research suggests that teenage girls excluded from FGC long to share their friends' experiences. In reviewing the reasons why women might "choose" FGCS, Fiona described how feminist concepts of liberation, autonomy, empowerment, and self-actualization have been appropriated in the service of socially-constructed ideals.

IV. 'Vulva Voices': Challenging contemporary constructions of female genital aesthetic ideals - Vanessa Schick, PhD

Vanessa presented her model of how women come to be dissatisfied with their genitalia. She documented this with her research on changes in Playboy centerfolds over the decades and her research on women's genital self-consciousness during sex. There are negative consequences for both sexual pleasure and health care to this increasing self-consciousness.

As an antidote, Vanessa explored the possibilities of showing college students genital-diversity-positive films such as Betty Dodson's "Viva La Vulva" and Nick Karras' "Petals: A Journey to Self-Discovery." She interviewed students on camera who had just seen the films, and, cinéma vérité style, was able to show their initial reactions.

V. Feminist Pleasure activism and sex education - Lynn Comella, PhD



Second wave feminism isn't often thought of as "sex-positive" but Lynn described how sex toy shop founders and vulva artists from the 1970s and 1980s can be seen as forebears of The New View and part of the history of feminist body politics. Lynn described how the masturbation coaching, sex education and vibrator sales work of Betty Dodson (Lynn's favorite image of Betty is shown at left), Joani Blank, and Dell Williams was part of the same knowledge projects as OurBodies Ourselves and the women's health movements that agitated for access and empowerment. They represented an earlier incarnation of the kind of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) feminist entrepreneurship that is thriving today, especially online. Their focus on vulva information and positive imagery was an aspect of sexual pleasure as sex education that needs to be preserved.

VI. Art and Activism - Laurenn McCubbinn



Laurenn, a Las Vegas artist-activist, described her work as following in the tradition of earlier cunt artist-activists such as Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneeman, and Annie Sprinkle. While they sculpted, photographed or displayed their own or others' genitalia, her work centers on the hidden dimensions of sex worker culture in Las Vegas.

For example, for one recent project (see illustration at left) Laurenn created a set of "hooker cards" that mimic the advertisements for local sex workers handed to tourists on the Las Vegas strip. Going to the cards' website or phone number, however, puts a person in touch with a sex worker offering information about the realities of Las Vegas sex work instead of an appointment for sexual services.

The Workshops

After lunch there were two sets of three 1 ½ hour long workshops that were all lively and well attended. "Crafting resistance," led by Rachel Liebert and Vanessa Schick, involved vulva knitting and tote-bag decoration, and was reported on in the alternative paper, the [Las Vegas Weekly](#) (see photo below).

"Do something! Transforming your research into activism," led by Susan Lopez, focused on her work with Desiree Alliance, a sex-worker led rights network. "The "Eew" factor: Clinical reflections on the role of vulva dissatisfaction/ disgust in women's sexual experience" was led by Las Vegas sex therapist Marta Meana, and cases were discussed that dwelt on the complications of genital negativity.



"Breaking body hair boundaries," led by Arizona gender studies professor Breanne Fahs, reviewed the major impacts her class assignment that women resist shaving their body hair had on her students, their families and their sex partners. Nick and Sayaka Karras and Carolina Ramos discussed the history and experience of the Petals Project and how they have seen it used in educational and clinical settings. And, in "Critical Health Psychology

and FGCS" Amber Hui involved a group in positioning vulva activism as part of personal and social transformation. She led her group through an exercise of imagining the factors preceding the decision of a woman to undergo FGCS.

Raffle and evening at the Erotic Heritage Museum

In the evening, many conference attendees journeyed to the substantial Las Vegas [Erotic Heritage Museum](#). We set up the 5 easels of our "Talkback to the surgeons" project and gathered more comments.



Rachel Liebert set up an exhibit titled "WANTED?" that parodied the policing of vulva diversity that occurs with the emerging FGCS industry (see photo left). She displayed dozens of vulvas made by members of the International Vulva Knitting circle, begun in 2008, that now includes over 500 members around the world. In line with our conference theme, each vulva had a tiny "wanted" poster and criminal justice system number signifying how women's desires are squeezed through political agendas.

We also had a display set up by a new Utah project called "[Stirrups and Stories: Reclaiming the Ob-Gyn experience through images and words.](#)" Many of the photographs and first-person reflections constituting their project are on their website. Organizer Nicole Lee, who drove to Las Vegas with her large display (see right), is eager for more participants and publicity, so check out their FB page and consider inviting them to your campus or agency.



In a private section of the museum Sayaka and Nick Karras set up a vulvar portrait photoshoot area for the next edition of Petals and reaped a bonanza of 16 volunteers. Many women found the experience matter-of-fact, but for others it was emotionally challenging and required quite a bit of courage. Usually Nick and Sayaka spend over an hour with each volunteer, but the experience in Las Vegas, perhaps symbolically, was far hastier and less personal. Nevertheless, volunteers felt the opportunity to put their bodies on the line, as it were, fit in with the spirit of the conference.



The final event of the conference was the Raffle drawing with sales to offset the costs of the conference. Originally the idea of Molly Adler, co-owner of [Self-Serve toys and resource center](#) in Albuquerque, we ultimately had 4 prizes and sold dozens of tickets during the conference and at the museum. The drawing turned out to be hilarious. Fourth prize, 2 autographed DVDs of Betty Dodson's work, was won by Chelsea Swall, a student from UC San Diego. Third prize, an autographed copy of Joani Blank's 1993 [Femalia](#), a famous but out-of-print booklet of genital photos, was won by Lynn Comella, who had expressed a wish for exactly that prize throughout the day! Second prize, the gift basket of goodies from Self-Serve, was won by Amber Hui, New York graduate student, and member of the conference

planning team. And first prize, the gift bag of souvenirs from NYC feminist sex store [Toys in Babeland](#), was won by Mario, a ponytailed visitor to the museum who bought \$10 worth of tickets at the last minute (see photo above)! The audience was convulsed with laughter, chorusing "typical Las Vegas" over and over. Fortunately, Mario's girlfriend, whom he is calling in the photo, soon showed up to claim the prize. She was delighted, needless to say!

Conclusion and what's next

Our counter-conference succeeded in many ways. We had an attendance of about 80 people during the plenaries and workshops although it could have been more at the museum. We made links between the business of cosmetic genital surgery and the escalating social pressures on women's self-image. We tracked the development of the new industry and how it is responding to critical voices like ours. We explored the impact of negative genital self-image on women and girls and compared the Western situation with that of genital cutting in some other cultures. We described and implemented various activist projects using crafts, gynecology experiences, art photography, classroom assignments, group organizing, and new crossover activist scholarship. Much was learned and much was shared. We made it clear to the cosmetogynecologists that their new business is under surveillance and we will continue the "Talk Back to the Surgeons" project online.

We are already planning our fourth conference, a large, plenty-of-advance-planning one, hosted and organized by Thea Cacchioni at Simon Fraser University on April 28-30, 2011, titled ["The medicalization of sex."](#) See you there!

Triffin, Molly (2010) Warning: These doctors may be dangerous to your vagina. [Cosmopolitan](#), July, pg. 159-161.

P.S. A student from UC. Berkeley attended the conference, and here is her feedback:

I enjoyed the conference immensely, and felt it was extremely valuable, not only for my thesis work, but also in expanding my own personal knowledge and involvement in this campaign. It was amazing to me to see not only scholars who specialize in the field, but artists and activists engaging in various resistance projects as well. I was really impressed with the various types of organizations and activists who were represented, and was able to speak with quite a few of them about their projects and future plans; I am in touch with several, and am blown away by their dedication and creativity in fighting the medicalization of sex in unique and inspiring ways. My hope is that, in my work, I can contribute to the growing resistance as well. I am currently applying to grad school, and finishing my senior thesis on the discourses of FGCS (now most likely to include more feminist and resistance discourses).

Jess Neasbitt

(P.S. Jess also joined the list serv)