



Title

Shakedown on Pornhub

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Shakedown on Pornhub

by Isabel Parkes • 26.05.2020

Following premieres at international film festivals and art world institutions, Leilah Weinraub's *Shakedown* (2018) played for its largest audience yet, on Pornhub, a pornography website that typically welcomes 120 million visitors a day but has experienced a fifty per cent surge in traffic as the world migrates online in response to the spread of COVID-19. Edited from 400 hours of footage shot over ten years, Weinraub's non-adult film exhibited on an adult platform elides categorisation and boldly anticipates new means of cultural production and distribution.

Shakedown is Weinraub's seventy-minute record of an early aughts, Black-owned and operated lesbian strip club that moved through various Los Angeles locations. In an early scene, viewers encounter Egypt, one of the Shakedown Angels, whom Weinraub asks to read aloud from promotional party materials **FIG. 1**. 'Was that good?' Egypt asks uncertainly, before music starts and scans of colourful WordArt flyers offering 'Wild Side' and 'New Booty Alert' prepare viewers for Shakedown's parties **FIG. 2 FIG. 3**. An authoritative voiceover introduced as Ronni-Ron, club MC and owner, calls out her audience: 'This is a gay club. Please don't disrespect my dancers. They dance for girls. If you don't like it, just have a seat'. Later, while washing her SUV, she summarises running a business: 'A man's supposed to work hard for his money, and a woman as well.' Weinraub mixes scenes of introspection from the Angels' lives with acrobatic and erotic feats of their labour on a low-lit, stageless dancefloor. Shakedown as a club finds form as Weinraub both partakes in and documents backstage anecdotes and front of house musings in vérité style, combining original with thirty-year-old archival footage from the pioneering queer club Jewel's Catch.

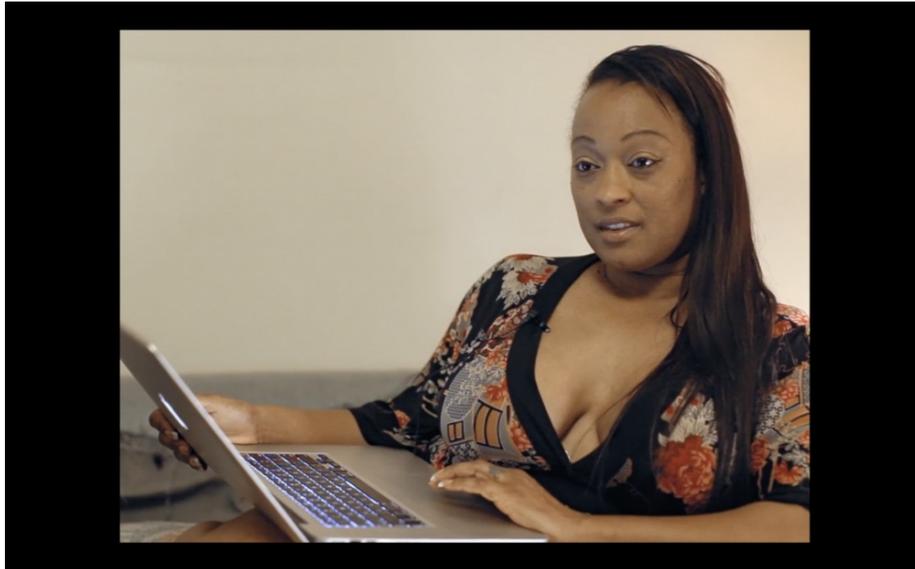


Fig. 1 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.

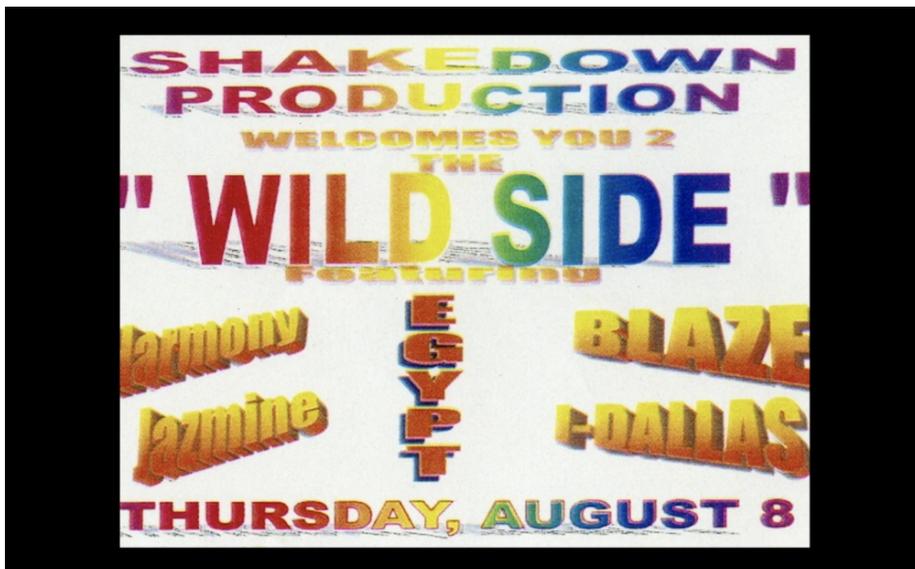


Fig. 2 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.

Weinraub is neither commercial nor didactic in how she articulates this underground family of femmes and studs. Rather than relying on the static evocation of similarities between characters, she engages the full scope of their specific narratives to make a nocturnal system 'visible only in its effects,' as Hortense Spillers describes in a 2006 essay.¹ By following the Angels on and off work and situating them alongside wives, colleagues and children, Weinraub puts forth what Spillers calls 'a repertoire of implements, from the fantastic/imaginal to the actual/material,² that splinter in pluralness and considerable variation'. Characters like Miss Mahogany FIG. 4 – whose first time performing 'was an accident' which occurred as she lip

synched without noticing her top was unbuttoned – or the lesbian couple who speak candidly about their process of artificial insemination create frames through which to consider queerness rather than catering to a sense that one suddenly ‘gets it’. There’s no mention of diversity or community, notions that instead become immanent through scenes like those with Mahogany or Ronni-Ron, who radiate a sense of ownership over this utopic space. In taking it mainstream, from the Whitney Biennial to Pornhub, Weinraub reverse engineers intimate and transient aspects of *Shakedown*’s parties and renders them timeless and accessible without flattening her subjects.



Fig. 3 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.

Early in the film, Weinraub asks Egypt if she was popular in high school. Egypt answers, ‘very,’ after which Weinraub asks if she was gay. Egypt explains that she was not, and that she behaved aggressively towards those she suspected were. The strength of scenes like these emerges both immediately, as Weinraub leans into her own narrative voice to position popularity alongside sexuality, and over time, as one reencounters Egypt seated alongside her long-term girlfriend and explaining matter-of-factly that her celebrated club persona is a site of ‘fantasy’ and liberating invention **FIG. 5**. Egypt’s adolescent bias towards gayness contrasts vividly with her lived experience on-camera and her magnetic confidence in the club **FIG. 6**. The contrast reveals a record of change that shares a feeling of introspection with viewers. Rather than limit herself to a static opinion about identity, Egypt conveys a resonant mixture of mutability, discretion and surprise.



Fig. 4 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.

Moments of inbetweenness also characterise *Shakedown* as a club that operates in a grey zone of legal and illegal, pleasure and power. Cash is king for Ronni-Ron and as frequently as Weinraub films bills raining down on gyrating bodies, she records the club's 'cash girls' gathering, counting and distributing them **FIG. 7**. Cash flows like energy and creates a clear system of value among the Angels that in multiple instances nevertheless fails to translate to the outside world. As one woman describes trying to get pregnant, she tallies her medical costs at somewhere between four and five thousand dollars, adding that '[the] dancing helps us, but we don't depend on it.' The intersection of internal and external realities grows violent, too, when police officers start stinging the parties. Viewers hear Weinraub ask the officers what they're doing. 'You're asking the wrong question,' she's chided, 'No comment.' Scenes like these highlight Weinraub's dexterity as a director who can both mediate viewer and subject and maintain her politics. In front of and behind the camera, her indignance emphasizes how what is deemed legal relates closely to sexuality, age, gender and race. *Shakedown* ultimately closes not because it promotes criminal activity, but because the individuals who embody it are convenient targets of state-sanctioned racism.



Fig. 5 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.

Shakedown today stands out as a testament to a pre-Black Lives Matter gay community that knew its value well before commercial interests in non-white and queer cultures had manifest. Streaming on a porn website visited by billions of people, Weinraub's fully accessible, expressive voice and her ability to amplify the voices of others so often marginalised mark a fresh departure from the traditional arts context. The departure also makes her return to it, as the film next travels to The Criterion Collection.

Shakedown's final scene depicts Weinraub asking Egypt to read from a script: 'Some places are just hard to find,' she recites, as scenes of LA close out the film. At a moment in which the whole world is online and the experience economy is cancelled, the places, movements and bodies *Shakedown* represents feel priceless, which is perhaps why this young director made them free for all.

This review was the winning entry to the 2020 Burlington Contemporary Art Writing Prize. For more information on the prize click [here](#).



Fig. 6 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.



Fig. 7 Still from *Shakedown*, by Leilah Weinraub. 2018. Duration 1h 11m.

Footnotes

- 1** H. Spillers: 'The idea of black culture', p.12, available at <https://artsonline.uwaterloo.ca/~wsiemerl/media/Hortense%20Spillers/Spillers%20The%20Idea%20of%20Black%20Culture.pdf>, accessed 20th May 2020.
- 2** Ibid.

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