

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jennifer Tyburczy. *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 296 pp. \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-31524-9; \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-31510-2.

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Published on H-Histsex (August, 2016)

Commissioned by Katherine Harvey



Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display proposes and advocates for a reconsideration of how displays of sex in museums should be approached, contextualized, and framed, and offers an altogether more queer means through which to challenge the established “taxonomies of normalcy” in museums (p. 11). Positioning display as a choreography of spectators’ bodies, Jennifer Tyburczy addresses the ways in which museums are theatrical spaces and become contact zones between bodies and objects, and how the navigating of bodies in spaces has the potential to make meaning. The spectator in turn is positioned as a performer, undoing notions of passive spectatorship and challenging the assumption that the benchmark for a museum spectator is a white heterosexual male, that any depictions of bodies or sex outside of his frame of reference are in some way “other.” Tyburczy attempts to unsettle the ways in which museums “participate in the production of emotions and ideas about the people who inhabit the margins of citizenship and about the parameters of acceptable speech” (p. xvii).

Sex Museums is a manifesto of sorts, the intention of which is fourfold: to explore the ways in which museums have shaped and iterated the binaries of “normal” and “perverse”; to discover how present-day “sex museums” have reshaped these binaries and understandings; to understand the challenges of exhibiting marginalized sexual “subjects”; and lastly to assert throughout that all museums are *already* sex museums.

Jennifer Tyburczy is former archivist and curator at the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, and as such employs a strong focus on kink and SM, specifically in the queer curatorship chapter. This is accompa-

nied throughout by a rich variety of case studies from the United States and South America.

The chapter on queer curatorship (defined as “curatorial activity that can highlight and rearrange normative narratives about what it means to be a historically and geographically specific sexual subject,” p. 3) is one of the book’s strongest moments. Tyburczy notes that queer viewpoints are crucial to fight oblivion—in other words, to visibility of non-normative bodies and sexualities. This is one of the few points in the text where Tyburczy explicitly hints at a social justice motivation for displaying queer and non-normative sex in museums, though a growing field of literature, including *Gender, Sexuality and Museums: A Routledge Reader* edited by Amy K. Levin (2010) and *Museums, Equality and Social Justice*, edited by Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale (2012), does address this. Queer curatorship is positioned as a counter to homonormativity and neoliberalism as much as to heteronormativity and homophobia.

Tyburczy’s writing borrows from theater and performance studies to consider embodiment and corporal histories when addressing the display of sex. It employs a necessarily interdisciplinary methodology in a book that is both experimental and performative, and whose carefully curated chapters put “queer principles into practice” (p. xvii).

Tyburczy charts the ways in which museums have engaged in more insidious forms of disciplining sexuality than other institutions such as prisons, schools, and asylums, especially in terms of non-normative sexual practices, most notably, queer sex. This disciplining also enforces a notion that sexuality/ies are modern inventions.

She also unpacks the way in which this disciplining ties in with ideas of nationalism, that there is an understanding, enforced by museums, of a “national sexual culture” which is understood both by the institutions themselves and by their visitors. David Wojnarowicz’s controversial work *A Fire in My Belly* serves as an example for this, as objections to the work and its inclusion in the 2010 Smithsonian exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, were on the grounds of its “un-American” nature, as much as its queer subject matter.

Freak shows are used as an example of displaying non-normative bodies. They could indeed be considered sex museums by their non-medical display of bodies and anatomy for entertainment, playing on the spectator’s assumed understanding of a “normal” body. Tyburczy states that even in an anatomical or medical context, displays of the body are deemed more acceptable when the subject is a white woman, presumably for the gaze of the white heterosexual male.

Shame and anxiety have also played a role in the ways museums have displayed, and in many cases, obscured sex and sexualities. Tyburczy traces the ways in which secret museums have policed access to material deemed unsuitable for mass consumption, and how the creation of barriers adds further to this idea of shame. She credits the debates around the display of Robert Mapplethorpe’s sexually explicit photography in mainstream museums with beginning conversations around the display of sex in museums, and in institutions finding more creative “display methods for managing the consumption of queerness” (p. 102). She focuses particularly on warning signs, which signify controversial material with both moral and economic motivations, but also as potential compromises to include such works. Using Judith Butler’s idea of “implicit censorship,” Tyburczy notes how museums use such signage to manage consumption, to manage the presumed anxieties of the spectator, to further create and enforce subliminal taxonomies, and to shape how visitors make meaning of displays of sex. Further mention of signage that denotes sexual material on the grounds of age appropriateness and the presumed suggestibility of young people would have been a timely addition here.

In highlighting the specially installed, weapon-wielding security staff at the Smithsonian to police those

protesting the display of the aforementioned Wojnarowicz work, Tyburczy misses an opportunity to explore the potential for important conversations to take place as part of this uproar, and for dissenting spectators to contribute to the museum’s own interpretation of works. The *Disobedient Objects* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (July 2014-February 2015), allowed space for visitors to respond to works relating to activism. A vibrant exchange between conflicting feminist groups in relation to campaigning about nude women that was a regular feature in UK tabloid newspaper *The Sun* became a work of art in itself, encompassing a whole wall of the exhibition.

Sex Museums is bookended with the assertion that all museums are, or have potential to be, sex museums, with the display of sex framed as a means through which to challenge the boundaries of political discourse in the museum. What exactly constitutes a sex museum is perhaps for the reader to determine. While Tyburczy notes that the naming of museums as “sex museums” was not the advent of museums as sites for the exploration of displaying sex, and that sex has always been displayed, more space could be devoted to explaining just *how* all museums could, by definition, be sex museums. She addresses the relatively short lifespans of sex museums, owing to governmental pressure, censorship, shifting economic climates, and shifting tastes. Not least is that their competition is largely other sites for leisure and pleasure, not necessarily other museums. She also addresses the contested nature of pornography, how it may be more to do with taste, than with sexualities or bodies. What “sex” means in the museum could have been teased out more thoroughly in order for this radical and engaging manifesto to feel more concrete.

What is made clear in *Sex Museums* is the way in which the language used in sex museums aims to *do* something, rather than simply to describe it. Sexual material culture is not necessarily about the object, but about the “performances of identity, desire, pleasure, representation, power, and regulation” that take place around that object (p. 12). The performative nature of Tyburczy’s writing ensures that *Sex Museums* does not remain a static museum studies text, and instead urges museums and indeed spectators to think more carefully, creatively, and queerly about how diverse sex and sexualities are displayed and navigated in the museum.

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Citation: Sean Curran. Review of Tyburczy, Jennifer, *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display*. H-Histsex, H-Net Reviews. August, 2016.

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