

Jennifer Tyburczy

# Sex Museums

The Politics and  
Performance of Display



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JENNIFER TYBURCZY

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**JENNIFER TYBURCZY** is assistant professor of feminist studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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FOR THE LEATHER ARCHIVES & MUSEUM

# Contents

*Illustrations ix*

*Preface: A Fire in My Belly xiii*

*Acknowledgments xix*

|   |                                                                   |     |
|---|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
|   | Introduction: All Museums Are Sex Museums                         | 1   |
| 1 | Hard-Core Collecting and Erotic Exhibitionism                     | 39  |
| 2 | Nudes and Nazis; or, Surveying Sex through<br>Violence in Museums | 65  |
| 3 | WARNING: Dissident Sex in the Museums                             | 101 |
| 4 | Touring the Sex Museum                                            | 125 |
| 5 | Exhibiting the Sexual Modern                                      | 151 |
| 6 | Queer Curatorship                                                 | 175 |
|   | Coda: When Sex Museums Fail                                       | 200 |

*Notes 209*

*Bibliography 255*

*Index 275*

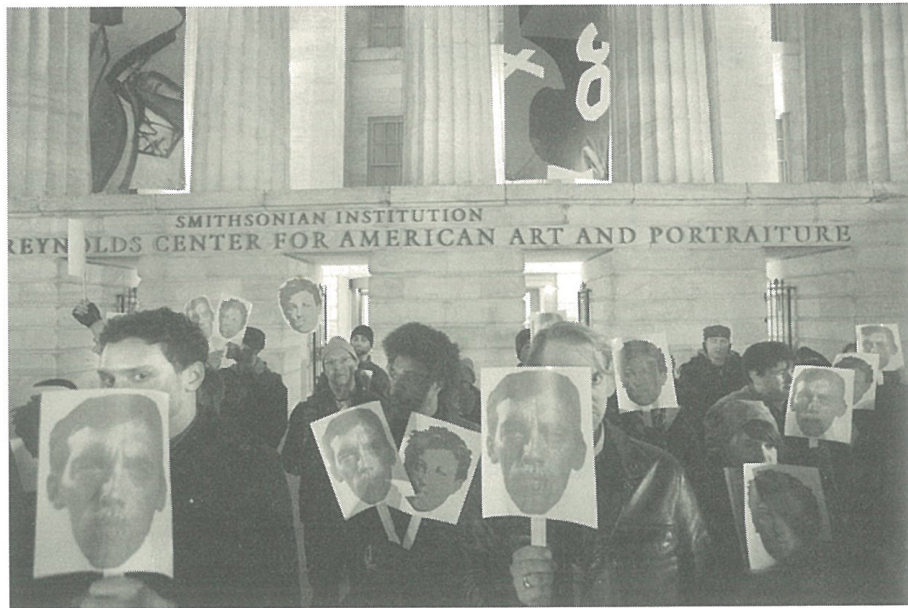
# Illustrations

- p.1 Protesters holding masks in support of David Wojnarowicz xii
- 1.1 "The Sims Position" 17
- 1.2 Plastinated pregnant woman at the *Body Worlds* exhibition 18
- 2.1 *L'origine du monde*, by Gustave Courbet 38
- 2.2 *L'origine du monde*, by André Masson 43
- 2.1 Body cast and skeleton of Saartjie "Sarah" Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus" 69
- 2.2 The vandalized *Toilet of Venus (Rokeby Venus)*, by Diego Velázquez 75
- 2.3 *Blue Nude (Souvenir of Biskra)*, by Henri Matisse 82
- 2.4 View of one section of the *Degenerate Art* exhibition 88
- 2.5 *Axed Roberts and Luca* from Andres Serrano's *A History of Sex* 96
- 3.1 Warning sign for *Hide/Seek* 99
- 3.2 Warning sign for *Lost and Found* 100
- 3.3 Warning sign for *Because We Are* 100
- 3.4 *Our Lady*, by Alma López 108
- 3.5 *La Virgen de Guadalupe con la cara de Marilyn Monroe*, by Rolando de la Rosa 110
- 3.6 Sex toy display 120
- 4.1 "Please do not touch, lick, stroke or mount the exhibits" 135

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- 4.2 *Naomi and the Swan*, by Karen Rosenberg 139
- 4.3 Erotic Japanese decorations 142
- 5.1 "Chacalator" 163
- 5.2 "Juguutilandia" 165
- 5.3 "Verbolario" 168
- 6.1 Leather sword sheath and whip 174
- 6.2 Still from *The Attendant*, by Isaac Julien 181
- 6.3 Mollena William's visitor book entry and lip stain 191
- 6.4 "Cum Rag" 197
- 6.5 "I was there. . . ." 197





P.1 Protesters holding masks in support of David Wojnarowicz in front of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Associated Press/Jacquelyn Martin.

## Preface: *A Fire in My Belly*

In December 2010, pressured by conservative lawmakers and Smithsonian Institution secretary G. Wayne Clough, Martin Sullivan, the director of the National Portrait Gallery (NPG), pulled David Wojnarowicz's work *A Fire in My Belly* from the exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. The video footage, which included images of masturbation, the poverty-stricken streets of Mexico City after the 1982 debt crisis, and the violence involved in popular sports such as bullfights, cockfights, and *lucha libre* matches, upset lawmakers owing to the brief scene of crawling ants on a Jesus-adorned crucifix. That their accusations were almost verbatim repetitions of those made by then senators Alfonse "Al" D'Amato and Jesse Helms and the Reverend Donald E. Wildmon in the 1980s alerts us to the fact that the culture wars, particularly around sex, are not over, not by a long shot.

The first outcry came from Bill Donahue, the head of the Catholic League, who claimed that *A Fire in My Belly* was "designed to insult and inflict injury and assault the sensibilities of Christians" and declared the artwork "hate speech," especially during the Christmas season.<sup>1</sup> The similarities between Donahue's rhetoric and arguments against the 1989 display of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in a yellow liquid (possibly the artist's urine), are undeniable. In 1989, the controversy over the alleged blasphemy of Serrano's image spurred by Wildmon, Helms, and D'Amato affected public policy, museum management of controversial subject matter, and, of course, federal funding.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the case of

Serrano, Wojnarowicz's detractors could not affect his career: Wojnarowicz died of AIDS in 1992 at the age of thirty-seven.

Thus, whether Donahue's assertion of hate speech was a veiled homophobic attack is less important than what happened afterward. Conservative lawmakers such as the newly minted speaker of the House John Boehner and the Virginia congressman Eric Cantor used the controversy as an opportunity to propose federal funding cuts to institutions such as the NPG. Both representatives used localized religious outrage over thirty seconds of footage to call for the end to an entire exhibition. In Boehner's words, which clearly echo some of the same rhetoric employed during the National Endowment for the Arts debates of the 1980s and 1990s: "American families have a right to expect better from recipients of taxpayer funds. While the amount of money involved may be small, it's symbolic of the arrogance Washington routinely applies to thousands of spending decisions involving Americans' hard-earned money. Smithsonian officials should either acknowledge the mistake and correct it, or be prepared to face tough scrutiny beginning in January [when the new majority in the House was to move in]."<sup>3</sup> In these tough economic times, museum exhibitions dedicated to the exploration of diverse sexualities become political weapons. They become symbolic of big government spending and stages for theatrically demonstrating what went wrong with Barack Obama's presidency. For Boehner, *Hide/Seek* was semiotically symptomatic of a flawed political agenda that gives financial support to institutions that do not adequately represent community standards of acceptable or desirable museum exhibition. The genre of the kind of work that the NPG exhibits should not be lost here, nor should the boldness of its installation of *Hide/Seek*: by including LGBT and queer-centric works of art as representative of national portraiture, the curators, Jonathan D. Katz and David C. Ward, sought to create a macroeffect on the museum world that Wojnarowicz's piece addressed in microeffect. In a sense conservatives were right to seize on this show as a monumental event insofar as it unabashedly proposed a contemporary national face that acknowledged and incorporated homosexuality.

Controversial museum displays, like that of David Wojnarowicz's *A Fire in My Belly*, turn museums into culture war theaters and illuminate the quieter but always ubiquitous battles surrounding sexual display. When *A Fire in My Belly* was withdrawn, many voices across the American political spectrum proclaimed the return of the culture wars of the 1980s. The media pinpointed *Hide/Seek* as the pivotal event that reenergized the polarized battle between the conservative Right and the liberal



Left. As in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s, questions about fundamental democratic issues such as freedom of speech, hate speech and its relationship to religious groups, sexual rights, the role of government in funding the arts, the limits of what should be displayed in museums as public institutions, and the parameters for defining art were split down the middle as they once again rose to national and international prominence. Twenty-three years after *A Fire in My Belly* was originally compiled, almost a quarter of a century after the culture wars, Martin Sullivan issued an apology for including the work in the exhibition and promptly removed it from display. In doing so, he saved the run of the exhibition but also set in motion a chain of reactions that demonstrated not only how the culture wars were prematurely thought to be over but also why museums had been grappling with the issue of sexual display, particularly queer sexual display, ever since the violent protests involving Robert Mapplethorpe's photography in that fateful year of 1989.

Those who opposed the withdrawal of *A Fire in My Belly* included the Association of Art Museum Directors, whose members issued a statement scolding the Smithsonian for acquiescing to external pressures.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the American Association of Museums defended Sullivan's decision to remove the piece but lamented the potential damage to the value of the exhibition that such an action could precipitate.<sup>5</sup> The Warhol Foundation, the largest private financial contributor to the *Hide/Seek* exhibition, vocalized its disappointment in Sullivan's action and added an important component to the debate since the fact of its financial backing of the exhibition contradicted accusations of wasted public funding.<sup>6</sup>

On December 3, 2010, two days after the work's removal, the Transformer Gallery in Washington, DC, became the first display space to screen *A Fire in My Belly*, first as an excerpt, and later in its entirety.<sup>7</sup> In collaboration with Wojnarowicz's estate and Rodrigo Espinosa, the director of Mexico City's Garash Galería, Transformer Gallery's director, Victoria Reis, obtained what some believe to be Wojnarowicz's final compilation and screened that plus seven minutes of Super 8 footage in an ongoing loop in the gallery's storefront. The glass window was painted with the symbol for "A Day without Art." That national day of action and mourning, formed in response to the AIDS crisis, was declared on December 1, 1989, exactly twenty-one years to the day prior to the withdrawal of *A Fire in My Belly*. The ironic connections between 2010 and 1989 were not lost on Reis, who, along with her colleagues,

organized an “artistic action,” the first silent protest on the steps of the NPG where participants held placards of an iconic image of Wojnarowicz with his lips sewn shut.

Indeed, even the most thoughtful and radical approaches to *A Fire in My Belly*'s removal in 2010 felt like déjà vu, what with the silent, peaceful protesters carrying masks that depicted Wojnarowicz's lip-sewn face, an image that had become synonymous with AIDS activism and that had originally appeared in Wojnarowicz's 1990 video *SILENCE = DEATH*, an homage to the mantra of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), an international direct action advocacy group. The protesters also projected images from *A Fire in My Belly* onto the outer walls of the NPG in direct activist reference to the projection of images from Mapplethorpe's censored exhibition *The Perfect Moment* onto the main entrance of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, on June 30, 1989. Yet, at the same time, the situation was markedly different and more insidiously dangerous. When I visited the NPG shortly after *A Fire in My Belly* had been pulled, I noticed guards with guns and batons patrolling the exhibition.<sup>8</sup> I later found out that the Smithsonian had its own police force that was especially appointed to the galleries where artwork for *Hide/Seek* was shown. I learned this from asking the guards (who wore white uniforms that distinguished them from the other guards, who wore black uniforms) about why they carried weapons: one refused to answer; another told me that the police force was installed in *Hide/Seek* galleries after a protester posing as a museum visitor was caught handing out pamphlets denouncing the video. Curiously, when I asked staff working at the front desk, they told me that they were unaware that guns were even in the building; later in our conversation they rationalized the armed presence by explaining that after the video's removal they had received phone threats from people who either demanded *A Fire in My Belly*'s reinstallation or called for the closure of the entire exhibition, or else.

In the museum world, what constitutes the domain of the controversial is a broad category that covers any representation or visitor experience that interrupts the naturalized order of normalcy or the conventional choreographies of museumgoing. While *A Fire in My Belly* was displayed as representative of lesbian and gay experience, it combines a variety of potentially disruptive visual images that have historically been deemed un-American. The video footage chosen for *Hide/Seek* included sexual scenes—particularly of masturbation—but also religious imagery to talk about other kinds of suffering, for example, the economic effects of neoliberal capitalism on Mexico City. To study the history of sexual

display, therefore, is to pay attention to the challenges of presenting all kinds of controversial forms of knowledge in museums, in particular the display of issues that are considered anathema to public discourse.

This book argues that we view museums as compelling spaces to explore what counts as controversial knowledge. It explores the museum's history as an institutional structure expressly designed to bridge educational, civic, and leisure industries and tracks a genealogy of sexual display to show how controversies about sex in museums have traditionally served to cover a wide range of political battles over representation. The cultural battles that take place over the exhibition of sex in museums concern more than just the struggle for representation, however; they also illuminate the performative impact of institutions on social experience and, more precisely, how 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. By reflecting on the ways in which sex has been displayed in museums, this book exposes museums as spaces where some of the most volatile and informative battles about sexual identity, sexual practices, and the history of sexuality have been and continue to be waged in the public sphere.

The exhibition of sex has resulted in some of museum history's most explosive moments, characterized by backlash, protest, and debate about the social function and role of museums in a democratic society. I seize on these unsettling occasions in museum history in an effort to understand how the politics and performances that make up the museum practice of display not only reflect but also profoundly shape sexual meaning. And I take some methodological risks, as both a curator and a writer, to call for, describe, and enact queer display praxis. In so doing, I treat the chapters that follow like the museum exhibitions I have curated—as experimental stages for performing grounded research and material practices of display that put queer principles into practice. My aim is to enthusiastically transgress presumed sexual norms in museums and to use these queer tactics to bring hidden or censored aspects of sexuality into public view.

For the history of sexual display is a little like playing hide-and-seek. What happens behind the scenes during a museum exhibition controversy is never transparent, and what makes up a museum goes well beyond the objects shown in its galleries or the practices of its staff. The controversy over *A Fire in My Belly* serves as one potent and recent example of how museum visitors, actual and potential, become active co-creators of meaning who change the interpretation of an object and the



significance of an exhibition by indelibly altering the context in which it is displayed and understood. Why the NPG felt the need to arm the guards in the *Hide/Seek* galleries, what precisely the angry callers said to the front desk personnel, what was spoken in confidence behind closed doors that resulted in the removal of *A Fire in My Belly*—these things we will never know. In a different version of the same game, all the objects included in *Hide/Seek* had been previously exhibited in other shows without controversy, but never was sexuality used as the frame for understanding them.<sup>9</sup> *Hide/Seek* sought to change that history by explicitly framing the objects vis-à-vis what they could tell us about the history of managing sexuality in the history of art. Display alters the meaning of the objects it shows, and in this case it ignited a debate that revealed how museums continue to be battlegrounds for waging political and social battles about what sex means. Inspired by *Hide/Seek* and other public sexual display projects, this book proposes material and concrete applications of queer scholarship in display settings as a vital method for reframing the relationship between sex and the museum.



## Acknowledgments

We humans are too simpleminded. We all like to think each person, place, or thing is only itself. A vibrator is a vibrator is a vibrator, right? But that's not true at all. Everything is stuffed to the brim with ideas and love and hope and magic and dreams. SHERMAN ALEXIE, "DO NOT GO GENTLE"

This goes out to all the people who saw the value in *Sex Museums*. Anyone who has been on the long journey that ultimately led to the book that now rests in your hands (or that appears on your screen) knows all too well the challenges I faced in showing the skeptical and the suspicious how a project that focuses on the politics and performance of sexual display went beyond a mere personal exercise in voyeurism, exhibitionism, or (the even more frequent accusation) prurience. To say that pleasure, personal or otherwise, had nothing to do with the project, however, would be disingenuous. Indeed, the real challenge in writing this book was devising a method of recording in words the importance of pleasure to politics, to the embodied experience of traversing and analyzing sexual spaces, and, perhaps most relevantly for the readers of this book, to consuming sex objects, whether erotic paintings, pornographic films, racy magazines, dildos, whips, sexual jokes and phrases, or academic books such as this one. For this revelation, I am grateful to all the naysayers as they consistently refocused my attention on the importance of seeking out new and innovative ways to write about sex and its intersections with politics, pedagogy, and performance.

Any sexuality studies professor faces similar practical and theoretical questions on a daily basis. How should we

talk about sex with our students? With our colleagues? What are the symbolic and actual borders of this discourse? When have we gone too far? And when does crossing the line lead to dangerous consequences? Who made the line to be crossed or avoided anyway and in the service of whom or what? And, when we do find ourselves in uncharted territory, should we stop, or have we actually stumbled on the very crux of doing sexuality studies scholarship in the first place? I hope that this book offers, in addition to its arguments about the specific sites, objects, and subjects that populate its pages, a myriad of ways to approach the problems, the politics, and, yes, the pleasures of writing and teaching about sex.

The Sherman Alexie quote that serves as an epigraph to this section suggests that the meaning of objects, especially sex objects, is too often occluded by their literal use value. But, as Alexie's narrator proposes, they too are teeming "with ideas and love and hope and magic and dreams." Writing and publishing *Sex Museums*, a sex object in its own right, has been one of my dreams, one brimming with the guidance and support of the following people, groups, and institutions.

I want to first thank my fearless mentors, who not only helped me to craft an earlier version of this project, but who also taught me how to talk about it knowing full well that, in the words of one of my mentors, this project would be (for some) a "tough sell." Lauren Berlant showed me the importance of publicness and feelings to sexual display; Tracy C. Davis taught me to think more rigorously about the history of museums in my project; and E. Patrick Johnson constantly inspired me to pursue a performance praxis—a meeting ground of theory and practice—where I would not only analyze sexual display but also put my ideas "on their feet" through embodiment, pedagogy, and curatorial labor. And, finally and most of all, thanks to Jennifer Brody, my always academic champion who in addition to teaching me all about the intersection of art history and performance studies also generously offered me the emotional and intellectual support to move through some difficult years in graduate school. She has since become a friend and a colleague whom I treasure dearly. Thank you, Jen.

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And, of course, thank you to all the anonymous visitors and staff whom I cannot name here but without whom this book would not have been possible. Over fifty sex museum visitors and employees spoke to me about what it means to display sex in museums. Their candid and savvy observations are everywhere in this book.

At the University of Texas at Austin, where I first fell in love with performance studies, artmaking, and queer theory, I want to thank Jill Dolan, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, Sandy Stone, Elizabeth Richmond-Garza, and especially Ann Cvetkovich, who instilled in me a love of the (queer) archive. At Northwestern University, I want to thank my performance studies cohort, especially Lori Barcliff Baptista, Phillip Hales, Habib Iddrisu, and Christopher Van Houten. Pavithra Prasad and I instantly became best buds. I cannot begin to express my gratitude for all the wit, creativity, and poetry she has brought into my life. Special thanks as well to Jeffrey Q. McCune and Gregory Mitchell. Although we missed the chance to be contemporary “perf studs,” your support in this and other projects has deepened my thoughts on sexuality studies; my gratitude and admiration to you both. Also thanks to my Northwestern writing group—Lori Barcliff Baptista, Christina McMahon, Tamara Roberts, Daniel Smith, and Christopher Van Houten. Special thanks as well to Nick Davis, Lane Fenrich, Min Kyung Lee, Adil Mansoor, Jeff Masten, and Katie Zien. My gratitude as well to the Affective Publics reading



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## All Museums Are Sex Museums

I view sex as a diverse, dynamic, interactive, and interdependent social relation cultivated by the ways in which bodies, spaces, and objects interrelate; it is not, therefore, solely a relationship between human bodies but also a relation between bodies and objects and the ways in which bodies are invited, coerced, and positioned around and toward particular kinds of objects. Museums are theatrical spaces of everyday drama, veritable contact zones between bodies and objects.<sup>1</sup> Sex has never been outside the scope of the museum's representational field, and the museum has always participated in the disciplining of sexuality that occurs in other sites (e.g., the prison, the school, the asylum), albeit differently. Especially when it comes to display—the interactive and public museum practice that frames much of contemporary Western understandings of knowledge and culture—museums have played a pivotal but often overlooked role in how we talk, think, and represent sex.

This book is about what happens when museums display sex, explicitly or tacitly. In it, I demonstrate how museum debates about what sex is and how to manage it have been integral to defining the parameters of sexual normalcy. In particular, I focus on the politics and the performance of display—that is, the ways in which sexual display transforms museums into culture war theaters where dramatic civic struggles over how sex relates to public institutional space, national and global citizenship, public discourse, definitions of art and history, and performances of sexual identity are staged. In addition to analyzing the diverse



sexual artifacts that populate museums, this book also investigates what can be learned about the formation of Western sexuality by studying how various museum publics have managed sexual knowledge through the use of display as a technique and the museum as an institutional space for disciplining sexuality both within and outside museums.

The museum management of sex has profoundly strengthened the tenacity of sexuality as a modern invention and its persistence as a category of politicized meaning. Diverse representations of sexuality, in some form, are always present in archival collections that reflect and shape definitions of *culture*. Most often, however, museums organize exhibits that assume that patriarchal heterosexuality and traditional structures of sexual intimacy and gender performance represent national sexual culture for their visitors. *Sex Museums* illuminates the heteronormativity of most museums and proposes alternative approaches for the future of public sexual display projects. Thus, it develops theoretical concepts with practical applications for collection, curatorship, policy management, and visitor services in museums.

In light of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's argument that "display not only shows and speaks, but does,"<sup>2</sup> this study examines the effects of museum display on the history of sexuality by exploring four inter-related themes. First, it treats the museum context (of the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries) as a pivotal and highly influential site in the construction of modern sexual subjectivity and the categories of normalcy and perversity. Second, it explores a group of present-day museums, called sex museums, as explicit sexual spaces in the public sphere that combine pedagogy and public entertainment to redefine what *sex* means. Third, it examines the successes and failures of sex museums and describes the pleasures and dangers associated with exhibiting marginalized sexual subjects (e.g., women, people of color, LGBT individuals). Fourth, it proposes the seemingly paradoxical assertion that all museums are already sex museums, even as a diverse array of sexualities has been historically marginalized from the museum's scopic field. While sex is present in most all museums, sex museums are a particular group of museums that have their own history that builds on but diverges from the ways that other museums have traditionally managed sexual display. Building on my experience as an archivist and curator at one sex museum, the Leather Archives and Museum (LA&M) in Chicago, my analysis also proposes alternative models of curatorial labor that I gather under the term *queer curatorship*. Queer curatorship is an experimental display tactic that stages alternative spatial configurations for two distinct purposes: to expose how traditional museums socialize



heteronormative relationships between objects and visitors and to cope with ethically fraught objects of queer cultures, for example, leather whips as objects with historical ties to both gay leather/kink culture and antebellum slavery. In homage to the exhibition *Mining the Museum*, in which the institutional critique artist Fred Wilson reorganized the white historical archive of the Baltimore Historical Society to centralize its margins by placing Maryland's fraught racial past center stage, queer curatorship aims to do for sex (and race) what Wilson did for race in the context of display.<sup>3</sup>

My analysis of museum history dovetails with the periodization that in *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault labeled as the perverse implantation, an "age of multiplication" wherein sexualities were dispersed and strengthened and multiple forms of "perversions" were invented.<sup>4</sup> The transition from immense Renaissance collections known as the *Wunderkammern* (wonder rooms) to the post-Enlightenment project of the modern museum was also characterized by dispersal and the reclassification of what Douglas Crimp has called the heterogeneous profusion of the *Wunderkammern*.<sup>5</sup> *Sex Museums* views these overlapping histories wherein objects and bodies were reclassified under newly invented categories as intimately related and takes as its central claim that museums should be counted among the institutional instruments that make up the perverse implantation. My examination of the museum context and its relationship to the proliferation of sexual perversions in Western thought thus begins with some of the earliest display spaces that emerged during that transition from wonder rooms to modern museums and continues into the twenty-first century in order to trace how the museum as an institution depended on norms and normalization in practices of display. Tracking the history of the museum through the history of sexuality shows how display materialized and shaped shifting political and social ideas about gender, race, and class as they related to changing notions of sexual subjectivity.

Yet the history of the normalizing force of the museum always paralleled another history—a queer history—one in which the display of unruly objects of nonnormative sex rebels against museum norms, as do risk-taking curators. Throughout the book, I foreground display as a materialization of queer theory and as a form of queer praxis. Specifically, I propose queer curatorship as a mode of display that puts antinormative principles into practice. Queer curatorship is a curatorial activity that can highlight and rearrange normative narratives about what it means to be a historically and geographically specific sexual subject. It can also materialize a spatial and discursive approach to display that utopically

imagines new forms of sexual sociality and collectivity between bodies, things, and nations in public institutional display spaces, such as museums. The point of queer curatorship as a form of queer praxis is not only to say that there is homophobia, transphobia, sex negativity, and racism at work when queer and dissident sexual materials are thought to belong in the trash can and not the museum, though this too is an important aspect of queer curatorship. It is also to say that a queer anti-normative point of view is crucial now in the struggle against oblivion, both in the form of the long history of suppression and of ignoring such materials and in the mainstreaming of gay culture, which may deem these materials irrelevant in the name of pride, dignity, and sameness with heterosexual cultures.

Thus, while heteronormativity, heterosexism, and homophobia are central to the version of museum history that *Sex Museums* imparts, so too is *homonormativity*, a more recently activated term within queer scholarship that aims to theorize an emerging set of social, embodied, and rhetorical codes for promoting and performing ideal forms of “gayness” while disciplining other forms of sexual difference. In the 1990s Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner initiated the use of the term *heteronormativity* when they famously suggested that homosexuality could never acquire the same normative force as the densely institutionalized workings of heterosexuality.<sup>6</sup> Queer theorists have since revised this argument when they introduced the term *homonormativity*.<sup>7</sup> Overwhelmingly, these theorists have emphasized the cultural influences of “neoliberalism,” an economic ideology that stresses privatization, a market economy, and transnational trade politics, on gay and lesbian formations and the emergence of assimilationist approaches to gay politics. Throughout the book, whenever I refer to homonormativity, I mean to pinpoint the phenomenon that queer theorists have seized on to illuminate the interrelationship between macroeconomic policies and quotidian sexual culture. The book therefore examines the disciplining of certain kinds of sex through display that span heterosexual and homosexual cultures from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries.

The concept of queer curatorship thus seizes on a definition of *queer* very much in line with twenty-first-century queer critique and particularly with the scholarship of José Esteban Muñoz. Muñoz defines *queer* as a “not yet here” and “as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.”<sup>8</sup> Central to the notion of display as a form of queer praxis is the repositioning of the body in relationship to the objects on exhibit, regardless of the sexual culture from which these

objects derive or whether the objects had previously been arranged in heteronormative and/or homonormative configurations. This approach to display as a materialization of queer theory and as a mode of queer world making draws inspiration from theater and performance studies scholars who prioritize questions of embodiment and corporeal histories to forge new paths for rethinking display in museums.<sup>9</sup> These scholars agree that, like theaters, museums carefully position viewers in particular scenes of meaning making where knowledge and the organization of that knowledge have always been staged. For Muñoz, as for this book: “Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.”<sup>10</sup> *Sex Museums* traverses the history of the museum through the history of sexuality, and vice versa, so as to imagine and reach toward the future queer potential of display.

Any conversation about display and the staging of knowledge in museums begins in archives, repositories of artifacts from which the objects for display are chosen. Performance scholars have also been instrumental in revealing the limitations of archives. In particular, Diana Taylor uses the work of Jacques Derrida, Paul Connerton, and Pierre Nora to imagine a symbiosis between official archives and the embodied performance of memory and history of the everyday. She theorizes performance as a “vital act of transfer” communicated through “performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproductive knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> *Sex Museums* extends Taylor’s project by exploring the distinctive relationships of sex to archives and to museums. Furthermore, it argues that sex should be viewed as a unique component of Taylor’s repertoire, one that possesses a close association with histories of policing and stigmatization. By combining sexuality and performance studies, I join scholars and artists dedicated to the project of queering the archive, a project that has historically wavered between outing gay and lesbian predecessors and locating sexual moments in the archive that disrupt the normative sexual narrative of a particular time and place.<sup>12</sup> By focusing on the display of sex as a performance rather than sexuality as an identity, I intend to keep my analysis open to all kinds of identifications and desires so as to question what constitutes history, identity, and publicness; I can then also examine what assumptions about privateness and publicness museums share with other spaces and sites for sexual discourse. Indeed, I propose that museums both reflect and shape the ways in which institutions manage sex in the public sphere.

In the following pages, I look at Western modernity’s quintessential space of display—the museum—to examine the ways in which museums



have been pivotal sites in the construction of epistemological frames for understanding sex. I go on to examine the late twentieth- and twenty-first-century museum phenomenon—the sex museum—to think about how and in what ways that genealogy can be reconfigured. Never neutral or natural, exhibiting sex exposes the theatricality of display and disturbs how we understand the museum and its relationship to sex and publicness.

### Sex Museum Theory

When I refer to a museum, I refer to a location and a space of display and spectatorship within which restricted performances of meaning making happen. *Museum* also signifies a positionality, a stance from which museum publics contest and reflect what Erving Goffman called frames of understanding, or the organization of the continuous stream of life activity into digestible components and categories of meaning.<sup>13</sup> Museums organize and display objects, and, in so doing, they simultaneously show the structures by which people understand and categorically arrange objects and also invent new models for understanding those objects. Whether the organizational structure of object arrangements reiterates, supports, or confirms an already existing frame of understanding or breaks, subverts, or moves between frames depends on the practices of meaning making enacted by bodies moving in, around, and through museums. This process of meaning making, practice, and action is what I will refer to throughout the book as performance.

My focus on how bodies move through space to interact and form relationships with other bodies and objects on display—what I call display choreography and describe at length in chapter 1—is intended to illuminate museums as sites of performance and as locations, to borrow a term from Michel de Certeau, for exhibiting “intersections of mobile elements” that specifically highlight sex as one of those elements. Like de Certeau, I view space as a “practiced place” guided by a general itinerary (e.g., floor plan) but with ample room for moments or pockets of visitor agency, active interpretation, and inconsistent experience.<sup>14</sup> For space to be a “practiced place,” bodies must circulate and make meaning within and around it. In this book, the intersecting mobile elements that compose space (and hence “sex objects” of analysis) include the experience of moving as a sexual subject within a particular urban landscape, stepping into a particular museum located within that landscape, moving through museum galleries where sex objects are displayed, organized,



and juxtaposed to other objects, textual analysis, and the predetermined assumption on the part of museum planners of who constitutes its audience. Like Rebecca Schneider, I seek to add “stimulating confusion” to scholarship on space, specifically how museum spaces, especially sex museum spaces, prepare scenes for performing the relationship between the passerby (the visitor), the passed by (objects on display), and archival sexual knowledge.<sup>15</sup>

I combine de Certeau’s definition of *space* with the work of queer geographers like David Bell and Gill Valentine who discuss “the ways in which the spatial and the sexual constitute one another.”<sup>16</sup> Geographers of sexualities start with embodiment—with what bodies do—in order to analyze how spaces are produced through social practices that, in turn, enact environments structured by regulating norms. These practices encompass sexual relations between the bodies and, I would add, objects that make up and take up space. Above all, these scholars agree that “sexualities can usefully be understood through the institutionalisation of spaces at a variety of scales, from the national to the transnational.”<sup>17</sup> In museums, hierarchical structures of race, gender, sex, and class are so intricately enmeshed in the architecture and layout of the space that the always ongoing process of constructing sexual normalcy becomes invisible, background, or seemingly “natural.” Studying the reiterations and disruptions of the hegemonic sexual and gendered order performed in museums contributes to the cultural study of how these structures and practices became institutionalized through display.

The museum’s history, its persistent resonance in the cultural imaginary as a place of objective education, and its spatial demands on the compliant body create atmospheres in which it is difficult to enact, detect, or imagine forms of embodied resistance. While museums primarily function on the logic of the visible, visitor resistance to how knowledge and expertise are organized and presented typically remains under the visual radar as public outbursts and emotional performances are deterred, if not forbidden. In all display spaces, not only what is seen but also what is felt are things that are carefully staged. With this in mind, *Sex Museums* identifies and reads the *emotional habitus*, to borrow Deborah Gould’s term, of museum displays and proposes that museum scholars view the production and circulation of particular feelings as another exhibitionary technology that—like the floor layout, the display design, and the content of the exhibition—mediates a museum visitor’s experience with objects.<sup>18</sup> The emotional habitus of a display, and whether or how this habitus is shared across different exhibitions in separate museums, not only furnishes the tone of a display but also

invests the display with certain feelings about the objects and bodies exhibited. My proposal that feelings be used as diagnostic tools, however, goes beyond the analysis of space; it also addresses the ways that the critical purchase of mindfulness, and in particular the emotional habitus of the museums I examine, can be extended to cover an investigation of museum visitors, their motivations, their horizon expectations, and their own analytic practices in museums as well. By analyzing archives, visitor comment books, and my own collection of museum ethnographies from contemporary sex museums as affective texts, I hope to illuminate how museum visitors emotionally resist sexual exhibits that they find problematic.

When I refer to sexuality, I mean the discursive and visual construction of sexual normalcy in the context of sexual display. For Foucault, sexuality simultaneously refers to power and pleasure, or to use his language, systems of surveillance, policing, and discipline, and to taxonomic configurations and intelligible categories (e.g., sexual identities). Like Foucault, I call for a “different economy of bodies and pleasures,”<sup>19</sup> one that embraces communities, desires, and practices and asks sex to speak in the service, not of vilifying or exposing the speaker, but rather of invigorating the political with pleasure. Throughout this book, I view museum practices that occur in, around, and with sexual displays in museums not *like* performances but *as* performances as I believe in the revelatory function of performance, and in particular performance studies, to show how “sexuality is a very real historical formation” through a “tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance.”<sup>20</sup> The examination of this tactical reversal requires a synthesized approach to analysis that incorporates more than one modality to encompass movement, speech, texts, narratives, objects, and the various practices (e.g., collection, exhibition, spectatorship, security, ticket taking, installation, publicity, etc.) that are specific to museums as sites where a multitude of ethnographic, artistic, scientific, and social historical frames are used to select, present, and consume objects.

As the museum studies scholar Tony Bennett has shown, power in museums operates through very specific mechanisms. Museums proceed through related and overlapping but ultimately different scopic dynamics than the panoptic devices of the disciplinary regime as defined by Foucault.<sup>21</sup> Bennett argues that the disciplining function of museums hinges on the logic of the seen, what he calls the exhibitionary complex.<sup>22</sup> According to Bennett, the exhibitionary complex constitutes “a public

dramaturgy of power,” whereas Foucault’s “carceral archipelago” focuses on incarceration rather than public display as the primary technique of power.<sup>23</sup> Museums emerged as constitutive of the exhibitionary complex, a system devoted to making visible those bodies and objects that had previously been displayed in private settings (e.g., royal palaces) to a small coterie of elite individuals. Display is the hinge that distinguishes the exhibitionary complex from the disciplinary regime described by Foucault, but ultimately both models encompass the construction and dissemination of power in distinct but historically synchronic institutions.

In keeping with how capitalism set the stage for the establishment and dissemination of new forms of power, practices of knowledge acquisition about sex in museums have generally been contrived as cheap amusements and spectacles. Like the dance halls, picnic grounds, and street corners of turn-of-the-century New York City, museums were modern sites for recreation and pleasure marketed toward the masses, but they were also social spaces in which the shifting contours of gender, race, and class “played out.”<sup>24</sup> What was commonly perceived as the leisure activity of museumgoing—an idea popularized and commercialized through the advent of dime museums and figures such as P. T. Barnum—often affirmed the social organization and hierarchies of the hegemonic culture at large. In these instances, display became a mode for staging modern state techniques for subjugating certain bodies and practices and celebrating others. These exhibitionary violences were rendered more insidious by the use of mundane display techniques to disseminate them among the public.

Drawing from Foucault’s theory of biopower, I position museums as one of many institutions in which there occurred an “explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations.”<sup>25</sup> Like Paul B. Preciado, I continue Foucault’s project by locating architectural sites of sexual popular culture as intertwining systems of representation for the display of biopolitical techniques that aim to govern sex, gender, and race. Preciado’s study of *Playboy* revealed how its influence on sex and sexuality extended well beyond the pages of the magazine to promote new sexed and gendered lifestyles that were marketed as “modern” and accessible through utopian but physical sites such as the Playboy Clubs of the 1960s.<sup>26</sup> I impart a related analysis of museums, but I begin in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, before the age of networks, to trace a genealogy of sexual display as a biopolitical technology for the organization of time and space and the capitalistic production of sexual social norms.



As in the scientific model of worker efficiency known as Taylorism, sexual display carefully presented the ideal of sexual life according to the values of a given time and locale and organized them into fractional components. In instances of explicit sexual display, museums served a pivotal function not only in presenting modern biopolitical realities but also in shaping those realities in entertaining and engaging ways. When exhibits tacitly displayed sex, they aimed to show the best method for achieving satisfaction, not in the workplace, but in the intimate home and within a person's sexual social life. In the context of the biopolitical museum, sexual hegemony took shape as production and social reproduction merged through the performativity of sexual display. Museums provided recreational stages for the galvanization of "normal" sexual desire through the leisure activity of museumgoing as a complicated popular practice that engaged the conventions generally brought to activities associated with amusement. The inclusion of sexual display in museums thus pinpoints a business strategy that helped frame the practice of museumgoing as an amusement and promised certain pleasures and disciplined others through visual and textual lessons of sexual biopower.

While museumgoing has always been a leisure activity and a site of popular entertainment, museum displays typically offer frames for consuming biopower in a manner that reverses the logic of the theater. As opposed to watching a drama unfold on the theater stage, display enfold the audience (as a collective body) and the spectator (as an individual witness) into the spectacle by "forming a technology of vision which serve[s] not to atomize and disperse the crowd but to regulate it, and to do so by rendering it visible to itself."<sup>27</sup> The architectural decisions that regulated bodies in space and time in prisons were adapted to the museum context, which, in contrast to the panoptic logic, demanded that everyone be able to see all things. The move from sovereign to state power included a transition from the private exhibitions of princes and aristocrats to "an organization of space and vision that would enable museums to function as organs of public instruction."<sup>28</sup> Museums provided the perfect platform to combine top-down coercion with the internalization of policing norms as the notion of what constituted the public shifted from "a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect," to "a collection of separated individualities."<sup>29</sup>

Occasionally, biopolitical production in museums also produced resistance in the form of embodied actions that opposed capitalist biopower and the emerging medicine of perversions it upheld. In rare instances,



museums became stages where minority voices and values regarding sex could be articulated, though only temporarily and at great risk. When museum visitors rebelled in overt ways, they defied the implicit and official rules of museumgoing as an activity experienced in leisure time. The individual visitor faced off with museum events that used sex as a powerful exhibitionary and strategic tool for creating a set of hierarchical relations for understanding modern sexual subjectivity. While certain curators or spectators resisted this burgeoning use of museums as sites for performing the politics of sexual biopower, the organization of space and vision in museums depended on acquiescence, docile behavior, and normative feelings about sex and sexuality. Museums also hinged on the acceptance of the frames they presented for understanding life as constituted not by the invention of specific historical and geographic formations and epistemologies but by the revelation of undeniable “truths.” Through the use of display techniques such as selection, juxtaposition, and labeling, museums of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries authenticated emerging biopolitical narratives and used the display of objects or human bodies framed as objects to show audiences the new biopower of hierarchical sexual differences between genders, races, and classes.

One often overlooked outgrowth of the exhibitionary complex pertains to how museums have consistently functioned as one of many institutions that have defined sexual perversity and additionally to how they have given rise to an erotophobic examination and exhibition of sex in Western culture. Through a process of meticulous citation and reiteration by which certain discursive and visual formations gain the force of common sense (a process known as performativity), museums establish taxonomies of normalcy. Through the performative display of what Foucault labeled power-knowledge-pleasure in museums, these categories of sexual normalcy (that which is visually framed and displayed so ubiquitously as to appear normal) and sexual perversity (that which is rendered obscene or offstage, as Linda Williams suggests translating the term)<sup>30</sup> take on the force of the natural. In museums, Foucault’s call for “bodies and pleasures” would require the organization on the basis of sexual practice rather than categorical identity in order to open up possibilities for creating new frames for understanding curatorial labor and sexual spectatorship.

Thus, when I use the word *performative*, I refer to two divergent strains in queer studies that utilize performance theory as an antiessentialist way of explaining how ideas and behaviors become sedimented into everyday life and take on seemingly natural or commonsense qualities.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, working primarily out of a tradition inspired by J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*, argues that performative language does things (e.g., constructs reality) rather than merely describing things (speech acts that Austin refers to as constative utterances).<sup>31</sup> For example, the group of museums explicitly known as sex museums that I focus on in the latter half of this book attempts to do things with words that shift the ways visitors understand, approach, and use sex objects. They do so through the creative use of narrative voice, for example, using humor and vernacular speech (rather than a detached and patronizing tone) to communicate potentially new sexual knowledge in an unthreatening and comfortable way.

In general, all museums that bill themselves as explicit sex museums take objects typically occluded by their literal use value—for instance, a purple, glittered and waterproof vibrator—and create contexts for situating and displaying them as complicated and historically contingent sexual artifacts. In the case of the bedazzled vibrator, sex museums might discuss the emergence of women-owned, queer-centric sex shops (such as Babeland or Good Vibrations); the celebration of female sexuality promoted by “sex-positive” or “prosex” feminists; the “clitoral turn” in female sexuality since the 1970s when sex gurus like Betty Dodson encouraged women to focus more on the clitoris than the vagina as the site for optimal stimulation and orgasm; or the effects of mainstream pornographic films on female sexuality as in the popularity of Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat*, an absurd hard-core farce of the so-called clitoral craze whose central character (played by the late Linda Lovelace) discovers that her clitoris is located at the base of her throat, thus necessitating deep and prolonged stimulation through fellatio.<sup>32</sup> Sex museums thus recast commodity norms of sexual material culture by using language to suggest that what defines a sexual thing is not always, only, or necessarily the thing itself but rather the performances of identity, desire, pleasure, representation, power, and regulation that happen around that thing.

I also refer to Judith Butler's theory of performativity as it provides the shorthand for the process of socialization whereby gender and sexual identities are produced through regulating and citational practices. For Butler, performativity's power to shape a sense of cohesive identity grows out of the seeming naturalness and transparency of what she describes as the “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”<sup>33</sup> The framing that sustains performative socialization is harder to identify because normalization has rendered it ubiquitous and, therefore, unmarked. Important to Butler's

performativity (and what distinguishes it from Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus) is "that a certain performative force results from the rehearsal of the conventional formulae in non-conventional ways."<sup>34</sup> *Sex Museums* treats display spaces as sites for furthering the development of the theoretical genealogy of performativity theory. It aims to explore "how to do things with things" and to track and recode how object arrangements in display spaces such as museums that already produce endlessly staged and reiterated performances between objects and bodies influence the reception and recognition of certain things as bad or good sex objects.

Sara Ahmed engages the epistemological goals and tactics of feminist phenomenology and queer geographers to make two primary claims that are helpful for theorizing the performativity of sexual display in museums. First, all spaces are sexed, and all locations, erotic or otherwise, orient their environments (primarily through strategic object placements) toward an assumed heterosexuality. Second, social differences result from the ways in which bodies relate to one another in space. Specifically, object arrangements create backdrops that (re)produce sexual tendencies. While Ahmed's analysis primarily looks to lesbian and gay desires (laudably placing women and lesbian subjects at the center of some chapters), her project also makes the question of race a queer matter. The embodied realities of living as a raced subject are visible in ways that sexuality is not (always).<sup>35</sup> The recognition of white sexuality as an empowered racialized sexuality, and not an original (as in presocial) sexuality or a benchmark against which nonwhite sexualities are derivative, is a mandatory first step in mobilizing this analysis. Dismantling and reorganizing sexual hierarchies that glorify white heteronormativity at the expense of other sexualities (including the many ways in which white people practice heterosexualities) to accommodate the complex intersections of nonnormative sexuality and race as well as class and gender pose some of the biggest challenges to sexual displays, then and now. *Sex Museums* therefore pays close attention to the ways in which the normativity of race and the normativity of sexuality become mutually constitutive in the history of the museum.

### Display Anatomies of Race and Gender

Throughout the book, displays of the female body will repeatedly emerge as some of the most informative sites for examining the geographic and temporal vicissitudes of how modern museums were used as stages to perversely implant contemporary notions of sexual normalcy and



abnormalcy. In particular, I focus on a kind of visibility that I will refer to as patriarchal perspectivalism as one consistent and persistent frame for sexing the display and spectatorship of the female body, dead or alive, in all kinds of museum environments. Patriarchal perspectivalism describes a mode of seeing that was born in early modern Europe and fortified in nineteenth-century museums, galleries, and elaborate theaters of exhibition; orchestrated by private collectors in commissioning artwork and establishing art markets for certain kinds of sexual representation; and used the female body as a display technology to institutionalize certain classed and raced norms of nationalized sexual culture and acceptable forms of public sexual consumption defined against the burgeoning category of the illicit obscene.<sup>36</sup> Most saliently, the history of the nude as an impossible and composite representation of white femininity looms large in the story of how patriarchal perspectivalism was developed in museums and performatively repeated in the burgeoning contemporary media of photography and cinema. In line with Laura Mulvey's work on the patriarchal gaze mobilized in mainstream cinema,<sup>37</sup> there is a long history of cultivating particular ways of seeing the female body, even in environments seemingly devoid of sex or, in the case of anatomical museums, a pulse.

So-called anatomical museums of the nineteenth century demonstrated the influence of emerging notions of sexual difference on the organization of pedagogical, institutional, and recreational spaces. The origin of these displays dates back to early modern Europe and the great tradition of anatomical illustrations that began in the sixteenth century. These illustrations belong to a genealogy of representations that visualized, categorized, and disciplined sexual differences between emerging notions of what constituted "men" and "women." "One would think," Lyle Massey has argued, "that under the leveling influence of the anatomist's knife, social divisions between men and women would melt away. Instead, the resulting visual images confusingly mixed new anatomical observations with moralizing conceptions of sexual difference and erotically charged points of view."<sup>38</sup> Unlike the display intentions of nineteenth-century exhibitions of gendered and sexed anatomy, however, early modern illustrators who contributed to the emergence of the modern science of anatomy made little to no distinction between sex, as physiological variation, and gender, as a notion of maleness and femaleness based in hierarchical power relations as they pertained to social, economic, and political contexts and norms. If these drawings were displayed, they would have also circulated within a display architecture more akin to that of the *Wunderkammern* with its emphasis on

the “strange and the miraculous” or the bounty and variety of human shapes, forms, and functions.<sup>39</sup> Categorical divisions of maleness and femaleness, therefore, neither looked the same nor possessed the same politicized and social meanings for sixteenth-century illustrators as they did in the nineteenth-century when the notion of men and women as “opposite sexes” took hold of the cultural imaginary and began to influence the spatial organization of public institutions.<sup>40</sup> The use of sexual difference to organize space in anatomical displays during this later period showed how modern forms of gendered political identity and narratives about seemingly private institutions such as marriage, motherhood, and heterosexual desire came to be displayed prominently in the developing public sphere.<sup>41</sup>

The nineteenth-century anatomical museum is possibly the first display architecture dependent on the hard core—a frenzied politics of visibility focused on the consumption of female genitalia and, in particular, the inside of the vaginal orifice and later popularized in mainstream pornography of the late twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> The theater historian Tracy C. Davis writes about how one such anatomical museum, the Ladies’ Museum of Anatomy, which traveled to New York in 1869, invited female visitors to move through displays in ways that not only showed them anatomical models, particularly molds of vulvas and vaginas, but also encouraged “a performance about the underlying meaning of the place [that] occurs, and is made by the visitor without the intercession of docents.”<sup>43</sup> Unlike other anatomical museums of the time that included depictions of the (dead) female body in a state of undress and often ecstasy and purported to be educational but have also been discussed as pornographic and used by men as an outlet of sexual thrill seeking, the Ladies’ Museum of Anatomy was just that: it showed the female body but admitted only “ladies,” thus interpellating a certain bourgeois class of women into a performative relationship with their vulvas.<sup>44</sup> Only superficially, however, did the museum attempt to educate the women about pleasure and the body; rather, it overwhelmingly displayed gynecological, infant, and congenital disorders and diseases that diminished any notion of female pleasure, orienting instruction instead toward motherhood and intercourse in the service of visitors’ presumed husbands. The exhibit offered a special all-female viewing where women (and their children) could traverse the space examining the models, comparing their bodies to the abnormal and diseased bodies on display, and then visit the doctor who held office hours on-site to discuss and possibly treat what they recognized as the freakish aberration of their reproductive organs and functions.<sup>45</sup> Thus, while the

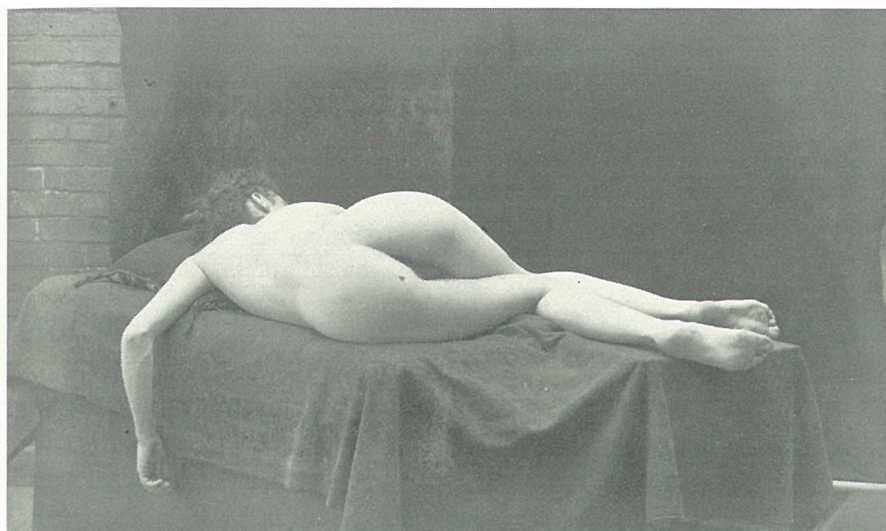


Ladies' Anatomy Museum provided a space where female visitors could encounter hard-core imagery, that being the mysterious interior of the female body, and while, like Davis, I want to maintain the queer potential for eroticism even amid these ocular medical technologies of patriarchal perspectivalism, the displays certainly denied the pornographic possibilities that anatomical museums that admitted men encouraged.

Encounters with the dead female body in anatomical displays of today offer a clue to the possible embodied repertoires of traversing the Ladies' Anatomical Museum. Entering the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia, a display space that preserves the look and feel of the nineteenth-century anatomical museum, shows how scientists staged the dead, female body according to the logic of patriarchal perspectivalism. Originally intended for medical students only, the Mütter Museum of today sells itself to the public as "disturbingly informative," playing more on its ability to show the weird and the wonderful rather than the purely instructional for the practical sciences. One particular anatomical photograph of a female patient or a woman performing "patient" shows the erotic perspective with which science portrayed medical procedures specific to women's bodies. I originally found the photograph in the widely circulating Mütter Museum catalog compiled by the long-time Mütter curator and director Gretchen Worden. The book contains more images than text and communicates a selection from the museum's extensive collection of photographs, body parts and skeletons, and artifacts.

In the catalog, a photograph taken by James F. Wood in the 1890s for a Philadelphia obstetrician by the name of Dr. John Montgomery Baldy shows an anonymous woman demonstrating the Sims position.<sup>46</sup> The Sims position is a well-known medical position for inserting an enema in the anus (and in the past a speculum in the vagina) and continues to be a well-used nomenclature in American medical and hospital environments. The position was invented by James Marion Sims, the self-proclaimed father of gynecology, who infamously used slave women as experimental subjects for his surgical trailblazing.<sup>47</sup> Sims's black female subjects served as the necessary, abnormal foil to support the argument of the normal sexuality of white, bourgeois American women, who were nevertheless eroticized and depicted as suitable sex objects in the medical photography of the period.<sup>48</sup> In this particular albumen print, a white woman presses her chest to the surface of what seems to be a table cushioned with a velvet or velveteen duvet and pillow. She is naked, her buttocks slightly raised and the cheeks parted. Her arm dangles alongside the table as if she is asleep, intoxicated, or, perhaps euphemistically, in a state of deep relaxation. She is in a perfect position to receive an enema

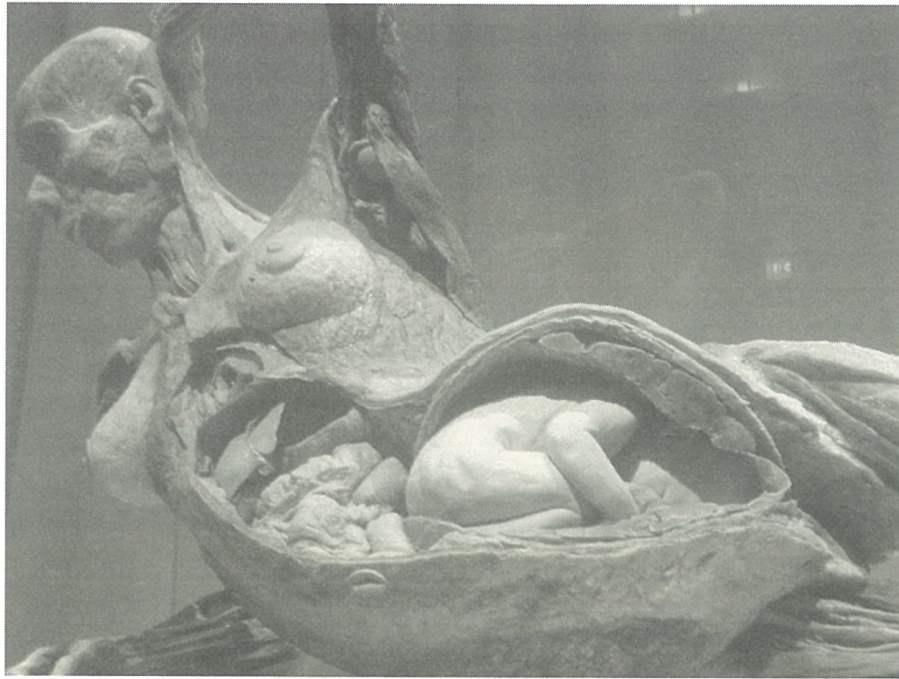




I.1 "The Sims Position." Albumen print, Mütter Museum at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Image used by the kind permission of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. Photo by James F. Wood.

or a speculum to examine the interior of her vagina, but the posture also suggests that she is available to receive the penis for vaginal or anal sex.

While I had originally viewed the Sims position photograph in the Mütter Museum catalog, I had another serendipitous encounter with it when the nationally touring exhibition *Extraordinary Bodies: Photographs from the Mütter Museum* returned home to Philadelphia in 2009. I was in town for the "Rethinking Sex" conference at the University of Pennsylvania, but as soon as it ended I made a beeline to the Mütter Museum.<sup>49</sup> Not knowing about the exhibition before my visit, one could imagine my surprise as I left the permanent collection galleries and wandered into this temporary display. Surrounded by photographs of corpses and bodily anomalies, the woman in the Sims position from the catalog took on new meaning. The wall panel explained that *Extraordinary Bodies* was meant to explore the "nonliving body stripped of its superficialities" and the "mysteries of human life and the challenges to medical understanding." The exhibition, which took up several walls in one partitioned gallery mixed contemporary fine-art photographs (e.g., by Joel-Peter Witkin) with a selection of reproductions of historic medical photographs from the museum's permanent collection. By blurring the medical with the aesthetic, and by including a wall text that portrayed all the photographers as "artists [who] create works that transcend the original education purpose of the Museum's collections," the



I.2 Pregnant woman posed at the exhibit *BODY WORLDS: The Anatomical Exhibition of Real Human Bodies*. Photo by Garrett Bryant.

Mütter showed how each photograph could be viewed from perspectives that are typically disaggregated from one another. Using the twenty-first century display of the nineteenth-century Sims position print as proof, it is my intention here to include patriarchal perspectivalism as one of many “transcend[ed]” purposes for the display and consumption of anatomical displays broadly. In the context of the exhibition, the woman, even if alive when photographed, was rendered a “nonliving body” through the juxtaposition of her body to the wall text description and the pickled or dissected corpses that surrounded her. Though not explicitly labeled as such, the vulvic aperture created by her upturned buttocks became the visual focal point for locating one of the “mysteries of human life and the challenges to medical understanding” that the exhibition purported to elucidate.

The staging of the female body for hard-core scientific scrutiny is not a new phenomenon, nor has it ended. Audiences experienced a modern-day anatomical exhibit when the amazingly popular and well-attended blockbuster exhibition *Body Worlds* arrived in cities throughout the United States and all over the world. Hundreds of plastinated corpses and corpse



parts were displayed for public viewing. The most aesthetically rich and affectively contemplative of these corpses consisted of a naked woman, her once-pregnant stomach cut open to reveal the dead fetus in her womb. At the Chicago iteration of *Body Worlds*, which I attended at the Museum of Science and Industry, this display was the only one to include a female corpse that was simultaneously eroticized and static. Surrounded by the other, more centrally positioned displays of male bodies arranged as if performing dynamic human activities (e.g., playing chess, riding horses, jumping hurdles), the female corpse, though arranged with much attention to aesthetics, occupied a slightly obscured corner of a remote and separate gallery. The dead, naked woman had been molded into a provocative pose with what was once her fetus sadly peeking through her cut-open abdomen. Around her, other aborted or miscarried fetuses (of varying and ordered sizes from smallest to most developed) floated in their individual formaldehyde tubs. With her hand resting on her thrown-back head, her breasts in-tact, and her body spread long, her decaying pose, while grotesque, recalled the stance of the modern-day pinup girl voluptuously posing for the museum visitor. Eroticized, and stigmatized by its marginal placement, the pregnant corpse simultaneously injected the exhibition with sex and represented the shameful inertia of failed motherhood and the politicized stigma of abortion.<sup>50</sup>

In the instances of both the Mütter Museum and the *Body Worlds* exhibition, it was not simply the positioning of the female body that invited an eroticized point of view. Rather, the props included in the photography elicited a particular sexual, rather than clinical, relationship to the dead female form. In the case of the Mütter Museum photograph, the velvet, the dangling arm in juxtaposition to the naked white flesh, and the up-turned buttocks fashioned a sexualized representation of an anonymous, vulnerable woman who wittingly or unwittingly involved her body in a scene that was organized as sexual but framed as medical and scientific. In so doing, the photograph dramatized a patriarchal encounter with the dead female body that blurred the distinctions between high-art nudes, hard-core pornographic photography (an emerging technology in the 1890s), and medical photography that circulated among the expert clinical classes of white elite men in the name of scientific research.

What are also blurred, however, are the racist origins of the speculum and the figure of the black woman as the unanesthetized test case for ocular and medical technologies. Positing the inside of the female vagina as a mysterious cavern within the context of the nineteenth-century anatomical museum coincided with the emerging view of sexuality as



some elusive, internal truth lodged in the body, or what Freud, who unquestioningly used the racist ideology of the early twentieth century, referred to as the dark continent.<sup>51</sup> As Terri Kapsalis argues for the history of the pelvic exam, so too did these anatomical displays furnish a theater that illuminated the gendered and raced “politics of visibility . . . and what is left invisible—pain and suffering, power differences, slave identities, questionable origins, semi-visible contraceptive technologies.”<sup>52</sup> New medical technologies and popular media such as photography and mass industrial production occurred alongside the birth of the modern museum in the nineteenth century and coincided with a time of teeming sexual consumption and production. Nineteenth-century anatomical museums exemplified the industrialization of the time period by seizing on these technologies as display apparatuses that could be used to show anatomical differences between genders and races in ways that galvanized normal sexual desire and the new sexual biopower. They did so not only in the service of the leisure activity of museumgoing aimed at the masses but also for the lucrative business of inventing pathologies.

In the nineteenth century, the display of the female body also contributed to the manufacture of the colonial gaze, not coincidentally at the same historical period as projects of nationhood and empire. Benedict Anderson, among others, viewed Western museums as decisive landmarks in the politicized production of the nation functioning through an “ecumenical profane genealogizing” that invented enemies “as in an ominous prophetic dream, well before they came into historical existence.”<sup>53</sup> No other exhibitionary technology more conspicuously used sexual display to create and record this abusive genealogizing than freak shows. In street fairs, circuses, and dime museums, freak shows not only exhibited but also created cultural otherness and narratives of cultural superiority and inferiority among nations through elaborate performance scripts that were mapped onto people of color, the disabled, and other nonnormative subjects. As in anatomical museums, sex was integral to freak show performance scripts, perhaps most infamously exemplified in the display of Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman, or, as she was advertised, the “Hottentot Venus,” whom I will discuss in chapter 2.

Both anatomical displays and freak shows arranged bodies according to the classifications and categorizations of the gendered, sexed, and raced knowledge of the time period; they also corroborated and extended this knowledge by interpellating new audiences to identify or disidentify with what they saw and how they felt and moved in that space. In the freak show, the exposure of flesh and the sexualization of

the displayed body became less obscene when the flesh in question was aberrant, other, or monstrous. In the anatomical museum, the exposure of flesh became more acceptable and tasteful when the flesh in question was white, female, and, as I mentioned in the earlier example of the Sims position photograph, dead. The anatomical museum and the freak show represented two sexual architectures that created acceptable forms of public sexual consumption through the performativity of display in nineteenth-century museums. Dependent on patriarchal perspectivalism and scientific racism, these display architectures promised to teach the new science of racial and gender hierarchies through the curatorial performance of sexual-social difference. Throughout the book, I pay attention to the ways in which museums of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries continue to unquestioningly use performance scripts of patriarchal perspectivalism and racist visual economies toward new ends; for the museums of the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first, these architectures of display shape-shift alongside normative assumptions of audience composition to conform to the political and sexual-social demands of their historical period. When one views museums through the lens of sexual display, the so-called postcolonial and postfeminist museum exposes itself as far from decolonization and liberation.

When viewing the history of the museum through the intersectional lens of race and gender, the historical performances that constitute display and spectatorship in museums have profoundly influenced the institutionalization of power-knowledge-pleasure. Foucault defined *power-knowledge-pleasure* as the regime that sustains Western discourse on sexuality. My examination of museums aims “to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.”<sup>54</sup> Practices of display have a multivalent relationship to the ways in which sex is put into discourse as it operates through diverse forms of performative citationality that, in the case of sexual display, include the implicit classification of sexual normalcy, the explicit labeling of perversity or obscenity, or one of many exhibitionary silences. Drawing on the work of the sociologist Avery Gordon, I intend for this book not only to analyze what is presented but also to “confront the ghostly aspects” of sexual display in museums to encourage “a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge, in our mode of production.”<sup>55</sup> While searching out and coping with ghostly traces in any archive cannot but change the museum practice of curatorship