

MoSex/LessSex?

by Lee H. Skolnick

Okay, I admit it. I watch the *Today* show while I stretch in the morning. This overflowing fount of revelation on our sometimes frightening culture offers me more and less information than I need to go about my daily activities. Despite the deluge I get to learn a bit about where my fellow citizens are coming from—how they might view the world, how they will interpret the messages that I put out there through the design of experiences.

So imagine my delight when, on the morning I finally sat down to write this piece, my faithful TV oracle decided to comment on the wealth of “Wacky Museums” that you might want to pack the family off to during your gasoline-sensitive summer vacation. Our enlightened media hosts introduced the segment by noting that the brood might not consider “serious” museums like the Louvre or the Museum of Natural History (where you could see things that “are worth a lot”) appealing or entertaining enough to merit family quality time. They went on to say there were other places where the “passion” for one thing or another that inspires museum-making and museum-going could be sated. We were then treated to video-bitelets of venues you could visit to see things that are presumably not worth a lot, like The Museum of Lunchboxes, The Museum of Jello, The Museum of Cockroaches, The Museum of UFO’s (and Research Center!—in Roswell, of course), The Museum of Mustard, The Museum of Bad Art, and The Museum of Salt and Pepper. And then, to my utter serendipitous shock, they mentioned The Museum of Sex, only to quickly add: “Enough said...I’m not going to go there!” I could end this article right here.

Because while they meant that they wouldn’t

touch this one with a ten-foot pole, the question is: who *does* go there? And, if not, why not? I mean, who is *not* interested in sex? Show of hands? Okay, now, who has actually visited this museum? Anybody? When I began to ask around, I couldn’t find a single person who had been there. Even given the possibility that some people might have been too embarrassed to admit they had gone (and this is a ripe topic for analysis by itself), it’s still quite an interesting phenomenon. While by far the most traffic on the internet is devoted to seeking pornography, somehow whatever marketing efforts are being expended on getting people in the door of this place must be an absolute failure. When I researched this point with MoSex’s Director of Public Relations and Special Events (wouldn’t mind an invitation to one of these!), I was told that they have “experienced steady growth since our opening in 2002 and every month our attendance exceeds that of the same month a year earlier.” *The New York Times* has stated that the annual attendance in 2006 was 105,000 visitors. Where are they all hiding?

So, the Big Questions

Is sex just not a topic people want to explore in the museum context? Is this just a crummy museum? Are the exhibitions too shocking? Boring? Embarrassing? Repulsive? All of the above? Can a museum of sex be successful? If so, what would it need to do? To try to address these burning questions, I made the ultimate sacrifice, stole a couple of hours from one of my typically harrowing workdays, and made the five block pilgrimage to see what all the fuss isn’t about.

Find/Enter

As a New Yorker, museum-goer, and architect, I must tell you that the first problems are location

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The front door is not the front door. What looks like the main entrance is actually permanently locked, with a roll-down gate providing confirmation. Photo courtesy of Lee H. Skolnick.

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and design. Interestingly, the museum is located in the area formerly known as the “Tenderloin,” a district notorious in the 19th century for its bordellos, dance halls, theaters and saloons. Still, unless someone had the perverse idea that hiding in one of the only overlooked parts of 5th Avenue in a ground level storefront wallpapered in cheap green marble bathroom tiles with a front door that is devilishly hard to find was somehow an appropriate interpretive strategy given the subject matter, I can’t think of a worse place to be. It’s uninviting, tawdry without any of the possible sleazy allure, and utterly lacking in the promise of elevating or stimulating any part of your mind or body. “Location, location, location” may be the mantra of the real estate world, but I’ve never seen a museum that didn’t gain from a good address, strategic placement, and a welcoming and at least somewhat appropriate and eye-catching iconography. And, oh yes, it’s nice to be able to figure out where to enter well before you decide you don’t really care that much. In the interest of my solemn mission, I persevered.

Once you do find the entry and emerge into the dim, miniscule lobby, you might think that one of your worst fears has been realized: is

this actually just an extension of an adult film theater, you wonder. If so: crafty design! They nailed it (I guess...I really wouldn’t know). The place was empty. As your eyes adjust, you search for the requisite visitor information and admission fee. \$14.50? You mean you have to pay more for this than for the real thing? Okay, this better be good! I mean, enlightening. I wonder what the member benefits are?

Designing Sex

In addition to the general relevance of this field trip to the subject of this issue (the “unexhibitable”), there was a more specific significance for people like us. The museum’s current exhibition was entitled *Sex in Design/ Design in Sex* so I had a ready excuse for being there if I happened to run into anyone I knew while touring the show. For the record, the show ran from January 31, 2008 to July 13, 2008. It has now been replaced with a new one, entitled *The Sex Lives of Animals*, billed as an expansion of the Museum’s original mission: “to preserve and present the history, evolution, and cultural significance of *human* sexuality.” (In other places, the mission also includes “advocating open discourse surrounding sex and sexuality as well as striving to present to the public the

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best in current scholarship unhindered by self-censorship.” Can’t argue with that.) Anyway, according to the introductory label copy, *Sex in Design/Design in Sex* “...presents a selection of the most compelling sexually inspired contemporary designs from around the world” and “illuminates the creative process that continues to stimulate our erotic imaginations.” Count me in, big time.

The exhibition creators appear quite earnest in their presentation and, no doubt, in their intent. Label copy is seriously considered and written in a tone of curatorial objectivity, although self-consciously bland, if you ask me. On the other hand, it is quite superficial from a scholarly standpoint, so I don’t think academic ambition is to blame. And the barely readable, tiny text on the explanatory labels made me wonder, yet again, whether they were saying that this was “forbidden content,” or they were just practicing bad graphic design.

The installation is even more banal, which gets back to this nagging question: as with the signage, are we being subjected to a sanitized, clinical experience in order to remove any sense that there is a prurient aspect to all this? If so, the museum has succeeded in sapping any erotic charge from most of the exhibits and artifacts. Ironically, the crudeness of the actual fabrication and installation details themselves—the materials, fasteners, finishes, etc.—while probably owing to budgetary constraints, is the only suggestion that a kind of cheap, rough aesthetic might have been intended; a reference to the ambiance of places where the devices that are displayed here are commonly sold or used. However, as tempting as it might be to ascribe such a sophisticated, consciously down-market edginess to the design, I fear that I am projecting way past what was really in front of me.

It’s Okay to Be Curious

So, you must be wondering what was there. It’s okay to be curious...

After an introduction that quickly spanned and connected what design is, how it shapes experience, and what this has to do with sex, the first section gave us an avalanche of imagery demonstrating, quite tamely, something that we all know already: sex sells. Entitled “advertising,” this overwhelming display of reproductions of magazine ads went no further, and used up a lot of wall space. Although all of



The Lobby. My first thought was: “what’s playing?.” Better come early to avoid the crowds. Photo courtesy of Lee H. Skolnick.

these ads must have been designed, there was little about their design that inspired sexual desire, and if there was, no one explained how to analyze and appreciate a real connection between design strategies and desired results.



The Gift Shop. From the display design you might think they were selling cookbooks and scented candles—only they're not. Photo courtesy of Lee H. Skolnick.

Following closely, but packing a very different punch, was the section called “for pleasure.” This sequencing was a critical design issue for me, because little about the physical arrangement of the spaces seemed to enhance the sense of the content or its interpretation (what might the “bubble diagram” have looked like?). I guess the curators thought this area was the real crux of the matter, because they wrote that “the relationship between sex and design finds its ultimate expression in the creation of products meant to enhance sexual pleasure, in both solo and shared encounters.” There was a quickie dash through the history of this genre of object, and an explicit message that they are often appreciated for their aesthetic value as well as their ability to provide pleasure. This suggestion, that these objects’ design could function to stimulate the mind as well as

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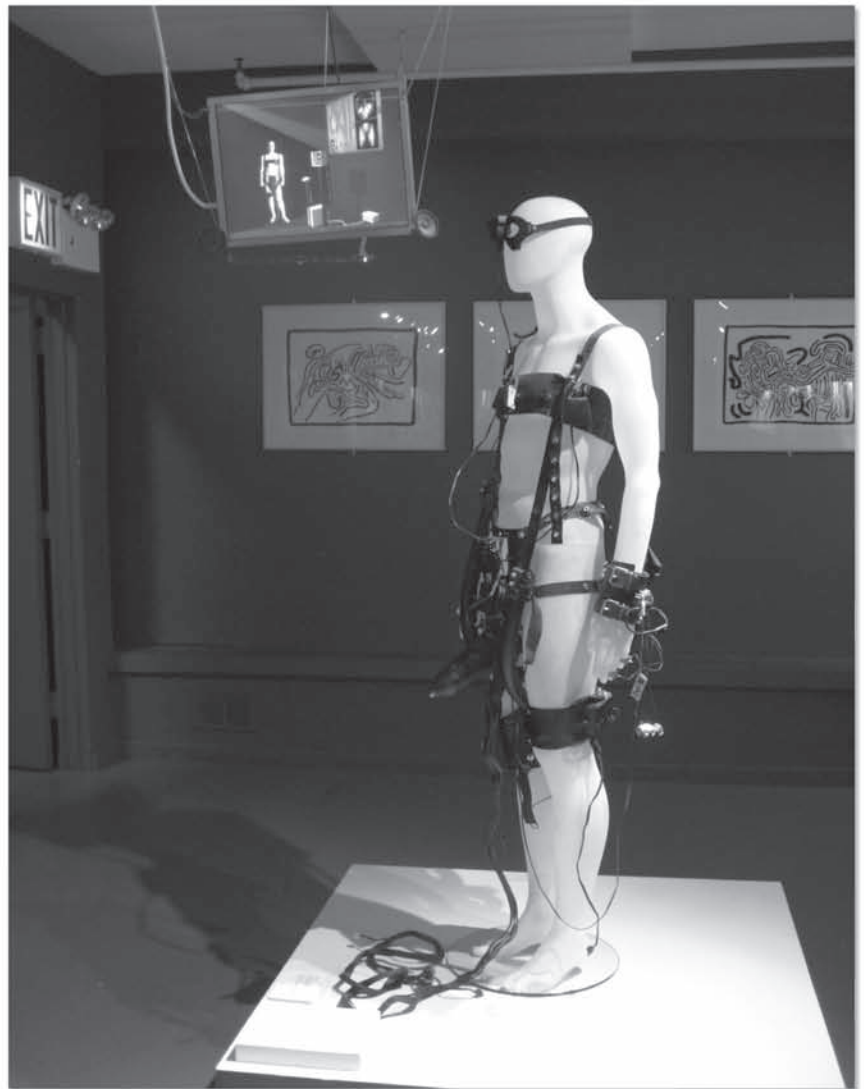
While the simple display relies on the childhood recollections of visitors of a certain age, a little more interpretation would have been appreciated. Photo courtesy of Lee H. Skolnick.

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sensitive parts of the body, and presumably thus enhance pleasure in combination, was in fact provocative. Strictly as a designer, of course, I was also intrigued by the notion that “new materials and technological advances” could produce “various sensations and interactive possibilities,” but no explanation was given as to how, so don’t go looking for them in any of our future projects, at least not for a while. The quite extensive array of sex toys was set out in a regimented arrangement. While making into a boring blur objects which individually might have sparked at least titillation, it had the effect of baffling me as to how some of these things might work. And, alas, there were no instructions.

Along the way, there were content or design touches that were meant to break the rather humdrum procession: (amazing that this would be necessary, considering...you know, but there you go). a Karim Rashid ‘art piece’; a wall of condom packages—presumably to show their graphic design characteristics. It should be noted that the museum has worked with quite reputable exhibition designers over the years – Pentagram, Casson Mann, 2x4. So I can’t quite pinpoint the design/content/experience disconnect I felt.

Other sections included “living with sex.” a kind of shelter magazine look at home decoration, only with sex as the common denominator—sex-themed/shaped wallpaper, furniture, mirrors, bathroom fixtures. I think some functioned sexually as well, but don’t ask me how. There was some mention that appreciation of these would grow “as we become more familiar with the process and tools of design.” Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?



Although this display was in the permanent collection exhibition, it is a good example of the old design maxim—in this case, “fashion follows function.” Photo courtesy of Lee H. Skolnick.

Then there was “decorating the body.” Accessories make the woman (or man): lingerie, edible “Candypants,” transparent and translucent clothes, panty toys, nipple clips, rectal dilators, merkins. (I never thought I’d be typing these words.) Apparently some of the jewelry was functional as well as decorative. Ouch!

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And, finally, to “designing the body.” Some definite psycho/sociological meat here: idealization, exaggeration, enhancement. Various forms of manipulation, from make-up through tattooing, plastic surgery, and beyond, all in the endless quest to make ourselves more sexually attractive, until we finally blast off into cyberspace where we can represent ourselves through customized, ‘anatomically’ optimized avatars who are endlessly attractive and never age!

announcement at all. The next thing you know, you turn around a corner and there is a hallway leading you to a small, winding stair. Somewhere there must have been a sign letting you know that you are on your way to **Action: Sex and the Moving Image**, but I can’t be certain.

Adults Only

As you mount the dimly-lit stairway, there is a faint, but growing sound of moaning and groaning. When you emerge into the darkened space, there are screens everywhere: all different sizes, distributed around the ‘gallery’(?). There is actually a sense to this chronologically and thematically oriented experience. But, honestly, who cares? In the face of the onslaught of sexually-explicit content from the beginning of cinema to the present surrounding you, it’s kind of hard to concentrate on whatever else might be intended here. Rather than lending the artistic integrity and heritage of some explicitly sexual great films to what we commonly label as pornography, just the reverse happened for me. In the context of the movies and videos that were produced for baseline titillation, the classics looked cheap. In sum (for you can probably live without vivid descriptions), I don’t think this was an effective interpretive methodology to seriously consider this material. The most fascinating part, in fact, was watching people watch. Especially heterosexual couples. The frozen facial expressions. The barely discernible squirming. And basically no conversation.

Exit Strategy

Okay, enough. So how do you get out of here? When you do find the exit, it’s back down another, better-lit stairway to **Spotlight on**



A display that asks much of the visitor—perhaps the creator felt that these objects speak for themselves. Sexual adventurers meet engineers? Photo courtesy of Lee H. Skolnick.

Whew! Was it good for you? If not, there’s more. (Who ever gets to say that and mean it?)

The exhibition ends quite unceremoniously—actually, without any perceivable

The simply displayed objects in *Spotlight* cover a wide range, and must have been lovingly collected over years.

the Permanent Collection. It's here that you get the definite impression that this place is the brainchild and passion of one, no doubt well-meaning individual. And, apparently, that impression is correct. The founder is Daniel Gluck, a software engineer in his mid-30s who also founded MyTrybe.com, "a social platform that connects users based on their personal values forming peer networks, and enables both users and communities to tap into their unique taste intelligence." Ivy-league educated, serious and successful, he's been integrally involved in organizing and marketing thirteen exhibitions to date.

The Museum's permanent collection of over 15,000 artifacts is comprised of works of art, photography, clothing and costumes, technological inventions and historical ephemera. Additionally, the Museum houses both a research library as well as an extensive multimedia library, which includes 8mm, Super 8mm, 16mm, BETA, VHS and DVDs. From fine art to historical ephemera to film, the Museum of Sex preserves an ever-growing collection of sexually related objects that would otherwise be destroyed and discarded due to their sexual content. (www.museumofsex.com, Aug. 21, 2008)

The simply displayed objects in *Spotlight* cover a wide range, and must have been lovingly collected over years. From 1950s sex education manuals and videos, to books, models, diagrams, blow-up dolls (the 'Real Doll', an interactive!—you'll have to see for yourself), something called the "Thrillhammer," patent illustrations, and holographs. And, lest we forget that this is a museum, a section on "Sex in Art"—a limited survey, including Picasso, Chinese and Indian erotica, and a Keith Haring.

Further linking the Museum of Sex to the great museum tradition is the obligatory 'you-can't-leave-without-going-through-the-gift-shop-first' Museum Store. And, oh boy, this place must have a great one, huh? Not really. An anti-climax actually. (Sorry!) Books, coffee mugs, some videos, other mementos. But, then again, this a museum, not a sex shop, right?

So?

So I mounted this intrepid expedition to address, if not necessarily answer, some questions about how appropriate sex is as an exhibition topic. But who am I to judge? I guess I'll throw them out for you to ponder, with a few highly subjective thoughts of my own:

Is the museum an appropriate venue to explore/interpret sex?

Ironically, this experience left me quite optimistic that you *can* have sex in a museum. (Wait, let me re-state this.) I think there is great potential to *interpret* the subject through a far more animated treatment. I can't help but wonder whether the curators and designers were just too timid to take a real position. Why not accept that this is a loaded topic and milk it for all it's worth? Our job is to connect with audiences.

Related to the question above, ***What is suitable/unsuitable to display? Is it inherently unsuitable, or just not displayed well?*** There must be another way to transition gradually into extremely graphic displays such as ***Sex and the Moving Image*** —one which would allow you the freedom to decide how far you're comfortable in going.

Does sex lend itself to this design medium?

Absolutely. First of all, *everything* can be

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interpreted through design. Sex presents fantastic design opportunities. I just didn't see them here.

What does it do to one's innate interest in a topic when it is subjected to the implications of a museum treatment (educational, cultural, scientific, historical)?

In this case, I became bored with something by which I might otherwise be quite stimulated. I don't believe for a minute that if the educational and other themes were treated in an engaging manner, I would have had that reaction. What's called for is a variety of experiences, separated as necessary, to induce the desired range of visitor responses. Excite, illuminate, explore, inform. The topic of sex lends itself wonderfully to this formula.

How do you limit your audience, if necessary, based on the content? Or do you limit your

content to fit the audience?

Although there are some cautionary signs in the lobby, as a parent, I would just rate the museum "X" and be done with it. Some content can be positioned and/or molded to suit various age groups, but sex on this level is "adults only."

For designers, how do exhibition techniques and design decisions affect the visitor's interpretation of the subject matter (glamorous, prurient, sensual, clinical, instructive)?

I am absolutely convinced that design colors interpretation no matter how innately and highly charged the topic. It just seemed like the designers were not certain in their intent. As a result, there was an uncomfortable ambiguity and blandness which caused the whole experience to lack interest or power.

And, finally, who gets to test the interactives?

