Ways of Seeing Sex: Gazing in a Sex Museum

By Emma Maguire

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak. . . . Soon after we see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are part of the visible world.

John Berger (1; 9)

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.

Jennifer Tyburczy (6)

Sex museums exist all over the world as tourist attractions. They are veritable caches of erotic art and objects, sites for sex education, playgrounds for the absurd, and keepers of the histories of sex. A survey on Trip Advisor locates sex museums from Reykjavik (The Icelandic Phallological Museum, which boasts a national collection of mammal penises) to Las Vegas (the Erotic Heritage Museum, the result of an unlikely collaboration between a preacher and a pornographer) to Seoul (the romantically titled Love Museum). Even Moscow has the Tochka-G Museum of Erotic Art, which seems to operate as a space of resistance to the conservative national politic. You can see already from the naming practices that each of these spaces frames sex differently. There's an emphasis on male biology in Iceland's phallological

museum. "Erotic heritage" implies a historical investigation of arousal and sensuality. There's an appealing slippage between love, romance, and sex in the euphemistic "love" museum, and a shift towards artistic representation in the "erotic art" of the Totchka-G.

Japan's museums are called *hihōkan* which translates to "treasure palace." Something about this idea of sex as treasure appeals to me. Sex as treasure is a lustrous thing that brings joy to the senses, something that is recognised as inherently valuable. But treasure is also hoarded, locked away to protect it from jealous fingers and ham-fisted looters. Treasure is coveted, possessed, and bought with money. Perhaps the most suitable place to lock up treasure *is* in a palace: an imperial structure that signifies hierarchy, the elite, and centralisation of power. But then palaces in fairy tales are magical houses of transformation and wonder. "Treasure palace" also sounds like somewhere you might pay for sex: there's a promise of pleasure, bought with money, ownable. All of these meanings are tied up in the way these museums frame sex for their visitors. And the naming is just the tip of the iceberg. There's also the meaning-making that happens once you get inside the doors.

In 2014 I visited one of these museums. I went to The Museum of Sex in New York, where I was looking for something specific. An exhibition called *NSFW: The Female Gaze* was displaying works of art depicting sex and sexuality, with the important distinction that all of the pieces were by women artists. I was interested in the theory behind this exhibition: if men had, in the past, been the ones who create most of the representations of sex and erotica, then men's ideas had significantly shaped how we as a culture understand what sex is, what images are erotic, and what is considered perverted or deviant. Because women might experience sex and sexuality differently to men, the idea behind the exhibition was to explore what new things women artists could teach us about sex, and what new perspectives we could see sex from.

The female gaze is a concept that comes from feminist film studies. The scholar Laura Mulvey, in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" proposed that film had always imagined a male viewer and that movies—overwhelmingly written, directed, and produced by men—had constructed a norm that sees life through the eyes of men. Under this "male gaze," women become objects to be viewed, consumed, and objectified. Jill Soloway, a gender non-binary writer and director, reinvigorated interest in the female gaze in a keynote address they gave at the 2016 Toronto International Film Festival. Soloway articulates the female gaze as one that is interested in characters' emotional interiors, that facilitates empathy with traditionally othered protagonists, and critiques the blind spots inherent in the dominant male gaze. Importantly, it's a gaze that moves beyond the Madonna/whore binary that structures much of western culture's female characterisation. Put

simply, it is a gaze that constructs women as subjects, not objects.

I understand gender as a social construct, and I think that anyone—regardless of gender—is able to step into, create, and see from the position of this gaze. So rather than attach this way of looking to a female body, I'm going to hereafter refer instead to the "feminine gaze".

This is the gaze that the exhibition *NSFW* foregrounded, but it moved beyond a focus only on film. The works included a range of mediums: photography, embroidery, film, painting, sculpture, and digital art. I wanted to visit the exhibition to find out what could happen to ideas about sex when they were seen through this feminine gaze.

The exhibition was on the top floor of the museum and I had booked a tour, but I was early. So I killed twenty minutes browsing the sex toys and erotic literature in the Sex Museum store. Light streamed through the windows, and there was fun pop music playing over the speakers. Bubbly staff were laughing with groups of customers as I hovered near a display table of super luxe vibrators. These vibrators were the new breed, many of them with female pleasure in mind and designed by women. As a result, they weren't just shaped like dicks. There were egg shaped devices, flat discs that fit in your palm, U-shaped vibes, and multi-pronged pleasure-givers with tentacles and rabbit ears. Around the store, the colours varied from rainbow bright to pastel to classic black, and many of them were Wi-Fi or Bluetooth capable, to enable users to control their lover's pleasure from afar with an app. The surfaces of these high tech devices were silky smooth, some of them like soft velvet, others slick and hard. With the bright, airy space, and friendly staff, the place felt more like an Apple store than a sex shop.

A store assistant with a cute ponytail and red lips offered to show me their range. She bounced between display racks like a pinball, and I tried to keep up. She held toys against my palm so I could feel the different patterns and strengths of vibration, she cracked inclusive jokes about crotchless underwear, and when I asked about a cute slave collar they had on display, she fastened the clasp at the back of my neck while I held my hair out of the way.

"Do you like it?" she asked, smoothing my hair over my shoulder as we looked in the mirror together at my reflection.

"I don't know. Yes. Maybe. I've never worn anything like this," I confessed. I wondered what my partner would think of the collar, the way the leather sat snugly against my skin, the way the metal ring hung at my throat.

"My theory is to try everything once—if I don't like it, I don't do it again. But at least then I know what I like and what I don't." She smiled.

I was surprised at how natural it was in this space to talk about sex—not in the abstract but about real sex, personal stuff. Things that are usually kept private, desires and worries only disclosed between lovers or close friends, became

appropriate conversation among complete strangers. I saw a girl handling a purple, oval-shaped vibrator with a small suction mouth on it. The woman next to her leaned over and said, "It's awesome, I have that one and I never use anything else anymore."

I should mention that this is the first space you step into as you enter the museum off of 5th Avenue. This shop was a space that cast me not as a viewer, but implicated me as a participant. It got me talking about my own needs and anxieties, and it encouraged me to explore, to touch, to ask questions. Like any retail space, it assumed that I, the customer, had desires that could be fulfilled by purchasing products. This participation was fuelled by capitalism (like almost everything in New York), but nonetheless it was a more active role than I had anticipated playing in the museum.

Eventually, my tour guide—a tall, elegant man who wore a tall, elegant hat on top of his fro—appeared, and led me alongside a nervous-looking couple to the first exhibition. We passed through a black velvet curtain and into a quiet space with walls that were deep red. This was more like the experience I had expected.

We moved through the paintings and made our way up two flights of stairs to the *NSFW* exhibition space. The guide left us to explore the pieces. The walls were bright white and tracks of halogen globes lit the pieces hung on walls. As I entered, I was confronted by a papier-mâché figure of a life sized woman reclining in a chair, her legs lazily open to me, her hand reaching beneath her underwear. One flabby arm reached behind her head, her voluptuous curves spilled over her waist band, stretched the fabric of her "I ♥ New York" t-shirt. I moved closer and noticed that her eyes were wide open, gazing up at the ceiling but looking at something imagined, something delicious. Captured in a private yet banal autoerotic moment, it struck me that this woman was not performing pleasure for someone else. It wasn't the theatrical, furious rubbing of heterosexual pornography. It wasn't even the eyes-closed in the dark, breathless gasping that I'd seen in erotic foreign films. This was an expression of what self-pleasure looked like without performance. The figure was still wearing her socks.

As I moved around the room I saw photographs of a beautiful, feminine man dressed stylishly and captured in lush colour schemes and pensive poses that had both grace and strength about them. There was an installation that reached almost to the roof: a mountain of concrete blocks and black-and-white cardboard cut-outs of naked women—no—the *same* woman, but repeated in various poses. She was in a trio, like the fates, playing coyly in each other's arms at the foot of the mountain. She was there again halfway up, with a salty expression on her face, perched on a brick. And there at the top, she sat relaxed with her arms on her knees, looking frankly at the viewer. There's a curious effect, I noticed, created by the contradiction of the

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flatness of the cardboard cut-out objects and the depth of the images of this woman—the artist—that are printed on them. When I get closer I realise they're not made of cardboard, they're printed on plywood. And the combination of black and white print, wood, and concrete spoke of something in the process of construction, something in a raw, unfinished state.

I was captivated by a series of blurry, sepia photographs that depicted men masturbating. The photographer, a label told me, was Aneta Bartos. Tonally dark, and rendered with an effect that imbued the images with an effect similar to an oil-painting, the men's bodies disappeared in places, swallowed by the abundant shadows. Their features were indistinct, lending them mystery, but each shot conveyed a unique character, lit always by some dim source, the moon perhaps, or a low golden lamp. These poetic and beautiful representations of male masturbation made me realise how rarely I've been called upon to view men's self-pleasure as sensual, beautiful, poetic, and gaze-able. More often it's something to laugh about, a mundane fact of life, something to be embarrassed of, or perhaps to fear. Even, in the cases of flashers or revenge porn, something used to shame women. The placard describes the men in Bartos' photographs as "vulnerable" and "sexualised" and this combination, I realised, was novel, too. Even if pornography of men masturbating isn't new (sites like PornHub boast thousands of examples) this was something different. This was erotic art, calling attention to its art-ness through the visual effects of tone, texture, and composition. But calling equal attention to its ability to arouse the viewer using men's naked bodies. It was a flip, I realised. It doesn't surprise us when women's bodies are objectified, but this gaze cast male bodies as beautiful sexual objects to marvel at.

In the centre of the room was a large, white cube, the size of a very small room. As I circled it, taking in the illustrations of sex and non-normative bodies, I eventually noticed the cube had a door. I entered to find a dark space lit only by a large projection screen. In front of the screen was a bench seat with two or three people on it. I sat in an empty spot. On the screen, a dual narrative was playing out. A skater girl waits with a beautiful stranger at a bus stop. In her mind, though, they are having sex. She returns home to finish off the fantasy, and herself. As viewers we were privy to her imaginings. I realised that I had entered a mini porn cinema.

But this wasn't like a lot of mainstream porn. I was impressed by the high production quality, and the imagination with which the short film

captured the experience of meeting a stranger who inspires erotic thoughts, and then going home and masturbating over them. This sounds kind of sleazy, but in the film it wasn't. The aesthetics were almost like an Instagram filter, washed out and sun-drenched, beautiful. The effect was a dreamy holiday fantasy. The camera focused on close-up, sensual details, like eye contact, the shape of the stranger's jaw, the curl of his smile, the way his hand gripped her skin. Also, the fantasy wasn't linear—it skipped time and moved back and forth, repeating some sequences that the protagonist really got off on, or leaving scenes and trying others, experimenting with what turned her on. And afterwards there was no guilt or shame for her, just the satisfaction of getting there, of post-orgasm bliss.

As the credits rolled, I became aware of the people around me. With a shock of modesty, I realised I was watching porn with strangers. You know that feeling you get when you're watching a movie with your parents and a sex scene comes on? It was like that: silently, yet undeniably, awkward. Next to me, a soft, round boy with thick-framed glasses leant over.

"They play on loop, this is the second one," he explained. I tensed, reluctant. I'd had enough experiences of being engaged in conversation by random men to know to be wary of what he might want from me, and I felt even more on edge being approached in this environment. I'll just point out again that *we were watching porn together*. I smoothed down my skirt and wondered if I should have worn something different to the sex museum. No, I thought, it was short but not short enough to send the wrong message.

"Oh, cool," I said.

"The next one is really good—it's by the woman who did that film *The Love Witch*, you know it?"

"Oh, yes! I love that movie." I relaxed a little. *The Love Witch* is written, directed and produced by Anna Biller, and it's a luxurious filmic ode to female sexual power. It feels kind of like the original *Bewitched* crossed with *I Dream of Jeanie*, but with a vengeful, feminist twist.

"Right? It's so good!"

"She made porn?"

"Yeah it's got a really similar feel to *The Love Witch*. Hyper saturated, seventies aesthetics, really cool and melodramatic. It's up next"

"Awesome, thank you."

"Yeah, enjoy it."

He got up and left. And that was it. He didn't want anything from me, and I didn't feel pressured to engage with him. I wondered if the space, with its feminist, sex-positive norms was exerting an effect on how people related to one another here. Or maybe he was just a nice guy who didn't have any ulterior motives. But I think there was something about the environment that made me feel a bit more relaxed, a bit more open to exploration.

This is curious because the key action I was performing here, in this exhibition, was looking.

I think of looking as a relatively passive action. But the process of gazing, looking, watching, seeing, is more active than we think.

John Berger was a British art critic who is well known for his book *Ways of Seeing*, published in 1972, which investigates the complexities of viewing art, objects, and images. I like his work because it's clever and accessible—the book was actually a four-part television show first, probably one of the most low brow forms of media at the time. Berger explains that seeing isn't just about looking, it is about making meaning from the world and figuring out how we fit in relation to that world. And it's something we are doing all the time. Berger puts it like this: "It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled." What he means, I think, is that acts of interpretation are never final, because everyone sees differently, so the meanings that we take from the things we see will always be in flux depending on who is looking. This is true between people: when one person looks at the Mona Lisa he sees a frown, when another person looks, she sees a smile. But it's also true that one person can interpret something differently at different times of their life: looking at Magritte's *The Lovers* as a teenager obsessed with ghouls, I saw a great idea for a horror movie. As an adult, I see something more mournful: an expression of the inherently human inability to truly know another person, or have them truly know you, no matter how much you wish to.

Seeing isn't just about looking, it's about interpretation, and museums are places that invite us to interpret objects on display, but they also influence the kinds of interpretations we make. One of the ways they do this is by positioning our bodies in relation to objects in specific ways. This is why sectioning off a private space in which visitors would sit side by side as they watch erotic films is a meaningful, deliberate strategy. It cues privacy, intimacy, and it cuts your senses off from the outside world so that you can let yourself become fully absorbed by the world on the screen. Even constructing an interior space within an interior space is interesting. This alchemy of eliciting meaning-making through embodied viewing is a big part of the practice of curation.

The German architect Matthias Sauerbruch passionately argues that brick and mortar museums have something that digital archives lack: "a place of three-dimensional space for direct, sensual, perception" (np). In an essay titled "The Museum as a Space of Encounter" Sauerbruch explains that, "in the flood of more or less interchangeable virtual promises, accessible for everyone at every place, it is the exclusiveness of the physical experience, the non-reproducible quality of an encounter between individuals (physically present or represented through their work) that makes the museum a superior place"

(np). While I'm not convinced by Sauerbruch's claim of superiority—I think that digital encounters can be just as profound as IRL ones—I do agree that what differentiates the two is the way that space can act upon a physical body to create the conditions for an encounter, and that "seeing" in a museum involves the whole body. What I mean by this is that viewing IRL exhibitions requires us to do things like walk around, step through doorways, squint, move our bodies closer or further from the objects on display. It requires us to negotiate other people in the space, to sit down when we are tired, and, importantly, it means that we are somewhat at the mercy of the curators, because we can't change how the pieces are exhibited, we must view them as we come to them. In some ways this is noticeable and overt: museums tell us we can't touch things. This kind of restricted access indicates a high value that must be protected. In some ways it is subtle.

Going back to Berger, one of the things I most valued learning from him is how to articulate what it feels like to exist as a woman, the way it feels to be permanently watched. When I first encountered Berger's theories, I had just turned twenty and was studying art. We had this fantastic, frantic art history teacher who was bubbling over with the wonder of artistic theory. She showed us Berger's television show and I was struck by how he gave words to an experience I was struggling to understand: that being seen is less an occurrence for some people, and more a state of being. And for me, at the time, the gendered way that Berger explains this really resonated. He says:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. While she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.
>
> And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.
>
> She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (46)

Berger explains how representations of women in art—*men's* representations of women—depict them as objects on display. And because men have predominantly been the ones to make, commission, purchase, display, value, and critique art, it is through a male gaze that our culture has come to view women. This means

that for men, culture teaches them to look at women, which is the simple part of the equation: they occupy the culturally constructed position of the seer (or "the surveyor" in Berger's language). But for women, it's more complex. Because works of art so often imagine a male viewer, women are very often invited to see women as objects to be viewed. This teaches them to imagine themselves as sights to be seen, especially when in public or in the presence of others: "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. . . . Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision—a sight" (47).

This concept of the masculine gaze fascinated me for how accurately it spoke to my experience as a self-conscious teenager, but later I appreciated it for how it proposed a *way of seeing*. This way of seeing was structured by power relations. Essentially, I realised Berger was saying that art teaches us to objectify women.

But the works of art that I saw at *NSFW* show that it doesn't have to be that way. A lot of the time, though, that's the way it is.

The last exhibition that I saw was a Virtual Reality (VR) show: an immersive, participatory experience of roughly fifteen minutes called *Celestial Bodies*. Located behind a paywall in the museum, for an extra fee you walk into a single-person booth where an assistant briefs you and fits you with VR gear: goggles, headphones, wrist cuffs, and a harness. Then you're released into the VR space, what I imagine in reality is a small, unadorned room but which opens out—in the VR experience—into an endless starscape with no floor, ceiling, or walls. This was legitimately a strange new feeling for me: walking out into space. But then, a stripper pole emerged and giant dancing women in G-strings and high heels began to float past me down the pole and disappear somewhere below the star spangled night sky below my feet. The headphones, awkward and heavy on my head, were blasting electronic music into my ears—it's an old track by DJ, producer, and well-known party boy Diplo.

The description of *Celestial Bodies* on the Museum of Sex website describes it as "an immersive room scale VR installation that brings Diplo's track 'Set It Off' to a new dimension. This virtual reality experience is an exploration of anticipation, sexual attraction, identity, presence, touch, scale, comfort, daring and spatial awareness—around a shared infinite pole dance in space."

This exhibit and the gaze it constructs, for me, is coded masculine through its focus on cutting edge digital tech, its incorporation of a soundtrack by electronic music artist Diplo, and the masculine desiring gaze that imagines an erotic experience that centres on a depiction of women whose job it is to take up the position of sex object. After the variety of sexual expression in the *NSFW* exhibition, the large breasted pole dancers seemed unimaginative. They were a textbook example of Berger's woman as sight, as

spectacle, as object. More than this, I was sensorially cut off from the others in the VR room.

Celestial Bodies is touted as "a couples VR experience" but visitors are welcome to participate without a partner. The room accommodates 4 participants, so if you're going solo you'll likely be placed in the space with at least two others. I was in a room with a couple. I could see them, or at least, I could see their avatars: sparkling humanoid forms that seemed to be made of light but lacked distinct features. They moved around, but we couldn't hear each other over the soundtrack in the headphones. An angel figure came and tickled our limbs with a starlight wand—what I imagine was, in real life, a feather toy. But when I tried to interact with the angel, it moved away.

This participation via an avatar felt a little like role playing. But in *Celestial Bodies*, despite the participatory promise of the VR experience, the role the viewer plays is closer to observer or witness. I felt I was being asked to witness the wonders of the masculine's gift to me: an embodied experience of outer space bestowed through technological mastery, and the spectacle of heterosexy exotic dancers who slide, one after another, down the giant pole situated at the centre of the VR space, dominating it. Although billed as participatory, to me Celestial Bodies was only an illusion of participation. It wasn't a social or a sexual experience. Mostly, I was just a bit bored and disappointed.

After I left the museum I was thinking about these two experiences over a bowl of spaghetti and meatballs. I sipped my wine and tried avoid the gaze of a passer-by, who looked me up and down unabashedly as I sat at one of the alfresco tables, enjoying the summer evening.

When I booked my trip to New York to see *NSWF* and *Celestial Bodies* I was interested in how the exhibitions would facilitate an erotic gaze or experience for those who came to see them. What I didn't expect to find was how the museum as a space worked upon me, exerted influence over my gaze, and how it moved my body through and around the difference spaces and exhibits, all the while shaping how and what I saw. It was exhilarating, stimulating, and disturbing.

I'd found a rich and intimate world in which I was encouraged to explore my own interiorities. Interiors are both abstract and concrete spaces, and here, protection from the outside allows for the expression and exploration of private desires, hidden longings, and stifled sexual subjectivities.

But this space is also complicated by gendered politics. It is permeated by patriarchal notions of sexuality, desire, and cultural value that ascribed elevated value to the exhibition coded masculine. *Celestial Bodies* was high tech, and apparently worth paying extra money to participate in. But I found more satisfying ways of participating in the *NSFW* exhibition, and even in the shop downstairs (yes, I bought the collar!). Most importantly, being invited to step into the position of looker, watcher, and gazer in the

museum, and being invited to view objects that did something new with the spectator's gaze was invigorating. There were even moments as a viewer when I forgot that I, myself, was a sight.

Jennifer Tuburczy is a feminist museum scholar, and she explains that "museums produce meaning through the interaction of people with objects. By collecting and displaying objects in particular ways, museums both reflect and shape meanings, definitions, and epistemologies" (2). The concept behind NSFW is feminist in its purpose: it is important to give women the opportunity to represent culture. Because it can change the culture.

Artist and art theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger (1992)[1] explains why it is vital that women artists are given space to exhibit work in order to shift cultural meanings beyond traditional Phallocentric symbolic domains. She describes works of art as "cultural/symbolic territories" onto which artists externalise cultural meanings that they have absorbed by "inscrib[ing] traces of subjectivity" into the work. These traces carry "ideas, perceptions, emotions, consciousness, cultural meaning." Ettinger explains that art is not unique in its capacity to contain unconscious traces of its creator's subjectivity, but it *is* unique because art's purpose is to be contemplated by a viewer. Thus, subjective traces are like "Trojan horses from the margins of [the artist's] consciousness," hiding in the symbolic world of the work. Crucially, when it comes to women's art, Ettinger explains:

> by analyzing these inscriptions, it is possible to create and forge concepts which indicate and elaborate traces of another Real and to change aspects of the symbolic representation (and non-representation) of the feminine within culture . . . I believe, therefore, that the Symbolic must be penetrated by women . . . In that way, alternative ideas, deviating from the Phallus, may enlarge the text of culture.

Here, Ettinger takes the Symbolic as it was developed by male psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan to exclude and subordinate the feminine from the field of meaning by centring on the Phallus. If art by women—and here I would expand Ettinger's theory to include trans* folk—has the ability to "enlarge the text of culture" by speaking through symbolic orders beyond the Phallocentric, it is vital that their art is given an audience that is granted the opportunity to interpret it.

The Museum of Sex's *NSFW* exhibition presents one such opportunity to shift understandings of sexuality through the interaction of viewers with work that imagines sexuality through the female gaze.

[1] The archived version of this source does not contain the original page numbers, so none are used to reference the direct quotes here. The reader is directed to Section II of the original article as the nearest location marker for the quoted material.

I finished my pasta and took the last sip of wine. Maybe if we give more opportunities to women, trans, gender nonbinary, and queer artists to represent sex, perhaps we can shift things like rape culture and street harassment, two sites at which Berger's theory of culture teaching us that women are objects plays out in awful ways. And at the same time, maybe these alternative ways of seeing can open out new opportunities for pleasure seeking, something that could be good for all of us.

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