

# HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

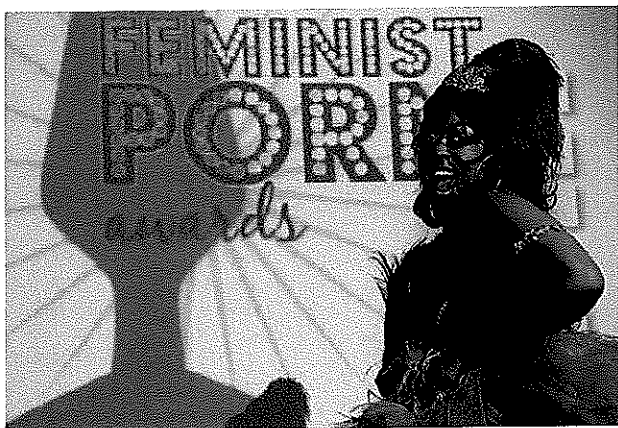
## Documenting the Public Side of Sex

by [Tiana Reid](#) on [June 20, 2014](#)



Installation view, 'Archiving Public Sex' (all images courtesy the University of Toronto Art Centre)

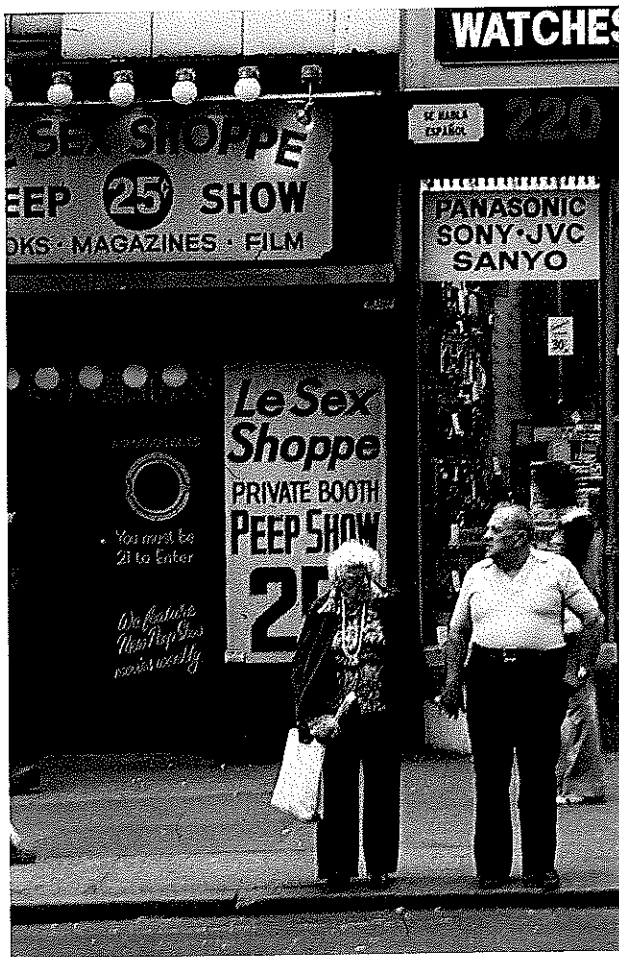
TORONTO — Some archives, following the lead of capital-H history, contain the stories of the victors, the production of top-down historical narratives. Others present the voices of those we may have missed, life as it's lived on the ground. The exhibition *Archiving Public Sex*, drawn from the Sexual Representation Collection of the Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at the University of Toronto and currently on view at the University of Toronto Art Centre, strives for the latter: a bottom-up take on the sociopolitics of sexuality and sexual practice in North America. Part of Toronto's annual CONTACT Photography Festival, the show contains a wide variety of artifacts: event posters, press releases, pulp novels, photography, magazine covers, film clips, bondage props, and archival letters. Many of the artists, activists, and organizers represented were also the donors of their own materials.



CoCo LaCreme Feminist Porn Awards Performance (2009), Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies Sexual Representation Collection (click to enlarge)

Those materials attempt to speak back to a more “official” history of sex, if one even exists: polite, heterosexual, monogamous, married, white, reproductive. Still, while the artifacts shown do rub up against a state-sanctioned narrative of what sex means and should mean, and on which bodies, much like its name suggests, *Archiving Public Sex* focuses less on sex than the *publicization* of it, mostly through print culture. By not only collapsing distinctions between public and private but also considering sex as a communal conversation and a social construct, the curators incorporate materials on the threshold of historical change.

The public realm is defined by what can and cannot be said, displayed, and seen in it. *Archiving Public Sex* attempts to push these limits by envisioning a different kind of publicness not constituted only by, say, model citizenship, but also by what’s encouraged or sanctioned — as the introductory wall text announces, “what sex is publicly encouraged, celebrated, restricted or permitted within the context of a prevailing social climate.” Even if just in the sealed-off space of the gallery, what we tend to think of as private can easily become collective, social, visible, and bleed over onto the public.



Max Allen, "Streetscape of 42nd St in New York City" (1979), Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies Sexual Representation Collection (click to enlarge)

Curated in broad brushstrokes, the exhibition, drawn from a vast archive, is divided into ten thematically overlapping and loosely chronological parts. While eventually cracking open definitions of art and baring it all, the predominantly realist show starts with the work that is the most ordinarily understood as art (and not smut): sentimental yet understated documentary-style photographs of shops and streetscapes in Toronto and New York City taken by producer Max Allen in the 1970s, triumphantly marking the history of sex coupled with commercialization.

The second section looks at two local Toronto events, the Feminist Porn Awards and the Morpheous Bondage Extravaganza, both started in the mid-2000s as alternatives to more mainstream understandings of commercial pornography and corporate art, respectively. As in much of the exhibition, the artifacts presented here are advertisements, Morpheous's in pulsing, comic-style posters and the Feminist Porn Awards represented in faux-neon bulb lettering floating on a pink background.

Other themes include censorship of the influential book *The Joy of Gay Sex* in Canada in the 1970s, visualized through framed statements, letters, and posters challenging obscenity laws from community activist stores such as Glad Day Bookshop, the self-proclaimed oldest queer bookstore in the world, which started out of owner Jearld Moldenhauer's Toronto apartment.

Classic pulp novels, with their racy illustrated covers and clear culture of deviance, are also highlighted as an important mode of distributing sexual materials.



Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens, "Dirty Sexecology" (2010), Kosmos Theatre, Vienna, Austria, Mark S. Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies Sexual Representation Collection

Photographer Carrie Leigh, perhaps more well-known to some from gossip rags as a former *Playboy* Playmate who sued Hugh Hefner, brings her muted yet imposing high-contrast covers of *NUDE*, a now defunct glossy magazine. By looking straight at the camera — and the viewer — the models in these black-and-white covers offer poses of self-awareness, hands unnaturally positioned, nipples covered by dozens of strings of beads. Others aim to pose more of a threat. Framed is Veronica Vera's "Post Porn Modernist Manifesto" of 1989, advocating for a sex-positivism that indubitably runs through the entire exhibition. Self-identified eco-sexual Annie Sprinkle's self-graffitied portrait, "Anatomy of a Pin-Up" (1984/2006), attempts to deconstruct beauty norms by using overwhelming black arrows to convey the constructed nature of femininity. Pointing to the thigh-high heels seemingly painted onto her doll-like figure, Sprinkle writes, "I can't walk and can barely hobble," among over two dozen more statements. Still, "Inspite [sic] of it all, I'm sexually excited + feeling great!" We don't know if we believe her.



Installation view, 'Archiving Public Sex' (click to enlarge)

Annexed to the main room is the theater gallery playing 45 minutes of audio-video footage, giving faces and movement to printed matter. Selections include scenes from the second-biggest grossing porn flick of 1981, *Deep Inside Annie Sprinkle*, and footage of projects by sex educator and founder of the Feminist Porn Conference, Tristan Taormino. For the most part, though, the screens, frames, and glass cases that hold the artifacts in the show — dildos, underwear, stickers, harnesses, business cards, necklaces, butt plugs, films, even signage once likely wheatpasted — act as ascetic barriers to what the exhibition really spurs: a desire to hold and handle, not in a purely sexual way, but rather in the way that Audre Lorde once described the erotic, as a kernel of energy, knowledge, and power.

As a feature exhibit of this year's Pride in Toronto, *Archiving Public Sex* does buckle when it takes for granted that the public-private boundary collapse is easy enough to pull off when the main subjects are predominantly queer, women and people of color. The subjects are presented as "other," making for, to some extent, a safe entryway into telling narratives of transgression. Does inclusion of historically marginalized subjects automatically destabilize a status quo of sexual thought and practice? Probably not, but the celebration of histories of activism and alternative expression often allows us to puff up at imagined contemporary and future equalities. What *Archiving Public Sex* does do a solid job of is showing the presentness of disciplining sex and gender, like the famous police raid of an all-woman and trans night at a gay bathhouse in

Toronto in 2000, which became known as the Pussy Palace Raid, or the arrests of over 300 men at another Toronto bathhouse in 1981. (There would not be a bigger mass arrest Canada until the 2010 G-20 summit protests in Toronto.) Both incidents are part of a much longer history of raids and repression, and an equally long history of community organizing.



Installation view, 'Archiving Public Sex'

*Archiving Public Sex* succeeds in bringing light to the necessarily social, cultural and political nature of sexual practice. It is, however, more ambitious sex education than sex exhibition, and we lose out on all-enveloping works and a desired sense of emotional attachment. Archival collections come to life best when accompanied by aesthetic objects that move us, things that strike us urgently. In the spilling of the private sphere out into the public, we may, after all, learn from that productive tension.

*Archiving Public Sex* continues at the University of Toronto Art Centre (15 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario) through June 28. The *CONTACT Photography Festival 2014* took place May 1–31 at various locations throughout Toronto.

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