

Sexuality in the Field of Encounter: The aesthetic topographies of Eros

Edward Bacal, University of Toronto

The experience of sexuality – including erotic sensation, desire, fantasy, and companionship – is traditionally understood as something *interior*. Conventional knowledge locates sexuality inside the subject's phenomenological horizon, the body's physical limits, the ego's psyche, and the privacy of domestic architectures; however, the history of aesthetic practice is full of examples that dis-locate sexuality, exposing it as a property of the exterior world. Whether in the pictorial space of Floating World prints or the ramp of *Seedbed*, numerous artworks have dis-located the experience of sexuality, challenging the borders that delimit the sexual body from the world at large. By complicating that body's relation to its environment, such works illustrate an aesthetics of sexuality that takes place in a decidedly expanded field. Additionally, by demonstrating how sexuality mediates the intersection of bodies, sensations, and spaces, these works envision alternative possibilities of social, political, and ethical encounter.

This session discusses how artists have reimagined the ways sexuality is embodied in space, exploring the historical and theoretical implications of those interventions. It considers how architectures, cityscapes, and natural topographies affect the performance and representation of sexuality. And it considers how sexuality contributes to the production and use of space in aesthetically relevant ways.

Speakers and Abstracts

Sexuality in the Expanded Field: Space, real estate, sex

Edward Bacal (University of Toronto)

This paper surveys a selection of films and artworks that, in their juxtaposition, illustrate how sexual practices index the transformation of urban space and vice versa. I begin at the lower Manhattan piers during the 1970s, a milieu equally famous for cruising as for innovative conceptual and installation art. This is the context in which Gordon Matta-Clark's 'anarchitecture' installation *Day's End* appears in *Pier Groups*, an erotic film that contrasts the sociality of anonymous men with the threat of displacement by redevelopment. After two decades of gentrification, Steve McQueen's *Shame* revisits this site, now overrun by the cold anonymity of luxury condos and boutique bars. *Shame* depicts a *non-place* where the logic of monetary exchange underlies an instrumentalised relation to sex, consumed as a kind of lifestyle product. These representations of Manhattan mirror a number of films that view the urban development of consumer society – the spatial manifestation of capitalist alienation – via sexual practices. Most notably, I consider the representation of domestic prostitutes in Jean-Luc Godard's *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* and Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman...*, along with the failed romance of Tsai-Ming Liang's *Vive L'Amour* and *The Hole*. In these films and in various other artworks, the exchangeability of sex functions as an aesthetic condition of the built environment, transposing physical space and immaterial social relations. I explore how that aesthetic condition informs, and is informed by, these works, which portray sexuality's ambivalent transformations in the post-industrial metropolis.

'To inch and cram, wedge, and, in full flesh, secrete herself through a lattice': The Atlas/Caryatid function in the architecture of Gins and Arakawa, Matta-Clark, Acconci, and the Erectheion

John M Cooper (Princeton University)

Atlas/Caryatid figures embody the ambivalent erotics of architecture. Subject to converging structural forces at nodes of compressive or tensile structural intensity, these semi-nude writhing (or dancing) insinuations of the body into space seem to offer both the possibility of total domination by irresistible and overpowering flows of socio-structural force, and also the liberating possibility of projecting from oneself the many trajectories out of which space itself is composed. These dual destinies of the Atlas/Caryatid function can be traced through architectural theory and history and are explicit in the writings, drawings, video, installations, and landscapes of

Madeline Gins and Arakawa whose work on the 'architectural body' forms a focus of argumentation in this paper. The question of what story of architectural erotics the Atlas/Caryatid figure might tell is pursued via Gins and Arakawa through the Tree dance of Gordon Matta-Clark, the Extension studies of Vito Acconci, the theorisation of body and space in Adolphe Appia's writings, and, ultimately, the debate ongoing since antiquity concerning how to read the double imprisonment/ecstasy of the Erectheion Caryatids themselves. In linking these discourses and practices, there is at stake a fundamental question about the embodied self and society, and eroticism as the iconographic mode structuring this relationship in architecture.

Bodies by Taylor: Working out and cruising with Taylor Mead on Television

Kara Carmack (University of Texas at Austin)

Approximately the same year Charles Gaines published the popular book *Pumping Iron: The Art and Sport of Bodybuilding* (1974), Taylor Mead hosted a bodybuilder known only as Hector in a cramped New York City apartment for an episode of the improvised public-access television show *Anton Perich Presents*. With no gym equipment in sight, the unusual workout regime for the camera involves bodily contact – tickling, teasing, and writhing; Mead's soft, paunchy body entwining with Hector's toned physique across two twin mattresses. Eventually, a loose plot for the episode, titled 'Monster Kit,' emerges: Mead pretends he has been creating a monster (Hector) in his Transylvanian castle. In the end, Mead urges the viewing audience to make their own monster by writing to the show to 'get a kit to make your own.'

This paper contextualises Mead's humorous workout alongside the post-Stonewall rise of the clone and gym-manufactured bodies. I also explain how the episode, operating at a complex, expansive site of male bodies, desires, sexuality, and parody, draws on coded language for cruising. I argue that Mead found the televisual medium suited to not just presenting and parodying physical and sexual scenarios on screen, but to also exploring sexual possibilities through the screen. This episode demonstrates how public-access television could be used as a semiprivate site for cruising in the city, in addition to gyms, parks, bars, and piers, finding new embodied social and sexual forms through the medium not otherwise seen or experienced on network television.

Performance and World-Making in London's Sex Radical Club Cultures

Flora Dunster (University of Sussex)

In the late 1980s and early '90s, London's clubs fostered the development of a lesbian sex radical performance culture. Emerging in the wake of the sex wars – a decade-long conversation within feminism which debated the politics of pornography and fetishism – nights like Chain Reaction and Venus Rising hosted erotic cabarets, allowing lesbians to articulate their desires before live audiences drawn from a trusted social circle. Where lesbian-feminism

argued against explicit eroticism, marking it as equivalent to male-identified desires, sex radicals adapted gay male practices and signifiers and pushed toward early formations of what would become understood as queer.

In lieu of (largely non-existent) documentation, these performances became public-facing through their translation into lens-based media. They influenced (and instigated) off-site photography by Del LaGrace Volcano and film-work by Annette Kennerley, regulars at the nights in question. Volcano and Kennerley's work substantiated the possibilities imagined therein, quoting the formal and relational qualities of the performances to establish the desire they tentatively expressed as concrete.

This paper focusses on the spaces where this dialogue between performance and its latent documentation occurred: gay clubs and cruising sites. It argues that the visualisation of sex radical practices and aesthetics was predicated on a pre-existing culture of public and fetishistic gay sex, itself tied to an urban ecology which has since disappeared. Volcano's photographs and Kennerley's films demonstrate how space impacts on the way sexuality is collectively imagined, underscoring the impact of gentrification on LGBTQ futures.