



PORNOGRAPHY IN THE CITY

A SYMPOSIUM AT CUNY GRADUATE CENTER'S JAMES GALLERY

Co-sponsored by the Center for the Humanities

image courtesy of Albert Steig

PORNOGRAPHY IN THE CITY takes up the questions posed by *Peeps*, the James Gallery's Spring 2009 exhibition on New York peep show arcades in the 1960s and 70s.

In an afternoon of discussion, we revisit the modes of spectatorship that the peep arcades introduced and the social networks they inadvertently spawned. Invited scholars, critics and artists evoke histories of non-normative sexualities and regulation in urban spaces, and consider current relationships between public sex and private experiences.

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TUESDAY DECEMBER 15, 2009 2-6 PM

2pm: OPENING REMARKS

Linda Norden, Director, James Gallery

Amy Herzog, Guest Curator, "Peeps"

2:15 - 4pm: PORNOGRAPHY, PEEP SHOWS AND PUBLIC SPACE

What is the relationship between public and private within evolving urban and commercial environments such as our neighboring Times Square? How have changes in technology and regulation affected sexual commerce, cruising, and other public and private negotiations?

Rachel Kramer Bussel, contributing editor, *Penthouse*, journalist, author, and editor of many books, including *Peep Show: Tales of Voyeurs and Exhibitionists*.

Jeff Escoffier, writer, activist, one of the founders of OUT/LOOK: A National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly and author of *Sexual Revolutions*, and the recent *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore*.

William Kornblum, professor of Sociology and chair of the Center for Urban Research at the Graduate Center and director of the study *West 42nd Street: The Bright Lights*.

Moderated by **Dagmar Herzog**, professor of History at the Graduate Center and author of *Sex in Crisis: The New Sexual Revolution and the Future of American Politics*.

4 - 6pm: PORNOGRAPHY AND ITS REPRESENTATION

How can we think about the relationship between art and pornography, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, and as it has evolved since? What is the relationship between viewing, voyeurism and consumption in public environments?

Douglas Crimp, Fanny Knapp Allen Professor of Art History and professor of Visual and Cultural Studies at the University of Rochester, author of *Melancholia and Moralism*.

Linda Ford, San Francisco-based artist and former peep show worker whose projects explore issues of fantasy, looking, power, and labor.

Bjarne Melgaard, Australian-born Norwegian artist, now based in New York, Melgaard's 2008 video *Gay Zoo* was featured in "Peeps."

Melissa Ragona, Assistant Professor of Visual Culture and Critical Theory, Carnegie Mellon College of Fine Art, currently researching and writing about Andy Warhol's recording aesthetics.

Moderated by **Amy Herzog**, professor of Media Studies at Queens College and author of *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film*.

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC: NO REGISTRATION REQUIRED.



**WARNING: This exhibition
contains explicit adult
material which some
people may find offensive
and/or not suitable
for children.**

Peeps

Premises Under Surveillance

Peeps is an experiment that evolved from the history of peep film arcades on the East Coast in the 1960s and early 1970s. It is a history that peep-shows, peepshows, peepboxes, and peepholes, with the unique twist that the content is film.











EXPLOR











544

543

575











Premises Under Surveillance

Peeps is an experiment that evolved from my research on peep-show pornography, film theory, and the politics of spectatorship. This project centers on the emergence of peep film arcades in metropolitan areas across North America in the mid-1960s and early 1970s. My interest in this phenomenon grew out of the discovery that peep-show film booths were created from recycled musical film jukeboxes and other outmoded media technologies. I became fascinated with the unique mode of address set into play by the coin-operated film booth: the customer is drawn into the machine as an isolated viewer, the sole recipient of the performance encapsulated within the film loop. The bodies on display within the loop are laid bare—literally—yet are accessible only through the limits of the “peeping” interface, reduced to snippets of duration equivalent to the time allocated to the deposit of a coin. Paradoxically, the customer is conspicuously on display within the space of the arcade, entering and exiting the shops and navigating between machines.

Peep arcades are complex social environments, locations for cruising, hustling, prostitution, drug dealing, and a host of other activities only marginally related to the content of the films. From the perspective of film studies, the peep show arcade thus presents a provocative field for rethinking questions of spectatorship and embodiment. Within the arcade, the body as represented on film is inextricably linked to the bodies of the viewers, the bodies of the machines, the physical spaces in which they are shown, and the larger cultural environments in which these businesses proliferated.

Given its proximity to Times Square, one of the most significant locales in the history of the peep arcades, the James Gallery is an ideal site for exploring these tensions. In 1967, Martin Hodas, the “peep show king of

42nd Street,” installed a group of retrofitted peep machines in an adult bookstore on West 42nd Street, launching a highly lucrative pornographic empire. Hodas’s savvy manipulation of licensing regulations opened the door for a flood of adult-oriented businesses to follow suit. This strategic occupation of an urban landscape by pornographic entrepreneurs set the stage for a range of corollary “occupations” of public space in Times Square. Most significant was the use of the arcades as visible sites of contact for gay men and other marginalized communities, particularly in the pre-Stonewall era. Indeed, debates about urban blight and development in Times Square are often implicitly driven by anxiety regarding public sexuality. This political context is central to any understanding of the peep arcade as a social institution.

Very much a work-in-progress, my goal in this exhibition is to create a social space in which historical artifacts are placed in dialogue with artistic works to question notions of public sexuality, private space, and the politics of looking. The space of the installation is designed to engage the bodies of those who enter it, eliciting a range of corporeal responses (self-consciousness, arousal, disgust, amusement, boredom, empathy, shame) and encouraging multi-faceted connections between participants, texts, and the architecture of the arcade. The challenge here is to recontextualize works in a manner that will evoke the corporeal experience of the peep show, while at the same time allowing us to view these images in new, unpredictable ways.

—Amy Herzog

For further reading:

Anthony Bianco, Ghosts of 42nd Street: A History of America’s Most Infamous Block (New York: William Morrow, 2004).

Amy Herzog, “In the Flesh: Space and Embodiment in the Pornographic Peep Show Arcade,” The Velvet Light Trap 62 (Fall 2008): 29-43.

Checklist

Unless otherwise stated, the films below were commercially produced.

Peggy Ahwesh, The Color of Love, 1994. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound. 10 min. Courtesy the artist

Peggy Ahwesh, Trick Film, 1996. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound. 6 min. Courtesy the artist

Alvin Baltrop, Untitled (pier photographs), 1975–86. 7 black-and-white photographs. Courtesy Alvin Baltrop Trust

James Bidgood, Pink Narcissus (excerpt), 1965–71. 8mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound. 70 min. Courtesy James Bidgood/Clamp Art/Strand Releasing

Martha Colburn, Cats Amore, 2002. 2½ min. Skelehellavision, 2001. 8 min. Spiders in Love: An Arachnogasmic Musical, 2000. 2½ min. Each: 16mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound. Courtesy the artist

Diverse Industries Productions, Batman and Robin Meet Dicknose, c. 1970s. 8mm film transferred to DVD, color. 10 min. Courtesy Museum of Sex, New York

Enamel-painted aluminum sign: "EXPLICIT". Original mutoscope with hand-reeled "fan dancer" film. Courtesy The Seymour Durst Archive, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York

Five 50s Peeps, c. 1950. Mermaid's Boudoir, Domestic Maiden, Mermaid on Parade, Bare-ly Bare, Femme Fatale. 16mm film transferred to DVD, b/w. Each: 3 min. Courtesy Albert Steg

Jean Genet, Un Chant D'Amour (excerpt), 1950. 16mm film transferred to DVD, b/w. 25 min. Courtesy Cult Epics © 2009

Lisa Kereszi, Girls Neon, Show World, Times Square, NYC, 2000. No Cameras Sign, Show World, NYC, 2000. Silhouettes in Corner, Muff Divers, Philippines, 2005. Door #22, Peep Show, California, 2005. Private Booths, South Beach Showgirls, Miami, 2002. Each: Chromogenic print. Courtesy the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

Lucy, 1961. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color. 11 min. Courtesy Retro-Seduction Cinema/RetroSeductionCinema.com

Bjarne Melgaard, Gay Zoo, 2008. Single channel video, color. 10 min. Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York

Matthias Müller, Sleepy Haven, 1993. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color, sound. 15 min. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Erben Gallery

Margie Schnibbe, Tweak, 2002. Single channel video, b/w, sound. 5½ min. Courtesy Circus Gallery, Los Angeles

Sexercise, c. 1960s. 8mm film transferred to DVD, b/w. 11 min. Courtesy Albert Steg

Starlight 366, 1969. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color. 11 min. Courtesy Albert Steg

Starlight 524, c. 1970–1. 16mm film transferred to DVD, color. 11 min. Courtesy Albert Steg

Starlight Marquee Cards, various: 1950s–70s. Photographs on cardstock, originally posted outside peep booths, b/w. Courtesy Albert Steg

Starlight Peep Stills, various: 1950s–1970s. Digital still photographs from 16mm film, color. Courtesy Albert Steg

Andy Warhol, Poor Little Rich Girl (excerpt), 1965. 16mm film transferred to digital files (DVD), b/w, sound. 66 min. (excerpt 33 min.) Collection The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh. Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.

In the following interview, which was conducted as his “factory” in a Union Square loft, the only time that Warhol became at all animated was when he started to discuss the “beavers” he had seen earlier in the day...

Joseph Gelmis: It's been suggested that your stars are all compulsive exhibitionists and that your films are therapy. What do you think?

Andy Warhol: Have you seen any beavers? They're where girls take off their clothes completely. And they're always alone on a bed. Every girl is always on a bed. And then they sort of fuck the camera.

Gelmis: They wriggle around and exhibit themselves?

Warhol: Yeah. You can see them in theaters in New York. The girls are completely nude and you can see everything. They're really great.

...

Gelmis: Have you actually made a beaver yet?

Warhol: Not really. We go in for artier films for popular consumption, but we're getting there. Like sometimes people say we've influenced so many other filmmakers. But the only people we've really influenced is that beaver crowd.

The beavers are so great. They don't even have to make prints. They have so many girls showing up to act in them. It's cheaper just to make originals than to have the prints made. It's always on a bed. It's really terrific.”

From **Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (New York: Double Day, 1970)**

“In Feminists’ Antipornography Drive, 42d Street Is the Target,” by Georgia Dullea, *New York Times*, July 6, 1979

Shyly, they slipped into the booths, dropped their coins into the slots and waited as the metal curtain ascended to reveal two young women dancing naked on a carousel. One of the dancers blinked.

“Ladies!” she cried, pointing to the faces in the booths. “One...two...three ladies!”

Everybody giggled. “You with a religious group?” the dancer asked.

“No, no,” came the reply. “We’re feminists.”

The dancer laughed and shook her hips. “I bet you feminists think we’re awful for selling out bodies like this.”

The feminists shook their heads. “Look,” said one, “we can’t condemn you if that’s how you make a living.”

“Right on, honey,” the dancer said. “It’s better than doing it for free.”

Such exchanges are becoming part of the Times Square summer scene now that a feminist group called Women Against Pornography has set up shop in the shadow of the city’s commercial sex district and begun giving guided tours of the neighborhood. Maintaining that pornography contributes to a “climate of violence” in which crimes such as rape, wife battering and child molestation are on the rise, these women are urging other women to tour the bookstores, peepshows and live sex show, to “check it out,” as they say in Times Square.

“Our tours are a small fund-raiser and a big consciousness-raiser,” said Dolores Alexander. “One think we’re trying to do is make the public aware that violence in pornography leads to violence in the street, in the bedroom and in the office.”

New York Times, March 21, 1969

To the Editor:

Cannot something be done about this rapid proliferation of so-called "adult peep show" shops?

At least ten more have opened within a block of Times Square since Feb. 1. They peddle out-and-out pornography, display disgusting pictures in the windows and attract in the main youths and rather disreputable types as potential customers. They don't even bother to keep the premises clean.

Add to these the record shops with dirty-lyric ballads and novelty stores with all sorts and lengths of knives on display along 42nd Street and you have an atmosphere no self-respecting New Yorker would care to show an out-of-town visitor.

Who is for spring cleaning with a vengeance?

Charles Peden, New York

One of the strangest features of shame, but perhaps the one that offers the most conceptual leverage for political projects, is the way bad treatment of someone else, bad treatment *by* someone else, someone else's embarrassment, stigma, debility, bad smell, or strange behavior, seemingly having nothing to do with me, can so readily flood me--assuming I'm a shame-prone person--with this sensation whose very suffusiveness seems to delineate my precise, individual outlines in the most isolating way imaginable.

...That's the double movement shame makes: toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality.

From ***Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*** by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).