

INTERVIEW BY STEVEN HELLER

The Museum of Sex sounds like a clever title for an adult movie or accessory shop, but it's no joke. Founded and directed by Daniel Gluck, the Museum of Sex (MoSex) is one of New York City's newest cultural institutions. With ambitious goals to raise the level of awareness, knowledge, and analysis of sex in art, culture, and commerce, MoSex is also a highly controversial venue and has faced its share of roadblocks. New York State refused to accredit it as a museum, declaring it would make a mockery of that designation, forcing Gluck, 36, to open MoSex as a for-profit business that cannot solicit tax-deductible donations or seek aid from charitable foundations and government cultural programs. Hence, the admission price: a whopping \$14.50 The Catholic League charges

that the museum is "run by pornographers," but MoSex's curatorial mission is loftier. Its inaugural exhibition, "NYC Sex: How New York City Transformed Sex in America," which opened in October 2002, investigated subcultures of the city, past and present, and its board of advisers was a who's who of New York intelligentsia, including Luc Sante, Mike Wallace, and Martin Duberman.

MoSex transcends taboos of sex and sexual representation in its image as well as in its work: Its graphic identity was created by Michael Bierut, and exhibit designs often reinterpret the museum's space on Fifth Avenue. Gluck, a former software developer/entrepreneur, recently discussed why he founded the museum and the impact he hopes it will have.



View of the MoSex exhibit "Get Off! Exploring the Pleasure Principle." Photograph: Bjorg Magnea.

HELLER: What prompted you to start a museum devoted to sex in New York?

GLUCK: What prompted me to take it seriously was the work of Camille Paglia and the clarity of vision it gave me on what a museum of sex could be and mean. What most excited me—especially during the early '90s—was her refreshing and brave approach to sex and art history, which connected me to the subject in ways I hadn't felt before.

It energized me. When contemplating a Museum of Sex, I immediately thought there ought to be one that could energize the public in the same way. I began to correspond with Ms. Paglia, as well as with other respected scholars, researchers, and artists. And it just seemed obvious to all of us that there ought to be a Museum of Sex somewhere in the world. After learning that no such place existed, there was no turning back.

I don't think a museum like this could have been created much earlier than the early 1960s, after which a great body of scholarship was developed. There was the trailblazing Magnus Hirschfeld, in Berlin during the Weimar era, whose museum [the Institute for Sexual Science]—which was more of a research institute—was subsequently burned down by the Nazis. I don't know why a museum like this hasn't been created sooner than [now], however.

HELLER: Did you have any trepidation about being involved in a sex museum? Did you have any qualms about, say, having your son tell his schoolmates what you do for a living?

GLUCK: Honestly, not at all. I am extremely proud of my work and think that by the time my son can tell his schoolmates what I do, the rest of the world will get it, too. The very idea of creating a museum devoted to the sub- *Continued on page 116*

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ject of sexuality—not necessarily human, by the way—is obviously a challenge to certain mores in our society. Some have even called it subversive. Perhaps it is, but not intentionally so. We are not poseurs. Our goal is to share, not to alienate. So much scholarship on sex and sexuality has never been presented to a popular audience.

HELLER: Is MoSex a place to simply explore quirks and eccentricities, or to integrate sex and sexuality into the mainstream?

GLUCK: While our exhibitions undoubtedly accomplish both, neither is our goal. Our mission is to bring to the public the best in current scholarship. We want to describe and illuminate the significance of sexuality in history and culture. At this point, we are a context more than anything else, developing topics for exhibitions ranging from social history—as in “NYC Sex” and a current exhibition, “Sex Among the Lotus: 2500 Years of Chinese Erotic Obsession”—to the fine arts, as in

[another current] contemporary-art exhibition, “Get Off! Exploring the Pleasure Principle.” Our collections will be broad, ranging from art and pornography to political memorabilia and technology.

HELLER: How and why did you decide to mount exhibits like “Get Off!”—which looks at the art of sexual stimulation—or “Sex Among the Lotus”? Does this focus on art reveal the direction of future exhibition planning?

GLUCK: “Get Off!” is not really about the art of sexual stimulation, which sounds like masturbation, but about art whose goal is to stimulate sexually—not necessarily the viewer, by the way; some are very personal pieces. Contemporary art was always an area we planned to feature as part of our range—in fact, we have even bigger plans in store.

Robin Kahn—the curator of “Get Off!”—approached us about a year ago; she was very passionate and had a vision very much in line with our own for a contemporary art exhibition for the Museum of Sex. So we backed her. Developing an exhibition about the Far East was the passion of one of our own directors, Dr. June Reinisch. June is also the director emeritus of the Kinsey Institute and was its director for over ten years. She has always had a strong interest in Far Eastern erotic history and ethics during her career. It also seemed appropriate for us to follow up the very Western-centric inaugural exhibition, “NYC Sex,” with an exhibition on a culture at the opposite side of the globe, with ideas and ideals of sexuality that are almost equally distant.

HELLER: All this takes money, needless to say. Most museums are funded by donors

who have something to gain, either culturally or commercially, from their generosity. How does this play out for the Museum of Sex?

GLUCK: The question of self-interest and generosity is quite relevant to our case. Because of early resistance to its formation, the Museum of Sex was built as a private venture and has investors rather than donors as its source of funding. Our investors' primary goal is to make money, but most of them also wish to be part of a venture whose mission is social enlightenment. In order to protect our founding vision, our corporate by-laws restrict the kind of investors we allow. For example, no investor comes from the adult entertainment industry.

HELLER: In 2002, there was an exhibition on sex and Surrealism at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that looked at a key aspect of the once-radical art movement. How was this different from what MoSex might exhibit on that theme?

GLUCK: "Surrealism: Desire Unbound" is a good example of the kind of exhibitions the Museum of Sex undertakes. But we would have focused more on the sexual aspects of the work and the environment in which it was created. Because we are a niche museum occupying a unique space in the cultural landscape, we have the freedom to be more specific and far-reaching in our exploration of our particular theme. We can afford to take risks that others can't.

HELLER: Let's say you did an exhibition on sex and advertising. How would you craft a narrative that is not simply there to excite or titillate the viewer? What will give it cultural importance?

GLUCK: We are exploring that subject right now. Sex in advertising has been a source of controversy for generations. We see potential for many themes exploring the role that sex and advertising—taboo and commonplace—play in reflecting and transforming social mores, self-image, feminism, esthetic ideals, and much more. We do not envision a didactic exhibition. Whereas another museum might approach the question from a conventional exhibition model, the Museum of Sex would consider taking part of the show out of the museum space altogether, opting for advertising venues as a "curated" space. Imagine a Houston Street Calvin Klein billboard as part of an exhibit display. Perhaps part of the exhibition will document [the museum's] own advertising struggles. You may find this surprising, but we've had difficulty getting advertisements displayed publicly that are much more innocuous than your typical Calvin Klein ad.

HELLER: What was once obscene is more accepted. Do you foresee a time when you have to push the envelope further to try to stay ahead of the curve?

GLUCK: There are so many major topics for us to explore that "pushing the envelope" is not really a concern—technology, theology, politics, art, social history—these days, everything seems to be pushing the envelope when it comes to sex. I can't say we will not explore taboo themes, but our interest in these themes is not to provoke shock but understanding. Sexuality is an excellent gauge of social attitudes and permissiveness—esthetics, standards, values, censorship, social freedom.

HELLER: The 1999 "Sensation" exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art was a good example of how, even in a city as diverse and enlightened as New York, puritanical values of repression still exist. What has been the response to MoSex?

GLUCK: We founded the museum during Mayor Rudy Giuliani's conservative administration, in an era of ever-diminishing public funding for art and culture. When New York State rejected our name on account of it being "unseemly" for a museum, we realized we had to do it on our own.

HELLER: Who is your target audience?

GLUCK: Everyone. Like "NYC Sex," future exhibitions may be limited to certain age groups, but our view of sexuality is that it is—generally—at the core of everyone's life experience; therefore, it is a uniquely strong way to connect people to the subjects we explore and to each other. I envision future exhibitions that cater to gay and heterosexual adult audiences, as well as shows that cater to families with children.

HELLER: Does the Museum of Sex really hope to be a destination for family outings?

GLUCK: We may not be a place where most families go together as a group; more likely, [visitors will come] individually or as couples. They might then bond over the dinner table.

HELLER: Do you believe that a museum devoted to sex will become a serious part of the cultural *mélange*?

GLUCK: Yes. The Museum of Sex will undoubtedly find a permanent place in the cultural *mélange*. The voice of our mission is too essential to be drowned out.