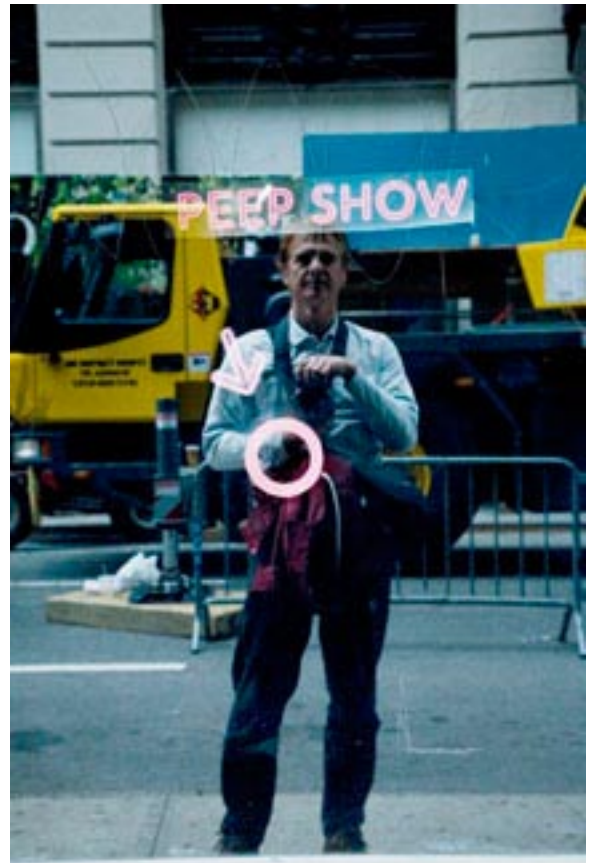


# Shake Your Money-Maker

[words and images by Dale H. Cotton]

When James Brown oozed out the lines “shake your money-maker,” he didn’t think we’d need a museum to identify a subject that to him was best explained by rhythm itself. Yet “sex” is a three-letter word packed with meaning. So much meaning that any mention of it is loaded.

A museum devoted to the topic is bound to activate hidden truths, powerful associations, fantasies, and long-fought denials. The Empire State Building looms over the Museum of Sex (MOS), which has been located just below Murray Hill (Fifth Ave. and 27<sup>th</sup> St.) on the outskirts of the Flatiron district since 2002. It is one museum that will get a rise out of anyone who pays the \$14.50 admission fee. Recommended for mature audiences, its mission is to explore “the history, evolution, and cultural significance of human sexuality.”



My mission was to connect some dots. How does one get from childhood to adulthood without discussing the one subject that may ease the path? And, how did my old nowhere neighborhood in Manhattan—home to cracks addicts, importer/exporters, and office buildings during the Reagan era—become upscale with high-end apartments, cafes, and now a sex museum?

Crack was the drug of choice back then, and after I witnessed it sold out of baby carriages I got out quickly. When I returned twenty years later, much had changed. On my way to a photo shoot on the Lower East Side, I rushed down Fifth Avenue and noticed the entrance to the Museum of Sex, where the peep-hole beckoned. I took a quick shot and vowed to return sometime.

After the shoot I headed back uptown to get a train to Jersey. A veteran street photographer, I’m equipped to explore, exploit, and exit gracefully when shooting in Manhattan. With my camera readied for action, I cast a sideways glance and noticed a young couple frolicking on the street



At the MOS, it's hard to know how to react to the various stimuli—films, gadgets, toys, machines, pictures. Should you get a rise or an education, be embarrassed or reminisce about past partners and experiences—or, all of the above? Your first task is to get in the mood. At the end of a long pink hallway, you read that “you may touch and smell the objects in this exhibit,” and reach up to feel the patches of PVC, fur, rubber, leather, satin, latex, and plush that adorn the walls. Next are how-to videos of types of sex play, the most obscure of which is “splashing,” erotic play with

corner after exiting a cab. I clicked off a split-second shot, and captured a sexy embrace. I started to wonder what was in the air here. Did this area all of a sudden come to life?

I've learned to follow signs, knowing they will lead somewhere, so I set out on another Manhattan odyssey. Next door to the museum on 27<sup>th</sup> Street is the Gershwin Hotel, a budget-minded artsy hotel, whose horned protuberances—like a building in heat—fit in well with its neighbor. You might think the hotel is the museum, because aside from the peep-hole and the large typography that spells out “kink,” the museum entrance is fairly inconspicuous in comparison. Once you're in though, and are surrounded by glaring pink walls and punk music, you know it's the right place.



food and other gooey substances, or blowing-up balloons to simulate growth (blowing) and release (popping). You can also sample whips, dress like a child, a nurse, or a wounded victims, or wear a mask.

The next room stimulates your filmic senses, where every type imaginable—from early stag films to today's celebrity sex films—is running in an ongoing image orgy. Some are projected on top of boxes, simulating beds, which curiously did heighten the reaction. In this dimly lit den of digitized iniquity, voyeurs remained silent, as if





reverting back to a space they normally inhabited in the privacy of their own home. A man filmed one of the films for his own viewing pleasure later.

The most imaginative film is *The Sex Life of Robots*, where doll-sized robots made of metal engage in a broad range of sex play. The creator, Michael Sullivan, a doll-maker, animation specialist, and former porn movie director, engineered robots to perform various sex acts in animation. He claims it's supposed to be like a silent robot porno movie from another planet, and got the idea when making an animated war movie with battling robots. YouTube found it a bit too risqué and removed it from its site, but don't worry, you are still likely to find Paris or Britney in the flesh there.

The final room contains mostly artifacts, machines, and more interactive items from the permanent collection. The exhibition that attracted the most attention is what looks like a female blow-up doll, but is instead a full-sized, anatomically correct figure in black, fish-net stockings. Next to her in a fiberglass case with fist-sized holes in the appropriate places, is a life-size, touch-me female torso. A young woman copped a lengthy and apparently satisfactory feel, judging by her smile as she withdrew her hand from between the torso's legs. Another man filmed himself groping the doll.

These figures can be purchased online from Abyss Creations. Made with "nearly odorless" silicone, "the skin is soft, slippery, and very elastic." Abyss offers fifteen full-size females—of various ethnic varieties and breast sizes—and only one male; guess who's purchasing these items? For \$750 you can get a female torso—from the ribcage to the top of the thighs; or for \$1,300 a male torso with a little more—from the neck down to the upper thigh, complete with an Empire State building replica of its own between its legs. One can only speculate as to how these creations are employed in private, but they are said to be easy to clean.

Displays also contain condom boxes, sex education guides, and more useful artifacts—like The Premier Vibrator from the 1900s that looks like a blow dryer. A full range of magazines,



pamphlets, and books gives a sense of the varieties of print media devoted to erotic imagery. For example, an 1855 guide called “Ladies of Fashion,” offers addresses and reviews of upscale brothels in New York City. But I suspect there is much more ink on paper geared toward this subject throughout history than can fit in any single museum.

Exiting down a long flight of stairs after an emotional ride, the MOS’s gift shop is eagerly awaited. Not only can you purchase postcards, “tasty” condoms, raunchy wrapping paper, candy bras and pouches, and other memorabilia, you can add to your collection of sex toys, erotic books, and even buy yourself one of Mike’s robots.

In a nutshell, the museum offers what you would expect it to—stimulating sex toys, imagery, and other items of immediate gratification—but lacks the subtleties that would have made it more realistic if not more enjoyable. Look at what is not displayed: music lyrics, advertisements, clothing that has gone in and out of fashion—from women’s robes that fully exposed the breasts in Minoan-era Crete, to today’s anti-erotic, low-slung basketball shorts.

In reality fear and anxiety cloud the horizon of most people when it comes to sex, and those psychological and emotional effects are left outside the museum walls. As Renaissance writer Montaigne asked, “what has the sexual act ever done to mankind, what has this natural, necessary, and legitimate act done that men do not dare talk of it if not with shame and exclude it from all serious or pondered discourse?” Most teenage boys of my era learned about the female anatomy from *National Geographic* and scoping out *Playboys* in drug stores—and projected that “knowledge” onto the girl next door.

Sex through pain, feign, and disdain gets you a quick fix but little else. Maybe the Museum of Sex should really be called the Museum of Sex Games, with a motto culled from the Peaches’ refrain, “fuck the pain away.” If only it was that easy.

And I don’t think James Brown had this “male”-box in mind with his line, “moving and grooving, you know, like a sex machine.” Without a machine, a mask, or image of any kind, the frisky couple I photographed on the streets of Manhattan managed to get it on.

