

## REVIEWS

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**‘The Institute of Sexology: Undress Your Mind’, Wellcome Collection, London, 20 November 2014–20 September 2015. Catalogue: Shereen El-Feki, Alyce Mahon, Christopher Turner, Wellcome Collection, London, 2014, 224 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780957028562, £24.99.**

Placed at the entrance to the ‘Institute of Sexology’, is a small photographic hybrid from John Stezaker’s project *Fall* (figure 1). The image splices two photographs showing the back view of a nude from a nineteenth-century anatomy book and unifies them into a misaligned figure. This image encompasses the themes and debates that curator Kate Forde intends to raise in the ten-month-long exhibition at the Wellcome Collection that explores the study of sex. Stezaker’s act of image appropriation destabilizes the historical paradigm of anatomical science that constructs normative categories of sex and gender. By merging two images the artist’s intervention points to the inherent instability of these models and the composite nature of sexual identity. This sense of fluidity is taken up in the exhibition as a whole; the Institute of Sexology contains a diverse range of photographic and archival material, objects, documentary film footage, audio-recordings and artworks that display the continually evolving history of sexology over the past 150 years.

The exhibition focuses on a number of pioneering individuals in the field – such as Magnus Hirschfeld (1868–1935), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), Marie Stopes (1880–1958), Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) and more recently William Masters (1915–2001) and Virginia Johnson (1925–2013) – yet the space of the Institute itself is divided thematically, by the different types of environments in which sexology has historically taken place: Library, Consulting Room, Tent, Classroom, Box, Laboratory, Home and Archive. In this way, the exhibition curbs the danger of either glorifying or demonising a select number of individual sexologists. However, the particular aims and interests of the individuals working within each type of environment are still represented, in the data they produced and collections they amassed. For example, the Consulting Room juxtaposes the work of Freud and Stopes on the basis of their attempts to resolve the problems of individual patients, despite the fact that Stopes’s pioneering work on women’s right to contraception in early twentieth-century Britain entirely rejected Freud’s practice of psychoanalysis in the treatment of sex-based problems and anxieties.

The emphasis on diversity within the practice of sexology is a crucial strength of the exhibition. The Library displays objects, images and data in the spirit of Magnus Hirschfeld’s Institut für Sexualwissenschaft,



**Figure 1** John Stezaker, *Fall XV*, 2009. © Courtesy of The Approach London UK, London.



**Figure 2** Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Man Seated, Wearing Corset and Holding Whip*. Photograph from the collection of Richard von Krafft-Ebing. © Courtesy of Wellcome Library, London.

founded during the Weimar years in Germany. The focus of this room is on the presentation of the material evidence of social science and the importance of data collation in the founding of practical sexology and its institutions. Hirschfeld's institution, therefore, is bound to mythical constructs such as scientific truth and objectivity. Within this framework, however, the objects on display are surprising in their variety and lack of historical coherence. From pastel-coloured postcards showing late nineteenth-century cross-dressing habits from the collection of Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1840–1902), to Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of the 1906 edition of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* and Henry Wellcome's numerous examples of phallic worship in objects from different time periods and cultures, the role played by objects in our understanding of sexuality as a broad culturally contingent category unsettles the apparently assured, scientifically-justified

exactitude of the practices and conclusions of these early institutions (figure 2).

The exhibition draws on the collections of many different individuals and the importance of specific collections in the founding of the discipline is well documented. The broader issues related to the activity of collecting within the context of knowledge production however, is not explicitly addressed at any point. This is surprising, as the idea of collecting as a historically shifting notion with changeable motives and meanings, appears to be a recurrent theme. Freud's antiquities, Bronislaw Malinowski's ethnographic fieldwork in Papua New Guinea and Alfred Kinsey's drawer of meticulously pinned Gall wasps are all collections that are underpinned by dramatically different imperatives. Further exploration of how these collecting patterns relate to the study of sexology more broadly seems important to any genealogy of the discipline. Many of Kinsey's items



**Figure 3** Sharon Hayes, *Ricerche-Three*, Film still from Sharon Hayes, 2013. © Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

on display have been borrowed from the American Museum of Natural History, which indicates the important role of collections in the exhibition. Though the incorporation of separate collections in the context of 'sexology' may shed new light on the objects displayed, in most instances their use in the exhibition merely reiterates extant knowledge rather than generating new meaning. For example, the objects are largely placed within an area of the exhibit that relates directly to their most common characteristics – e.g. the Tent room for ethnographic collections.

Specimens of Kinsey's research in the U.S. in the first decades of the twentieth-century are joined in the Classroom by various other media. Part-documentary and part-filmic group portrait, Sharon Hayes's 38-minute film *Ricerche: Three* (2013) showcases the attitudes of a group of female students towards issues of gender and their bodies (figure 3). Projected in large-scale format, the dialogue of the students being questioned by Hayes pervades the exhibition. Whether this was intentional or not, the voices of young women alternating between impassioned debate over the contemporary politics of gender equality, race and sexual orientation punctuates the viewer's experience of the historical materials displayed in the other areas. This aural dynamic has immediate feminist implications, as the voices of women mediate visitors' experience of objects that have played an historic role in policing categories of gender. The palpable presence of antagonism and debate also serves as a reminder that politics plays as much of a role in sexual practices and research conducted around them as personal preference or individual research.

In the last room, the Archive, visitors are invited to contribute to the work of

the sexologists by registering their own experiences and continuing the debate about sexual practices, orientations and the effects these conversations have upon contemporary political and social issues. The rich programme of events and interventions in the space suggests that the exhibition does have the potential to provoke debate and participation.

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**'Disobedient Objects', Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 26 July 2014 – 1 February 2015. Catalogue: Eds. Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon, V&A Publishing, London, 2014, 144 pages, paperback, ISBN 9781851777976, £19.99.**

'Disobedient Objects' at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) collects together various activist ephemera from 1970–present, defined by curators Catherine Flood and Gavin Grindon as the material remainders of social movements. Objects range from tear-gas masks made using empty water bottles during recent Occupy movements, to playful, even absurdist inflatable cobblestones used in the Berlin-Kreuzberg May Day protest in 2012. The exhibition considers how everyday objects have been appropriated and adapted for protest, most typically in urban spaces during political demonstrations. In addition, the curators asked what the relocation of disobedient objects to the institutional gallery space would mean in a context that frequently reflects nostalgically on the past or affirms the status quo rather than contests it.