Exhibit AIDS

At sex museums, condom skyscrapers can be masterpieces, but HIV information is still a work in progress.

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A virus spread through bedroom behavior surely deserves a place in the annals of sex history. In spring 2006, London will open the newest of a dozen worldwide sex museums—a cultural trend lending a sheen of academic gravitas to “please touch” art and paraphernalia. Though the London site plans to push sex education and social responsibility, POZ detected no mention of HIV in media coverage so far. So how have other halls captured the bug?

U.S. sex museums push the viral envelope but have hardly put HIV under the microscope. In its first year (2001), New York City’s Museum of Sex ran “NYC Sex: How New York Transformed Sex in America,” which celebrated gay communities and their pro-condom ’80s posters. Assistant curator Sarah Jacobs says HIV is “definitely part of the museum’s ongoing mission.” At Hollywood, California’s Erotic Museum, curator Eric Singley says AIDS is too depressing for museumgoers. “We have concentrated on the positive potential of human sexuality. People come to our museum to be entertained.” Within Miami’s spanking-new World Erotic Art Museum, there’s no trace of HIV. “It’s definitely something we’ll address as we build our collection and think about future exhibits,” says art director Julian Murphy, whose own HIV art contributions include a condom-capped World Trade Center.

Even in Europe, where risqué theorizing blossomed in the mid-’90s, HIV is only slightly more visible. Barcelona’s Museu de l’Eròtica focuses on ancient erotic art. But temporary exhibitions have included AIDS-themed works and a condom vending machine. Amsterdam’s Sex Museum barely ventures beyond early contraception, while Paris’ Museé Eroticisme manager Joseph Kalifa says he skips the pandemic. “If we start talking about HIV and prevention, it becomes medical, and that becomes boring.” But Jim Hubbard, who documented old-school ACT UP activists and made his videos available at the New York Public Library, thinks this line of thinking is wrongheaded: “There’s a wealth of material out there—zines, comics, paintings, videos—and it’s not the least bit depressing.” Plus, who’s ever heard of a boring museum?

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