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# Whatever Happened to Sex in Scandinavia?



Thomas Bayrle  
Various works from  
the 1970s, installed in  
'Whatever Happened to  
Sex in Scandinavia?',  
Oslo, 2009

## Office for Contemporary Art, Oslo, Norway

In 1960 the then US president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, described Scandinavia as a hotbed of 'sin, suicide, socialism and smorgasbord'. Inspired less by prudishness than by rivalry-fuelled anxieties over the region's prosperous leftist model of participatory democracy, the characterization stuck (and probably boosted tourism). It is precisely the intertwining of sex, politics and the Nordic countries' relationship to the wider world that's at the heart of 'Whatever Happened to Sex in Scandinavia?', an ambitiously widescreen, century-spanning endeavour that resists the simple designation 'exhibition', despite the 200 art works and artefacts displayed in OCA's handsome new galleries: from Edvard Munch's saturnine lithograph of a literal *femme fatale*, *Vampyr II* (1895), to Harun Farocki's fantasy-foiling, deconstructive film of a *Playboy* centrefold shoot, *Ein Bild* (An Image, 1983). But, spilling over into ancillary screenings, lectures, a mooted book and an exhibition guide that's a heavily researched historical essay in itself, this is essentially a labour-of-love research project with a visual component.

So, what you may have missed: 19th-century Scandinavia pioneered sex reform, hitching it to individual rights and endorsing sex education and contraception for the working classes (at OCA, magazine illustrations from c. 1930 by Käthe Kollwitz feature children dragging their emaciated mother down). There's a copy of Wilhelm Reich's *The Sexual Revolution* here, because Reich spent much of the 1930s' in Scandinavia while fleeing the Nazis, and there are books by his intellectual heir Herbert Marcuse, whose vouchsafing of play and free love as an escape from repressive societies shaped the hippie movement. And it's here that

the show really catches fire, because its curator, Marta Kuzma, is interested in repositioning the art of the 1960s and '70s – both in and out of Scandinavia – through novel optics. The show isn't arranged chronologically, and almost everywhere you look there's visual argument for the trickle-down of sexual liberation into art and the counterculture: Lee Lozano's Marcuse-influenced 1960s' paintings transforming instruments of labour into sexual organs – phallic screw threads etc; Thomas Bayrle's hot-coloured screen prints, from 1970, in which neat little repeated iterations of miniature breasts and penises are mechanically built into fellatio scenarios and spread-legged women; Dan Graham's *Detumescence* (1966), an outsourced text describing what happens to the male physiology after orgasm. This, in other words, is not the traditional model of cerebral Conceptualism. It's hot and sticky – and that, so the argument goes, is indirectly due to Scandinavia, which produced films such as Vilgot Sjöman's *I Am Curious (Yellow)* (1967), which was the subject of a landmark legal case that transformed American censorship laws.

Sex in the '60s and '70s was a smokescreen for radical thought: look at these copies of the *Evergreen Review*: breasts on the outside, 'new story by Beckett' (those were the days) on the inside. Sex was politics, as in Marie-Louise Ekman's doll feminist painting *Striptease* (1973), in which, panel by panel, a woman regresses to an ape, then to an evolved man. Sex was a battleground, as the show's screening of *Obscene* (2007), a documentary about Grove Press'