

Histories of Sexuality (Histórias da sexualidade) was hosted in Sao Paulo, Brazil in 2017 by the Museu de Art de Sao Paulo (MASP). It was curated by Adriano Pedrosa, Camila Bechelany, Lilia Schwarcz, and Pablo León de la Barra¹. Pedrosa, since becoming director of MASP, has curated and hosted several exhibitions as part of a *Histórias* series, including *Childhood* (2016), *Sexuality* (2017), *Afro-Atlantic* (2018), and *Women* (2019), *Dance* (2020), and *Indigeneity* (2021)². Like the other shows in the series, *Histories of Sexuality* was a large exhibition, with more than 300 works by 126 artists¹. Instead of being organized chronologically, like many large-scale exhibits are, the exhibit was organized around nine themes: *naked bodies, totemisms, religiosities, gender performativities, sexual games, sexual markets, languages, voyeurisms, and activisms and politics of the body*¹. This exhibit was held during a time of great public unrest in Brazil, which can be, in turn, a great breeding ground for creating important and meaningful conversations in and around the world. All in all, it was largely successful in exploring ideas and themes that were otherwise subjected to political scrutiny and conjecture, especially in the Global South.

Histories of Sexuality presents sex, sexuality, eroticism, and nakedness as completely natural parts of humanity, challenging taboos surrounding these themes and forcing the viewer to embrace different interpretations of these subjects from across the Global South. In conjunction with lesser-known artists—most of whom hail from under-represented areas of the Global South including Africa, Asia, and the Americas—there are also works displayed by more well-known and traditionally Euro-centric artists like Edgar Degas, Pablo Picasso, and Paul Gauguin³. Additionally, these works were placed around art from different time periods and art movements, placing them in new contexts, eliminating hierarchies, and blurring boundaries between them. For example, Edgar Degas's sculpture titled "Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer" (1878-81) was displayed in the middle of a gallery with other works by similar artists as well as an array of artists from the Global South. On its own, this sculpture is one of Degas's most beloved, praised for its realistic depiction of a young ballerina in the Paris Opera Ballet, and confident stance of the girl despite her implied poverty⁴. In the context of this exhibit, it touches more on the fact that young girls in the Paris Opera Ballet were more susceptible to being sold into prostitution and treated poorly due to their social status⁴.

Furthermore, this exhibit came at a time in Brazil where there was a dire need of more conversation about a variety of issues dealing with sexuality and the human body. The country was, at the time, faced with violent protests amongst citizens and the government, much of which

¹ MASP, "HISTORIES OF SEXUALITY 10.20.2017-2.14.2018," MASP, <https://masp.org.br/en/exhibitions/histories-of-sexuality>.

² Maximiliano Durón, "Histories' Mysteries: In São Paulo, Curator Adriano Pedrosa Has Started a Revolution-within a Museum's Walls," ARTnews.com (ARTnews.com, February 5, 2020), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/adriano-pedrosa-curator-masp-historias-1202676815/>.

³ Alessandra Simões, "Histories of Sexuality," Artnexus, 2018, <https://www.artnexus.com/en/magazines/article-magazine-artnexus/6074f93dc883936413edd189/109/histories-of-sexuality>.

⁴ National Gallery of Art, "Little Dancer Aged Fourteen," National Gallery of Art, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.110292.html>.

was spread via mass media. It was a time in which the lines between freedom of speech and censorship by the government were being blurred in Brazil. This exhibit was not planned amongst these conditions specifically but came at an opportune time. Before the exhibit was unveiled, MASP held several workshops and lectures on the topic, preparing the public for the context of the exhibit.

The exhibit itself brought in 18,000 visitors to the museum in just ten days, solidifying it as a blockbuster exhibit⁵. Due to its strong controversial content, there was an imposed age restriction so no one under the age of 18, even if accompanied by an adult, would be allowed into the exhibit⁶. At the same time this exhibit was being held, another exhibit named *Queermuseu* in Rio de Janeiro was held with similar themes, but with a more radical execution. The exhibit was so controversial that it was eventually shut down after several calls from the public. One being after a controversy of a child interacting with a live performer, where she was encouraged to touch the naked body of a performing artist⁷. There were also many works of art that carried themes that some people deemed as way too taboo. “Cena de Interior II” by Adriana Varejão, was one of them, which was criticized and subsequently censored in *Queermuseu* for its depiction of zoophilia⁴. It remained on display at MASP for the duration of the exhibit.

One can note the similarities between the other exhibitions in Pedrosa’s *Histories* series, for example *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, which was opened more recently. Through *Afro-Atlantic* and *Sexuality* were quite different in size, (*Afro-Atlantic* included about 450 works by 214 artists), Pedrosa still tells the stories of a marginalized communities who have been subject to violent and controversial actions, while highlighting both local artists and other artists from different parts of the Global South⁸. In both exhibits, well known artwork and artists were displayed in conjunction with the lesser known, opening up the public’s view and creating a larger platform for conversation and recognition. A stark difference between the two would be the inclusion of women: in *Afro-Atlantic Histories*, there were only five women artists displayed, each with only work on display on the MASP exhibit, but in Tomie Ohtake there were a considerable amount more⁵. While creating large exhibits like this, it is difficult for curators to include everyone within the population they are seeking to represent, and there are almost always

⁵ From the Newsroom, “Exhibition on Sexuality Almost Doubles MASP’s Audience,” VEJA (VEJA, October 31, 2017), <https://veja.abril.com.br/cultura/exposicao-sobre-sexualidade-quase-dobra-publico-do-masp/>.

⁶ Isabella Menon, “Masp Opens 'Stories of Sexuality' with Works That Go beyond the Artistic Nude,” Folha de S.Paulo, October 19, 2017, <https://www1-folha-uol-com-br.translate.google.com/illustrada/2017/10/1928192-masp-abre-historias-da-sexualidade-com-obras-que-vao-alem-do-nu-artistico.shtml>

⁷ Isabella Menon, “Prosecutor Investigates Video in Which Child Interacts with Nude Artist,” Folha de S.Paulo, September 29, 2017, <https://www1-folha-uol-com-br.translate.google.com/illustrada/2017/09/1923128-promotoria-investiga-video-em-que-crianca-interage-com-artista-nu.shtml>

⁸ Alexandre Araujo Bispo, “Afro-Atlantic Histories: Pluralizing Narratives,” Contemporary And, October 24, 2018, <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/pluralizing-narratives/>.

visible holes that cannot be patched. It very well may not have been the curator's intent to include so few women artists, but when creating a bigger picture, it seems like there were compromises to be made. Similarly, the exhibit *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-85* created in 2018 did not include many Black women artists, but again at no purposeful intent of the curators; there has to be a balance between what the curator's objectives and views are and which artists and artworks are displayed, though this balance may not always have favorable factors.

Histories of Sexuality was, all in all, an impactful exhibition that forced the Brazilian public to confront the idea that sex is an integral part of life, despite the social taboos surrounding the topic. The exhibit presented the many ways in which artists process and perceive their experiences with sexuality. This was especially important for the population represented here, specifically those hailing from the Global South, as the taboo of sexuality is often punishable in violent manners, prevent people from being able to properly express themselves. MASP continues to breach social taboos in their upcoming shows in the *Histories* series, including *Brazil* (2022), *Nature* (2023), *Sexual Diversity* (2024), and *Delirious Histories* (2025)⁹. Though they will most likely continue to face the same if not more backlash as they have for their exhibits, they are doing great work in challenging the old and bringing about new societal norms.

⁹ Durón

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