

Striptease:

Undressing Domesticity

Public nudity as a political and social category, as a moral or legal transgression, but also as a spectacle, is a recent invention. Only modernity has stylized the feminine nude until it became a coded as well as a marketable practice. Although a premodern tradition of the theatrical, sacred, or comic nude already existed, the striptease—as a commercial exploitation of nudity in a public spectacle, as a spectacle that unravels the body, that undresses it in a progressive and choreographic manner in the sight of a public who pays—appears with the bourgeois modesty ethics and the new spaces of consumerism and entertainment in the modern city: circuses, popular theatres, freak shows, music halls, concerts in small cafés, cabarets, water shows, and so on. It is within this tumultuous context of the colonial and mercantile metropolis in London, Paris, Berlin, and New York, among improvised boxing rings, trapeze acts, and human zoo exhibits¹ where the French can-can and the “*déshabillage*,” the exotic dance, the American burlesque, the extravaganza, lap-dancing, and table dancing emerge. The first performances that codified nudity are the result of the shift of the prostitutes’ seduction techniques from the brothels to other urban spaces of entertainment. In other cases, such as in the famous “Coucher d’Yvette” or “Coucher de la Soubrette,” the performances of nudity dramatize a frame of the domestic interior in the public space: the spectator is supposed to be given access to watch how Yvette undresses herself before lying on her bed.² What all of these performances have

in common is the usage of garments and its opacity or transparency within a theatrical frame where the body is unraveled and shown. This theatrical body, which includes wigs, knits, feathers, and even sculptured armor, works as a masturbatory architecture that hides it and at the same time reveals, covers, and exposes it.

During the eighteenth century, the gradual unearthing of images of sexual practices and sculptures of oversized phalluses in Pompeii generated an epistemological rupture within the modern understanding of the relationship between sexuality and space. In 1819, the "obscene" objects and frescoes were concealed within the Gabinetto Segreto—the first museum dedicated to exhibit "what should not be seen." Located at the intersection between archeology and fiction, Pompeii was the first modern "pornotopia." The modern notion of "pornography" emerged in European vernacular languages between 1755 and 1857 directly out of this Pompeian debate.³ The dialectics of exposure and concealment at work in the Secret Museum would be paradigmatic of the management of gender and sexuality within the modern city.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the same dialectics between modesty and seduction affecting the body and unbarring it led the bourgeoisie to "dress the furniture," inventing pants, for instance, to cover piano legs. Legal historian Marcela Iacub has showed, following Foucault, that the legal definitions of "obscenity" and "pornography" that appear during this time and that affect the representations of the body and of sexuality have to do not so much with image, with that which is shown, but rather, with the regulation of its usage in public spaces and the fiction of private domesticity and the intimate body, bastions of the bourgeois culture.

Reintroducing the logic of the Secret Museum within the space of the city, the different antiobscenity and antipornography regulations do not seek to repress or to make the representation of sexuality disappear, but rather "to distribute it in space," "to segment it in two opposing regimens of visibility, a private and a public one, defined according to the spaces they occupy. It was

possible to enjoy the sexual liberties prohibited by the penal code in the private space, while in the public space it was imperative to hide them."⁴ What depicts sexual acts and the sexual representations as lawful or unlawful is not their content, but the space where their exhibition takes place. Modern sexuality does not exist without a political topology, without a regulatory wall that divides the spaces in public (which means the ones that are watched by the state's moral eye) and private (only watched by the individual conscience, by the eye of God—or rather, by the eye of the artificial satellite).

Bombs, Bikinis, and Biopolitical Topographies

The years that followed the Second World War during which *Playboy* emerged were crucial to the reconstruction of a visual political topology where the representation of domesticity and the female body played as key signifiers. In July 1946, while the American government exploded a 23-kiloton nuclear bomb over the small Pacific islands of the Bikini Atoll as part of Operation Crossroad, two different French designers, Louis Réard and Jacques Heim, publicly introduced two-piece bathing suits for women called, respectively, the "Bikini" and the "Atom."⁵ Situated at the very junction of the individual body and the political body of the nation-state, the "bikini" (or the "atom") condenses the conflicting practices of political management that regulated the visibility of female bodies within the public space during the Cold War, moving from a strictly geopolitical ground to domestic architecture into fashion and popular culture.

The name "bikini," chosen by Réard, does not come from the Latin *bi*, meaning "two," and *kini*, meaning "square inches of clothing," as sometimes is suggested, but is rather a direct reference to the atoll associated with the destructive atomic energy of the bomb understood as "sexual" and "female" and with the iconic image of pin-ups pasted to the weapons, among which Rita Hayworth was undoubtedly the most popular. According to a media gossip items launched by the Los

Angeles *Herald-Express*, a picture of Rita Hayworth was taped to one of the first atomic bomb (the so-called Gilda Bomb) that was dropped on Bikini in 1946, becoming a popular emblem of the cultural relationship between sexuality, female nudity, and the atomic fear.⁶ As Réard suggested when he presented the first bikini, the smallest piece of clothing ever designed could create the same dramatic impact on the public that an atomic bomb could.⁷

The association between visibility of the female body in the public sphere and atomic energy, which Réard's bikini and later the *Playboy* pin-up came to materialize as cultural objects, was already at work within postwar political discourse. In her essay "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women and the Bomb," Elaine Tyler May discusses the ways in which the Cold War policy of containment equated the atomic threat to American society with the perceived threat of female sexuality to the stability of the American family.⁸ According to May, female sexuality and atomic energy can be understood as disruptive forces; while the State Department tried to contain the Soviet menace, the government's domestic policies tried to contain women within the domestic sphere. For May, the American Social Hygiene Association saw the atomic bomb not only as a military threat against America, but also as the possible cause of family disintegration and sexual promiscuity. Charles Walter Clark of the Social Hygiene Association wrote in 1951: "Following an atom bomb explosion families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down." In order to prevent this moral disintegration, Clark called for a "strict policing... vigorous repression of prostitution, and measures to discourage promiscuity, drunkenness, and disorder."⁹

The slippage from the atomic bomb to sexual promiscuity as national dangers depends on a biopolitical figure already at work in the disciplinary regime of the nineteenth century that equated the domestic sphere and the female body and understood both as the generative spaces of the racial and sexual purity of the

nation-state whose borders and reproduction techniques should therefore be scrutinized and regulated. Within this biopolitical discourse, the nuclear outburst was read as a course of moral division and disintegration: The physical process in which a nucleus or other subatomic particles emit a smaller particle and divides into smaller units, destroying the existing unity of a given body, played as a signifier of moral disruption and disintegration of traditional national, domestic, and bodily frontiers. The American Social Hygiene Association and the Civil Defense Administration saw the increasing presence of women within the public sphere during and right after the war both as a civil danger and a sign of sexual disorder, relating paid work and economic independence to promiscuity and prostitution. According to this logic, women outside the domestic space *were* atomic bombs. This biopolitical metaphor made women's visibility within the public sphere a danger only equivalent to atomic radiation and led to a intensification of the defense of domesticity and the privacy of women's bodies. According to Elaine Tyler May, the connection between fear of the atomic age and worries about disruptive sexuality was so pervasive that as late as 1972 a civil-defense pamphlet published by the government continued to personified radioactive rays (alpha, beta, and gamma) as sexy female "bombshells":

The pamphlets made explicit the message that sexually liberated women were potentially destructive creatures who might, like atomic energy, be tamed and domesticated for social benefit.... Beside this explanation was a drawing of the three "harmful and helpful" rays, personified as sexy and flirtatious women in seductive poses. The large-breasted battling beauties wore ribbons across their torsos as if they were beauty queens, with the names "Alpha," "Beta," and "Gamma" emblazoned across each figure's chest.¹⁰

Although they were promulgated long after the most anxious moments of the anxious 1940s and '50s, the association of images used in this government pamphlet constructed a narrative where the sexual and economic emancipation of women were



Figure 4.1 Copa Room showgirl Lee Merkin poses in a cotton mushroom-cloud swimsuit as she is crowned "Miss Atomic Bomb 1957." the Miss Atomic Bomb girls (Don English/Las Vegas News Bureau/Las Vegas Sun).



Figure 4.2 Unknown, *Danse Atomique* (Marilyn Maxwell), 1950. Gelatin silver print. From the MGM film *Key to the City* (John O'Brian Atomic Archive).

still represented as a dangerous force able to destruct traditional domesticity and the nation-state.

As Beatriz Colomina has noted, within American public policy, the protection of the home as bulwark against the dangers of the atomic age translated into the boom of the underground fallout shelters, specially promoted by Jane Wood Fuller, president of the California Federation of Republican Women and Republican representative of the FCDA. Studying Jay Swayze's projects for the Underground Home Corporation during the postwar years, Colomina has underlined how the shelter constructed a totally interiorized domesticity, which excluded the window view and the outside weather.¹¹ Following the biopolitical and visual implications of Colomina's statement, we could further argue that the fallout shelter was the ultimate and an almost literal attempt to control, reprivatize, render invisible, and bury not only domesticity but also women's sexuality. There were women's bodies and their reproductive power that had to be concealed and protected from the radiations of public visibility and sexual deviation, the fallout shelter being an extreme gesture of removal of domesticity and the female sexuality from public visibility.

Playing within this biopolitical narrative, the invention of the bikini in 1946 meant the visual inscription upon the physical body of the conflicting fears and desires represented by female sexuality outside the domestic sphere. If the atomic bomb was a threat to the integrity of the biological body of the individual and the political body of the nation-state, the bikini was the representation within the public space of the paradoxical status of female sexuality: a disruptive energy that must be governmentally controlled and kept within the borders of domesticity, but also a seductive energy and the object of heterosexual male visual desire. Before becoming a popular fashion garment, the bikini was a textile architecture, a technique for strategically revealing certain parts of the female body while concealing others, a visual design that gave a new status of public visibility to the female body outside the domestic sphere but also outside the realms of pornography and prostitution.

It would be impossible to explain how Louis Réard, a car engineer who worked at the Régie Nationale des Usines Renault SA in Billacourt, where he developed and refined such 1930s models as the Primaquarte and Nervasport, ended up designing the first bikini without reference to Parisian nightclubs and cabarets. In fact, Réard worked during the 1940s with his mother running the shoe shop for the famous Paris female cabaret show Les Folies Bergères. Réard's bathing suit was probably inspired by the dancing suits of the cabaret: it made of just thirty inches of fabric,¹² consisting of a bra top and two inverted triangles of cloth connected simply by a string, leaving both the navel and the hips uncovered.

Réard's insight was to understand that the cultural and political meaning of a piece of clothing could be totally modified by changing the topography of its exhibition. Whereas in Les Folies Bergères the two-piece garment was considered part of the exercise of unveiling the body, "stripping," and therefore of female nudity; outside of the cabaret, taken to the public stage of a swimming pool, the two-piece became a strategic technique for covering (instead of revealing) the sexualized areas of the female body. This tricky transition from the erotic and pornographic domains to popular culture was stressed by the fact that the first woman to wear Réard's bikini in public was Micheline Bernardini, a nude dancer who worked at the Casino de Paris and who officially introduced it four days after the Bikini atomic bomb tests, on July 5, 1946, at one of the most popular Parisian pools, the Piscine Molitor in Auteuil.

Almost the same year, another French designer, Jacques Heim, created his own two-piece bathing suit, describing it as "the world's smallest bathing suit." If Réard took his inspiration from the Folies Bergères dancers' costumes, Heim said that "*l'atome*" was the French version of the Tahitian garments that he saw at the Paris colonial exhibition of 1931, but also the transformation of sportswear into everyday apparel.

Although very similar to each other, the main difference between the bikini and the atom was that Heim's model bottom

in a comical tone, a city dominated by violence and police surveillance, where women are vamps and men are mobsters, and it doesn't really matter if they are bankers or roulette players.

That was the Chicago that embraced the publishing of *Playboy* magazine and where the first pornography of the *Playboy* Mansion was established. With the end of Prohibition in 1933 and with police attention on communism and espionage during the postwar years, the mob could control the city of Chicago more easily. In the 1940s it expanded unto Rush Street, in the heart of the old northern red-light district where the cabaret used to be, into the Cicero suburbs where Al Capone was born and the strip of southern Calumet City, the most important web of casinos, gaming houses, and brothels in all of North America.

Superimposed on the legal map of the city of Chicago, a nocturnal cartography emerged, where the game and sex industry mapped its own streets and access routes. As John J. Binder reminds us, "Local gambling included the famous 'Floating Crap Game,' so named because its location was changed regularly to avoid detection. Gamblers did not find it, instead they were ferried from downtown hotels by drivers to some nondescript location in the surrounding area."¹⁴ The transformation of Chicago's traditional brothels into striptease clubs happened during this period. The striptease club was a new space for socializing where millionaires, politicians, and strippers came together. "The Mob's vice activities," explains Binder, "had moved from outright prostitution, because society no longer tolerated visible brothels, to running striptease clubs, with girls serving the customers in a less visible fashion."

Chicago's club strip would afterward become an exportable model for the construction of red-light districts in other insular paradises, as happened a few years later in Cuba and after that, in other "legal and economic islands" built within the country, such as Las Vegas: "Chicago's mob invested first in hotel casinos in Havana, Cuba and after the mid 50s went into Las Vegas and helped built the Strip. Beginning with the Stardust, by 1961

piece was large enough to cover the female bellybutton. As the battles between the two models show, the two piece bathing suit was not simply the exteriorization and exhibition of female underwear to public gaze, but rather the invention of a new political and visual order where the borders between publicity and privacy where reorganized.

Sweet Home, Public Home

Playboy would challenge the regulation of private and public spaces, controlled through surveillance and secrecy, but also through photography and media dissemination. *Playboy's* transgression of the visual politics of the Cold War did not depend on the bodies it showed, but rather on the intent of modifying the political frontier that separates the public and private spaces. Using pornographic techniques invented by the cabaret theater, *Playboy* did a striptease of the spaces that until then had remained hidden, through each turn of the page of the magazine: The articles and stories unveiled the interior of apartments, bachelor pads and, finally, the mansion. *Playboy* was undressing the private space in front of the eyes of North America, and by doing so, it was shaking its conventions and its codes of representation.

In fact, Hefner began this process of public exhibition (or publication) of the private even before the launch of *Playboy* magazine in 1953. Young Hefner, who had worked as a journalist for *Esquire* magazine and as a selling agent for the small wholesalers of nude magazines during the 1940s, self-financed the printing of a comic book, *That Toodlin' Town: A Rowdy Burlesque of Chicago Manners and Morals* in 1951.¹⁵ Conceived as an alternative guide to Chicago, the different vignettes of the book created a fictional map of the city: Union Station and the chaotic metropolitan traffic; the bodily experience of the crowds on North Avenue Beach; the urban landscape of skyscrapers as erotic spectacle; the nightclubs of West Madison Street and North Clark Street, where naked girls swim in see-through pools for clients; sex workers, vagabonds, and fortune tellers on Maxwell Street. Hefner presents,

Chicago had major interests in the Riviera, the Fremont and the Desert Inn."¹⁵

According to Rem Koolhaas, "buildings have both an interior and an exterior. In Western architecture there has been the humanistic assumption that it is desirable to establish a moral relationship between the two, whereby the exterior makes certain revelations about the interior that the interior corroborates. The 'honest' facade speaks about the activities it conceals."¹⁶ Hefner's cartoon book stripped the Chicago skyscrapers' facades to show the underlying class and crime conflicts—made by blood and sex, according to Hefner—and therefore put the moral relationship between architecture's interiority and exteriority into question. *Playboy* would continue the task of theatrically revealing what was hidden behind modern facades.

Domestic Writing, or Interior Decoration as Self-Fiction

Striptease as a journalistic technique becomes even more explicit when, two years after the publication of his first comic, Hefner sold an article entitled "How a Cartoonist Lives" to the *Chicago Daily News*. Published on March 21, 1953, the story portrays, through interviews and photographs, the private life of an anonymous couple and the interior of a Chicago apartment.¹⁷ However, it wasn't just any story: the newlyweds were the Hefners (Hugh and Millie along with their baby, Christine), and the apartment was their own home on 6052 South Harper on the South Side. Using self-fictional writing and representation, Hefner turned theatrical, media, and surveillance devices to his own interior, rendering his domestic space visible.

Displacing the striptease technique of publication of the private toward his own life, Hefner began, even before the publication of *Playboy*, a domestic self-exhibiting process that prefigures the later spectacularization of the bachelor pad and the Playboy Mansion, and that anticipates the consumption of intimacy that would later characterize the end of the twentieth century, with the arrival of the reality show and JenniCam. The article

consisted of a story about "urban modern life" and five photographs of the apartment where Hefner himself, his wife and his daughter posed for the camera. The Hefners' house, decorated by Hugh himself, is represented as an example of "modern living" full of "simple and functional" designs, among them an orange Womb Chair designed by Hans Knoll and Herman Miller, fiber-glass chairs, and a television in the living room. According to the *Chicago Daily News*, this impression of modernity was accompanied by examples of visual advancement in art and science, with a reproduction of a Picasso painting and a pair of x-rays, showing Hugh and Millie's abdomens, hanging on the walls. A few months later, Hefner would end up pawning these same pieces of furniture for \$600 to be able to pay for *Playboy*'s first issue.¹⁸

"Modern living," the article explained, "is a favorite subject in Hugh Hefner cartoons. He pokes fun at their stark simplicity and functionalism. But the apartment he and wife Millie call home is simple, modern, and functional. They were thrilled when they found an old apartment in a building at 6052 S. Harper. It needed a lot of work before it suited them, but one look at it now compensates them for their labor. The landlord removed the old paper and had major replastering done. Then the Hefners went to work—spackling, cleaning, painting, varnishing, and papering. The end result is an apartment chock full of originality and personal touches." The master bedroom "is simply furnished with yet low walls, contrasting dark green bamboo shades." In the dining room, the "walnut dining set is by Herman Miller, record cabinet was built at home by Hefner," while elsewhere "cartoons are used in Christine's room. . . . One wall is papered in strips from "Pogo" which appeared in the Daily News!"

However, what fixes our attention on these images, beyond the few pieces of furniture, is the way in which the Hefners have turned the private life of the American heterosexual white family into theater. In this modern scenario, Hugh and Millie occupy positions that are as scrutinized as their furniture. However, the traditional gendered codes of representation in the suburban

house during the postwar era have been subtly inverted: in the living room, while Millie appears in the couch reading the newspaper (an activity typically coded as masculine), Hefner seats on the floor, positioning himself, in the photograph, at an inferior level to his wife, and with the baby on his knees. More than a feminization of the masculine position, we could say that Hefner avoids the classical 1950s masculine emplacement to locate himself in the site of infancy, a space before verticality, rejecting the superior level of adulthood as well as the gender norms, which govern within it.

Prefiguring the photographic reportage and the television show that would later be set in the Playboy Mansion, Hefner exposes and makes the interior of his own apartment visible by a theatrical construction of a domestic self-fiction. What we are shown is a striptease of American heterosexual domestic life. Nevertheless, this is not an unveiling of a hidden truth, but rather, a theatrical production and a narrative construction process in which each detail has been technically orchestrated. In fact, the article produced a fiction that had little to do with reality: by that time, the Hefners had already decided to divorce, and Hefner had begun sexual experimentation at the swingers parties, although, they decided to "play the part" of the perfect couple, as Millie would later explain.¹⁹

This spectacle of interiority is the first instance of what would later become *Playboy's* representation strategy par excellence: the production of a theatricalized and public self-fiction of domesticity. The most striking aspect of this story is the display of what we could call "architectonic self-fiction," a visual narrative where autobiography is produced through the representation of interior design. There are no psychological details in the article, which would allow one to delve in the characters' intimacy. The main hypothesis working behind this first photo article — which would later gain strength within *Playboy* — is that modern subjectivity cannot be accessed through a psychological narrative, but rather must be constructed through architectonic representation. The

question, "How does a cartoonist live?" is answered by exhibiting his domestic interior space. If we take into account that domesticity has been historically defined after the appearance of the bourgeois interior space in the nineteenth century as opposed to public space and publicity, we could then say that the operation initiated, tactically, with this article in the *Chicago Daily News* and would later unfold in its whole vastness in *Playboy*, is a domestication process of the bourgeois interior, its very production as media exhibit — a condition that will come to characterize a new *undomestic domesticity*. This is not just a process of showing a domesticity that already exists, but rather a production of a fiction of domesticity through media representation. Or rather, the dedomestication of nineteenth-century disciplinary domesticity. In *Playboy*, this mutating domesticity will take the form of a pornotopia, a theatrical and multimedia interior produced and reproduced through media, surveillance, and pornographic techniques.

A process of reconstruction of traditional limits between privacy and publicity, similar to the one Hefner set through the self-display exercises of the domestic was taking place in some of the best-known architectural projects of the 1950s. While Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson eliminated the internal divisions and used the crystal walls to uncover domesticity (another way of undressing architecture), Hefner insists in representing domesticity as/in media (first with photography and writing and later on through television, cinema, video and even video games).²⁰ What is being revealed is architecture's theatrical and political character, the cultural conditions separating the visible from the invisible which had funded the private and the public regime since the nineteenth century and up to the Cold War. This unveiling of domesticity taking place in Mies van der Rohe and Johnson as well as in *Playboy* will result on the production of a "postdomestic" interior that no longer is characterized by its privacy and in which the inhabitants are conscious of their double theatrical condition: serving at the same time as actors and spectators.

