What’s Up With All the Oligarch Sex Parties?

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Should you find yourself invited to a Bezos sex party, it might be helpful to know that you are not obliged to have sex. You can listen to music or watch performances, observe your fellow guests, and, with permission, touch them. But no one will consider it rude should you leave without having sex. If you’re invited to an orgy, however, that’s a whole different ball of wax, and people will most certainly be offended if you don’t participate. Especially if you are the sixth person in the room, in which case your presence is technically crucial. An orgy requires six to 20 people. Fewer than six, and the encounter is simply categorized by the number of participants: threesomes, foursomes, and so on. More than 20, and we’re back in the terrain of the sex party.

This isn’t information that I, personally, ever felt I needed to know. Among other things, I have an aversion to crowds, especially in the bedroom. The performative aspects of sex parties that participants seem to enjoy most are, to me, a turnoff, another way that social media—and the image-driven FOMO culture it spawned—has made life into content.

But I decided to do my journalistic due diligence on sex parties because I kept reading about them in the news. For instance, New York’s former COVID czar acknowledged participating in what the *New York Post* called “drug-fueled sex parties”—during the first year of the pandemic, no less. (It’s probably not worth a letter to the editor, but given that he said his parties were limited to 10 people, we now know that technically the proper terminology for such a gathering is not *sex party* but *orgy*. Each participant, he says, took a COVID test before having sex. *Turnoff* doesn’t even begin to describe nasal-swab foreplay.)

In the course of my research, I did not—I would like to be clear here—participate in any sex parties. I think it’s wise not to get that close to your sources. I learned that “play parties” can take place in people’s homes, but many happen under the auspices of private clubs. I reached out to a number of prominent ones, wondering if the sex-club boom was real, and what actually goes on at them. One of my major findings: People, especially rich people, come up with extremely elaborate justifications for getting laid.

To be clear, these clubs are not brothels—guests have sex with one another, not with the club's employees. Some say that they are putting on performances of "high erotic art"; others want to promote "equitable pleasure." They all try to sell erotic experimentation less as a means of gratification than as a moral virtue. They are creating, they insist, not so much a venue for sex as a gathering space of "like-minded individuals." People who are "liberated" from social mores. People who think differently. People for whom the normal rules don't apply.

Snctm, a members-only sex club in Beverly Hills inspired by the movie *Eyes Wide Shut*, opened about a decade ago, and growth "was slow and steady" at first, Robert Artés, the club's managing director, told me. "But the last three to four years, there's been tremendous growth in this space."

Snctm members pay $12,500 or more a year for access to masquerade parties that can cost upwards of $2,000 a ticket. KNKY Rabbit, a sex club in L.A., offers annual memberships that range from $10,000 for the "Fluffy Tail" level to $250,000 for the "Burrow Elite Membership." NSFW, an exclusive sex club in New York, also has a tiered membership. The most basic, a reasonable $300, gets you access to a members' chat group and invitations to parties. The "Tribute" and "Status" tiers can range from $750 to $2,500. Members, referred to as "lovers," can purchase VIP-party upgrades for $1,000 a piece, or hire NSFW to create custom play experiences for themselves and their friends, starting at $5,000. Memberships are for life.

NSFW stands for New Society for Wellness, its owners say. The club claims more than 10,000 members around the world, and considers itself as much a movement as a club, dedicated, according to its mission statement, to helping members "Live Adventurously": "We believe sex is a gift that should be explored, honored and mastered through experience and education. Knowledge gained from expanding your sexual wisdom is one path to real happiness." Among the people seeking real happiness through such ends are CEOs, politicians, and celebrities, Daniel Saynt, the club's founder and "chief conspirator," told me. "We're looking for the most creative, most interesting people. We're trying to collect individuals who see sex as something that needs to be prioritized." A 14-point questionnaire evaluates people on categories such as hygiene, goals for their "sexual journey," wealth, career accolades, and travel history. An applicant must hit nine or more points of "attraction."

This is not a key party with your schlubby neighbors. Members are not just rich and influential; they're beautiful. Particularly the women, who at many parties are eligible for reduced-price or free admission. At clubs like KNKY Rabbit, applicants submit photos in addition to describing their sexual desires. Artés confirmed that Snctm screens "based

on appearance": "While we are inclusive of race, religion, gender identity, and everything like that, we do want a party of beautiful people."

Snctm's big selling point is anonymity. Artés said that its members are "affluent and prominent leaders in their field or in business, entertainment, or arts." Some of the guests "keep their masks on all night long." (Does a little mask over the eyes actually make a celebrity unrecognizable? Perhaps the illusion of anonymity is part of the fantasy.)

Putting on a show is essential. Guests arrive, mingle, and then take in performances—elaborate burlesque, *shibari* demos, flogging. NSFW exhibits highly produced erotic performances that make you feel "like you're in a gallery," Saynt told me. Snctm's black-tie masquerades incorporate "erotic theater." KNKY Rabbit combines "artistic innovation and exclusive experiences."

Club owners say it's just like interactive theater—except instead of giving a standing ovation at the end of the show, you can lie down and have sex with your fellow patrons of the arts. "What we do, you can't do onstage at Lincoln Center," Artés said.

It's easy to draw a line from the libertines attracted to high-end sex clubs to the "move fast and break things" ethos of Silicon Valley technocrats. And the kink industry is thriving in the valley. In a Medium post, the product designer Chris Messina, famous in some circles for "inventing" the hashtag, described nonmonogamy as nothing more or less than a design solution: "Out here, we're data-positive and solution-oriented and if your product (i.e. marriage) is failing for 50% of your customers, then you need to fix it or offer something better."

In *Brotopia*, Emily Chang's 2018 book on Silicon Valley, she writes about tech bros who speak frankly and "proudly" of their frequent industry orgies—"about how they're overturning traditions and paradigms in their private lives, just as they do in the technology world they rule."

A 2007 survey of individuals worth $30 million or more found that 70 percent felt like their wealth gave them a "better sex" life, and that the majority felt their sex life was more "adventurous and exotic" than other people's. Threesomes are the most common sexual fantasy among Americans. For most people, they remain just that, but among the rich and famous, *abundance* is the word.

One of the things that draws people like these to sex parties is the fact that the standard rules don't apply, that they're places where the answer to every desire seems to be *yes*. These are people who are "chasing the rainbow," as Jan Gerber, who runs Paracelsus Recovery, one of the most expensive rehab centers in the world, put it to me. Gerber has a front-row seat to the sex lives of the ultrarich because his clinic, which is based in

Zurich, provides rehabilitation and psychiatric services to billionaires and the globally famous. It's possible, he suggested, to become desensitized even to pleasure. You can do "something very exciting the first time," he told me—whether it's skydiving, shopping, or sex—but the brain's "tolerance" builds. Soon "plain vanilla sex" just isn't so "exciting anymore." He said he sees a "higher incidence of narcissism" among "people of wealth, especially self-made ones." They feel they deserve to be indulged.

Clay Cockrell, a therapist who specializes in working with the very wealthy, says he sees a lot of patients who feel like, "*I'm bored. I'm numb.*" Eventually, "you've flown on the private planes, eaten at the best restaurants … What else is there? Some of this then gets transferred into high-risk behavior, kink sexual behavior, because they're bored and they want more."

To each his own, I guess. But I can't help but see these people's dismissal of the simple joys of life—their insistence that monogamy is dull and middle-class—as a tragically snobby form of cynicism. In the course of my reporting, I often found the marketing of the clubs comic and absurd, but I came to see the people joining them as deeply sad.

Club managers stressed to me that even the rich and entitled have to follow the rules—that rules are in fact central to their business.

Touching other attendees requires affirmative consent. Touching paid performers is strictly forbidden. Some clubs, such as Snctm, don't allow drugs and have strict rules for alcohol. "Whenever you have sex involved, you have consent issues," Artés told me, "so we can't have anybody on drugs or intoxicated." This is not just about protecting guests; it's also about staying in business. Performers have to sign contracts, and the club has a 38-page policy manual laying out the rules: "They cannot touch any of the guests. They cannot touch other performers because, otherwise, you could be in violation of prostitution laws." The businesses already struggle against the biases of the financial industry, club runners told me. "We've had difficulty with banking, with credit-card processing," Artés told me. "There are tax companies that have turned us down."

Everyone I spoke with mentioned the importance of consent. Saynt told me he wanted to "create a space that feels safer than a bar … where you can walk around naked and you don't feel like anyone's going to harm you." In this context, consent is not meant to be restrictive, but liberating. You can feel free because you're told that nothing will happen to you that you don't want to happen.

But no one stressed consent as much as Luis Cortes, at Sucia NYC. He and his wife, Morgana, started throwing their own parties after finding themselves uncomfortable in much of New York's play-party scene, which he described as "very white," not just in terms of demographics, but in terms of relationships to privilege and standards of

beauty. They founded Sucia NYC in 2020 after the sex parties they were hosting in their own apartment got too big for the space. (“It was a lot,” he told me. “Like, we live here, right? I use the couch during the week.”) They now run the club out of a 2,200-square-foot space in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and charge a relatively affordable rate—$100 to $150 per event, with a sliding scale for teachers, artists, and activists. Their Instagram account emphasizes “community” and “decolonizing your pleasure.”

Sucia, Cortes told me, aims to center “the joy and pleasure of Black and Indigenous women and Black and Indigenous LGBTQI-plus populations.” It eschews traditional beauty standards and welcomes bodies of all shapes and sizes. It doesn’t charge men more than women, a practice Cortes objects to: “If you have women coming in for free and men are paying X amount of dollars,” he said, those men are “coming expecting something.” He sees consent as especially paramount because Sucia caters to a population that has historically “had less connection with bodily autonomy”—people who haven’t always been taught that they can say no.

Cortes said he’s seen people have breakthroughs and breakdowns at parties as they process shame, religious guilt, or past sexual trauma. The club offers aftercare workshops, and brings in experts for talks about sexuality and religion and combatting heteronormativity.

Cortes was also one of the only people I spoke with who never used the word *fantasy*. When I brought it up myself, he seemed offended. “That is lazy,” he told me. “That is dangerous. That is some fucking, like, knight-in-white-armor bullshit. It’s like, no—this isn’t fantasy; this is real things.” Then he said it even more emphatically: “We don’t, we don’t, we don’t, we don’t sell fantasies.”

But *all* club runners sell something. Everyone, including Cortes, is in the “sexpitality” industry. At a Sucia party, after a talk about consent, you can listen to Afrobeat and take in a performance. Cortes shared with me a list of some of his favorite acts: “Eli the naked trumpeter. They do flogging. They do impact play”; “You know Sir Marvelous. His thing is he does forced orgasms”; “Clavel Marchito, she is a sex-workers’-rights advocate out of Chile … and she’ll come in and do fire play and some flogging and stuff”; “Selena Surreal … She walks on glass. She does a knee dive into Lego bricks.”

Yes, these acts are real. Personally, I can’t imagine enjoying watching someone walk on glass, and playing with fire sounds less erotic than a Tony Robbins retreat. But these acts seem to offer another version of what Gerber and Cockrell were talking about—a way to break through all the boredom and numbness. Rich people might go to a sex club because they’re deadened by excess and privilege. Working-class people might go because they’re tired of being ground into dust. Either way, they all want to feel

something again. Whether the club is promoted as a "path to real happiness," art appreciation, or social justice, these are all businesses finding an ideological or class-appropriate way to market the pursuit of pleasure.

For some patrons, the party may not be an excuse for the sex at all; the sex may be the excuse for the party. Saynt told me that he's noticed that younger patrons, especially Gen Z, are mostly interested in the "performance of eroticism." "They're not having sex at these parties as much," he said. "They're just coming for the costumes."

All of this is in contrast to many of the sex-party stories I'd been reading in the news, about events such as Sean Combs's "freak-offs," at which he allegedly coerced drugged women into having sex with male prostitutes. That's not a sex party: That's a crime. (Combs "denies as false and defamatory" claims that he drugged and sexually abused people.) Recently, *The New York Times* reported on a document prepared by federal investigators showing "a web of payments" among former Representative Matt Gaetz and associates "who are said to have taken part with him in drug-fueled sex parties." Court filings also accuse Gaetz—who was briefly Donald Trump's pick for attorney general—of having sex at one of the parties with a 17-year-old girl. Also a crime. (Gaetz denied any wrongdoing and called the allegation that he'd slept with a teenager "a false smear"; the DOJ investigation was closed without any charges.)

And yet it's not hard to imagine someone enjoying a sex party at Snctm or KNKY Rabbit, chafing against their limits, and then going off to do their own, independent thing. Saynt described to me a benign-sounding version of this: Members might meet for the first time at a play party, hit it off, and start "going on trips and going on yachts and boats and having little sex parties everywhere." But presumably no one's monitoring those sex parties in the middle of the sea to make sure the sex is safe and respectful. We're talking, as Cockrell put it, about rich people who are in "control of every aspect of their life. Nobody's going to tell them no. And if somebody does, they're just going to go build a castle where *no* doesn't exist."

People do bad things in castles like that.

Sex clubs promise people that they can push the limits of sexual freedom without going too far. They sell rule-breaking sex in a rule-bound environment. They say they're breaking barriers—not repackaging the world's oldest profession. As in any business, their promoters are hunting for an audience and building a brand.

Speaking of branding. I learned something at the end of my reporting that seemed to highlight the thin line between the sexual freedom promised by these parties and the darker impulses that the rules of our society exist to contain. When Robert Artés shared with me Snctm's policy manual, full of rules to ensure the safety of its employees and

guests, I saw another name listed on the front: Robert Testagrossa. After going down a few rabbit holes, I learned that Artés was a pseudonym, and for good reason. In 2007, Testagrossa pleaded guilty to assault and served five years in prison for what he acknowledged to me “were serious events, for which I accepted serious consequences.” He expressed regret for choices that were “driven by misguided passion and a lapse in judgment.”

His girlfriend at the time had lured a man who had ghosted her after sex to a hotel room. There, Testagrossa and another man Tasered the victim and held him down, while the woman heated up a piece of metal that had been twisted into a four-inch letter *R*. She then seared it into her former lover’s skin.

You can’t do that at Lincoln Center, either.