

Puppetry of the Penis: A Deconstruction of the Phallus as Weapon

Claire L. Kovacs

Puppetry of the Penis: the Ancient Art of Genital Origami (Figure 1) was conceived in 1996 by Simon Morley, of Melbourne, Australia, as the title of an art calendar that showcased twelve of Morley's penis "installations." Years before, Morley's youngest brother had demonstrated a contortion ("the hamburger") and as a result of natural sibling rivalry, this evolved into a repertoire of similar tricks. Word soon spread regarding Morley's unique talent, and he decided that live performance would be the best outlet for his form of art. The natural choice for his stage partner was fellow Melbourne resident, David "Friendly" Friend, who had also created quite a following with genital acrobatics of his own devising. In Friend's coy explanation, he began his career in the bath and developed his skills further when he discovered beer in college. The two men joined forces to script a blend of body-based comedy exuberantly revealed in *Puppetry of the Penis*.

Morley and Friend, dressed only in sneakers and outrageous capes, made their debut in 1998 at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. The debut was a huge hit which then kicked off an eight-month tour of Australia, the trials of which are recorded in their documentary *Tackle Happy*. In 2000, they performed at the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival where they delighted and shocked audiences in another sell-out run. After their initial rush of popularity, they had a five-month run in London's West End, toured Canada, the United States, Spain, and Iceland, spawned five supporting companies and to date have grossed over fifty million dollars.

Psychologists might well ask why such a risqué subject is so popular. How have these "dick tricks" performed in bathtubs, locker rooms and fits of drunken debauchery turned into an international sensation? Simon Morley begins the nightly routine with the quip, "Ladies, this is probably your first opportunity where you can have a good fifty-minute stare at a penis—in a non-erect fashion, of course, have a good belly laugh at it and not hurt anybody's feelings."¹ And the ladies are laughing—the men as well. *Puppetry* Producer David Foster realized the potential in the outrageous performance when the woman sitting next to him was literally overcome with laughter.

This paper developed out of a course taught by Dr. John Ciofalo at Case Western Reserve University. I would also like to wholeheartedly thank Dr. Edward Olszewski for support, encouragement, and guidance on this and other scholarly endeavors.

¹ Simon Morley and David Friend, *Puppetry of the Penis: the Ancient Art of Genital Origami, Live at the Forum* (Video: WIN Media, 2003).

Poking fun at the phallus is exactly what this show is all about: the phallus is something that is normally reserved for very few uses—urination, masturbation, and procreation. Visual images of a phallic nature often allude to power, dominance and violence. The *Puppetry* show challenges preconceived notions of the penis and its function as an object of sexuality and symbol of power. In his review in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, theatre critic Joe Adcock states,

the strictures of genteel decorum are violated. And so are the dogmas of smut. According to puritan dirty-mindedness, the naked body in general and exposed genitals in particular have to be one thing and one thing only—and that thing is sexual. Neither decorum nor dirty mindedness apply to *The Puppetry of the Penis*.²

The intermingling of body-function and humor did not find its beginnings in the performances of Morley and Friend; modern performers have been combining these two concepts for some time. One sees examples of this in the comedic sketches of the Burlesque theaters of the nineteenth century and in the acts of such performers as Joseph Pujol, "Le Pétomane" and his shows at the Moulin Rouge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Blessed or cursed, depending on point of view, Pujol possessed an innate ability to intake of large amounts of air or liquid into his anus. At first horrified, he soon began to exploit the performance potential in a routine that consisted of a series of impressions of occupational farts (e.g. those of a bricklayer or nun) followed by impressions of everyday sounds (calico being torn, the sound of a cannon, thunder). He would then briefly leave stage and return with rubber hosing emerging from his body like a tail. With the aid of this tube he would smoke a cigarette and play a flute. To conclude the performance, he would remove the tube and blow out the footlights. His entire act was performed in full clothing, but he also gave special performances, to men only, in which he wore a pair of boxers with a hole cut in the seat.³

² Joe Adcock, "Puppetry of the Penis Draws the Gals," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 9 August 2003.

³ For more information on Le Petomane see Jean Nohain and François Caradec, *Le Petomane 1857-1945* (Sherbourne Press, 1968) and Ricky Jay *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (New York: Villard Books, 1986). In a related example, Honeysuckle Divine made her career by means of her

A contemporary example of the amalgamation of sexuality and humor can be seen in Annie Sprinkle's 1991 performance *Bosom Ballet* (Figure 2). In this performance, Sprinkle "stretches, pinches, squeezes, twists, rocks, rolls, and jiggles" her breasts to music, usually the "Blue Danube Waltz," under a pink spotlight, while dressed in opera-length black gloves and a tutu.⁴ Sprinkle, like Morey and Friend, infuses her act with humor which creates distance between the traditional inherent sexuality of women's breasts and her own breasts as props that she manipulates during her performance.

In ancient Greece, the practice of infibulation, or tying up the foreskin of the penis, is mentioned in late lexiconographic sources in definitions of *kynodesmai* ("dog leashes"). A reference in Phrynichos (85; A 13) indicates that *kynodesmai* are "the things with which the Athenians tied up their private parts when they stripped, because they called the penis a dog." The practice of infibulation involved stretching the foreskin over the head of the penis and tying it using string or in some cases rolling the penis and securing it; such practices were invoked during athletic activities. The use of *kynodesmai* seems then to have been a personal choice and may have had a sexual or performance-related component.

Athenian Old Comedy costume props included the phallus as one signifier of a character's status as a buffoon; it was an element of vulgar humor. Certain comic characters would wear a prosthetic phallus (Figure 3),⁵ which created a situation in which the body part became a focal point for humor, the philosophy which Morley and Friend adopted for *Puppetry of the Penis*. While the contexts have changed, the process by which *Puppetry* exploits the penis for the sake of humor remains constant.

Modern audiences are drawn to the practitioners of such body art, as exemplified in the work of Morley and Friend. Perhaps the attraction lies in challenging the social norms. The anus, penis and vagina have very specific functions relegated to the strictly private sphere. When inhibitions are brought out of the closet and into the social realm through the agency of humor, audiences seem to respond positively.

In his essay in *Sex and Humor: Selections from the Kinsey Institute*, John Bancroft discusses a neurological study that

genitalia. Starring in a number of pornographic films as well as live shows, Miss Divine performed the feats of blowing out candles, shooting lotion, playing the trumpet, and shooting ping-pong balls from her vagina.

⁴ Sprinkle has also performed many variations on the *Bosom Ballet*, including a *Bosom Tap Dance*, in which she glued taps all over her breasts and fingertips, the *Bosom Ballet Folklorico*, performed to Peruvian music, the *Bosom Polka*, and the *Bosom Samba*, performed with a live samba band in a football stadium during half-time. See Annie Sprinkle, *Post-Porn Modernist: My 25 Years as a Multi-Media Whore* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1998) 102-103.

⁵ A passage from Aristophanes' *Clouds* (537ff) speaks of the refusal to lower the tone of the comedy by introducing actors wearing the phallus. T.B.L. Webster argues that Aristophanes is claiming that his actors appear with their phalli tied up. The hanging phallus, as illustrated in Figure 5, was the symbol of a sexually dissipated life. Both positions are illustrated on an

through imaging has linked humorous stimuli and sexual arousal to the same areas of the brain. Both humor and sexual arousal were used as positive controls for a "rewarding experience" in the study, and in both cases, some of the same areas of the brain were activated.⁶ While it is obvious that both humor and sex create positive responses in a person's mood, what is of interest is the connection between sex and humor.

Bancroft tries to formulate the connections from the scientific perspective as a medical doctor and the director of the Kinsey Institute; he utilizes the observations of Gershon Legman, who, in *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: an Analysis of Sexual Humor*, set out to define the symbiotic relationship between sex and humor. Legman outlined two basic tenets of sexual humor as the "disparagement theory" and the "anxiety-reduction theory." The disparagement theory enumerated genres of sexual humor, particularly those in which the punch line of a joke revolves around the sexual performance or competence of a certain group of individuals (races, sexual orientations, genders, etc.). Legman's "anxiety-reduction" theory proceeds from the premise that "many, if not most of us are scared by or uncomfortable about sex and use humor as a way of reducing those anxious feelings."⁷

Bancroft, in his observations of sex and humor, refers to the "absurdity of human genitalia" and the phallus in particular when he writes: "set against all our sophisticated criteria of male beauty and beautiful male power, the male genitalia are in ridiculous contrast."⁸ Bancroft thus addresses the dichotomy of meaning with regard to the mythic attributes of the phallus as opposed to reaction to its actual appearance. While the phallus has always been the consummate symbol for male power and sexual potency—from religious iconography (the lingam of Shiva) to fetish or talisman—its depiction is often the brunt of many jokes.

Turning to the question of how *Puppetry of the Penis* deconstructs the phallus as symbolic of sexual weaponry, one may note that the addition of humor totally alters the viewer's perception of the sex object. The performance of Morley and Friend addresses women in the audience by encouraging a good "belly laugh" at the expense of the male body and the penis in particular. The male component of the audience is

oenochoe in Saint Petersburg, Russia (PV Ph 6). See C.W. Dearden, *The Stage of Aristophanes* (London: The Athlone Press, 1976) 111-113. T.B.L. Webster, "The Costume of the Actors in Aristophanic Comedy," *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 5 (1955): 94-95 and W. Beare, "The Costume of the Actors in Aristophanic Comedy," *The Classical Quarterly, New Series* 4 (1954): 64-75.

⁶ For more information on the study see J. Redouté, S. Stoleru, M.-C. Grégorie, et al. "Brain Processing of Visual Sexual Stimuli in Human Males," *Human Brain Mapping* 11/3 (Nov. 2000): 162-77.

⁷ Summarized from John Bancroft, "Sex and Humor: a Personal View," *Sex and Humor: Selections from the Kinsey Institute* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002) 9.

⁸ Bancroft 10.

targeted for a laugh at themselves and their own anatomical explorations. Both Legman's theory of anxiety-reduction and Bancroft's ideas on the absurdity of the phallus can be usefully deployed in understanding the phenomenon of *Puppetry's* success. Legman's theories on the anxiety-provoking potential of sexual manifestations stem from the understanding of the phallus as a power object within society and as the epitome of masculinity. In ancient Rome, young boys were given *bullae*, or a locket which contained a small phallus; called a *fascinum*, the amulet was a symbol of the impending step into manhood and stood for the virility that would soon mark these boys as men. Also in Rome, a man with a Priapic,⁹ or large, penis was thought to possess extraordinary strength, and there are some accounts of soldiers' promotions being based upon their perceived attributes. The possession of a large phallus was a sign of supposed virility and strength; Roman soldiers might carry phallic amulets or possess armor or weapons with phallic designs. The phallic nature of weapons—from swords, to guns, to nuclear missiles—is an intrinsic iconography aligned with concepts of masculinity. War historian Robin Morgan has argued that men receive “an orgasmic thrill in violent domination...maleness itself becomes the weapon of destruction.”¹⁰

Thus, the associations between masculinity, virility, and strength have been linked to the phallus in many cultures. Even in our closest relatives, the primates, there are similar codes of masculinity revealed through dominance hierarchies; for example, male stump-tailed macaques use symbolic forms of sodomy to establish dominance.¹¹ In our species this link between masculinity and the phallus has its basis in the hormone testosterone. The visual metaphor for testosterone is once again the phallus, and it is this hormone that is often linked, at least on some level, with traits that can be considered male: violence, dominance and aggression. David Friedman, in *A Mind of its Own: a Cultural History of the Penis*, states, “We cannot say testosterone creates violence in men. What we can say, though, and without any fear of contradiction, is that testosterone creates the organ that many men refer to as their manhood...”¹²

In modern military societies, aggression is considered an extremely valuable commodity, and recruits are taught that they need to display aggressive behavior consistently. Lack of

aggression is correlated with femininity, inadequacy, and ultimately, death.¹³ Traits of masculinity are inevitably linked with military prowess and the masculine ideal: if it is identified as a representation of any single subset of the masculine population, the phallus summarizes military aggressiveness. Military historian, Joshua Goldstein observes, “Men's participation in combat depends on feminizing the enemy and enacting rape, at times both literally and symbolically, thereby using gender to symbolize domination.”¹⁴ The effeminization of the adversary is a commonality of war—throughout the ages and throughout the continents. In examples of ancient warfare, an entire population might be effeminized by the execution of the male inhabitants, the raping of the women and the subsequent enslavement of the women and children and such was the fate of the Melians in Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. As recently as 1995, the carnage that was visited upon the people of Srebrenica in Bosnia when Serb forces conquered the town stands as a barbarous reminder of earlier practices.

Another act of war against the virility and masculinity of a conquered enemy is the castration of victims: symbolically, the degradation of the victims combines with the victor's desire to assume the virility of their enemies and the same may be true of the taking of trophies which may either transfer the power of the victim to the victor or be part of a conqueror's rituals to appease gods of war. Ancient Egyptian friezes depict large piles of penises as part of the pharaoh's plunder,¹⁵ chiefdoms in the Inca empire displayed the dismembered penises on the roads as a warning to enemies,¹⁶ and the Amalekites cut off the circumcised penises of the Israelites and threw them into the air to Yahweh, crying, “This is what you like, so take what you have chosen!”¹⁷ During the Viet Nam conflict, President Johnson boasted, “I didn't just screw Ho Chi Minh. I cut off his pecker!”¹⁸ and the news media have recently published disturbing photographs from the Abu Gharaib scandal. The Kinsey Report underscores the lesson: “During warfare in probably every part of the world, such mutilation has been considered the supreme subjugation which the conqueror could bestow upon the conquered.”¹⁹

Examples cited above describe the phallus as a weapon at the extremes of violence, but such concepts can also be applied to the gendered roles of sex and sexual violence. In tra-

⁹ Priapus, a Roman god of animal and vegetable fertility, while small in stature, possessed an extremely large penis. It was traditionally depicted, in proportion to his height, as half the size of his body.

¹⁰ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender: How Gender Shapes the War System and Vice Versa* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 350.

¹¹ Goldstein 359.

¹² David M. Friedman, *A Mind of its Own: a Cultural History of the Penis* (New York: Free Press, 2001) 248.

¹³ John Hockey, “No More Heroes: Masculinity in the Military” in Paul R. Higate, ed. *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003) 17.

¹⁴ Goldstein 356.

¹⁵ Alfred C. Kinsey, et al, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1998) 739.

¹⁶ Goldstein 358.

¹⁷ Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1995) 18.

¹⁸ Goldstein 358.

¹⁹ Kinsey 739.

ditional sexual relationships the male takes the dominant role and the phallus may be regarded symbolically, if benignly. In other contexts, the role of the phallus as a weapon also transfers to the idea of the aggressor in sexually violent acts.

Morley and Friend's genital manipulations undercut any sexual or power connotations. Theirs is a game-like approach and many critics have likened their antics to those of children. If Morley and Friend's shenanigans take on a type of ribald naiveté, then in so doing, they have desexualized the phallus and deconstructed its symbolic role as a weapon. The phallus in the context of *The Puppetry of the Penis* has lost its erotic, and therefore symbolic, undertones becoming instead a source of amusement.

Morley and Friend encourage audience members to replicate their tricks in the privacy of their own homes, the comfort of their bathtubs or in the company of good friends. At one point in the performance, they lead the audience in an

introductory course in the art of penis installation (Figures 4-5).²⁰ They take the mystery out of an aggressive symbol, the emergence of which is normally reserved for the bedroom or for propagandistic allusions to power. The *Puppetry* stage show allows both men and women to share in a liberating comic and non-intimidating experience. Bancroft's theory of the absurdity of the phallus underlies *Puppetry* as viewers and puppeteers set aside any hostile or even sexual impact of the situation. Morley and Friend remove all connotations of the aggressive symbol of the phallus from the anatomy of the male penis, deconstructing the object and separating it from its traditional symbolic meaning.

Case Western Reserve University

²⁰ Morley and Friend have also published a book entitled *Puppetry of the Penis* which teaches readers how to replicate twenty-six of the "installations."

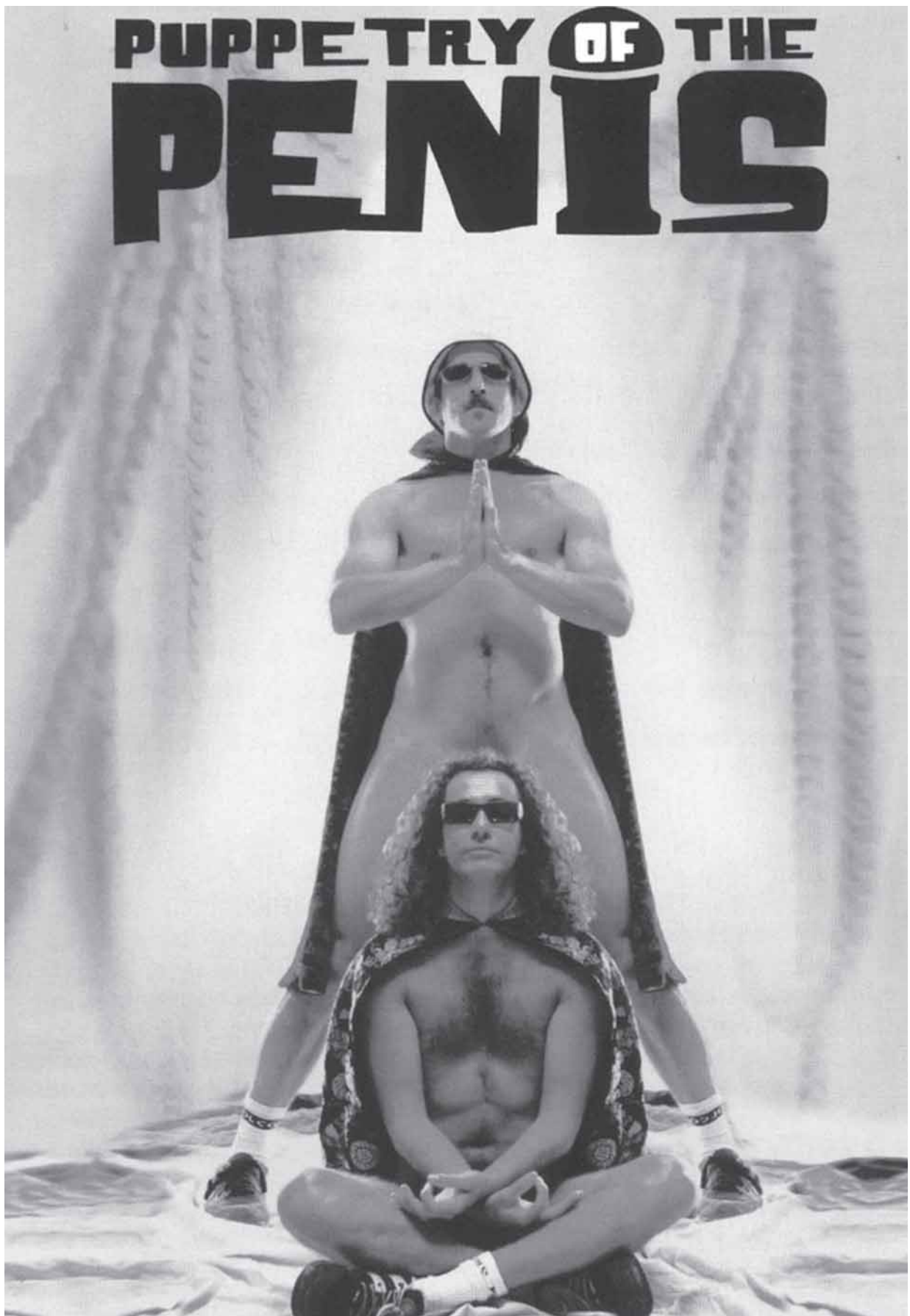


Figure 1. Simon Morley and David 'Friendly' Friend, *Puppetry of the Penis*, 2003, publicity photo. Photo courtesy of Simon Morley and David Friend.



Figure 2. Annie Sprinkle, *Bosom Ballet*, 1991. Photo courtesy of Annie Sprinkle.



Figure 3. Red-Figure Bell Krater, attributed to the McDaniel Painter, c. 380-370 BC. GR 1849.6-20.13 (Vase F 151) © The Trustees of the British Museum.

HAMBURGER



1. Place the testicles on your fingertips.



2. Roll the penis between the testicles.



3. Turn on a 90-degree angle.



4. Squeeze the testicles and hold like a hamburger.

Puppetry of the Penis Copyright © Simon Morley and David Friend 2000

Figure 4. Simon Morley and David Friend, 'Hamburger' Installation Lesson from *Puppetry of the Penis*, Instructional Book, 2000. Photo courtesy of Simon Morley and David Friend.

PUPPETRY *of the* PENIS

*The Ancient Australian Art
of Genital Origami*



SIMON MORLEY & DAVID FRIEND

Introduction by Kathy Lette

FOR ADULTS
ONLY

Figure 5. Simon Morley and David Friend, Cover Art for *Puppetry of the Penis: The Ancient Art of Genital Origami* an instructional booklet for their installations, 2001. Photo courtesy of Simon Morley and David Friend.