

HistoryCulture Sofia Eriksson

Presenters: Sofia Eriksson (Australian Sweat Bathing Association)

Title: "Sauna as Subversion"

Abstract:

Sauna bathing is generally thought of as a technology of relaxation and invigoration, and in terms of its potential in facilitating good psychological as well as physical health. Less well known, however, is the way that sauna, and more broadly speaking thermic bathing, has frequently figured in histories of political and cultural subversion. From contemporary artists employing the ritual of the sauna to challenge norms around the naked body in public spaces, to the Victorian Turkish Baths of the 19th century providing both financial capital and meeting places for the politically radical Foreign Affairs Committee, spaces of thermic bathing have played an unsung, yet surprisingly central role for many who have tried to challenge the powers that be. This paper explores this rich history from the perspective of an inclusive bathing pluralism, and suggests that – much like the coffee houses of the 17th and 18th centuries – practices and spaces of public thermic bathing have provided (and continue to provide) a fertile ground from which both collective and individual subversion can grow. The paper concludes by reflecting on various ways that collective thermic bathing could play a role in meeting some of our contemporary political and social challenges.

Keywords: sauna, thermic bathing, critical theory, political history, social history, social activism