

Whoring Art



*A Red Light
Anthology*

To punish us, they will say no one will want us. But life could not go on without us there, outside of everything. The economy would collapse, every norm and stricture would be burned up in the savagery of existence if we whores weren't there to offer our bodily love. Without prostitutes, this world would founder in the darkness of the universe.

— Camila Sosa Villada, *Bad Girls*

Whoring Art: A Red Light Anthology

Edited by HXSSY: Mercy St. J, Adanya Dunn, Anna Torres

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Whoring Art

A Red Light Anthology

Edited by HXSSY

Spookstad

A portion of the proceeds from Whoring Art will be sent to La Mocha Celis, a school for travestí, trans and non-binary people in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Another portion of the proceeds will be used for grassroots and whore-centered sex working projects in Amsterdam and Berlin. Please read the letter from La Mocha Celis' president Virginia Silveira's on page 181 to learn more about their work.*

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Preface

We are moving through a moment of the West waking up. Another wave of global, decolonial movements is rising and we are given the obligation to respond. And as we sit in the belly of the beast, in Amsterdam, the birthplace of capitalism + colonialism, we would be unsighted to not acknowledge the extreme violence of ongoing weapons deals, extractivism, global racial capital, and white supremacy as it functions all around us, and thus threads its way into the very text you're reading.

The country we are writing this from, this very city even, has only made its position clear by taking away freedom of speech from protesters, whose rebelliousness elucidates the violence ingrained into years of ongoing genocide and colonial conquest.

In the final stages of putting together this publication, we witnessed the onslaught of zionist football hooligans taking the streets of the Burgwallen in a violent and racist rage, with absolute impunity, wreaking havoc. That was Thursday. Nearly a week later, we are still under a protest ban in the city of Amsterdam. Although the majority of the hooligans are gone now, we cannot help but think how closely intertwined sex work is with the nexus of genocide, exploitation of labor in the Global South, mass censorship, police brutality and so on. In the last week, an amalgamation of this was brought to the edges of the Red Light District.

While this text focuses on sex work within the microcosm of a small neighborhood, we'd be amiss not to see how Amsterdam's canals, radiating outward from De Wallen, send signals out to the rest of the world which

Whoring Art: A Red-Light Anthology

are then returned to us. How we talk about and position sex work here matters, and what happens in the rest of the world will have an effect on sex work here, and elsewhere.

To ignore these global violences and the webs of complicity we are woven into—whether as sex workers, residents, or creatives—will not make us safe. And although the main theme of this book concerns itself with a form of labor commonly associated with joy and escapism and pleasure, we are still witnesses and actors amongst the global brutality and bloodshed.

Talking about a form of labor that commonly attracts all sorts of attention, we have to speak, to say: from Palestine, to Congo, to Sudan, to Haiti, to Turtle Island, to Armenia, to Lebanon, to Syria, to Iran and Afghanistan...

Viva, viva the global revolution!

November 2024

Mercy St. J

Introduction

This book wasn't planned.

Like most community projects, it was born from a dream. One that was dripping with luscious visions of a queer and trans, whore-led community space and atelier in the closed brothel windows in the now gentrified Sint Annenkwartier, a small corner of De Wallen, Amsterdam's Red Light District, where most traces of brothel life have given way to posh art galleries and niche clothing stores.

To make that dream a reality HXSSY—our small, three-person collective, each with our respective expertise and connection to De Wallen—applied for state subsidy to rent back the closed window spaces for the sex working and queer community. Controversial, as it was the very same grant program, the so-called City Center Approach (*Aanpak Binnenstad*), that advocated for “cleaning up” De Wallen—which, in turn, is the reason why so many windows have closed, why few-to-no more darkrooms exist on the Warmoesstraat, why people became hostile to junkies hanging on the streets, and how Amsterdam's Red Light District as we know it today has emerged, in all its depraved heterosexual, zoo-like glory.

But it seemed worth it. Why not give it a go, and in the meanwhile, at least distribute some cash back into the hands of some sex workers? Looming in the background of the hyper-gentrification and window-closings in De Wallen was the municipality's “alternative solution” for sex work in the city: the so-called Erotic Center. A quasi-panopticon—and thus termed the “Erotic Prison” by a group of sex worker activists—this plan would remove the remaining 200 or so working

Introduction

windows from their historical Red Light neighborhood, and place them in a red, glowing mega-brothel on the periphery of the city by 2032.

The closing of brothel windows, coupled with the erasure of queer spaces and loss of darkrooms in the city center, seemed at a tipping point. With no more brothel licenses being distributed in town and with the existing ones being already under threat, there was no way to open up and reclaim the windows as a workspace. So, instead, we envisioned a cultural center for sex workers, a living room for queer, sex worker artists and cultural producers, nestled in the Sint Annenkwartier. A brothel for the sex working arts... a nod to the *bordello-speelhuizen* of Amsterdam's own past.

We wanted to mobilize around arts and culture not to enable further gentrification, but as a way to re-imagine the neighborhood, share means and resources with sex workers, and to make space for sex workers to define their own subjectivities. We began compiling written pieces, visual art, autotheory, histories, poetry and research pieces about De Wallen—about its current political condition and its history. Friends we had worked with before, from across the Netherlands and internationally, also joined in. Before we knew it, we had over 20 pieces of work from sex workers, queer folks, arts and cultural workers, researchers, and Red Light District residents—all reaching towards that initial dream.

Meanwhile, we began meeting with Amsterdam city officials and Stadsgoed NV—the municipal real estate group that had been buying up most of the closed window spaces—to find the brick-and-mortar space of our

HXSSY

dreams. But our vision wasn't "commercial" enough for them, and since there were plenty enough other "social projects" in the area, they weren't going to give us a physical space in the Sint Annenkwartier.

But, we still had collected all this writing and artwork...

Initially, these pieces would become some kind of research or guidebook for cities and urban planners on how to understand and respect sex worker spaces. The work we had collected, however, was beyond this: it was deeply creative, theoretical, juicy, unique, and it needed to be shared. That's when we decided that this collection of work should have a life of its own.

We launched a self-published version of this text, the *Queer Sex Workers Artists' Manifesto*, on January 16 2025, at HXSSY's finale Queer Sex Worker Cabaret at the Casa Rosso. Since then, the book quickly sold out wherever we took it.

Feeling the book needed a larger reach beyond our own DIY-bookmaking skills, we connected with Spookstad, an offspurt of Mokum Kraakt, a collective that had previously squatted five windows, endearingly named the Hoerenhuys, on the Dollebegijnesteeg in January 2024 in an action to keep the Red Light in the city center. In what felt like a homecoming of sorts, nearly a year to the date after the squatted Hoerenhuys was evicted by the city, we began working on the current version of this book.

So, while our vision of an autonomous whorehouse, watched over and protected by matron St. Anne, did not come to fruition—or, at least not this time around!—we did create this beautiful, artful, defiant, poly-vocal,

Introduction

and collaborative book. Through the process, we came to mourn, honor, recognize, and exalt the history and influence of sex work in a tiny yet complex neighborhood—and also in the broader reaches of the art world beyond it.

The text is divided into three sections: *Red Light Theories*, which delves into the theoretical and historical affect of De Wallen; *The Personal as Poetry* or, an ode to the creative power of sex work by sex workers themselves; and *Re-imagining the Red Light District*, as a kind of spell-casting for whore-centric visions of De Wallen's future.

Our hope is that this anthology will add to the chorus of voices aiming to place sex workers in the ranks of cultural and artistic producers; serve as a loving reminder to sex workers that their artistic and cultural practice is worth a whole lot (up front); and to show the rest of the world what is owed unto sex workers for having been placed in the role of muse, research subject, and artistic object for centuries.

To the sex workers, to the whores, we owe our deepest gratitude, respect and honor. Thank you for your genius, your sexiness, and the gifts of your whore-lineages, ancestry, and communities. This text and our work in this book will always be indebted to the whore wisdom that surrounds us—past, present and future. It's a blueprint for the next whorehouse. Because while laws and municipal structures come and go, whores will always remain.

Sekswerk gaat door ;-)

Mercy St. J, Adanya Dunn and Anna Torres



Red Light Theory: A Theoretical Approach to De Wallen

What is a Red Light District, in theory? And why theorize about Red Light Districts? What creates the affect of a Red Light? It is the air of colliding realities: sex workers, neighbors, tourist attractions, temples, local pubs, kindergartens, massage studios, churches, Chinese restaurants, and erotic shops. De Wallen cannot exist without sex workers, and it certainly cannot exist without the other daily, ordinary markers of its identity. In its own conception of un/ordinary duality, the Red Light District gets imbued with a magical quality because the quotidian easily gives way to a potential site of desire, the forbidden, and, of course: sex. Red Light Districts are places of exquisite normalcy and a commoning of all things impudent and cheeky.

So, what makes Amsterdam's Red Light District? What creates the affective space in which sex is bought and sold? What

Red Light Theory

happens to a Red Light District under diligent regulation and legalization of sex work, hyper-gentrification, and in an age when biopower deeply influences the architecture and restructuring of cities? This section will theorize and historicize how a Red Light District is made and what affect is produced there, in the midst of fluctuating political, social, and moral perceptions of sex work. Most importantly, these pieces will ask of you: what could happen when sex workers are in charge of their own image, labor law, work places, and community spaces?

Mercy St. J

Prelude

Mercy St. J is a FSSW, dominatrix, writer, photographer, and community organizer, the producer behind Full Service Productions and co-founder of HXSSY.

I was walking around the Red Light, cruising the corners of the Sint Annenkwartier when I noticed a new scaffolding protruding shamelessly out of the alleyway: a blue swath of construction cloth stretched over a protective, skeletal frame. All swaddling a familiar old, brick brownstone that used to house a brothel. A thin, blue veil to shelter the old building as the windows—the last emblem of sex work on the Dollebegijnensteeg—are plastered over. The windows, which used to compose a door frame, are now cut by half and their doorstep disassembled. They will now function merely as windows, losing their double-entendre. A window that was once an entry, is once more just a window. Its meaning, a marker of history, work, of the touch of whores, washes down the cigarette-filled drainage grate at the center of the alley as the rain arrives, dampens the entire scene, and makes it even more of a depressing site.

One day last week, these new windows were still in production. Construction workers bumbled about the *steeg*, and left large gaps in the building for months as they were being installed. I can only imagine that one day, two or three years ago, these windows were still doors that welcomed an array of coos, hollers, whistles, chatter, gossip, the fast click of pleasers, and faintly-muffled orgasms. The sounds and textures of a hustle which is not only slowly fading, but being destroyed by

Prelude

an assortment of backhoes and bulldozers that wreck through the sinks, beds, tiles, mirrors, toilets, showers, and walls that were once a place where workers buzzed about—earning money for university tuition, to feed their kids, to send money home to sick parents and relatives, to keep the lights on and the rent paid.

The neo-gentrification project of the City Center Approach may call these new windows an improvement, a space to boast a new art gallery or hip clothing shop, or bourgeois nail salon. The old BonTon club sits across the street from the new window's protective veil, now some kind of storefront. "No hookers, less sex" seems to be a driving motto of the municipality these days, perhaps to their own chagrin. I wouldn't know, though, because I am not the one so minutely and fetishistically concerned with the sex others are having—whether for money or not.

Moreover, I have to roll my eyes at the irony of the "protections" of a UNESCO site, a preservation regime that selects which history is worth re/membering. In the case of Amsterdam: the whitest and the Dutchest—which happen to also be the most prude. The architectures of a glorified era, built on the backs of conquest, extraction, forced labor and displacement; a quaint village facade of feigned innocence to a violent, colonial past that afforded the stones and visual flourishes of one of the richest colonial capitals.

Obviously the history of whores, which exists amongst the ins and outs of this port city, is not worth re/membering. Or else maybe our windows—mediators between the ordinary and the extraordinary, portals between real and illusory; windows that, in all their transparency and unambiguity, held years of transaction, conversation,

boredom, mystery, insult, joy, secrets and hot gossip—would remain.

Are these windows not a marker of what makes us human, too? Alive and bustling, perhaps hot and heavy, and all-in-one, humbly, human?

I stumble onto the Dollebegijnensteeg often, dreaming up a space that will once more be a place for sex workers. It's my walks through the now desolate Sint Annenkwartier that have left me dreaming of a place for sex workers to be, beyond the ties created by the hustle of work-under-capitalism: a place that lends itself to the joy, pleasures, community, and the creativity of sex workers, a place that pays due respect for the centuries of hustle in De Wallen. Perhaps a place where we can still earn some cash. And in the midst of that, speak truth to De Wallen's history—and its present moment—that isn't just about sex work, but also about colonization, migration, power, empire, capitalism, and displacement.

I want us to find an honest coming to terms about how we find ourselves in this wreckage, as we work within its lasting architectures. How do we do this, from the position of laborers and weavers of pleasure and fantasy? As people connected to this tiny, yet fantastic neighborhood?

Some may see giving space back to sex workers as a kind of reparation, after enduring centuries of criminalization and carceral ramifications for our work, and generally being sequestered to some of the lower ranks of society. Some will see it as another sleek and opportunistic business transaction. Some will see it as pandering to governments and selling out to the systems that oppress us... as if sex workers had not dipped into the

Prelude

pocketbooks of politicians before, in one way or another.

As any venerable whore who can break definitions and binaries wide open, slink through the fissures in/between, and make good use of the wreckage, I imagine it incorporates a bit of all these projections and interpretations, and utilizes them as attempts to find new ways and routes of bringing whore-culture to an abundant new circumstance.

I want a new kind of spell-casting, a touchstone, for new visions of Amsterdam's Red Light District: one where auto/theory, art, the personal, and the political collide as orgiastic bedmates. We need to signal in a new era of De Wallen, and the representation of sex work: one that seeks to center sex workers as a part of its past, present and future. Where sex workers are not seen as an urban problem, but where whore-wisdom and militancy—the unconstrained genius of sex workers, that is—is recognized as a part of social solutions.

As I round the corner from the Dollebegijnensteeg, past the coffee shop and Oude Kerk, over the bridge and towards the Oudezijds Achterburgwal, I am met with the red glow from an intrusive installation. An illustration of a colleague, Betty, stands before me: animated, eyes glowing with the twitch of computer generation. Suddenly a digital, fake haze coats the screen, "HELP" appears as if frantically written across the fake-window's surface, and she disappears behind a quick close of the curtains. The police are looking for evidence from a cold case. Betty was murdered in 2009.

A few moments later, she re-emerges, eyes still darting, glowing at confused onlookers who haphazardly drift across the Oudezijds.

Mercy St. J

My hopes for whore-representation soar and are simultaneously met with the current reality that most people care for whores only after their stories are spun into murder mysteries. The present, sometimes, is a chilling glass of water. I wonder if it will cure my thirst or shock me. Perhaps, both.

MORE ASS

THESS
LANDS
DSS
♂
♂

Mariska Majoor

In the Red Light District

Mariska Majoor is a Dutch writer, speaker, entrepreneur, and former sex worker.

I was seventeen when I started working as a window prostitute in Amsterdam's Red Light District. The work itself wasn't new to me. I had been doing sex work for a year, so it wasn't all that exciting anymore. Standing behind the window, however, wow, that was "next level." It took a while before I felt comfortable and understood how the game worked. That first evening, I was hardly brave enough to get up from my chair or look at people on the street.

The next day, things went better, and soon I was more confident and streetwise than ever. The Red Light District felt like my neighborhood, my world.

It was the exciting 1980s and a completely different atmosphere than today. There wasn't really much talk about prostitution (we didn't know the term sex work yet) in the media. There was certainly no broad debate about window prostitution. In the Red Light District, window brothels were part of the landscape, just like junkies, homeless people, and all those others who were rejected by the rest of the world. Yet it has always been a normal residential area, complete with a church, a monastery, and a daycare center. A mirror of society, but a society where sex workers are accepted and truly belong.

I will try not to romanticize it more than necessary. Of course, everything wasn't perfect. In the 1980s, there was little to no control over the working conditions of sex workers, and the sex industry could pretty much set

In the Red Light District

its own rules. For example, I don't believe I had clean sheets on my work bed every day, and cockroaches were the real regulars. The police had other things to do, as I was able to work as a minor without any problems, and no one ever came to the door to provide information or ask if I was doing okay.

Although I was very attracted to everything that was naughty at the time, and was well aware that a lot of things were happening that couldn't bear the light of day, there was also another side to it. There was a sense of togetherness. We helped each other with problems, formed a united front when necessary, and enjoyed the life we led. Well, most of the time, anyway. I felt at home and it was only years later, thanks to contacts with sex workers from other countries, that I realized how important it is to be part of a community. Especially if you don't quite fit into so-called normal life or if you lead a complex double life. Which is the case for most sex workers.

For many people, the Red Light District is a neighborhood that is very strongly connected to their lives. With what they do, but also with who they are. People who have lived or worked in the neighborhood for a long time, but also people who like to visit the neighborhood or live on the streets. This neighborhood once had the title of "sanctuary." A sanctuary for dissenters. A part of the city where you were welcome if, for whatever reason, you didn't fit in the rest of the world.

Sex work has been an important part of this neighborhood for almost as long as Amsterdam has existed. It has become embedded in the social fabric, as it were. Sex workers are fully accepted there and therefore feel safe and part of society.

Mariska Majoor

I have been fortunate enough to travel to a number of very different countries, where I have met sex workers working in the most diverse circumstances.* Sometimes in countries where the work is completely prohibited, such as the United States, and often in countries where part of the work is criminalized, which is the case in most other countries. In such cases, paying for sex or providing the opportunity to do so is punishable by law. This does not mean that the work is done less, but it does mean that it is carried out in invisible and therefore often dangerous places. When I described to them how sex work is organized in Amsterdam, sex workers often couldn't believe their ears. A safe, legal workplace, not having to hide in the woods, and being able to call the police if there is a problem instead of having to pay corrupt officials or offer them free services. Normal for us, but a dream for many colleagues in other countries.

Prostitution policy in the Netherlands, and especially in Amsterdam, has long been an example to the rest of the world since the 1990s. The policy of tolerating the existence of brothels, which the Netherlands had from 1911 to 2000, was not ideal, but the safe and relatively well-organized workplaces for sex workers and the degree of visibility and contact with the industry that the government had as a result, were almost like a blueprint for governments in other countries

* I made these trips with my daughter Robin for the book project: *United Under a Red Umbrella*. You can read more about the Red Light District and my experiences in the second book I made with my daughter: *De Wallen, toekomst van ons verleden*. Also available in English on Amazon: *Amsterdam Red Light District: the future of our past*. The above books are also available at the Prostitution Information Center (PIC).

In the Red Light District

that were desperately searching for the best approach. In the years around the lifting of the brothel ban in 2000, the Red Light District and the world around it changed. Prostitution policy became a serious point of attention. Partly to improve conditions for sex workers, partly to gain more control over prostitution in the city. Unfortunately for many parties, it was also to discourage sex work and ban brothels where possible.

The Red Light District was renovated. Requirements were imposed on window brothels, such as minimum dimensions and hygiene regulations. A special prostitution team was formed by the police at Bureau Warmoesstraat, whose tasks included identifying pimps and actively seeking contact with sex workers. The tax authorities also became more active, and I remember well how they would station themselves at certain locations in the neighborhood to count how many customers entered a window brothel and how long they stayed on average. The sex industry struggled with this sudden attention from the government, and it took some getting used to for everyone. Suddenly, it was mandatory to put up a sign next to the sink with pictures showing how to wash your hands properly. A licensing system for brothels was introduced, there was increasing attention for forced prostitution, the internet made its appearance, changing the way sexuality was experienced (commercially or otherwise), and people from outside the EU couldn't easily work in prostitution any longer. At the same time, as European borders were dissolved, many people from Eastern Europe came to work in the Red Light District. Addicts and homeless people have now been removed from view or helped as much as possible, and

the licensing conditions for brothels are so strict that you almost have to be a saint to get one.

All this together means that the Red Light District looks very different today than it did in “my day.” Better? In some ways, yes, in others, not really. Lots of rules, government oversight, and all kinds of social workers watching over everything may discourage pimps, but it also discourages customers and sex workers themselves. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, then, that a lot of sex work is being done out of sight. All the attention on forced prostitution has not done the image of sex work any good either, confirming society’s negative view of the profession.

Don’t get me wrong, of course there should be rules and of course problems such as forced sex work must be addressed. The point is that sex work itself is seen as a problem, and if that is the starting point for policy, then it goes wrong at the outset. We now live in a time when people travel a lot and capital cities have to deal with the nuisance of mass tourism. Amsterdam’s city center is also very popular, not least because of the window brothels. To say that not everyone is happy about this is an understatement.

The current debate is mostly about relocating window prostitution to an erotic center outside the city. The hope is that this will reduce the number of tourists visiting the Red Light District. But this is, of course, an illusion. The Red Light District has always been visited by tourists. Even during my working years, it was very busy in the evenings, especially on weekends, with crowds of onlookers shuffling along the canal on Saturday nights. If you have to walk through that, it’s pretty annoying.

In the Red Light District

If you look at it from behind the window, it's especially annoying when people take pictures of you or are rude. But as a window prostitute, you quickly learn to ignore anyone who isn't a potential customer. You look past them, as it were.

If you walk down the street and you have no experience as a window prostitute, you can't imagine what it's like. People have a certain image of this work, and often that image doesn't correspond with reality.

Some people say "window prostitution is outdated" and that because of this it's a good idea to move sex work to an indoor erotic center. That makes me angry. Who else but sex workers themselves have the right to decide something like that? I'm glad that I don't work in the current climate. Not because I think the rules are so wrong, but because I have a problem with the underlying reasons behind some of the rules and projects. The term "position improvement" is often used by government authorities these days. It is the ideal term to gain political and public approval for all kinds of projects that are not necessarily good for sex workers.

I don't want to go back to the Red Light District of the 1980s. I understand that the world is always changing and that you have to move with it. But there are some things that remain the same and others that you can leave to change with the times. Sex work is one of those things. For sex workers in the Red Light District, it's about being your own boss, playing the game, and earning your money. That's what it's all about. Sex work has traditionally taken place in the Red Light District. It's not surprising that it attracts a lot of people. If there are too many at times, you have to limit the number of visitors.

Mariska Majoor

But not by closing window brothels, and changing the character of the neighborhood in such a way that it just isn't the same, at the expense of sex workers who are supposed to be the ones helped by this.

What I am trying to make clear with a lot of words is that, as far as I am concerned, the Red Light District should be preserved as a neighborhood where window prostitution is, and will always remain, a part of it. Sex work is a legal profession, and sex workers have just as much right to their workplace in the Red Light District as anyone else who is part of this special neighborhood. It's as simple as that, and nothing else.

Translated by Dee



Oudekerkplein



Nieuwmarkt

Nieuwe Kerkplein

Louwerzijde

Korte Nieuwe

Boortjeplein

Oudekerkplein

Moluksesteeg

Oudekerkplein

Kruissteeg

Mannikenssteeg

Oudekerkplein

Grachtsteeg

Bloedsteeg

Stoefsteeg

Barnesteeg

Koerssteeg

Project 1012, 2011

Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Gedurende de... project 1012... 2011...'

Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Gedurende de... project 1012... 2011...'

Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Gedurende de... project 1012... 2011...'

Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Handwritten notes in Dutch: 'Gedurende de... project 1012... 2011...'

Anna Torres

Cartographies of Remembrance: Mapping Queer & Sex Working Spaces in De Wallen

Anna Torres is an artist, independent researcher and educator, co-founder of Team Hot Space and architect-in-residence of HXSSY.

Since the opening of The Empire in 1911—the Red Light District’s first self-proclaimed queer establishment—more than two dozen significant queer spaces have shut their doors. From police raids, discriminatory laws, mysterious fires, or plain and simple bankruptcy, the past 100 years have witnessed the systematic erasure of bars, clubs, cafés, restaurants, hotels, backrooms and shops welcoming a primarily queer and gay clientele.

During the sexual liberation movement of the ‘70s, Warmoesstraat was home to a well-established and visible leather community, earning Amsterdam the name of leather capital of Europe. Over time however, the establishments welcoming these queer, gay and trans patrons were forcibly shut down by municipal policies, struggled to make ends meet and faded from the map. Today, only five venues remain: café ‘t Mandje, café The Queen’s Head, leather shop RoB, club Eagle, and club Dirty Dicks. This erasure of queer history is no trivial or isolated case, and can be put in parallel to the calculated closure and erasure of sex worker spaces in the area. One would be foolish to ignore the overlap between these communities, their experiences and their struggles.

Cartographies of Remembrance

Indeed, in the past 50 years, more than half of the neighborhood's sex work windows have been closed by the municipality (including through the municipal Project 1012 and the City Center Approach), only to be replaced by art galleries, overpriced shops and high-end businesses. That is around 250 window spaces erased from the map. This process of erasure, still ongoing to this day, raises the demand for work spaces while supply dwindles. Low supply coupled with higher rent prices pushes workers to work in illegalized scenarios such as from home, in hotels or at clients' places.

While the Dutch context is often presented as a haven of tolerance and progress—a place where queer people and their queerness are socially accepted, and where sex work is seen as an integrated part of society without discrimination—the reality is far more complex. In places like the Red Light District, a strong movement of neo-liberal gentrification and moralistic “clean-up” through discriminatory policies has been the root cause of the disappearance of queer and sex worker communities and spaces.

A Red Light District? Yes, but make it palatable to the average heterosexual visitor, keep the public space clean, vanilla, and family-friendly for tourists at all times. No kinks in the streets, or they'll risk being straightened out.

Recording the often forgotten phenomenon of disappearing queer and sex worker spaces, and their precious, yet unwritten history, is crucial for their remembrance. These maps serve as a reminder that the fights for justice, recognition and dignity are always connected—with a deep understanding that liberation for one cannot come without liberation for all.

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Boomerang -
gay sauna
2007
closed 2010

Casa Nova
gay club 1992
closed in 2005
reopened in 2010

Armas Bar - leather bar
opened in 1985 as a
leather bar
closed in 1999

Verano
gay club
opened in 1985
closed in 1999

Red - leather shop & atelier
opened in 1996
closed in 1999

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Motiv - lesbian bar
1991 & closed in 1999

Cafe Rheinland (1983) - dance bar
first gay hosted on Westmeierstr
closed in 1996

Dirty Dick
leather bar
reopened in 1997

Gate Ambler
leisure club
opened in 1986
moved to
1118
closed in 1989

CHR - gay disco
closed in
FUCKX opened
in 1988
closed in 2013
reopened in 2016

LEISURE BAR
gay club
opened in 1986
closed in 1999
reopened in 2013

Motiv - lesbian bar
1991 & closed in 1999

Bar de...
gay club
closed in 1999
reopened in 2013

Madame Anthon - transvestite bar (1961)
reopened as La Bar de... in 1965

Madame
Thur in 1980
closed in 1989
reopened as... bar

Marthe Singelenberg

The Right to Have Sex in the City

Marthe Singelenberg is a researcher, sex positivist and resident of De Wallen area in Amsterdam.

Sex has always been a part of the city. Where lots of people gather, there will be sex. Most cities have integrated sex into the public realm of the city by offering spaces where one can enjoy sex or explore one's sexuality, be it as a participant or an observer. Many cities have neighborhoods where these types of activities are concentrated: Red Light Districts (RLDs). In literature, these have been defined as spaces "where prostitution is heavily concentrated and somewhat visible in a specific area of the city."¹ Personally, I would argue for a broader definition which does justice to the diversity of activities found in these districts, and focuses more on the desire to visit these sexy places. I would define RLDs as places which people visit to enjoy sexual entertainment in different forms, catering to a diversity of needs and desires.

As I found during my fieldwork in Amsterdam and London, what makes these districts so unique is the attraction of a great diversity of people and activities. There are people who are coming in to have a night of erotic entertainment with their friends or partner(s). There are those in need of a quick release, or those who are looking for intimacy. There are those who are there to work, and those who are there to share their expertise. There are those who are curious about their own

The Right to Have Sex in the City

sexuality, but might need a little inspiration or encouragement. There is never one reason to visit an RLD, there are often many. Besides places to visit, they are also a home to many: residents, sex workers, patrons and entrepreneurs who often form a close community.

RLDs have become more popular since the sexual revolution of the 1970s, as the standards of the heteronormative marriage were being questioned and sex started to regain its space in the public realm. Not that this has been a linear process, as there is still a lot of fear and shame around sexuality. Female sexuality, especially. Or even more so, queer sexuality. There is no profession which has been subject to such double standards as sex work: while prostitution attracts millions of visitors in Amsterdam, for example, it is also heavily moralized and stigmatized. This has everything to do with the way society views sexuality in general: as something that is very exciting and desirable, but also as something that needs to be hidden in the private spheres where it cannot be seen. RLDs play an important role in showcasing sexuality as something that can be fun, safe and exciting at the same time.

In the last couple of decades, the existence of RLDs has been under threat. Cities like Hong Kong, Taipei, Montreal, Antwerp, London and Amsterdam have instituted policies aiming at transforming their RLDs by, among other things, limiting the number of sexually oriented businesses and by investing in real estate.² As I have argued in my article “Red Light Gentrification,”³ these policies can be analyzed as attempts to “clean up” RLDs by removing “undesirable” activities and people, to make way for new investments, middle class residents and new consumption spaces. These processes of

gentrification have been taking place at different paces and in different forms, depending on the local institutional and cultural context.

In Soho (London's RLD), for example, urban renewal efforts are the outcome of a collaboration between the local city council and a number of private investors. Social housing has been converted into luxury apartments and sex show theaters turned into exclusive erotic night clubs. The red light character has been partly maintained, but turned into "high class" entertainment. In Hamburg, the famous Reeperbahn has been home to the harbor city's RLD for centuries. In an attempt to limit the visibility of sex work, the street housing window prostitution has been closed off for women and children. In that way, it is believed, the window workers will only attract customers. This shows the heteronormative assumptions which are projected on this RLD. In Antwerp, the majority of windows have been closed down, to be replaced by an erotic center built at the same location. There, sex work has been moved back from the public into the private realm.

In Amsterdam, the gentrification of the RLD has been state-led. In 2007, the Amsterdam municipality launched Project 1012, named after the area's postal code. The project focused on reducing the clustering of "criminogenic and low quality enterprises" and creating a more "qualitative and diverse" area.⁴ Since then, a significant amount of windows have been closed down. Currently, the city has made plans to build an erotic center in the south of the city, in order to displace the majority of the sex workers who are currently working in De Wallen. A small number of windows will remain,

The Right to Have Sex in the City

as a site of “historical heritage.” At the same time, the “red light character” of Amsterdam’s RLD has been used to promote new businesses adding to the “upgrade” of the area. Examples of this are lunchroom Quartier Putain and Red Light Radio. These spaces promote a consumption pattern which is associated with gentrification, while using the red light character as a way to promote the exciting image of the neighborhood. This again is an example of the double standards towards sex work: while it is stigmatized as being immoral, it is simultaneously used to promote gentrification. However, it is important to add here that these businesses are also putting effort into connecting to the neighborhood.

As the examples of the regressive policies towards RLDs show, most cities have absolutely no idea how to govern sex in the city. As there will be sex, and people will want to buy and sell it, why not offer safe and exciting spaces to do it? The double standards surrounding sex work show that another sexual revolution is needed. How can we reject something that is such a basic need in society? Let’s get sex out of the shadows. Let’s educate those who are in need of liberation. Let’s create a safe environment free of stigma, judgment and violence.

Let’s celebrate, desire and enjoy sex!

Adanya Dunn

Pole Dancing Opera Burlesque: Reclaiming Carmen at a Sex Theater

Adanya Dunn is an opera singer, multidisciplinary artist, and creative entrepreneur, and co-founder of HXSSY and Red Light Arts & Culture.

The lights are dim and I'm getting ready to walk my juicy queer ass on stage, to take the pole. A classical trio tunes their strings on the other side. I'm about to sing one of the most famous arias of all time, the "Habanera" from the opera *Carmen* by Bizet... and I'm going to strip my clothes off and sing opera upside down on the pole.

Carmen is one of the most recognizable operas in the world. By presenting one of its most famous pieces at Amsterdam's most infamous sex theater, Casa Rosso, my intention was to create a site-specific, context-responsive intervention where classical music and sex worker histories intersect and inform one another. By introducing layers of juxtaposition between the elite traditions of opera, stigmatized labor of sex work, and stereotypes of sex workers, we embody sexual performance as subversive, queering the Western classical canon.

The "Habanera" has become so culturally ingrained that it stands on its own, almost entirely separate from its source material. It's a popular melody that has dominated Western culture for over a hundred years, appearing in films, commercials, and popular media. In fact, many songs from *Carmen* have taken on lives of their

Pole Dancing Opera Burlesque

own through remix culture, becoming musical memes that are often more recognizable than their origins. This is also true of most cultural touchstones across musical genres. The melody can suddenly speak to completely different experiences and communities. Artists fill the song with their own meaning, and through that process, the music evolves beyond what any single creator could have imagined. The music ceases to *be* its own original output and *becomes* a part of a living conversation between artists across time.

This is the Red Light District. The audience isn't sitting in the hushed reverence of the opera houses I'm used to singing in... they're cheering, screaming, completely alive, almost overwhelmingly so. The opening lyrics of the aria *L'amour est un oiseau rebelle* (love is a rebellious bird) take on entirely new meaning when it's sung in a space dedicated to sexual labor, expressed through pole dance (a lineage grounded in sex work histories and strip club performance). This meaning is made all the more profound when performed for an audience that understands the power dynamics that these words have historically carried!

Yet nothing is ever devoid of its source material. It is necessary to acknowledge the problematic colonial and patriarchal origins of Carmen. The character was created through a 19th-century European male gaze that exoticized and ultimately dehumanized a Roma woman's sexual agency. This unfortunate depiction has now become a mainstream trope of our current media landscape: the non-white sex worker killed by one of her former "encounters" and whose existence is subjugated.

Adanya Dunn

As part of HXSSY's Queer Sex Worker Arts & Culture Cabaret Series, we take the "Habanera" completely out of its operatic context, removing it from Carmen's narrative arc, the other characters, the tragic ending (in which she's murdered for refusing to submit). This updated context fundamentally shifts what the piece can mean. It allows space for another politics to emerge, one in which the "Habanera" isn't building toward Carmen's murder. Now the aria is no longer contained within a narrative that punishes her autonomy. Her words about love being untamable can now breathe differently. They exist on their own terms, in their own moment, unpacking the dramatic inevitability and centuries of varying interpretation weighing down on them.

With Carmen's original words, there's power in being promiscuous. There's power in being sexual. There's power in being desired. That power can be reclaimed, even when the original space was created through disempowerment and harmful stereotypes. The politics doesn't disappear. The colonial gaze, the racialized stereotypes, the ultimate destruction of female agency are still embedded in the piece's DNA. Through this updated rendition, however, the meaning gets complicated, layered with new interpretation and nuance that exists in dialogue with previous versions.

In musical terms, *Carmen* has withstood the test of time. The music is glorious and the themes, character narratives, and plot are written in such a complex manner that it has allowed for numerous interpretations and has captured the imaginations of so many. That's partly why the character and the story have survived—people continue to find new meaning.

Pole Dancing Opera Burlesque

As the opera field continues to evolve, there's renewed potential for engaging with both legacy pieces and emerging works, particularly through collaborations with those that have historically been marginalized, misrepresented, or stereotyped within operatic narratives.

Creating space for the proverbial rebellious bird, her words continue to evolve and transform through many other voices and experiences, inspiring new lineages of performance, resistance, and care... not only within the opera world, but across art forms, movements, and communities.

At the Casa Rosso Sex Theater, with an eager audience, hooting and hollering as I hit the high notes and shed my clothes upside down on the pole, the "Habenera" can't hide behind respectability or artistic distance. Singing about untamable love in a space where sexual labor is celebrated and not apologized for, "love is a rebellious bird" becomes an affirmation rather than a fatal foreshadowing. The aria is now a reclamation of power through an intersectional, queer, feminist lens, celebrating sex work as work, and affirming Carmen as a woman possessed of her own will.



Anna Torres

Half Past Five

The narrow curve of the street is an echo chamber
for all of the city.

The clip-clap of heels on a mother's hurried feet,
resonates on the warm cobblestone,
picking up her child at the next door,

a gentle look through the glass and the smell of perfume
sweetening up the street glowing red

a familiar habit

others wait, before the window sitting,
slowly, smoking the hour down
indecisive, assertive, observing, maybe calculating and

The necklace of windows slowly opens up and

the echoes escape and

the curve unwinds and

all become visible and

the all-seeing bells toll and

it's half past five.



36

TEN
LORD
GO CALL
TO ADAM
ADD SAID TO HIM
WHERE
ARE
YOU?

M. Alberto

The Margins Are the Heart: On the Beauty of What Society Can't Define and Our Challenges as Collective Story-Tellers

M. Alberto is a Euro-Caribbean sound+word artist, working as a musical dramaturgist, poet and artist-researcher on both sides of the Atlantic.

I. The Margins Are the Heart

While anti-sex work feminists see trading sex as the ultimate concession to patriarchy, I see it as a refusal. A refusal to accept the terms we've been given, to accept the violence of poverty, exhaustion, and overwork, to accept the limited options and future we're meant to be content with. In that refusal is an affirmation of our right to exist, of our right to survive, and the possibility of a reality without white supremacy or capitalism. Again, this is not because sex work is inherently radical and empowering—it's a job like any other job, with the potential to be exploitative or fulfilling based on the day and interaction and context—but because alternative economies can illustrate alternative ways of interacting.¹

— Matilda Bickers

The Margins are the Heart

It is not on the artificial apex of capital but on the seams, at the “margins” of society, that we can witness the beautiful breadth of human potential. The margins are the well-spring of culture. It is in the unquantifiable of the hustle that people foster creativity, innovate, adapt and take care of one another. To survive. (Fighting a dozen fights at any given time.) Where we need to truly live in the now, where we will find joy in the mundane, and in the fantastical. Where being unique doesn’t come with the assumption of exclusion. Where wine is made from water, at times literally.

We survive through tiny revolutions, each time we re-shape highly colonized concepts like time and relationships to our own boundaries and abilities. Nowhere else in the streamlined interactions of day-to-day capitalism have I seen so much diversity in bodies and connections than between those moving on the margins, in the shadows of “decency.” The bitter but sweet positive of being marginalized, might just be this necessity to explore alternatives to the given paths whenever these paths are inaccessible or incompatible.

In *Working Girl: On Selling Art and Selling Sex*, Sophia Giovannitti argues that surviving totalizing capitalism by existing and creating in its blind spots, perhaps gives us a chance to resist, explore, and experience more fully: “[i]llegibility might provide us protection, and room to discover.”²

II. EXT. CARRIBEAN STREET (CURAÇAO)— HIGH NOON

*nested in a void between alleyways and streets and alleyways
there is another village equally colorful*

M. Alberto

*sex is hung dry, here, in the Caribbean sun
in the backrooms of the miniature bodega
you can see through the hole in the front
where you order malt liquor
and lottery tickets
and pussy, if you can afford it*

*a quiet scene,
a sparse parade of lips and pleasers,
friendly greetings
getting that money (up front)
all doors are swung wide open
eyes peeled on the street from every glass-less window
the wind carries the faint smell of sewage
and the equally faint sound of amateur Típiko
a kwarta jangle, and an honest tenor singing
“Bo’n Ta Haña Mas”
a john stops in front of the open blinds and calmly listens*

III. The Violence of Being Defined Involuntarily

Only when human sorrows are turned into a toy with glaring colors will baby people become interested—for a while at least. The people are a very fickle baby that must have new toys every day. The “righteous” cry against the white slave traffic is such a toy. It serves to amuse the people for a little while, and it will help to create a few more fat political jobs—parasites who stalk about the world as inspectors, investigators, detectives, and so forth.³

— Emma Goldman

The Margins are the Heart

Inside this machine that cannot work with fluid parts, the operators impose their own convenient definitions on the undefinable. Definitions; as frameworks to capture and control disorderly bodies. Failing to fit inside these frames equates to losing your humanity from the point of view of the mechanism. In other words: those with power decide how people are categorized, and everyone that falls outside of these categories will not be considered a full person. This is why we see that safety, privileges and rights that the “machine” provides, are not accessible for the un-see-able. On the contrary, this is why states (and state-sized industries) remain the biggest threat to the survival of those the state itself pushes to the margins.

Many liberal, white feminists will choose to be blind to this assessment and willingly weaponize the state apparatus against workers. And specifically sex workers, while as amorphous as a group can get, include many people that are particularly vulnerable to state violence—as many exist on complex intersections between borders and bodies, gender and class, race and ability.

A good example of how definitions are used for systemic harm is in the historically tightly controlled meaning of “work.” Camming, dancing, full-service work, domming and other hustles, even in all their fluidity, perfectly fit any definition of the word “work”—noun and verb, but this is somehow considered to be still up for discussion.

This economic system built on colonial categories of binary gender, race and ability, continues to undermine the legitimacy of labor that fails to fit the tightly controlled frameworks. While this same system claims that

issues of exploitation are specific to “undefined” labor like sex work and alternative ways of survival, these issues are fundamental to the concept of work itself under capitalism. We need think about who owns these descriptors. We need to allow ourselves to claim them, queer them, fuck them. Destroy them if necessary. And if they serve us: take care of them. We need to move away from the elitist urge to control and infantilize “The (Sex) Worker” and everyone else who survives on the margins of legality. These neighbors, comrades and strangers have the skills and abilities to shape their own lives and communities—and, frankly, are already taking care of themselves just fine. We only need to uphold each other’s agency to do this, together, by tearing down unnecessary barriers within our cultures, societies and cities. As well as collectively take responsibility for safe and accessible infrastructure. Since we all are complicit in what keeps all of us down. However, clearly, no power should ever constrain an individual or a community to some top-down definition and decide for them what their needs are. Policy-makers take note.

In other words: sex workers can take care of themselves. However, collectively, we must take care of sex work. The systemic, the semantic and the cultural.

Just a thought.

In how many ways do “civilians,” artists, politicians, academics and workers themselves define and confine the space that sex work takes in society?

IV. Demythologizing

Margin’s thin but n**** I’m finna make a stack
Tales grim but the kids just laugh

The Margins are the Heart

It's a grimy ring e'rytime i get out the bath
It's a tiny thing but I still pluck a dime out the grass,
Her smile is sunshine but when the music stop
she still gotta squat to pick up the cash

— Billy Woods, 2023

For one, taking care of sex work means demythologizing it. We collectively hold the responsibility over the myths we (re)produce, and this is especially true for artists and other culture makers. While a significant portion of sex workers are artists inside and/or outside of their sex work, other artists and media love sex work for its aesthetics and reproduce it in hollow stereotypes. In between “sad hooker” songs and bubble gum feminist anthems, books of “shades of white” high-class hobby-fetishism or endless hoe-to-housewife-redemption-arcs, it’s rare to find media that features sex work(ers) in a non-fetishized form, as people, with full lives and mundane issues. And beyond that, any more forward thinking or “utopian” depictions of sex work in media are nearly non-existent (and I don’t mean girl-boss-billionaire power-fantasies, but creative suggestions for possible futures).

That is not to say there is no need for critical perspectives, or nothing to be critical of, because there is, absolutely. However we (all of us) should be aware of the simple fact that rehashing stories that are aligned with existing stereotypes, no matter how dramatic, always dehumanize the subject. Stereotyping affirms harmful stigmas. Artists: do better. Stories and mythologies are something we share as a culture. Mythologies are often even shared by people with opposing perspectives and different realities, that’s how fundamental they are for

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our understanding of the world around us. There is a lot of shame for folks who have only seen versions of themselves depicted that are fetishized, inferior or helpless. In this way culture conditions us to not relate as equals to some others. This is why policy-makers consistently get away with making uninformed decisions about sex workers' livelihoods. This is why "civilians" aren't out there protesting these decisions.

To quote historian and sex worker Lexi Schway: "with shame comes stigma, and with stigma comes violence."⁵ And this violence comes in many forms:

I always tell people the worst thing about sex work is the stigma and a lot of them are shocked: people think I'm going to tell them things about sleazy agents or terrible producers or bad clients, but the worst thing about sex work is the stigma that is heaped upon you from the outside world. Stigma loses people their loved ones, it loses people their families, they get harassed and trolled, and stigma also strips people of resources that they need. They could be kicked out their homes, they could lose their banking, they could lose online platforms even if they don't post anything lewd on them, they could be denied access to mental health care, certainly unstigmatized mental health care; and let me tell you how hard it is to find a gynecologist who will have an honest conversation with me. I think a lot of breaking down stigma has to do with humanizing sex workers.⁶

— Riley Reyes

The Margins are the Heart

The myths we (re)produce not only exist before violence, they are at the root of it. On a large scale—we are reminded time and time again: systemic violence is ultimately unstoppable if the receiver is sufficiently dehumanized through contemporary mythology. I would invite us all to regard ourselves and everyone we interact with as collective story-tellers. All media we consume. All conversations we have. We need to take care of the stories we tell. Through art and in general. Be curious—& sensitive—& aware of who writes the definitions that we use—& come up with our own—& fuck shit up—& listen.

As a last “&” I’d say, it is worth it to look out for and support the incredible art that comes directly from workers, yes, including work that is not sexy.

V. WINDOW LOOKING OUT OVER THE WATER (AMSTERDAM)—A GRAY, LATE AFTERNOON

*It has been raining since October, relentlessly,
as if it pours to hold down the filth of a myth crumbling,
in a web of demolition sites
the water stops the dust stops the news from spreading:
another whorehouse dead
another hole in the ground
the protestants huddle inside (for all to see)
behind the tall windows
which are the face of a city
that is transplanting its heart*

*power is still hiding in plain sight, behind
that facade of a culture*

M. Alberto

*and its performed openness
its arrogant invitations
to look right through into the home
into the innocence of the private
of the white family or whatever there is left of it
these tall windows and their lack of secrets
on the surface, at least:
the Dutch keep their bodies buried overseas
In this culture we don't speak,
and we do not feel with who we do not see*

*The rain is still clattering down, tactlessly
an endless plague of locusts dying mid-flight,
bringing the news from the holy land,
turning into puddles on the pavement
bending tent ceilings
over the hundreds of thousands of quietly accepted
bodies on the fields
with nowhere else to sleep
(white feminists should ban strawberries)
instead, they smash
the other's windows
perimeters for working class hustle
in an attempt to curb
wild-growth of culture
with state violence
in the name of capital
disguised as care*



The Personal as Poetry: Sex Workers' Self-Told Narratives & Artwork

Are sex workers also artists? Or maybe many artists just so happen to also be sex workers? Do sex workers need art, as much as the art world needs us to maintain their centuries-long profiteering and appropriation of whore-aesthetics?

Perhaps there are parts of sex work that naturally envelop a worker's creativity—how much of that is art, and how much of that is work? In an era of great hustle, i.e. late-stage capitalism, in which reproductive and care labor, content creation, and artistry is all too closely linked to productive value and money, we are left to flounder in these questions.

Sex workers don't need art to justify the quality of their work nor their right to visibility, as the art world has no justification in having produced patriarchal, male-gazed, and client-centered images of prostitutes for centuries. Rather, sex workers deserve

to re-inherit what is rightfully theirs: the re/production of their stories, narratives, imagery, and imagination. As any good sex worker may know, those who have control over the imagination are able to influence perception. And perception holds all the power, whether in a session or in society.

As a reclamation and attempt towards re-centering, this section treats sex work and art work of the same caliber, featuring many artist sex workers and sex working artists. In this section, we hope to leave the hustle up to the sex worker to narrate, define, and interact with, without the conventional fluff of romanticization or drags of moral prudence. Here, we leave you with a taste at the intersections of sex work, the self, the political, and the poetics of it all.

Odisea

Gogo Dancer

Odisea is a writer and performer, a teacher and a booker.

I always lie about my first time
I never really had one
It never really mattered enough to put a date on it
That sacrality of the body
They even made up an anniversary
However, I remember the first time I was paid for sex
The first time I got money for giving pleasure
That was a turning point for me
And my body remained the same
and my life remained the same
Perhaps my life did change
I had found a way to exploit my body
a different way
Since working means using your body
there are different ways to use your body
to exploit it
I exploit my erotic capital
I exploit my youth
In the system we live in
each one survives how they can
No one should work
No one should work
I will exploit myself however I want
and I want this one
here
and here
deeply
slowly

Gogo Dancer

and watch the money when it's done
In this capitalist
cis
straight
patriarchal system
We're all prostitutes
the sacralized body
the sacralized body
My work is to put on a performance
I can be a woman
I can be a man
I can be both
I can be what you want
I can be a fantasy
a fantasy in exploitation
like in every job
Is there work without exploitation?
Which exploitation is worse?
How to measure that?
I do not judge your body
I do not judge your job
with all due respect
I tell you
fuck your belief
fuck your belief
you won't manipulate me
**I know the difference between prostitution and
trafficking**
prostitution is not trafficking
prostitution is not trafficking
whatever you think about desire
does not entitle you to criminalize

Odisea

marginalize
it doesn't entitle you to stigmatize
I don't need you to rescue me
I don't need a hero
I don't need your morals
Janitors are also exploited
construction workers
teachers
farmworkers
nobody denies them their rights
I also want my rights
exploitation is intrinsic to capitalism
I long for **the day we fight to abolish capitalism**
I long for the day we fight to abolish work
until then I will be a stripper
a prostitute
I will take my clothes off
I will drop on the floor
I will dance
like a gogo dancer
who dances for you
for money
who offers you their body
for money
like a gogo dancer
DINERO

Translated by Nora Mal

SEX WORKERS ARE ARTISTS



Whether it is with
our makeup



Our
tempting
Selfies



The sweet way we
carry ourselves



or our sexual services



Performance permeates
everything we do.



We know how to
entertain an audience,
draw in a crowd

Comics Slut



We know how to cast spells and shapeshifting is part of our hustle.



We have our own culture, our own rituals and aesthetics



OUR CULTURE is in fact so alluring that civilians keep copying us



Look at history: society may try to push us to the margins but still you find us at the forefront of Revolutionary change.



Not only are we artists, our existence is art. Art of resistance, art of defiance, art of rebellion and art of perseverance.



COMICS SLUT

Comics Slut









Salvada por el Sex Work

Siento orgullo de pensar que mi primera performance en Berlín y la segunda de mi vida, fue un evento por los derechos de lxs trabajadorxs sexuales. Fue el 3 de junio del año 2021, yo venía de un contexto personal bastante pésimo, sin oportunidades, sin papeles, con una pierna rota en recuperación, con el corazón roto, con mucha tristeza encima. Tenía poco tiempo en Berlín y muchas ansias de poder seguir adelante a pesar de mis tragedias.

Sin duda, el trabajo sexual y la performance en escenarios fue lo que me sacó de lugares tristes y oscuros (Y mis amigxs claro). Para esa primera performance, que fue el inicio de muchas cosas bonitas, escribí un poema y es el primero que pueden leer de los que acompañan este texto, es también la primera vez que me animo a publicarlo para un medio. Mi intención fue: escribir un poema en el que poner de manifiesto lo que realmente pienso sobre el trabajo, sobre el sistema en el que vivimos y sobre la práctica del trabajo sexual. Una amiga hizo la traducción al inglés, otra lo leyó para que yo la grabara y usara en el escenario mientras me quitaba la ropa para terminar bailando una canción de La Zowi. La canción habla sobre ser puta, se llama Gogo, al igual que el poema que escribí (en ese tiempo yo no hablaba inglés y entendía muy poco). La Zowi siempre me inspiró, ella milita el trabajo sexual a través del arte, entre otras cuestiones políticas que pone de manifiesto en sus trabajos de una forma cruda y directa “trátame como una gogo.”

Hago el ejercicio todos los días de no sentir vergüenza, ya que es eso lo que nos inculcan desde el estigma, por

Salvada por el Sex Work

pensar diferente, por vivir y trabajar por fuera de los parámetros convencionales de una sociedad hipócrita. Hacer el ejercicio y enfrentar los discursos de odio, de exclusión y que solo crean más marginalidad no es algo fácil, yo tomo las palabras de activistas como Georgina Orellano cuando dice “yo no vendo mi cuerpo, yo ofrezco un servicio” o las palabras de Despentés cuando dice de usar el trabajo sexual como una herramienta para llegar a lugares que de otra manera no llegaríamos, y poner ese mensaje en un cartel enorme mientras bailo semi desnuda, algo que parece tan simple pero no lo es para nada.

Mi posicionamiento político frente al trabajo y al TS, sigue siendo “Nadie debería trabajar” y se muy bien que el trabajo sexual puede terminar siendo igual de tedioso y aburrido como cualquier otro trabajo, pero hasta que no tengamos todos los derechos como en cualquier otro trabajo, seguiré en un escenario semi desnuda bailando Sad girlz luv money con un cartel enorme que dice “less cops more sluts.”

Saved by Sex Work

I feel proud to think that my first performance in Berlin and the second of my life was an event for sex workers rights. It was the third of June 2021, I came from a rather terrible personal context, without opportunities, without papers, with a broken leg in recovery, with a broken heart, and a lot of sadness. I hadn't been in Berlin for a long time and I had a lot of desire to be able to move forward despite my tragedies.

Without a doubt, sex work and performing on stage was what took me out of sad and dark places (and my friends of course). For that first performance, which was the beginning of many beautiful things, I wrote a poem and it is the first that you can read of those that accompany this text, it is also the first time that encouraged me to publish it. My intention was: to write a poem in which to reveal what I really think about

Odisea

work, about the system we live in and about the practice of sex work. A friend translated it into English, another read it for me to record and use it on stage while I took off my clothes to end up dancing to a song by La Zowi. The song talks about being a whore, it's called *Gogo*, just like the poem I wrote (at that time I didn't speak English and understood very little). La Zowi always inspired me, she militates for sex work through art, among other political issues that she highlights in her works in a raw and direct way: "treat me like a gogo."

I practice the daily exercise of not feeling ashamed, since that is what they instill in us through stigma, for thinking differently, for living and working outside the conventional parameters of a hypocritical society. Doing the exercise and facing the discourse of hate, of exclusion that only creates more marginality, is not easy. I took the words to heart of activists like Georgina Orellano when she says "I don't sell my body, I offer a service," or the words of Despentes when she says to use sex work as a tool to get to places that we would not otherwise reach, and put that message on a huge poster while I dance half naked, something that seems so simple but is not at all.

My political stance towards work and sex work is still "no one should work" and I know very well that sex work can end up being just as tedious and boring as any other job. But until we have all the rights as in any other job, I will continue to be on a stage, half-naked dancing to "Sad girlz luv money" with a huge sign that says "less cops more sluts."

Translated by Nora Mal and Cy

Kami Million

Whore Cares? [A Fragment]

Kami Million is an artist, stripper and community organizer, working to destigmatize sex work through performance, community gatherings, ceramics, paintings and writing.

When I became a whore, there was a part of me that could finally be free. From another perspective you could say that I created a part of me that had to play dead. Holding a secret can feel like the constant presence of a ghost living by your side. If you're not acknowledged as a valid part of society, the only way of existing is to get together with those around you who are misfits for the same reason. In order to care you first have to exist. This text is about the way that whores care for and simultaneously are not cared for. It is a fragment from a longer text that is titled "Whore Cares," which I wrote as my thesis at the Dirty Art Department at the Sandberg Institute. If you are interested in reading the full text or if you want to share any of your thoughts please feel free to reach out to me. I hope to inspire whores to care more carefully for themselves, to continue caring for one another. And to finally, together with our allies, deconstruct the systems that criminalize the care strategies that we know work best for us.

This text is a compression of personal experiences as well as more theoretical research, drawing from books, documentaries, audio-recordings and music as examples. Personal experiences feed me with direct information from the community and industry. For me this varies from working in clubs to being part of sex worker

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organized events and demonstrations. The sex work community is very dear to me, and I always try to treat it with care and respect. It is important that more of us who are directly engaged in sex work are the authors of stories and academic texts, the creators of art and other forms of self-expression. Academics and media-makers can hand their microphones and cameras to us. We are academics and media-makers too. It is a big responsibility to represent my community with my own voice, my own biases and necessarily incomplete view of this broad and diverse industry. I can only speak from my experience, which is one of many, and very different to those of other sex workers.

I come from a place of many privileges. I am able-bodied, I am white, I am queer but pass without any doubts as a cis-girl in my work, I was born and raised in the Netherlands which means I have all the legal documents such as work permits and residency status. More than that, I have chosen to do the work that I do. I stand high on the ladder of the “whorearchy.” The whorearchy describes the division of various sex workers based on their working rights, working conditions, and experience of stigma. It compares different workers and places them in a hierarchical order. An example could be to compare a white documented dominatrix with a trans street-worker of color. The dominatrix has more access to working legally, she has easier access to a safe work place and has better chances of being accepted or even looked up to by civilians.* This is in

* Civilians is the word we use for non-sex workers. We encounter this description in zines, books, speeches and more. As stated at the introduction of the book *Tricking Hour*: “Then there is what we might

Kami Million

contrast to the street worker for whom it is really hard to work legally, who experiences the constant threat of police violence and is seen as a victim, as a problem and not even as a human being in many cases. The big gap between different sex workers is very problematic. We should not compare sex workers with one another nor put them in a range of respectability and differentiate who deserves rights and better working conditions. The whorearchy should be deconstructed. All sex workers deserve respect, better working rights and conditions.

But first I want to discuss the question of the relationship between sex worker and customer. The often-discussed dynamic of the “powerful man” and the “vulnerable woman” is a cliché. There are many different types of clients and workers. Clients are not only men and especially not just stinky old men which many civilians tend to think of when thinking of sex workers’ clients. We come across women, couples, and queer people too. Having said that, we can state that the majority of sex work services happen between a female worker and a male customer. I do tend to refer to men when talking about the customer. Both because of how many male clients there are, but more importantly, because of the patriarchal construct that sex work is situated within and the problems reproduced within patriarchy. This patriarchal construct is one that I and many workers want to attack, and calling out the men by their gender is sometimes helpful in this battle.

call the ‘civilian gaze,’ the lens which non-sex workers see us through. The one that demands we coherently identify with either victimhood or popular feminist notions of liberation through sex positivity.”¹

Whore Cares?

Sometimes when I navigate the streets I look at them, differently than they look at me. I feel seen as an object, but I look at them as numbers, calculating their “value” as a game: “How much would he pay? How much could I make him pay?” It’s a way of thinking that sometimes slides into my behavior as a counter-reaction to how men behave towards me in public space. Working in a strip club for the first time was a moment of epiphany for me: I finally found a way to turn the tables. I could decide when they were allowed to look at me, and how much that would cost. I often feel more vulnerable when walking to the club at night than being in the club itself. In the club it is often the case that the client is in a vulnerable position, which is a positive thing and could be demystified more. In a healthy situation the worker decides on who is and who is not welcome to receive their service, what options there are and which actions are not allowed. There are also workers who don’t have access to this autonomy and have to do things they don’t consent to.

This may be due to financial struggle or pressure from someone they work for. There are always multiple realities, sometimes at the same time. Lorelei Lei describes it as the “violence and joy” that is always present.² By looking at the examples of a worker being in power we can hopefully extract the meaning of a safe work environment and reproduce that where we can. If the mainstream narrative would be more nuanced, we could form a better opinion on power relations. In certain cases, I find the worker powerful and the client vulnerable, and in that there is space for therapeutic moments for clients to experience. Some clients come for a good

Kami Million

time or a party while for others the worker can be of great importance in their lives. They nurture them, they hold them, or they listen to them. All forms of care that not all of us receive equally on a daily basis.

A sex worker can provide an answer to a lack of care and intimacy. We often fulfill some kind of role as a caretaker: they pay and we nurse. But the way we care for our customers is not at all reflected in the way politics, governments and systems treat us. Sometimes it feels like no one cares about us. We have our red umbrellas, signifying our pride. We can also see them as a protector for the dark clouds above us, a protection of the bricks that are thrown at us, or a boat to float in when we need to stay above the water. Sex work can be fun and boring, hot and horrible. For some it is a way to generate extra cash or to let their sexual self thrive. For many it is simply a method to survive in a cold hard capitalist reality. The work can be hard and it takes a lot of strength to be a worker. Some days are fun, others are shit.

But one thing that would make the life of workers so much lighter, so much easier, and so much more autonomous is a better context to work in. The stigma is the beast that kills us. There is an abundance of elements in the context that we work in that make it difficult to exist or work safely. There are laws against us, there's police harassment, most banks won't allow us to use their service, there are many families that exclude us, there are bosses that fire us, there are children taken away from us because we work to give them a roof, bread and education. Many strategies that we use to work more safely are being criminalized. Protection systems that we created for ourselves are illegal in many places. Often,

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governments use the argument of “protecting” or “rescuing” sex workers to implement these laws, while only making the situation more dangerous by implementing them. The current developments in Amsterdam are an example of this. The WRS³ reminding us of the Nordic Model and the Erotic Center⁴ which us workers call the “Erotic Prison,” are local cases where sex workers are being dismissed and thereby harmed by this unfair policy making.

Civilians, politicians and legal entities have to learn about how diverse sex workers are and understand that we are human, we are us, we are you. Feeling accepted as a human being would improve the lives of many workers already in such a drastic way. Decriminalization and full-body autonomy is what we demand. No Swedish model, no FOSTA-SESTA, no closing of windows. We deserve to be in the light, we deserve to make money in a fair way. We deserve to live.

Because there is such a lack of care from the systems we live in that the need arises to care for each other. We have a very strong community that cares for each other in revolutionary ways. As a counterpoint to that there is also still the reality of internalized whorephobia and the whorearchy. The illegality of sex work can be one of the reasons for many workers to not want to be related to being a sex worker at all. They therefore distance themselves from the sex work industry while being part of it. This can be very isolating and separates different groups of the sex work community.

Having acknowledged that, there are many examples of care-taking within the community that are deeply impressive. There have been grassroots organizations in

Kami Million

the sex work community for a long time. We look back at the revolutionary work of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson who founded the STAR House in New York. This was a community house for LatinX, Black and white trans sex workers and other homeless gay, trans, and lesbian youth who cared for each other.⁵ Sex worker action groups exist in many different places and in different forms. Some are doing the practical and powerful tasks like providing condoms on the streets where others organize art gatherings in which sex workers express their experience, wishes and demands. Often these people work hard, with deep dedication and most of the time for free in order to improve the circumstances in which the community works and lives.

After all this caring for both the clientele we work with as well as for our peers in our community, caring for oneself is often forgotten or not prioritized. Not all of us have access to care and comfort. How can we deal with that? Looking back at the history of self-care we find out that the Black Panther Party found ways of care that were revolutionary.⁶ Ways that elevated the community from their marginalized position and brought them closer together. Their actions clearly show how community care and self-care are closely related to each other. How care within the sex work industry can look is really context-dependent and may be different from person to person. There are strategies of care that we can integrate in small moments or with small gestures. An example is to find a way to consciously open and close a work session. Another technique can be to energetically protect oneself before going into a session. Sex work itself can for some individuals be the way to

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care for oneself. It is a job that allows for more freedom and flexibility which can be helpful in the case of a mental or physical illness or disability. Choosing the hours and days of work yourself are necessary for those who cannot keep up with the continuous hours and days of work that other jobs ask for.

There is a pattern that has been repeated throughout history where sex workers are caretakers, and are not cared for by the society in which they live. They create their own spaces with their peers in which they can feel safer. I wish for these spaces to continue to exist, and for those oppressive ones to go up in flames. We will keep fucking the system until it serves us better, and until then, we will hold each other where we can. For us as individuals, I wish us all to be able to always return to ourselves to check in, to rest and to heal. I want us to be cared for, I want us to be able to be soft, I want us to dream. I want to dream about brighter futures and an easier existence for all. This is what we all deserve. We deserve to be loved, by ourselves and those around us, may this be something that we can all experience more. Yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Leslie

Trabajo Sexual

Leslie is a sex worker activist, trans activist, and BIPOC activist.

Ser una trabajadora sexual no es fácil, es una vocación que debe ser elegida, la persona debe nacer y sentir que está hecha para eso. Cuando yo vivía en Cuba, el trabajo sexual era muy difícil. Lo que hay allá no es legal como en Holanda. Escondiéndome detrás de los árboles y sin poder ser libre de ejercer la el trabajo que quisiera hacer. Cuándo yo viene para Holanda, la vida cambió porque a diferencia de mi país aquí el trabajo sexual es legal, está permitido y regulado. Se reconoce como un trabajo como cualquier otro. Aun así, las cosas pueden cambiar y pueden mejorar mucho más.

Porque ya que vivo aquí más de 6 años y que pertenezco a la comunidad de trabajadores sexuales y el que ya estoy adaptada a las reglas del país, sé de primera mano que uno tiene que luchar para seguir haciendo más cambios y seguir mejorando la vida para las trabajadoras sexuales. Hay muchos requisitos que piden aquí en Holanda para hacer trabajo sexual, como por ejemplo: ser mayor de 21 años, ser capaz de comunicarse con su supervisor en un idioma que ambos entiendan, tener un pasaporte holandés válido o un pasaporte de la Unión Europea, tener un permiso oficial para trabajar en los países bajos, está registrada en la cámara de comercio y tener en cuenta que necesitará una licencia válida para casi todos los tipos de trabajo sexual.

Aquí en Ámsterdam se puede trabajar en diferentes lugares y locaciones. Por ejemplo, se puede trabajar detrás de la ventana o en clubes también en una casa

Trabajo Sexual

particular, como escort, en la calle, a zonas peatonales y otros, es tu elección. En función de lo que sea posible de dónde vas a ejercer, se puede elegir entre prostitución de ventana, escort independiente, trabajo empresa de escorts, o trabajar en un club o casa particular. Muchas veces cuando uno llega a este país nuevo no conoce de estas reglas, no? Conoce de estos parámetros que hay que cumplir para poder tener el permiso de trabajo. De trabajadora por cuenta propia de efecto, tu prueba de empresa, por lo que yo me cuidaba mucho al principio igual de la policía vivía con el mismo miedo que en Cuba. Pero incluso aguantaba porque pensaba que si me detenían y me cogía la policía me podían deportar de vuelta a mi país.

Ahora, después de recibir mi permiso de trabajo, pude aplicar por los medios correspondientes y realizar todo de manera legal para desarrollarme como trabajadora sexual. Antes, cuando no tenía permiso, te contaban una historia y se aprovechaban de mí. La clientela era muy agresiva, trataban de aprovecharse de una, de chantajearnos e inclusive trataban de no pagar por el servicio. Aún así lo más importante es la vida y la seguridad. Había veces que por no ser reportado a nuestro país y por sobrevivieron un cliente agresivo, a veces uno tenía que soportar los maltratos y se dejaba sometera eso. Ya no pasa conmigo porque gracias a dios ya yo cumplí el parámetro y saqué mi licencia.

Por ejemplo, hace poco hice una obra de teatro en la vieja iglesia en el centro de Ámsterdam, cerca de la zona roja. Tuvo que ver solamente con trabajadoras sexuales, las que representamos la obra, y lo que queríamos dar a ver era cómo veíamos nosotras cuando las personas

Leslie

tratan de ayudarnos, pero no saben hacerlo de la mejor manera, ni cómo poder ayudar. A una trabajadora sexual no se le dice lo que debe hacer. Es preguntándole qué necesita como cualquier otra persona que uno desea ayudar. No es ir exaltando o pasando el arco de suplicación o de su deseo, sino preguntarle qué es lo que necesita y qué puede hacer para resolverlo, para ayudar a cada uno. Nunca se debe asumir qué necesita la persona. Solo vemos la vida diferente, y para lo que a alguno es detestable, para otro es un tesoro. Yo, mirando hacia adelante, veo que las trabajadoras sexuales de Amsterdam y en el resto de Holanda van a progresar más, porque cada vez estamos más unidas, tenemos más información y nos están escuchando.

Es lo que la comunidad necesita. Cada vez que tengo un cliente, pienso en otra chica o en otro chico que también haga lo mismo, porque digo que lo que me pueda pasar a mí les puede pasar a ellos, y eso me preocupa. Por eso sigo luchando por la libertad y por la seguridad, por mejores pagos y mejores condiciones para las trabajadoras sexuales. No es solo para mí, es para todxs.

Sex Work

Being a sex worker is not easy, it is a vocation that must be chosen; the person must feel that they are made for it. When I lived in Cuba, sex work was very difficult, since it is punishable there, it is not legal as it is in the Netherlands. I lived running from the police and in fear, hiding behind trees and not being able to be free to do the work I wanted to do. When I came to the Netherlands, life changed, because unlike in my country, here sex work is legal, allowed and regulated. It is recognized as a job like any other. Still many things could change and be much better.

Trabajo Sexual

Since I have been living here for more than six years I belong to the sex worker community and I am already adapted to the rules of the country and how everything works, I know firsthand that one has to fight to keep making more changes and keep improving life for sex workers. There are many requirements here in the Netherlands to do sex work, such as: being over 18 years old, being able to communicate with your supervisor in a language you both understand, having a valid Dutch passport, residency permit or an EU passport, having an official permit to work in the Netherlands, being registered at the chamber of commerce and being aware that you will need a valid license, in some municipalities, for almost all types of sex work.

Here in Amsterdam you can work in different places, different locations: you can work behind the window, in (strip)clubs without a private house, as an escort. In some cities in the Netherlands, you can work on the street, in pedestrian areas. Depending on what is possible where you are going to practice, you can choose between window prostitution, escort or independent. Or work in an escort company or work in a club or a private house. It's your choice.

Often when you arrive in a new country you don't know the rules yet. You don't know these parameters that you have to fulfill to be able to have the permit of a self-employed worker, your proof of company (chamber of commerce registration), so I was very careful at the beginning, even with the police. I lived with the same fear as in Cuba. I even endured the worst because I thought that if they stopped me and caught me, the police would deport me back to my country.

Now I received my work permit, after I applied through the corresponding means and did everything in the correct and legal way. The clients still tried to tell a story or take advantage of me as they did before, when I did not have a permit. The clients were very aggressive, they tried to take advantage of me, to blackmail me and try not to pay for the services. The most important thing is life and safety. There were times that in order not to be deported to your country and to survive an aggressive client, you sometimes had to put up with mistreatment and let yourself be subjected to this. This no longer happens with me because thank God I have already met the parameters and got my license to work.

Something very special that happens in the Netherlands is that sex work is interrelated with social and cultural events. For example, I recently did a play in the Old Church in the center of Amsterdam, in the Red Light District, which had to do only with sex workers. We

Leslie

performed a play and what we wanted to show with our play, is how it feels when people try to help us, but do not know how to do it in the best way. You don't tell a sex worker what to do. It is by asking her what she needs, like any other person, that you can help her. Ask her what she needs and what you can do to solve it, to help her. One should never assume what the person needs. We just see life differently and what some people detest, for others is a treasure. I look forward to seeing if the sex workers of Amsterdam and in the rest of Holland will progress more, because we are more and more united. We have more information and we are listening to each other's' voices.

It's what the community needs. Every time I have a client, I think about another girl or another guy who also does the same thing. Because I say what can happen to me, can happen to them. And that worries me. That's why I continue to fight for freedom, for safety and for better money and better qualities for sex workers. It's not just for me, it's for everyone.

Translated by Nora Mal and Cy

*La Vie en Proost
Lapdance*

EROTIC CENTER AMSTERDAM



*La Vie
& Rose*

EROS INSIDE



*All
Lustre en
naar de offer*

La Vie en Proost



Alejandra Ortiz

The Truth Will Set Me Free

Alejandra Ortiz is a Mexican writer and activist and trans refugee in the Netherlands.

Dallas, September 2002

It's a warm Saturday night. I am a skinny nineteen year old brown boy with crooked yellow teeth, wearing red lipstick, bad makeup that cannot conceal my acne and facial hair, heavy eyeliner, and two thin pencil lines in place of the eyebrows that I shaved with a razor. I am wearing a cheap cleopatra-style wig and a short red dress from Forever 21 with socks rolled up where breasts should be. Atop shiny black stilettos from the thrift store, I walk up and down in front of Fiebre Latino nightclub. I feel fantastic, sexy and fierce!

I just freshened up in the club toilet after serving a client. Now I'm ready for the next one. I turn on the discman in my bag: *You spin me round round baby round round, like a record...* My friend La-Madonna, a travesti from El Salvador, first showed me this place five months ago—it's been a blessing. When I came out as a gay travesti, I was immediately fired from the restaurant. The Mexican staff already hated working with a maricon because I'm so feminine and flamboyant. But when I actually came to work dressed as a woman, they went crazy. When I came out I was spat on, called names and beaten. Ironically, by the same men who asked me for sex in secret. When I complained about it to the manager he decided it was my fault and fired me.

The Truth Will Set Me Free

Since then I haven't been able to find a job and I still have to get money from somewhere, to help my family in Mexico. So I've been coming here... If only the people in my village knew what I do!

Sometimes I fuck or blow really nice gringo clients. I prefer those. Gorgeous tall white men who look like telenovela stars. Sometimes I really can't believe how lucky I am to get paid to have sex with them. Their dicks are always clean, and most of them treat me like a human being. Some even kiss me. "Ay maricon, at night all cats are gray," La-Madonna says when I bring it up. Whatever! Besides being handsome and respectful, the gringos pay well and rarely try to haggle. Latinos and African Americans are tougher customers. The latter think that because they have a big cock, you want to be with them for free. Ugh, if only big cocks could pay my rent.

It gets very busy here on weekends. Today I've already made \$250, almost a month's rent. Those big dumpsters behind the warehouses are perfect for pushing your butt to the max. Last week a man who looked like Antonio Banderas came to me. He wore crocodile leather boots, a big belt, cowboy hat and all. He didn't pay but drove me home in his Ford 150 pickup truck. As we drove north, he told me that he is from Arandas, a small town in the state of Jalisco. "I'm from Aguascalientes," I said back. I lied, I didn't want him to know I'm just a ranchera, a peasant girl.

"You are so beautiful," said Antonio Banderas. "Tu eres la travesti mas bonita, that's why I chose you. I could have any real woman I want but I wanted to try something new and you look really special. Wanna suck my

Alejandra Ortiz

cock while I drive?" After those beautiful words from such a handsome man, I wanted nothing more.

In the parking lot in front of my apartment complex, he pulled a small plastic bag full of angel dust from under his seat.

"Quieres una rayita?—do you want a sniff?" I took it like a champion. Once in my bedroom we fucked like there is no tomorrow. Without a condom, of course. I'm terrified of AIDS but I couldn't help it. I wanted to feel him inside me. "I love you" he said as he sat on top of me. "I want to be your boyfriend. Your ass is so tight." I was high on cocaine and high on love. Once he came he moaned loudly and as soon as his cum entered me, he pulled out and the love talk stopped. He had something to do, or had to go to work at 5 a.m. It was not clear which of the two. He picked his clothes off the floor, washed his cock and took my phone number promising to call.

I've been thinking about him all week. At home I wait by the phone, on the street I hope he will come to visit me. "Una puta enamorada no es buena pa'l negocio—a whore in love is a stupid whore," says La-Madonna. "And bad for business." I know but I can't help to think of Antonio. My heart and my nice tight ass belong to him.

It is now Wednesday and it couldn't be quieter. Quiet days give space to think, which I don't like to do. I'd rather be distracted from thoughts of the dreams that never came true. I need a cigarette then. Damn, forgot my lighter.

"Hey! Do you have a lighter?" I ask Estrellita, the fifteen-year-old travesti with the Luciano Pavarotti voice, who is waiting for a client. She hesitates.

"Only if you give it back," she concludes.

"Of course I'll give it back bitch I'm not a thief."

The Truth Will Set Me Free

With a cigarette in hand I sashay further down the avenue, rocking my put-on hips from side to side. When I was little I wanted to be a priest, or an architect. I designed baroque churches on a drawing pad. But I had to leave school at fourteen to help my mother. My father sometimes appeared out of nowhere, to beat us up and get my mother pregnant.

Some villages have the smell of misfortune. Mine was such a village. There is only work during the harvest season. But that's only a few months a year and only if there was no drought. That is why most, especially young men, migrate to the US.

I started prostitution when I was thirteen, when Don Chuy gave me 50 pesos to blow him. I had found him attractive for a long time and he always treated me well so those 50 pesos were a little extra for something I had wanted to do for a long time: stick my nose into his big bush of pubic hair and run my tongue over his cock. In the village people called me ugly maricon. But not Don Chuy. He liked me and paid to touch me, jerk me off or cum in my ass or between my legs. It was not much money, sometimes a sack of potatoes, dry beans or soap. I didn't really care: he made me feel like I was worth something. Even if it was in secret.

The idea that someone as ugly as me could get paid for sex changed me. I'm not sure if it made me feel any better but at least it gave me a way to make money. I was able to help my mother and siblings.

And now I'm a wetback in Dallas, one of so many undocumented migrants. My childhood dreams have not come true. I can't help it anymore, I'm already nineteen. But let's be honest: how cool is it that I get paid for what

Alejandra Ortiz

I love to do? It's also exciting. Last week I was chased by a man I had blown in the dark against one of the pillars, under the George Bush Highway. A skinny Guatemalan with calluses on his hands. I stole \$500 from his wallet, stuffed it into my underwear, and ran. With my high heels in one hand, my bag and wig in the other.

"You son of a bitch!" the guy shouted and he started running too. "I'll kill you if I catch you!"

If it wasn't for a drunken partygoer coming down the highway, he would have done it. The drunk saw me running, stopped his Landrover, let me in and drove off. He really earned his thank you blowjob. If his uncircumcised cock had also been clean, I would have enjoyed it myself. I washed it with beer to mask the smell.

Of the stolen money, I sent my mom \$300. She didn't like it much. "Next time I expect more. You should be thankful that we tolerate you the way you are. So you have to help us," she said. She doesn't know what I'm doing. My roommate La-Maritza say if I'm not careful, they'll find my body by the roadside one of these days. Last month, Lisa-la-Chapina, a Guatemalan travesti, was murdered at her home. She was only 29. She saw it coming, everyone knows that travestis don't live long anyway. Yet for days we were sad, scared and silent. Now everything is almost back to normal.

There were rumors that she was fucking men like a man. Maybe that's why they killed her. Some say it was one of her boyfriends. Another story is that a client killed her because he found out she had AIDS. Every time a maricon dies they say he had AIDS, even if it isn't true. I am so afraid of dying of AIDS, poor and alone.

En la sala de un hospital, de una extraña enfermedad murió Simon,

The Truth Will Set Me Free

es el verano del 93—shit now I have that terrible song in my head about that gay man who died of AIDS.

“Ten cuidado flaca” says La-Maritza—be careful. She also did the streets in Mexico City when she was young, after she was kicked out of the house by her Catholic parents when they found out she was wearing women’s clothing. I think she had a really bad time then. That’s why she hates me doing this. She sounds just like that old travesti in *Fiebre Latino*. The one who looks like Ursula from *The Little Mermaid*, with those big tits and eighties hair. She is always preaching to the youth.

Recently, I was cleaning up in the club toilet after a client had come on my face. Ursula was sitting in one of the cubicles, taking a shit or something. Drunk as usual. And then she started to cry and beg that we would do something different with our lives and stop the fuckery. “I never listened and now that I’m 36 I have such a long criminal record that I can’t find a job anywhere and can’t go to school anymore. Stop it before it’s too late girls.” The other girls and I, we laughed at her—fucking alcoholic old bitch.

Everyone continued to live the same life. Only La-Britney had listened intently to Ursula and disappeared after a few days. “She’s back to her parents,” Estrellita says. “They really wanted him back, as long as he stopped wearing women’s clothes. Good for him. I think I would give up this life too if my parents paid for my education. But they don’t.” I keep thinking about Antonio. Estrellita shakes her new J.Lo ass in front of me. She had it injected with airplane oil yesterday. “It only cost \$500! Can you believe it?”

Alejandra Ortiz

While I'm looking at her ass, we see a silver Chrysler Sebring coming towards us. Estrellita's previous client hit her bottom so hard that it still hurts and she now wants to go home and rest. "You take it Flaca," I walk to the car.

"Hola, papi..." I say. What a handsome man. He must have a big one and he certainly won't haggle.

"How much?" he asks with a flirty smile. Goodbye Antonio Banderas, hello Brad Pitt!

"For you, fifty bucks papi." Immediately the man pushes a badge on my face and says words I do not understand. Two other men come up to me and then everything goes very fast.

Three days later, in the cell I share with two other travestis and drunken men who call us names all the time, I can't remember what happened. One minute I was walking towards a car, the next I was sitting in the back of a police car with my hands behind my back. With my one phone call, I called La-Maritza. She is trying to scrape the bail money together. What if I get deported? What if my family finds out? Ay virgencita, ayudame—Oh Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, help me! I swear I'll stop the fuckery, but help me.

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Cass Traitor

Survival of the Sickest: A Sex Worker's (Opera) Celebratory Recovery Story

Cass Traitor is a multidisciplinary artist and writer, and an editor for Red Insight. Trigger warning: Contains references to domestic violence and sexual coercion.

Around fifteen years ago, life was at an all-time low. The friend I was sharing an apartment with had kicked me off the lease, and I was suddenly homeless. I had no money to find a new place, and I no longer knew who I could trust, let alone ask for help.

But a new love interest did offer to help me out. It was the very early days in our relationship, but he was happy to set us up with a place to rent together, and I could pay him back for my half later. He knew that I'd dabbled in sex work, and he didn't mind. In fact, he said that I could use the second bedroom as an in-call space. He'd dated sex workers before, it was no big deal. He was mature, and serious about his intentions in the relationship. Or so I thought.

The hero's cape turned out to be made up of many, many red flags, tightly stitched together. There's a word for men in their forties who target young people, and encourage them into unhealthy sexual situations. I couldn't see it at the time, because that's how grooming and love bombing works, particularly if you're neurodivergent and in a desperate situation.

Within days, photos were being taken and put online without my consent. The kind of images that felt so

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disempowering I wouldn't have even liked them in a trusted partner's private collection. Web shows were booked for me, without prior discussion about what I would or wouldn't be doing on camera. My questions were met with threats and aggression; it soon became clear that it was safer to play along.

My career ambitions and artistic dreams melted away, as I knew that this graphic sexual content would follow me forever. The shame bubbled up within me because I no longer liked what I was doing, and he weaponized that shame to keep me silent about my work and my situation. It stopped me from forming new friendships, seeking other types of work or speaking much with family, all so that he could benefit from my isolation.

My partner coached me to expand my skill set, or rather boundaries, so that I could take on more clients. According to his logic, I was living in his home that he'd paid for, and I owed him a lot of money so naturally he should have full financial control. He was helping me to get work, and we were supposedly running this business together as a team and as a couple—so of course he should get half of all the earnings. My measly half didn't add up to much, as costs kept creeping up. Several busy months later, I was somehow still paying him back. He just wanted to keep milking his cash cow.

He wasn't a person of color, wearing a thick gold chain, driving a cool car, or any other common stereotype that people might have about pimps. And I wasn't glamorous, feminine or sexually confident. I was an awkward, queer autistic kid with a penchant for kink, which I'd turned into a side hustle while trying to not fail university. He doesn't deserve a description or possible humanization.

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I hope he rots in the excrement of his own actions. My point is: like all forms of domestic violence, it can happen to anyone at any time. And it often happens without anyone else around being able to spot the signs.

Fast forward several horrible years.

One day, I was out grocery shopping when I received a phone call. Luckily I was allowed to talk to this friend. Thanks to her being a distant relative, she wasn't perceived to be a sexual or romantic threat. But she was already on thin ice, as she'd once mentioned feminism. I double-checked that I had privacy, since he often followed me and watched me, listened in on my calls, and looked through my computer and phone. She casually mentioned a queer cabaret night, and something about sex workers doing a performance. Neither of us had any idea in that moment that this show would change the rest of my life.

I hadn't heard of the Sex Worker's Opera, let alone the phrase "sex work," and I wondered whether it might apply to me. I felt nervous, unable to google anything. My unease stemmed from the thought of being around people a bit like me. My recent experiences of providing paid sexual services had been awful, and I wasn't ready to talk about it. And maybe I wasn't ready to hear others talk about it either.

But the show must go on. My cover story worked out, and I safely arrived with my wingwoman. We snuck into the backseats and joined the audience. I had no idea what to expect, but with a sudden flourish of a clarinet and violin, the starlets had arrived. All at once they were eloquent and funny, polished and messy, plain and pretty,

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sensitive and brash, male and female, youthful and older, and queer and disabled and gender bending and camp and stoic and soulful, and resoundingly normal.

My problematic misconception had been that all hookers must fully adorn themselves with massive boobs, hair extensions, heavy makeup, and sky high heels; a sort of self-objectification because they just love sex, or at least love being paid for it. Perhaps it was a way of distancing myself from the reality of what I was doing, since it was so far from this notion of sexual empowerment, sexual agency or public displays of supposed sluttiness. Bear in mind that I'd never knowingly met a sex worker, or seen any cultural representations of sex workers that I could relate to.

Sex Worker's Opera schooled me in a lot more than my first impressions. In their upbeat opening song, they somehow explained that sex work is a choice, that sex work is criminalized and stigmatized, and that while everyone may have an opinion on it, sex workers' perspectives should come first due to their lived experience and insight. A bonus verse looked at feminism, and gave a roundup of the main prohibitionist rants versus the main pro sex work arguments. A jazzy, sultry piece was next, which featured some of the same BDSM services that I offered. A dominatrix hammered home several points about choice, and consent. This was followed by a strip club scene, with dancers in dialogue about creepy male bosses and crappy working conditions. It seemed that the characters liked the dancing, but not the club.

Each of these songs got me thinking about my own work. My clients were mostly lovely. It wasn't the work

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that was the problem, it was the conditions of the work that were the problem. These conditions created a coercive situation, and I was sick of it. The stigma surrounding sex work had kept me quiet, since fears of how I'd be judged or treated made it harder for me to articulate my situation or ask for help.

I started to think about choice, and how it shifted when I was operating under pressure. Pushing through my own discomfort didn't sound like consent, even if my actions were linked to someone I cared for. Ironically I'd developed pretty good communication skills around limits with my submissive clients, and I could intuitively read their expressions to know what felt right for them. It dawned on me that I'd gone so far beyond my own gut warnings about what felt safe for me, that I needed to remember and reconnect to this part of myself.

After so much isolation in a shitty situation, watching the show meant that I was experiencing something that I could make sense of that might also make me feel understood. I don't want to conflate sex work with trafficking, but given my situation the show did make me feel less alone. That night, I got a sense that I deserved better and that I should protect myself from things getting worse. A brief moment of clarity cut through years of trauma, as I could start to see that none of this was my fault.

This is the power of community, and art. And community-led art. A project like this has so many unspoken outcomes, as it can reach people and change their hearts, minds and lives in ways that we may never find out. Live performance took the shortcut to my feelings, and it's hard to imagine how I would've gained this insight elsewhere when I didn't even know where to look.

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Reading the show's accompanying booklet of diverse, complex stories helped me to let go of my internalized stereotypes, like the ultra-glam happy hooker. Plenty of sex workers have an alternative style or service, many are entirely uninterested in their clients' dicks or sexual capabilities and just want to feed their kid (or cat). The stories also challenged any whorephobia that I'd had against myself, to work towards self-acceptance.

The Sex Worker's Opera cast might have seemed super relatable and real, but they might also be secret sex worker superheroes. Being surrounded by a bunch of radiant queer sex worker artists was infectious. The performers were so free with each other, getting high on each other's sensuousness, playfulness and joy. The audience was eating out of their hands, devouring every moment of their storytelling, song and dance. Through every stage of the show's emotional journey they kept the audience onside, and a little bit in love.

As the show finished, I had goosebumps and a sense of belonging. Claps and cheers swelled and filled the room to a standing ovation. The cast and musicians were bowing and blowing kisses in return. My friend gently gripped my hand and said: "You should go talk to them."

The cast spilled out into the bar, and I said: "Hi." I told them that I was a sex worker, as if I'd said it a thousand times before. I mentioned that their show was the first sex work representation that I'd been able to relate to. I thanked them and we hugged. Drinks were drunk. It was Pride that day in London. They invited me to join their Pride and post-show party. Swept up in their after-show afterglow, I switched off my phone and joined them for a beautiful, blurry night of bondage bonding experiences.

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The project was in its infancy, so I offered to help with something practical like making a website. Instead they invited me to hang out at their next rehearsal day, in a totally low-key way. I turned up because I knew they were welcoming and warm, and I could get involved on my own terms: anonymously and without expectations. I trusted the directors, we'd become firm friends. And their trust in me meant a lot; their belief in my capabilities stood in for my own. This support plus my sex work money-making-mantra: "Fake it till you make it" got me into my stripper heels, to step out onto the stage for the first time.

Fast forward several wonderful years.

I went on to play a key character in the Sex Worker's Opera during its first full theater run, and as it toured around the country and the world for several years. I submitted an anonymous story to the project's bank of over a hundred global sex worker stories that form the basis of the show, and I co-devised a scene around it. The project originally started in 2014, so we are now ten years old and we feel like a family. Our next dream is to create Sex Worker's Opera: The Movie!

I developed a lot of confidence through performing with the Sex Worker's Opera. Small conversations here and there about our daily lives as sex workers gave me the reality check I needed. The friends I made along the way led me to a community that had my back, as I figured out my situation. I found ways to see clients independently and save up a secret emergency fund, until I was ready to leave and build a new life for myself.

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I currently work from my own BDSM studio, which I also run as an affordable space for sex workers and queers. It is located pretty much next door to the venue where I first saw and met the Sex Worker's Opera. I am a live artist, filmmaker, writer and editor who is always ready to talk about the transformative power of community, community spaces and community arts.

Kaiden Ford

The Truth

Kaiden Ford is a sex working artist, working with dance, physical self-discovery, poetry, books, film and the rare art of “just being.”

As I sat there in bed being paid by the hour explaining my desperation to try to pay my rent, my client responded, “you must remember there are millions of millionaires in this world yet only a small percentage of people who have what you have. You must make sure you capitalize on that.” I was completely in shock that this man saw so much potential in me. And that had such an influence on me. I suddenly understood sex work wasn’t a money game. The money is the most insignificant thing to gain from this... I came to realize I was in bed with the 1 percent. The amount of knowledge, life hacks, and a little insider trading that was shared as pillow talk was a lot more valuable. These people became more of my friends than my actual friends. They wanted to help me, they wanted to see me thrive, and they never questioned me. I was seen for me. I’ve been judged by my friends, their parents, and kicked out of places because of who I am.

Why is me having sex with 3 people a month for money looked so down upon, but having sex with 25 people a month off of a hook up app deemed socially acceptable? Why is me getting tested multiple times a month made to feel dirty? Yet many people haven’t seen the inside of a clinic, but many other people have seen the inside of them. There’s nothing wrong with either, I just wish people would see. I shall never fit into your expectations of me. I was not put on this earth to fulfill the void in your soul. I am me, pretty as can be.



Kaiden Ford

Billionaire Beneath my Bed

The orchestra started playing
The music blocks out his sounds,
the stories he tells.
Afraid of it all
Something just wasn't right
I lay my head on his ankle
The symphony gets louder
He gets harder
I go softer
I look aimlessly into the darkness.
I was there, the actress of it all
The spotlight was on me, he couldn't find me
The violin solo begins, and I knew I wasn't alone
They are creatures of habit no morals would allow it
Billionaire beneath my bed I wish you the best



The Majestree

Desexualization of Disabled Queers

The Majestree (she/tree) is a disabled erotic performer and a lesbian dominatrix for men.

As a disabled lesbian dominatrix for men and a queer erotic performer, I am many complementary and conflicting identities in one. It makes my position different from the others and I can clearly feel and notice the discomfort when I make non-disabled people aware of their privilege in their already-stigmatized position as a sex worker.

This discomfort is a daily occurrence for disabled people. This discomfort is never far away and reveals to us how our position in this society differs greatly from the non-disabled population. While it brings non-disabled people in a position that they are not used to, conversations around disability are, for disabled folks, actually a necessity to establish a somewhat “normal” existence in a world where we are always an afterthought or not even thought about.

How can we guarantee freedom for everyone and every body when the structures at base exclude bodies and minds that differ from the norm? How do we challenge existing ideas of attractiveness and embrace revolutionary practices of body positivity and sexual freedom in a society that is fundamentally ableist?

We actually always exclude, still chasing pretty privilege, that is, privileging abled bodies and minds that function neurotypically.

Desexualization of Disabled Queers

The queer and sex worker communities challenge existing narratives, coming from a place of wanting to belong and expand, to rise above and make a change that lasts. The collaborations between communities that arise from this behavioral change create an interesting combination of identities and oppressions alike.

With the normalization of sexuality, physical pleasure is often viewed as a space where mind, heart and soul can align in total harmony and chaos. Being in spaces where people explore their boundaries and expressing emotions and desires that were never allowed in other spaces, creates an absolutely valuable and needed connection between people who can enjoy and are welcomed in those spaces.

Unfortunately, with the rise of these new structures and what we believe they hold and give, we make the struggle of disabled people once again invisible as we are not actively talking about these realities and spinning in our bubble of revolutionary privilege.

In a society where societal norms often dictate what is deemed acceptable or desirable, the desexualization of disabled people remains an often overlooked issue. From ingrained social barriers to institutional narratives, eugenics and laws made to degrade and reduce disabled people to a medical burden, the journey to discovering and embracing one's sexuality as a disabled person is extremely complicated and, for many, an impossible personal narrative.

To combine this with the almost-revolutionary progress the (non-disabled) queer community is trying to achieve, is again a barrier for disabled queers that is

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overlooked and forgotten, resulting in total exclusion and non-participation.

As a disabled lesbian myself who performs in drag, was a dominatrix for men and now is an erotic performer in the queer scene, I recognize the differences in myself before and after my disability came to fruition, as well as how my queer community reacts and interacts with me. I suddenly realized the inaccessibility of spaces which were first my holy grail and dating became more of a task.

I became less and less of a human being and more of an object of shame. Ableism became an immense part of my life, basically the moment my butt sat down in my wheelchair. I've always been confident as a person but as my identity changed to an object for non-disabled people to pity, I struggled. Suddenly I was reduced to non-sexual, no longer a woman, a useless waste of space, just a burden.

Not queer.

I wished I could tell you that I overcame this narrative immediately, middle finger in the air, "I am who I am, I don't care," but this would be a reduction of the disabled reality and experience going through a system that is designed to remove disability entirely from this society.

I struggled hard and I still do.

And this is only my personal experience, from someone who developed a disability later in life, having experienced the non-disabled privilege most of my childhood and teenage years, which creates a whole different experience than disabled people who are born with ableism weighing on them immediately, reducing them

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to an medical object, reducing even human touch to the solely medical.

Let's break down some of the systemic problems which make the disabled experience entirely different from non-disabled people coming to terms with sexual freedom.

As medicalization of disabled individuals is extremely normalized, disabled people frequently encounter physical and social environments that are not designed with them in mind. From inaccessible buildings to limited transportation options, educational systems that are not designed for neurodivergence or learning difficulties and the frequency of institutionalization instead of personal assistance and individual choice.

These barriers not only restrict mobility but deny disabled people the idea of independence and agency over their own life, creating an enormous barrier that is totally out of the control of the disabled person and prevents them from participating fully in social and sexual activities.

The narrative perpetuated by media, healthcare and education plays a significant role in the desexualization of disabled individuals. We're portrayed as asexual beings or devoid of sexual desires, viewing any form of sexual expression as a shameful or problematic outburst of the disabled person, instead of a human need. Sexual agency is not considered part of a disabled experience.

The consequences of desexualization extend far beyond the physical realm, deeply impacting the mental well-being of disabled individuals. Constantly being bombarded with messages that undermine their sexuality and identity as a human being, many struggle with feelings

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of isolation, inadequacy, and a profound sense of alienation from their own bodies and the human experience.

Navigating sexuality as a disabled person comes with its own set of challenges, ranging from physical limitations to societal stigma, inaccessible sexual health resources, lack of education and limited representation increase these difficulties, leaving many lost and unsupported in the (queer) journey towards sexual self-discovery.

As the sex worker and queer community expands and blossoms with all their different identities and intersectionalities, the necessity for accessibility, full inclusion and understanding of disabled people and our particular complicated position in this society and the queer community, is really overdue. To combat this stigma around disability and (queer) sexual identity, concerted efforts are needed to promote inclusivity and dismantle harmful stereotypes. Because desexualization of disabled individuals is not only a matter of personal preference or societal taboo. It is a fundamental denial of humanity and agency.

By acknowledging and challenging the barriers and narratives that create this harmful stereotype as a community, we can create a more inclusive and affirming society in which all individuals, regardless of disability and their status in this society, can thrive and unite in.

We, as a community and as human beings, cannot afford to exclude and deny such a big part of our own community. The responsibility should be shared and carried by the group at large. By being an ally, doing research about ableism and holding ourselves and our peers accountable, we can expand as a community.

Desexualization of Disabled Queers

The narrative of “only non-disabled people can be sexual and sex workers” is over, as there are many crips ready to dance, explore and fuck things up, like everyone else. So, next time while climbing the stairs, stepping into your inaccessible window, going to the non-disabled toilet, looking at your online advertisement for your event without image description or subtitles on your videos, think about who you are excluding, and if you can truly justify segregation like this while claiming to be intersectional and for everyone.

Whoring Art: Creating at the Intersection of Sex & Money

“Hey honey, wanna come visit?”

My colleague has been working the windows for some time, and smoking for longer. The slight huskiness of her voice carries itself on the light breeze that drifts between the outside world of the alleyway and the darkened, red hue of the brothel room.

“Hey darling, how are you?”

She greets nearly every passerby, gracefully and with an ambient, loving charm that doesn't seem to fade between when she starts her shift at 10 am and wraps up in the evening at seven. Even the occasional “fuck you!” or quarrel with the more unruly clients is dealt with gracefully, and with a professional distance. She giggles, sings along to the ABBA tune that grainily fades through her iPhone speaker. I hear the flick of her lighter as she brings another cigarette to her perfectly plump lips.

Meanwhile, I am clunky and clumsily stirring around in my boots, pounding on the window at tourists who raise their iPhones at eye height, whose digital worlds meet my workplace through the mobile camera lens, “1... 2... 3... captured!”

I guess you don't have to go to a museum to see bad art about prostitutes anymore.

There I am, framed in my window, captured by the tourist camera and teleported from my canal-view room in Amsterdam through digital worlds: Instagram captions, WhatsApp messages, and Facebook posts. Sometimes I try to give them at least a little show:

Whoring Art

a middle finger or two, or simply plant my fingers in a “V” formation before my lips and give them a nice, long lick. I like to save the latter specifically for the omas that stare a little too long.

Our typical mechanism to keep tourists off our backs and us off their social media feeds is an array of water guns, that range in size from small hand-held devices to super-soakers. Instead of the pool toys, this time I ask the window-operator on duty to bring down a few pieces of paper, a marker, some tape.

“Thanks for indulging my art project,” I tell them jadedly.

“Can’t wait to see what you make,” they wink and leave me again to my devices.

“NOT UR PRETTY PICTURE,” I write in bold, “I’M NOT A TOURIST ATTRACTION, I AM A WORKER!,” and tape it to the door.

The line between sex work as work and sex work as art can be a thin and undefined edge; one that cuts between what is considered respectable and what is not. In its most reductive form, the equation unfolds like this: art is good and cultured, sex work is bad and dirty. Usually the two cannot mix and remain mutually exclusive, in the sense that sex workers are not acknowledged as valid cultural producers.

Rather, sex work as work is something to be ashamed of, a reason to be discriminated against, a basis for stigmatization. For such tangible work, sex work carries an intangible cultural and artistic heritage. Or rather, an unacknowledged one.

However, when a prostitute is captured by the male gaze, the man-artist’s eye—or now, even, by the tourist’s

phone camera—they are once more a neat subject, captured, framed. A tamed, docile subject that is not a threat. A safe distance away. Contained.

How can the sex worker speak, if the only recognized position—or subject/tion—they can occupy in order to be seen is that of oil paint on canvas or through the illumination of a phone screen? Why are sex workers ever really seen from the male gaze still, a framing that is certainly not our own? We are expected to wait nicely in our windows, undulating through the hyperreal. Representations merging with matter, tamed and tempered.

This desire to contain prostitutes is not a new or unfamiliar concept, however. It extends as far back as the Spinhuis—a penitentiary system in which street workers were made to spin yarn on display as punishment for simply being whore. It extends into our present moment, positioned as Amsterdam’s proposed Erotic Center, where sex workers are forcibly displaced from their traditional workspaces in De Wallen, in a red, glowing prison-like structure on the edge of town. Why are we only seen when we are captured?

Toni Cade Bambara, Black feminist artist and filmmaker once said: “the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.”

I don’t know if my colleague would consider her hooking as art, but I do know that all the “honeys” and “darlings” and “sweethearts” that visit her, find her irresistible, revolutionary even: the puff of smoke that escapes her lips when she lures them to her door, the black jewel detailing on her salmon-pink bikini, the way she piles her blonde hair into a bun on the top of her head in a scrunchie. How she can greet customers in at

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least four different languages, turn them on their heads, give them a hot time, and leave them wanting more. How she can be calm and cool and collected and sexy, even while stringing together breathy coos and spells, to even the most inept men.

All for pay.

For that reason, I would dare call the hustle an art form. Sex workers are the weavers of worlds; we are conjurers of connection, charmers, aesthetes, wordsmiths. And, in fact, we are very adept at defining and composing ourselves, without the intervention of the external artist or tourist mediating our subjectivity.

A Chicago Reader article on the collision of sex work and art quotes Julia Bryan-Wilson from her book *Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work Since the 1970s*:

Given the amounts of money that continue to change hands in the art market—a culture of seductive commerce that flies in the face of the current worldwide recession, described in broadly sexual terms as “overheated,” “frenzied,” or “near a climax”—art is widely recognized as libidinal, desirous, and transactional.¹

Tell me that doesn't sound like whoring to you?

Maybe the story of my colleague here was, after all, just a libidinous attempt to sell what I am trying to ask you: is sex work art? Meanwhile, for many who do define themselves as artists: sex work is the way to make ends meet while also focusing on their art. Annie Sprinkle, Nan Goldin, David Wojnarowicz are a few of many more that come to mind. Whether to the contentment of gallery owners or museum directors, or not:

the art and sex world collide. Where competitive arts grants run out... clients invest and support our creative endeavors and help us reach towards our futures. I won't come to an easy conclusion as to whether sex work is work or art. Art is also work, a hustle under capitalism. And in that case, we should feel obliged to—at the very least—be comrades with one another.

The container of sex work is slippery, un-governable, and restless most of the time; its indefinability is also what creates the charm and lure around it. The same can be said of art: its elusive nature creates and propels our curiosity towards different, other-wise worlds and imaginaries. What I do know, in my own time being a whore, is that the creative genius—the resourcefulness, resilience, and even revelatory nature of sex workers, and specifically my queer and trans* sex working colleagues and friends—is a deep well of inspiration to me, and a medicine. A gentle balm for those days when I want to throw in the towel and go back to civilian life. I see my friends scrape together the ruins of hetero-cis sexuality, turn it on its head. Reappropriate it. Earn a buck, pay the bills.

If I wasn't doing sex work, I think I would not be here. I would not be able to afford film or developing costs; nor to support my friends in jail, nor cover costs at community events when things always seem to run more costly than expected. Sex work affords me the time now to write this text to present to you.

I am not going to leave you with a clear answer on whether sex work is art or not. Such a clear definition is too easy for you! And after all, I believe in making people work for rewards. It's a part of my job. What

Whoring Art

I will give up is this: sex work as art is not just a framed image of the male-gaze prostitute; sex work as art is a creative force to be reckoned with: as the hustle nourishes and feeds many of the lives of creatives, supports their artistic drive, and pays the bills long enough till the next project is done.

This text was first written for Amsterdam Art Week 2024 and presented to a dinner for members of the Young Stedelijk at No Limits! Art Caste in Sexyland Noord.





Odisea

My Body is A Gun

My body was always a tool

My sensuality

My sexuality

My body is a gun

I don't care I will be your fuckin cliché

If in the end I'll get what I want

Una amiga once told me during an interview I did to her:

She said something like “erotic capital”

Erotic capital

Erotic

Money

World

For me, someone who grew up next to a lake salted
with the blood of a “matadero” (a slaughter), this
was the key

My friend who is my life's mother also told me over and
over again: stop doing it for free

Stop doing it for free

Stop doing it for free

My Body is A Gun

Stop doing it for free
My body is the key

At that moment Berlín never was an option
The world never was

This is not a poem, these are words of gratitude to my
friend and my body, my sensuality and to all the
profane entities that my friend prayed to for a differ-
ent future for both of us

Now that we are in that future that we prayed so much
to all heretical entities, life is boring without them,
we were always closer to fairies than to the religious
beliefs that come from heterosexual cis white men

I think of **Tlazolteotl**, the Aztec goddess of lust, sex and
pleasure, goddess of whores, sex workers

I think of the fairies,

I think of Pomba Gira,

I think of Iemanjá

All the profane entities my friend prayed to

Of course I would rather be a heretic than worshipping
a god who only commits horrors, wars, genocide

Genocide
Genocide

Odisea

A god who fears sensuality and pleasure, freedom, not
only fears it, he also punishes

A god who is tyrannical and used to justify horrors,
massacres, a god who is the god of sadness

I ran away from that god

I ran away from everything that was expected of me

until I became a fairy who worships the profane

**“Y ahora soy tan profano y usted, quién diría, sagrado
amor”**

Yes maybe all fairies love Satan

fairies that migrated

fairies that crossed the ocean

fairies who used their bodies in a sinful way

very sexy empowered fairies

Yes all fairies love Satan

Yes all fairies love Satan

Yes all fairies love Satan

for you this dance offering

My Body is A Gun

For existing

And for the thanks

And remember your body's a gun!

Kaiden Ford

Welcome to the Game

Welcome to the game

An opportunity stands in front of me

A path laid to help those behind me

How does one use sex work for the greater good?

Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor a robinhood
from behind the sheets and not on the streets

A golden ticket.

A seat at the table to help those less fortunate than me

How does one say no to such a beautiful gift.

Life is a beautiful thing you see. Troublesome nonetheless,
but all too fun for me. I wear this hat very proudly.
But this hat wasn't something that was given to me,
you see! It's something I earned. A badge I wear
proudly on my chest for all to see. This isn't for you
nor is this for me. This is the path brutally paved by
my sisters before me.

My art isn't just for me, it's a story for those after me.
A happy ending for them all to see. The beautiful
creature that is in front of thee is

who I share with you, who I want to be.



Re-imagining the Red Light: Radical Prostitute Imaginaries

Why is re/imagining Red Light Districts important? And who gets to re/Imagine? To echo an earlier text, sex and sex in the city will always exist. Sex work, in some formation, too, will always exist—come hell, high water, or even the end of capitalism. We have seen in Amsterdam throughout centuries of shifting empires and regimes—and therefore different flavors of tyranny over sex work and Red Light spaces—that despite all municipal and national regulations, sex work and its spaces have persisted. As it exists currently, De Wallen encapsulates the scourges of modernity and capitalism: over-consumption, compulsory heterosexuality, condensed and stuffy living conditions, municipal overreach and bureaucratic interventions, the echoes of patriarchy rattling about the streets at 4 am.

Catharsis aside, the reality is that the construction of modern, liberal Red Light

Districts does not take into account workers' wishes, desires or dreams. Instead, liberal municipalities assume that a prostitute would only ever hope to exit or escape sex work. Whore-futurity, then, is a very political and disputed concept.

Who would dare imagine a whore-future, who would dare dream to be a whore when they grow up? To create and make spaces for whores, in physical reality and in the ranks of society? Have you really never encountered a dominatrix, a stripper, a window or street worker, a porn actor or escort, and not been seduced by their power, beauty, wit, charm or cunning? Perhaps even wanted these qualities for yourself?

In the midst of these questions, the push-and-pull, the neo/liberalism of the city grinds on. And these policies, restrictions and anti-whore imaginaries are intentionally designed to push us out, not only of the collective, societal imaginary, but our home in De Wallen, too. Through an arduous, bureaucratic process and in the name of "uplift," municipalities obliterate our workplaces, community spaces, and culture

along in the dust clouds that billow off the construction sites of former prostitution windows. Sex work becomes as see-through as the ether, as empty and transparent as a shut-down window.

In their essay, “Whoring In Utopia,” Pat Califia writes in the tenor of cruel optimism, “the halcyon, golden days of prostitution may be happening right now.”¹ Pat encourages us to get a few hundred bucks from the nearest ATM and run down to the Red Light District, as quickly as we can, before it’s too late. Before it’s all gone. The same tone of cruel optimism rings down the hollowed, empty, and dark alleyways of the Sint Annenkwartier. And, in any case, the workers on shift wouldn’t mind the extra euros. However while you’re there, ask yourself: what would this space be, were it up to whores to self-determine? This section is a nod to possible imaginaries of whore futures.



Jeanne van Heeswijk

To Get Intimate With the Church

Jeanne van Heeswijk is an artist who facilitates the transformation of public spaces in order to radicalize the local.

It's OK...

a space to not be OK

For difficult conversations

To reconnect, interconnect present past future

To pause

To share different realities

We sell reality

To not be documented

To take time

To chisel time

Tectonic time

To have conversations

[to hold them]

It's OK...

To celebrate sex work

To queer the Oude Kerk

To be longing

different belongings

To get intimate with the Church

To get intimate in the Church

Calibrating intimacies

Space rituals

It's OK...

To ask for consent

[please do not use my picture]

It's OK...

[do you want a private dance?]

It's Ok... to gather

It's Ok... together

It's OK... to doubt

convictions, belongings

To question assumptions

To process

To clean up what I messed up

To start over and over again,

[and again and again]

Ring the freedom bell

[when wars rage on]

It's OK...

To not fit a box

[your box]

To listen

Even when it gets complex

To question neighborhood plans

Asking for whose future

To work the neighborhood

To not use the "D" and "I" words

Amid differences

It's OK...

To honor who shows up

Who can't

Who won't

Fit bureaucratic measures

It's OK... to take space

To make (it) public

Make public

Safer... [for us]

To be

Jeanne van Heeswijk

you/them/they,
us in multiple configurations
angry, sad, upset,
wondering, belonging,
welcoming.

Welcome
to bring yourself
and what and whom you love
as we are Sacred

It's OK... commoning uncertainties and narrating different realities, a multiple-year collective art project, critically engaged the Oude Kerk as a place of "refuge" (and sanctuary). both historically, in the present and in its future(s), looking into how refuge connects to processes of care and embodied solidarities of the civic. Care here can be understood not only as self-care, but as the aim to create safer spaces to become collective. From May 26 May to 24 September 2023 different collective formations researched and tested how and in what way the Oude Kerk can become a center of refuge again, where culture, healing and community spirituality encourage communities of care.



A Conversation About Representation and Sex Work

Jan Hoek is an artist and writer who collaborates intensively with people that are often treated as outsiders.

Mercy I wanted to ask a little bit about you, yourself as an artist, and also your positionality with regard to sex work and also how that's evolving. And I'd love for you to talk about your project, *Sistaaz of the Castle*.

Jan When I graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, I made my first steps into the art world in the field of photography. My work then was about the relationship between photographer and model. The tension between them, the awkwardness, the different expectations both groups can have. In the beginning, I was exploring the moments when it goes wrong. Now, I am more focused on finding strategies in which I can collaborate constructively and equitably with other groups.

Sistaaz of the Castle is a photography and fashion design project with the activist group of sex workers from Cape Town called SistaazHood. They're almost all homeless trans sex workers. I did the project with Duran Lantink, a fashion designer. And in that work, you can raise the question: to which extent do you need to belong to a group before you can photograph them?

I think that, historically, they always said that a photographer is like a fly on the wall, it's like a neutral identity. But I think that's really an old-fashioned way to look





"OH 'DOOD
"I WANT THIS IS GOOD"

A Conversation

at it, because it ignores the fact that a photographer is never neutral and many photographers are still straight, male, Western and highly educated.

In reaction to that theory of neutrality, there was a movement from people within their own communities to represent themselves. And that's something I mainly support. But I still think there is an element, a nice thing from photography, that you can also meet other people who are unlike you in many ways. Groups and people who are further away from you. And I think that you reach a point of understanding that no one is exactly like you, because you are always an intersection of many things.

I think for me, in order to photograph someone, you maybe need to be connected or clear about your relationship you have with the topic or the person you are photographing, and that's where it becomes interesting. But this is also a question I want to ask back to you because you are a very active sex worker, but you are also much more than that. You do different kinds of sex work, but you're also a community organizer, have a degree in philosophy. And then when you photograph someone, in which sense do you think that people should be from your community or should look like you? How different can they be, and how do you decide that?

M My work originates a bit differently. You're right, I am a sex worker of six years. Almost seven years. And I am a community organizer. But my relationship to photography itself reaches far beyond that of sex work. I started taking photographs when I was really young and became obsessed with making images. I started back up again when I moved to Berlin.

I was actually surprised by how pervasive sex work was in Berlin. Before I moved, I was living a lot in rural communities and I had friends who were like sugar babies here and there, but never people who were career sex workers, or did sex work as their main income. So I started working with queer, trans, and non-binary sex workers because they were around me and there was just a practical need for profile photos and I was like, yeah, I can help you with that! I was lucky at that time I had a big apartment and living with a bunch of other queer people. I could use the living room space as a makeshift studio and I started taking photos of people who were also queer and trans and sex working.

So I wanted to create a lot of space for autonomy around people's ability to step outside how they identify, and into a persona that they maybe just use for work purposes. I get it, because I also work as a different gender than my own.

So that's my relationship to both sex workers and making images of sex workers as a community thing, risen out of practicality. In terms of photographing people that I am not close to in terms of positionality, I definitely do feel more precautionary because I know that the camera itself becomes an actor in a way. There's such a long strand of violence that comes with the camera as a voyeuristic tool, whether that's in a colonial context or orientalizing context, or simply people who are still making photographs of sex workers, where you know the photographer benefits from being able to capture the sex worker without the sex worker being able to do anything.





A Conversation

Could you explain a little bit more, in depth, the project of *Sistaaz of the Castle*, and how you negotiated your relationality to one another?

J With the *Sistaaz*, it really started from a different point. Me and Duran were already friends and wanted to collaborate. We were thinking of who'd be the most interesting people to collaborate with. We kept thinking about fashion and movies, the people we see in the magazines... that they are always so boring. Then when researching, we saw somewhere on the internet a picture of two sex workers in South Africa and it was quite clear. We thought *these* two should be the people that are in the magazines. These women should be the style icons. Instead of all these white European models that are normally style icons.

So we started to contact them and found out that there was a whole organization called *SistaazHood* with 30 girls. We arranged to visit them in Cape Town and from there, there was a whole process. When we approached them they said that they would meet us, but not promise us anything. They were very clear they would only go through with a project if there was something in it for them.

Outside of sex work, the *Sistaaz* make their own outfits. All of them are designers. Because we had a fashion angle they were really enthusiastic. This whole side about their creativity and the art they made never got acknowledged, so the focus on their creativity is something they really liked. They said if we wanted to collaborate, however, we'd first have to get to know everyone. That all 30 *Sistaaz* should have the feeling they are involved. They

requested first a workshop where they could make clothes and that I would photograph them. So we did it. We came with a lot of materials, and they made outfits. I made school yearbook-like pictures from them, a sort of royal portraits. Just their face and their shoulders.

It turned out that this whole workshop was a test. They tested us to see if we were respectful, but also if in the photography, that we were not trying to sexualize them. From that trust, our collaboration developed. They said, okay, now you can photograph individual members, but we will call them ambassadors. As an ambassador, individual Sistaaz also represented the other girls.

We ended up following six of the Sistaaz for more photos. There was always the group leader with them during shoots. They were so organized and so keen on their process. It was important for them that we wanted to do the whole project and shared the copy right, so we decided to do this project under completely shared authorship. Meaning that if we make money, it wouldn't be charity. If we make money, we all make money, it's shared. And if there is an opportunity to do something with the pictures, we're all able to decide to do it or not.

Since we negotiated shared authorship and built trust over time, navigating our differences wasn't so difficult. Also because sex work was not the main theme. It sometimes came to the front in a few pictures we took in places where they also brought customers. Sex work was not a secret, but it was more about their clothes and fashion. And I think in that we found a sort of a common ground and made it a community project.





A Conversation

I'm interested to know if you have some examples of photography projects around sex workers that were really not okay for you?

M I love also how sex work is not necessarily at the forefront of the Sistaaz series. Capturing "sex work" can be an easy and glitzy default to fall into. It's the sex. It's very easy to capture people's attention through sex and sexuality. I think that something altogether different happens when you choose to put that equally in the mix of other identities, or on the back burner even.

To answer your question: last winter I was walking towards Zeedijk from Oudezijds Achterburgwal, and all of a sudden I see this glowing image coming out from what was most recently a small shop, a clothing boutique. This glowing, computer-generated image of a woman. She was sitting down in her brothel chair and looking around at people. And it took me a while to realize, oh, it's not a real person. It's like a LED image. Actually, the police department of Amsterdam had gone out of their way to create this fake brothel window at the very north end of the of the Oudezijds, on a building undergoing construction work. They used this construction as an opportunity to create this image of a young sex worker, and young mother, who was murdered in 2009.

Her name was Betty and she was from Hungary and the optics were just astounding. I was so infuriated that anything like this could be produced about sex work. Around the hologram, they had an installation of the history of her death, which also included very violent images of her murder scene, right where women are trying to work literally a few doors down. It was maddening

to me. I thought this is not how we should be remembering Betty. We should be honoring her, not presenting her as a cold case to the general public and tourists.

Recently, I had my photo taken for the City Archive in Amsterdam. And I remember being very like, okay, show me your other work. I want to know what you've done. But then this person had taken stunning pictures of Toni Morrison and Tupac and Allen Ginsburg. And I was like, okay, check mark. I was impressed by their other work. They did take care. I think that element of *taking care* is very important.

And it sounds like that is the kind of approach that you have within the Sistaaz as well. Not that they were asking to be taken care of, right? But that they were interested in a kind of reciprocity and non-exploitative context. I think when there are multiple intersections on the table, approaching that moment of image making with mutuality and care and joint profit is important.

With your current project, *No Limits! Art Castle*, being a kind of intermediary between different marginalized groups and also the high art world, what kind of projects do you see for yourself, going into the future? What kinds of challenges in the representation of sex workers do you see?

J I don't photograph so much anymore. And in that sense, the way I work now with sex workers is much more from my role within *No Limits! Art Castle*, where I do projects with sex workers, with people like you, where sex workers also represent themselves and tell their own stories.









A Conversation

I feel sometimes I want to do more photography projects for myself again, though. And I think it would be so nice to make a series about clients. I haven't really seen that. I think only in the States I saw one series, I think from Susan Meiselas. She managed to photograph customers in a brothel. I think there's another stigma on the clients of sex workers. Even a lot of my progressive, left-voting friends who are pro-sex worker rights, still stereotype clients as old and ugly. So, I think there's still a lot of sentiment that creates like a good-sex-worker-and-bad-client narrative.

I do think I look like an average client, because I am one. But I also think that the stereotype of an average client is maybe very different than me. So I hope that will be my next step, to photograph clients. But it's so difficult to find these clients who are willing to be photographed. I tried in Bangkok, but that it was impossible! I just didn't manage, because no one wanted to be photographed. I had sex workers helping me and asking clients, if they wanted. But I have the feeling that here in Amsterdam, I would manage better.

Adanya Dunn

Re/imagining the Future Through the Past: Against Appropriation & Toward Sex Work Arts and Culture

Sex has always been an integral part of urban life, and Amsterdam is no exception. Where people gather, sex inevitably weaves itself into the social fabric, becoming part of our collective story. Sex is threaded through my own journey of collaboration and community-building in unexpected ways.

Many don't realize that hundreds of artists and creatives call De Wallen's streets home and have for hundreds of years. Between government-subsidized ateliers, hidden galleries, work studios, arts and music student accommodations, and history... Creativity pulses through these narrow lanes alongside the red lights. And it's no coincidence that art and sex work are bound together, as they both slink around the narrow alleyways of this district.

Sex work and culture have always been dancing
together
In the shadows
In the spotlight
In the spaces between

When I look to re/imagine the Red Light District, I look to these lineages, these deep-rooted connections between art and sex work... reminding me that no creative expression

Re/imagining the Future through the Past

here exists in isolation: creativity is always an homage to its surroundings, and creativity is particularly attracted to those in whom sex has also carved out a notable role. We cannot re/imagine without first re/memorizing.

Look at fashion's trickle-up effect: underground night-life aesthetics becomes high-end trends (think Vivienne Westwood). Or the G-string and thong—birthed from bold expressions of sex workers and burlesque performers in the early 20th century... from underground clubs to mainstream streets. From tight-knit communities to pop culture icons. From practical necessity to fashion statement.

Each incarnation carries echoes of its origins.
(As if we could separate the art from its origins!)
Think of Storyville, New Orleans:

Jazz flowing from brothels and bar rooms
Lulu White's Mahogany Hall
Where music was more than entertainment—
It was resistance, amusement, pleasure, inception.

Music intertwining
Different worlds colliding

Race
Class
Art
Sex
Work

All creating something that would reshape music,
culture forever.

I like to see the “arts” as a subversive instrument,
a topically aesthetic and perhaps superficial tool
That simultaneously digs deep

Adanya Dunn

Makes space to
Plant seeds

In writing about re/imagining the red light
I know how sex workers have been
reimagining society
throughout history

Their contributions
appropriated
sanitized
popularized
mainstream-i-fied
Until their origins blur

But the essence remains:
pain and joy
defiance and risk
creativity and survival

What I envision is a Red Light District where communi-
ties come together
Each bringing their own gifts
Each acknowledging their lineages
Each recognizing that sex work
culture ripples far beyond
the window, a district, a picture frame,
a postcard...

And here we stand at the edges
On the contours
Interlacing multiple worlds
And weaving new ones

Re/imagining the Future through the Past

Acknowledging these intersections

Where art, culture, sex work—

all inseparable from one another—

Whether we choose to remember it or not—

Play a role in

transformation

remembrance

celebration

creation

A Red Light Spatial Manifesto: 10 Points on the Specificities of Red Light Spaces

1. Red Light Spaces are for Sex Workers

Red Light Spaces exist first and foremost to cater to sex workers' well-being and agency. They exist to support sex workers' ability to openly and safely interact with clients, facilitate negotiations, communications and transactions on their own terms, and to exist within their communities.

2. Red Light Spaces contain multitudes

Red Light Spaces are complex, layered, multi-faceted spaces where an array of communities intersect and overlap. These spaces hold many different life stories, lived experiences, and hold space for the spectrum of the city. This gives Red Light Spaces their richness, and specificity. Red Light Spaces cannot be flattened out.

3. Red Light Spaces are urban parentheses

Red Light Spaces are anchored in their urban context, and simultaneously serve as local microcosms. In these spaces, a play unfolds, away from the usual social norms, with its own backdrop and scripts. Each person stepping on stage becomes, knowingly or unknowingly, a character playing a specific role assigned—client, visitor, worker, resident, partner... Red Light Spaces are a stage for performance.

A Red Light Spatial Manifesto

4. Red Light Spaces hold a mirror to society

Red Light Spaces are the first to resonate with the echoes of social unrest and societal changes. They reflect, within the margins of their condensed intensity, the transformations of policies, the increasingly conservative laws and rise of a moralist policing of bodies. Think reproductive rights, rights of disabled folks, trans* rights, rights to protest. What happens here eventually happens everywhere, and sets a precursor for the world at large, for better and for worse.

5. Red Light Spaces exist in myth and reality, in the banal and the extraordinary

Red Light Spaces exist in the worldwide collective imaginary as a symbol, a myth shaped by cumulative projections of fantasy, mystery and constructed narratives. Simultaneously, Red Light Spaces exist within the banal realm of the everyday. These spaces run on the daily business-as-usual and are anchored in the tangible reality of the mundane. When trying to tackle one side, policy makers tend to forget the other.

6. Red Light Spaces should be self-made, by and with sex workers

Red Light Spaces have historically always been redefining themselves and have been shaped by sex workers, their expertise and their evolving needs. All decisions taken about Red Light Spaces should be based on the lived experience and opinions of sex workers. Whether

organically implemented or artificially created, Red Light Spaces should be imagined, designed and built by sex workers and their comrades.

7. Red Light Spaces should be playgrounds for consensual experimentation and sexual discovery

Red Light Spaces should be safe places of exception where people can experiment, learn and discover different facets of themselves: empathy, care, queerness, kinks, beautiful debauchery in all its forms. Red Light Spaces should also hold space for other kinds of experimentation, like new forms of self-made, horizontal organizational structures and self-initiated community and cultural programs.

8. Red Light Spaces should be accessible and adaptive

Red Light Spaces should be made accessible to all bodies: dis/abled folks, trans* bodies, bodies of color, queer bodies, bodies that are hurting and bodies searching for pleasure. They should also be flexible and malleable spaces, which can adapt to the evolving needs of its users. It is crucial that these marginalized communities be included within these spaces and all the processes pertaining to them. This benefits not only sex workers in allowing them to safely and comfortably work in these spaces, but also clients with specific needs. Accessibility also means that Red Light Spaces should be, geographically, easily reachable and systematically connected, such as Amsterdam's central and integrated Red Light District, for example.



a parasol
as oblique
reference,
to Monet's
Lady
in a garden

a vase
of flowers
the bouquet of
which is at Paris



a tufted carpet
on its designated
plymth

A Red Light Spatial Manifesto

This ensures that Red Light Spaces stay visible, accessible and inclusive.

9. Red Light Spaces should stand for freedom and liberation

Red Light Spaces are inherently political spaces. They should be shaped to support sex workers' fight for their rights and for decriminalization, to resist gentrification and to support all marginalized communities in their fight for liberation. The intimate is, after all, political.

10. Red Light Spaces should hold space for forward-looking, hopeful narratives

Red Light Spaces should be places where actors feel free to rethink dominant and redundant narratives. Spaces of tension, social turmoil and catering to a single cis-het fantasy are frozen in their storylines and could benefit from new, disruptive and imaginative perspectives. Queering the script, making space for community care, for a variety of sex work needs, for different forms of (collective) pleasure away from the capitalist buzz of overconsumption, Red Light Spaces should be spaces that nurture creativity and future optimism, where people dare to dream and imagine...

More Sex, Less Halsema: Squatters and Sex Workers Against the Erotic Prison

Lev is part of the squatting collective Mokum Kraakt.

Just for a moment, I can see it all going terribly wrong, when the cop we're talking to, a neighborhood veteran with a hard and furrowed face, threatens to send in the riot squad. "I could consider that a barricade," he bristles, pointing at the lone wooden pallet someone has put across the alleyway. As a first-time police liaison, I'm nervous, but my comrade, who has done this many times before, is unfazed as she gets out her binder with images to show that the building we're standing in front of, a row of former sex work windows, has been occupied for a few days already. It takes a tense thirty minutes, then we manage to convince him to leave, and the riot squad stays home. I dial the burner of the people inside to let them know the action is a success, and when I look down the narrow street, a crowd of black-clad anarchists with flares in hand are losing their mind to *Murder on the Dancefloor*. It's a bizarre and joyful pairing.

Rewind a few weeks: Mokum Kraakt, the squatting collective I've been a part of, is about to be buried. Formed in 2021 to protest the housing crisis and the ongoing sale of the city to investment capital, we've squatted all over the city, but at this point we haven't pulled off an action in almost a year. A performative

More Sex, Less Halsema

funeral is proposed, but when we meet to discuss it, L, an early member of the group, skilfully redirects us towards a new action. “I’ve got the perfect target,” she says, “it’s in De Wallen.”

L’s focus is timely. Local news has been dominated by a controversial plan, championed by mayor Femke Halsema, to construct a so-called “Erotic Center” on the outskirts of the city. Once built, it would justify the removal of prostitution in the historical Red Light District, and the closure of the remaining sex work windows there—an intensification of the municipality’s long-standing policy of closing windows.

The target L identified has recently been acquired by Stadsgoed NV, a public-private partnership that buys up and refurbishes sex work windows for commercial use. The acquisitions are part of a concerted effort to “upgrade” the area, which despite no longer being nearly as dangerous and run-down as it was in the eighties and nineties of the previous century, still provides an anarchic counterpoint to the city center’s smoothness.

In that deliberate policy of gentrification, L sees a link with the politics of our previous actions. Tourism forms an added dimension in this: our first action protested the city’s overtourism, and the municipality’s failure or unwillingness to address it, as a factor in the housing crisis. But in De Wallen, the same problem is instrumentalized by the municipality itself: the closure of the windows is presented as necessary for combatting the large numbers of tourists that come to the Red Light District, even though research conducted by the city itself shows that closure would not result in a reduction in tourism. The goal is not to reduce tourism

but to gentrify it; the likely result, as L points out, can be seen on the opposite side of the city center, in the Negen Straatjes: a sterilized area that critic René Boer, in his book *Smooth City*, points to as a prime example of urban smoothness.¹ That's what Stadsgoed NV and the municipality have in mind for De Wallen.

We know the action can only work if we join forces with people from the Red Light District already involved in activism against its gentrification: the sex workers. A few days after we commit to the target, a small delegation ends up in the living room of M, a sex worker and organizer who works in De Wallen and has been involved in activism against the erotic center and the closure of the windows. Together we make a plan: we will do the squatting, they will mobilize other activists in the area, to start using the space as an organizing hub against the erotic center once the action succeeds.

We spend the next week drafting a statement, slowly explicating the solidarity between our groups by writing and discussing. Our point of entry is the fight against gentrification, but it soon becomes apparent that more is at stake, like safety: pushing sex work out of the city center and into a suburban area next to a highway will likely make sex workers less safe, no matter what the municipality is saying.

A gentrified city is also a prudish city, in which sex is scrubbed out of public space: something M traces all the way back through the closure of sex work windows, year upon year, to the shuttering of leather bars and other queer spaces on Warmoesstraat in the 80s and 90s. The “erotic prison,” as M calls the erotic center, is the flip-side of that tendency: a place where the state legalizes

WET OF
GEEN WET
SEKSWERK
GAAT
DOOR

and regulates sex work only to maintain ever-increasing control over who can and cannot have sex for money, and in what way. They make the comparison with the punitive regime of the Spinhuis, a seventeenth-century workhouse in De Wallen for poor women arrested for petty crimes like prostitution, where tourists could pay to watch them. By the time we agree on the final text, it is clear where both our groups find each other: in the demand for urban space to be shaped autonomously by the people who live and work in it, rather than being managed top-down.

We send the statement out to news outlets who we know are keen to report on squatting. Some of the slogans we've come up with get printed on large posters in a visual style indistinguishable from the city's tourist-facing "I Amsterdam" promotion campaign, then sneakily swapped out with ads in bus and tram stops—an act of *détournement* which is later acknowledged, to everyone's delight, by a cease-and-desist letter from the municipality.

After the action is successful and we enter the newly conquered building, which we've agreed to call 't *Hoerenbuys* (The Whorehouse), we find it mostly untouched, as if the windows were shut down just a day before. Heating and running water still work, and after a few days and some help from a comradely electrician, we manage to get the power back on as well. The only unresolvable issue is, strangely, an enormous pile of dirt that we find in one of the rooms, rising nearly to the ceiling.

When I come back to the squat a few days after the action, the place has been made cozy with lights and decorations—but the windows have been reinforced with steel mesh. The banner we carried during the action

More Sex, Less Halsema

(“MEER SEKS, MINDER HALSEMA”) and hung from the building has been snatched a few days before.

That stolen banner was one of the few negative reactions. Almost immediately, there is an outpouring of support for what we’re doing, from groups like the Prostitution Information Center and night mayor Freek Wallagh, but from more unexpected quarters as well, like local shop owners. When right-wing media outlet PowNews tries to make a tendentious item about the action, they struggle to find anyone in the Sint Annenkwartier who will say something negative. M puts it down to the informal solidarity still shared between locals in De Wallen, the chaotic nature of the area notwithstanding.

Still, the issue we are trying to address is complex, as L recalls finding out during the “neighbor day” organized a few days after the action. “I spoke to one of the window operators, who told me many sex workers come here from elsewhere, make quick money and go back home to buy property—becoming landlords themselves. I realized that our approach before had perhaps been a little naive.”

Another complexity presented itself in collaborating with activists who, despite sharing our political views, still came with their own activist culture and expectations. But the groups grew closer in an unexpected way. D, a member of Mokum Kraakt who was very active in fixing up the space after the action, tells me how this meeting of sex workers and squatters led her to start doing sex work herself. “I would be standing there in my dungarees, power tool in hand, and men would knock on the window asking ‘how much?’ That’s when I realized how easy it would be.”



MEER SAKS
ONDER HALSEMA

NENSTEEG
CENTRUM

More Sex, Less Halsema

L also remembers how the collaboration made sex work something more accessible for herself. When she started working in a nearby strip club, the activists we had been organizing with came to her first shift and were there to check in with her afterwards. It was a relatively brief experience—“I can’t deal with drunk men well enough”—but D has kept working in the windows.

Some squats remain for years, but most get evicted in a matter of weeks—the Hoerenhuys among them. Barely a month after the action, we find an eviction notice pinned to the door. The letters of support we gather, from neighbors as well as from international sex workers’ rights organizations, fail to convince the judge in the following court case, and no one is eager for a confrontation with the cops, so we decide to leave by ourselves.

What we did was successful as an effort of propaganda, foregrounding grassroots resistance against the municipality’s plans. The action garnered media attention, incited discussion about the Red Light District and broke through an existing narrative about squatting. As squatters and sex workers, we definitely found each other in a love for performance and spectacle, valid political tools in their own right.

But as we realized quite soon, the fight against gentrification and “smoothification” of De Wallen requires sustained organizing. We wanted the Hoerenhuys to be a place from which to start doing this work, but the precarity of squatting in 2024 meant that we barely had time to even get started. Additionally, the necessity of squatting targets that could provide housing, as well as the student protests against the genocide in Gaza that erupted a few months later, took away

energy from a potential follow-up to the Hoerenhuys action. And so the action remained limited to a single intervention, rather than the constant assault promised by our statement.

When I ask her how she remembers the action now, L shrugs. “Perhaps it leaned into nostalgia a bit too much,” she says. “Which might be true for more Mokum Kraakt actions. There is a powerful image of De Wallen as they once were in the public imagination. Maybe that was in our heads too. It’s not like my fascination with sex work disappeared after I stopped working as a stripper, but now it’s just one of these fascinations that one has.”

M says they are proud of what we managed to do together. “I think squatting and sex work are alike in this way: what lies underneath is not always so spectacular. Sex work can seem seductive, but is work in the sense that it is often boring and mundane, and performed under bad working conditions. Squatting can seem radical, but is still a kind of band-aid for a much larger housing crisis. Both are ephemeral, coming and going. I know many queer and sex worker spaces that didn’t last as long as the Hoerenhuys.”

We still got our funeral in the end. After the announced eviction, the sex work activists stage a wake for the Hoerenhuys. When I walk into the alleyway that evening, I see an altar has been put up, dildo-shaped candles are lit, and above the wall of photos, art and posters, I read RIP DE WALLEN on a string of black streamers. It makes me unexpectedly wistful: squatters are typically unsentimental, and evictions tend to be met by a spirit of resistance, or by shrugged shoulders and



LOVE



mind er

A → KRAKEN
GAAT



Halsen



More Sex, Less Halsema

a desire to move on. This gathering feels like an act of care for both our groups, for our getting together, by commemorating what we managed collectively. After M reads a eulogy (“like any good hooker, who has witnessed many a *petite mort*, we will come again, and again, and again...”) a coffin made out of a former daytime locker is carried into the alley, and while Rammstein’s *Mein Herz brennt* blares from a portable speaker, the ghost of saint Anne rises from the grave, ready to haunt the poké bar or trendy fashion boutique that these former windows will soon house. As she is dripping candlewax on her chest, and suddenly the speaker gives out, we chant the riff along, in unison.

The Death of the Brothel & Post-Red Light Aesthetics

You're moving north, up the Oudezijds. The water of the canal is reflecting fluorescent, red light from the milky-grey of its shallow channel, where trash floats alongside a duck or two. The street itself is nearly empty, it's just before dawn. A hazy, blue-green hue hangs in the sky as seagulls peck at the abandoned French fries protruding from between the cobblestones. The imposing neon of a giant, pink elephant from the Casa Rosso looms in the near-distance, its likeness also casting brilliant shapes into the water that runs up the spine of the city center. In honesty, it's a bit tacky, but you've never questioned it.

You look up and there are girls still working, in the last hour or two before they pack up and go home. Gorgeous as they are, they look somewhat similar down the aisle of illuminated windows, you notice some patterns: a femme-fatale all-black body suit, a relaxed white-button down look, large-framed teachers glasses, Yankees caps. Large tits and long hair seems to be largely the dress code. And there's no trace of any men—gay nor straight—offering services from the window.

You hear the scuffle of feet, a client negotiation happening, some reggaeton drifting out of a room from a bluetooth speaker, and a worker's voice haphazardly following along to the lyrics. Nails ticking against the window to beckon a potential customer closer, a short argument breaks out between a group of workers and a john trying to take a photo. The perpetrator scuffles off

The Death of the Brothel

with his tail between his legs, after being told off by a towering blonde in Pleasers.

“Heeeyyy, Honeyyyyy...”

“Wannnaaa comeee viiiiisiiiiit meeeee...?”

A worker coos to you from across one of the alleyways. What do you see?

Staring into the window, you are already gazing into a mirage of temporality. A trans/historical and performative space, carried on by the tempos of sex, gender, and money. A sludge of bio-politics that meets architecture, bodies, cocks, pussies, dildos, condoms, lube, PrEP, HRT, birth control, a cocktail of other drugs, labor and capital.

The brothel is always being informed not just by its present moment, but an architectural and affective system of symptoms and phenomena, including but not limited to: surveillance, sanitation, morality, sexualities, fluids, medicinal interventions, prosthetics, licenses, fetishes, legalities, borders, and coloniality.

The Red Light, a symbol of a city’s libidinous, free-spirited sexual prowl, however, is actually a manifestation, in part, of 19th century Europe’s regime of confinement of sexuality: that sex and sexuality should be kept secret, private, maintained and groomed within the procreative, heterosexual bedroom... lest it be prostitution, or for the insane.

Stay with me now.

“The brothel and the mental hospital,” writes Foucault in the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, “would be those places of tolerance: the prostitute, the client, and the pimp, together with the psychiatrist and his hysteric [...] seem to have surreptitiously transferred pleasures that are unspoken into the order of things that are counted.”¹

Tolerance being the optimal word here, in a Dutch context, too: prostitution is counted amongst the order of things not as a recreational activity for the client or as work for the prostitute, but as a tolerated, “necessary” evil for the function of good, clean, moral, reproductive sex. As long as a client pays penance to the church, still has a wife to bang at home, and prostitutes remain subjects of Christian charity and alms-giving, then prostitution can still be allowed to function. For now.

You step closer to the window, admire the worker for her tenacity. It’s technically illegal for her to beckon you by calling out to you on the street, according to the municipality, she’s simply supposed to stay put, quiet, behind her window until you, the client, approach her. That’s good and proper solicitation.

You’ve visited the windows before, though, so you know the drill already: 20 minutes suck & fuck, 100 euro. You flip through your wallet, but only find 70. You know better than to low-ball a worker because you’ve been there and done that before. You ponder about leaving, but she’s sweet and says she can hold onto your watch and iPhone as you go over to the nearest ATM and get out the rest of the cash. And you do just that, and take out another 100, just in case.

Once you return, you hand over 100. She smiles and lets you in. You don’t bother to ask for her name and she’s polite, and doesn’t ask you yours—just as if you’re visiting from somewhere. Underneath the smell of cigarette smoke that’s saturated the walls for decades, you can smell the bleach and cleaning product etched into the floor tiles and stainless steel sink. She asks you to wash yourself with warm water and soap, and hands you a towel to dry yourself.

The Death of the Brothel

On the bed, there's no trace that this room would ever be used for sleeping, though a long time ago, it was probably a living room. The bedsheet has traces of bleach stains from daily cleaning. The entire situation is rather polite and tame.

Sex work, when mediated as a form of labor—"when sex becomes work," one could say—is an extension of this regime of tolerance in the form of transparency. The brothel is not simply a place of prostitution, it's a workplace, an office. Taxation, STD tests, room rent, licensing systems, entry interviews, municipality-mandated six-month check-ins, the Salvation Army dropping by with coffee and small chocolates every now and then are all markers of "work" as an affective vector to keep whores docile, tame and within the tyranny of good, secular-protestant order.

This is how the Calvinist fixation on transparency, a fetish for cleanliness and the orderliness, lives on in the translucence of the window brothel. Framed, illuminated, and tidy, workers' visibility through the window emerges not as a marker of Amsterdam's penchant towards sexual freedom—albeit, ostensibly, a kind of libidinal-induced frenzy—this visibility and transparency become in themselves a new form of discipline, that redefines the order of things.

Prostitution may be less a necessary evil in this model, and more a recreational treat or paid service to be offered for the daring client—only becoming possible through harnessing the means of prostitution's capital and bio-power. The architectures that govern the purpose-built brothel may not be too far away from the modern sanatorium—I mean mental

hospital—that Foucault mentions. With similar regimes of cleanliness, order, and transparency, respectively in the form of prognosis, diagnosis, and treatment. The stainless steel, bleach, and pharmaco-interventions are all the same.

Luckily for you, the trip to the ATM gave your mind time to wonder about the sexy time ahead. By the time you get back to the window, you're already turned on. Looking at your hard cock, the worker smiles, which is to say she's thankful that some of the harder work is already done. She tells you to lay back and puts a condom over your hard cock, and begins sucking you. It's actually nothing out of the ordinary, but it's good enough. You enjoy it, and slip further into pleasure, riding the wave of endorphins from having a hot chick suck your cock, and having paid for it. In any case, it's the most action you've gotten in a while.

This part of town used to be sketchy, you remember. But now it's something that you can really enjoy without worrying about pimps or the Hells Angels hanging around. Thank god. There's even a nice espresso bar around the corner. It's really much more comfortable for you that the municipality has gone to such great lengths to regulate these kinda places.

Mid-suck, the worker's alarm goes off. She apologizes, and in both a frantic and polite demeanor tells you that you have to leave, it's closing time. That the brothels are mandated to close at 6 am, no exception, and that for everything to be cleaned properly by the room's manager, you must leave now so that she can be out of the room and turn in her key by 5:30. It all feels a bit abrupt, your cock still hanging in midair, but it's not the first time it's

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happened to you: being cock-blocked by management. After all, these rules are reasonable, you think.

A tad dazed with this turn of events, but since after all you're a nice guy, you hurry to throw your pants back on, flushed still with lingering endorphins, grab your wallet, keys, and phone, and head out the door and back out into the maze of alleyways. A drug dealer quietly asks you if you'd like some cocaine as you near the Damstraat, but you kindly decline. He can tell you've just been sucked and you're on the way home. "That's okay, sleep well, brother," he smiles at you.

You smile back and give him a half-nod, dig your heels into the pavement and move along. You look at your phone for the time, 4:45 am. Did you really have to rush out of the window, you wonder? You shrug and try not to think too hard about it, becoming a part of the ever-growing statistic: clients who come and go from the window in under seven minutes or less. Not to mention clients who have visited a window brothel in the year 2025 and not contracted an STD, and jotted down as a notable mention in a regular, municipal check-in: "yes, he was kind enough to just leave!"

This story is just one anecdote that's hurried along by an appeal to a dusty, queer theory: that is to say, how did and do regimes of the order of sex and sexuality infiltrate the ways in which sex work is managed and moderated by the state today? At base, I'm here to ask you: what's the difference between a municipality and a pimp? I'll give you the quick answer: one has higher taxes than the other.

The Red Light in the era of municipal checks and regulations was dead upon arrival in a shroud of statistics,

measurements, and data—all things to be quantified under good and orderly governance.

In other words, the brothel is dead. Welcome to your new co-working space, do you want a sugar-free soda with that? The price of PrEP has gone up since last month, but you may be able to get a chlamydia test on your full-panel tomorrow, if there's still enough research funding.

In the case of Amsterdam, they've nearly measured, calculated, and confined sex work to no return. De Wallen, as well as the last-lingering Red Light windows along the Spui and Ruysdaelkade in de Pijp, stand as a testament to how "good governance" claims bad bodies. Out with you, there's better things to see here! Goodbye brothels! Insert: posh art gallery, concept store, aforementioned espresso bar.

"One day," says Foucault, "perhaps in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the rules of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest confessions from a shadow."

He continues: "The irony of this deployment is in having us believe that our liberation is in the balance."²

We know what happens when sex work is *forced* into the shadows, but what if we chose the shadows ourselves? Where the illumination of imposed measurements, order and transparency cannot touch us; where statistics and neoliberal fantasy cannot pose a threat, and we can escape the orderly regime? What if instead of continuing to bow down to hyper-visibility and its imposed voyeurism, we retracted into the place that we know best: the

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darkness. Wasn't it Inanna herself, goddess of the cult of the prostitute and whore-mother, who gained her power by slinking into the dark depths of hell? Shedding one piece of clothing at a time, and entering the darkness in the first-ever recorded "striptease" in history?

In this age of pervasive management, with municipal regulation and destruction taking away our dark spaces—dark rooms, cruising zones, *tippelzone*; when the threads of the neo-enlightenment entangle queers, whores, trans* folk into governance's desire to define and clarify... obscurity becomes a cool and encasing refuge from the light.

In the shadows. Maybe that's where a sort of whore-topic home for sex work could thrive.

Like many others, I am pining for something better than what we've been dealt, as I scrape off the scummy residue of regulatory bio-politics that ooze out from under the doorstep of the municipality and invades my workplace. But in the spirit of Pat Califia and his idea that "the golden days of prostitution may be happening right now"³ and from this place where legality and regulation seek to eliminate the unknown and unruly... we find ourselves at the brink of combustion. A place where sex work escapes work. A place where we have the potential to refuse the current and historical reign of order, and wreck it with all the fury and queer becoming of what we do in the dark.

This text was first written for Amsterdam Art Week 2025 and presented as a part of No Limits! Art Castle's Sex o'Clock Artist Talk series in the St. Annenkwartier, De Wallen.

Beau Velvet

Manifestation

Beau Velvet is a stripper, erotic performer, proud whore and activist, and queer as fuck.

Let's create a protective layer around our skin
So that only gentle touches will reach our bodies
So that only sweet conversations will reach our minds
So that only vibrant energies will touch our souls

We are protected. Our bodies, minds and souls are
sacred and will be treated as such

We are beautiful
We are powerful
We have great intuition, and we trust it fully
We are gentle
We are kind
We are mysterious
We stand in our truth

We attract wealth
Money flows to us
Because we own it
We deserve all the money that flows to us
We deserve all the adoration directed at us
We deserve all the opportunities that come to us
We deserve to be treated with respect
We deserve to be treated with dignity
We deserve to be treated with love
Touched with love

Manifestation

Showered with love

Embraced with love

Held with love

We deserve to be touched in all the ways that feel good
on our bodies

We deserve to be fucked so intensely good that we forget
everything else

We deserve the best orgasms

We deserve it all.

El camino en la Mocha Celis: Educación, Lucha y Esperanza

Es un verdadero privilegio poder compartir mi historia y el latido de la Asociación Civil Mocha Celis con ustedes. Hablar del Mocha no es solo hablar de una escuela; es hablar de mi vida, de la vida de mis compañeras, de la resiliencia y la transformación que brota de la educación y la lucha por nuestros derechos. Soy egresada, docente y hoy, con un profundo orgullo y una gran responsabilidad, soy la Presidenta de esta Asociación Civil que es mi hogar.

Mi propio camino, como el de tantas otras personas travestis y trans, estuvo marcado por la exclusión. El sistema educativo tradicional, con sus prejuicios y su falta de comprensión, nos empuja fuera de las aulas, nos niega el derecho a formarnos, a crecer y a proyectar un futuro. Esta realidad nos condena a la marginalización, a la falta de oportunidades laborales y, a menudo, nos deja con el trabajo sexual como única vía para subsistir. Es una realidad dura, pero es la que nos impulsó a crear el Mocha Celis.

En 2011, nació el Bachillerato Popular Travesti Trans Mocha Celis. Fuimos la primera escuela secundaria de gestión social y autónoma, creada por y para personas travestis y trans, no solo en Argentina, sino en toda Latinoamérica y el mundo. Elegimos el nombre de Mocha Celis para honrar la memoria de una compañera travesti asesinada en el barrio de Flores, histórico barrio de la ciudad capital. A la Mocha la mató la policía, aún seguimos exigiendo justicia por ella y tantas otras compañeras. Sin embargo, su nombre se convirtió en un

El camino en la Mocha Celis

símbolo de nuestra lucha por la vida, por la dignidad y por la justicia.

Para nosotras, la Mocha, como espacio, siempre fue mucho más que un lugar para obtener un título. Es un espacio seguro donde podemos ser quienes somos, sin miedo al juicio ni a la discriminación. Es donde pudimos reconstruir nuestras trayectorias educativas, fortalecer nuestra identidad y encontrar una comunidad que nos entiende, nos apoya y nos celebra. Nuestro plan de estudios no es solo académico; está atravesado por una perspectiva de género y diversidad, abordando temas que nos atraviesan, fomentando el pensamiento crítico y empoderándonos para participar activamente en la sociedad. Recuerdo las primeras clases, el brillo en los ojos de mis compañeras, la emoción de volver a estudiar, de sentirnos parte de algo que nos pertenecía. Fue ahí donde entendí que la educación es la herramienta más poderosa para nuestra liberación.

Desde el principio, supimos que nuestra misión no podía quedarse solo en las aulas. Las barreras que enfrentamos las personas trans son múltiples y complejas. Por eso, desde la Asociación Civil Mocha Celis, hemos desarrollado una serie de proyectos complementarios que buscan brindar un apoyo integral a nuestra comunidad:

- La Biblioteca Popular Lohana Berkins: Nombrada en honor a nuestra querida Lohana, un ícono de la militancia travesti argentina, esta biblioteca es un tesoro. Aquí no solo tenemos libros, sino también documentos y materiales que preservan nuestra memoria, nuestras luchas, nuestras voces. Es un espacio vital para la cultura, el encuentro y el debate.

Una Carta de la Mocha Celis

Creemos firmemente que para construir un futuro justo, necesitamos conocer y visibilizar nuestro pasado y nuestras contribuciones para la sociedad que somos y la que queremos ser.

- Programa Empleo Trans: Sabemos lo difícil que es para nosotres acceder al empleo formal. Por eso, impulsamos iniciativas que buscan generar oportunidades laborales dignas. Ofrecemos capacitaciones, talleres y promovemos la creación de cooperativas o emprendimientos propios. Nuestro objetivo es claro: romper el ciclo de exclusión y ofrecer alternativas al trabajo sexual, como única alternativa. Es fundamental aclarar que, si bien buscamos estas alternativas, también defendemos los derechos de las trabajadoras sexuales. Entendemos la complejidad de esta realidad y abogamos por un enfoque de respeto y protección para quienes la ejercen, sin estigmatizar a nadie.
- Programa de Acceso a Derechos: La vida trans en Argentina, a pesar de los avances, sigue presentando desafíos. Por eso, brindamos asesoramiento y acompañamos a nuestras compañeras en procesos de cambio de DNI, acceso a la salud, a la vivienda, a la justicia y otras problemáticas que enfrentamos en nuestro día a día. No queremos que nadie se sienta en soledad.

Es imposible hablar de la Mocha sin mencionar el contexto actual de Argentina. Después de años de logros históricos en materia de derechos para la comunidad LGTBIQ+, con leyes como la Ley de Identidad de Género de 2012, que fue pionera a nivel mundial, hoy vivimos un momento de profunda preocupación.

El camino en la Mocha Celis

El ascenso de la derecha y la llegada de un gobierno con posturas conservadoras ha generado un clima de incertidumbre. Estamos viendo, y sintiendo, importantes retrocesos en la legislación y las protecciones sociales, también en el clima generalizado de violencia callejera e institucional. Hay recortes de fondos a programas de género y diversidad, una inflación que golpea brutalmente a los sectores más vulnerados, y un discurso de odio que busca deslegitimar los derechos que con tanta lucha hemos conseguido.

En este escenario tan desafiante, la Asociación Civil Mocha Celis se convierte en un bastión de resistencia. Nuestra existencia misma es un acto de militancia. Nuestra continuidad es crucial por varias razones:

- **Garantizar el acceso a la educación:** En un momento donde la educación pública enfrenta serios desafíos y la inclusión de poblaciones vulnerables está en riesgo, la Mocha es la garantía de que la comunidad trans tiene un espacio donde formarse y proyectar su futuro, sin importar los obstáculos.
- **Proteger nuestros derechos y visibilizar nuestras realidades:** Ante los intentos de invisibilizarnos o de poner en duda nuestras identidades la Mocha sigue siendo un faro para la afirmación de nuestra identidad, la lucha por nuestros derechos y la denuncia de la discriminación.
- **Ofrecer una red de contención vital:** En esta crisis económica y social, donde las redes de apoyo son esenciales, la Mocha funciona como una verdadera comunidad que brinda contención emocional,

Una Carta de la Mocha Celis

psicológica y material a nuestras estudiantes y a toda la comunidad. Somos una familia.

- Mantener viva la esperanza: En tiempos donde la desilusión y el retroceso pueden parecer abrumadores, la existencia y el éxito de Mocha Celis son un recordatorio poderoso de que la lucha por los derechos y la inclusión es posible. Demostramos cada día que la educación es la herramienta más poderosa para construir un futuro más justo y equitativo para todos.

La Mocha Celis no es solo una escuela; es un movimiento, es un hogar, y es el símbolo de la resiliencia y la dignidad trans en Argentina. Mi trabajo, y el de todes les compañeres que hacemos la Mocha, es un testimonio vivo de que la educación es una herramienta de liberación y de que debemos seguir defendiendo los derechos de las poblaciones más vulneradas, especialmente en estos tiempos tan difíciles. Y construyendo articulaciones internacionales para poder sostenernos.

Para nosotres, la Mocha Celis es el camino hacia un futuro donde todas podamos vivir con dignidad, con educación y con plenitud.

Virginia Silveira, Travesti argentina

Presidenta de la Asociación Civil Mocha Celis

Junio 2025

The Path to the Mocha Celis: Education, Struggle and Hope

It's a true privilege to be able to share my story and the story of the Mocha Celis Civil Association with you. Talking about Mocha isn't just

El camino en la Mocha Celis

talking about a school; it's talking about my life, the lives of my classmates, the resilience and transformation that comes from education and the fight for our rights. I'm a graduate, a teacher, and today, with great pride and responsibility, I am the president of this civil association that I can call my home.

My own journey, like that of so many other travestis and trans folk, was marked by exclusion. The traditional education system, with all its prejudices and lack of understanding, pushes us out of the classroom, denying us the right to education, growth, and a future. This reality condemns us to marginalization and thus a lack of job opportunities, often leaving us with sex work as our only means of survival. It's a harsh reality, but it's what drove us to create Mocha Celis.

The Mocha Celis Popular Travesti High School was founded in 2011. We were the first autonomous and socially managed (meaning by the people not by the state nor by a private company) secondary school created by and for travesti and trans folk, not only in Argentina, but throughout Latin America and the world. We chose the name Mocha Celis to honor the memory of a fellow travesti that was murdered in the Flores neighborhood, a historical district of the capital city. Mocha was murdered by the police, and we continue to demand justice for her and so many other trans folk. However, her name has become a symbol of our fight for our lives, dignity, and justice.

For us, The Mocha, as a space, has always been much more than a place to earn a degree. It's a safe space where we can be who we are, without fear of judgment or discrimination. It's where we were able to rebuild our educational paths, fortify our identity, and find a community that understands us, supports us, and celebrates us. Our curriculum isn't just plain academic; it's informed through the lens of gender and identity, addressing issues that affect us, fostering critical thinking and empowering us to actively participate in society. I remember the first classes, the sparkle in my classmates' eyes, the excitement of going back to study, of feeling part of something that belonged to us. It was there that I understood that education is the most powerful tool for our liberation.

From the beginning, we knew our mission couldn't be limited to just the classrooms. The many barriers that we trans folk face are multi-faceted and complex. Therefore, at the Mocha Celis Civil Association, we have developed a series of complementary projects that seek to provide comprehensive support to our community:

Una Carta de la Mocha Celis

- The Lohana Berkins Public Library: named in honor of our beloved Lohana Berkins, an icon of Argentine travesti activism, this library is a treasure. Here we don't just have books, but also documents and other materials that preserve our memory, our struggles and our voices. It is a vital space for culture, connection and debate. We firmly believe that to build a just future, we need to know and highlight our past and our contributions to the society we are and the one we want to be.
- Trans Employment Program: we know how difficult it is for us to acquire formal employment. That's why we promote initiatives that seek to generate job opportunities. We offer trainings, workshops, and encourage the creation of cooperatives or individual businesses. Our goal is straightforward: to break the cycle of exclusion and offer alternatives to sex work. It's essential to clarify that while we seek these alternatives we also defend the rights of sex workers. We understand the complexity of this reality and advocate for a respectful and protective approach for those who practice sex work, without stigmatizing anyone.
- Access to Rights Program: despite progress, trans life in Argentina continues to present challenges. Because of this we provide counseling and support to trans folk through the process of changing their ID, accessing healthcare, housing, justice, and other issues we face in our daily lives. We want no one to feel alone.
- It's impossible to talk about Mocha without mentioning Argentina's current political climate. After years of historic achievements for LGBTQ+ rights, with laws like the groundbreaking Gender Identity Law of 2012, today we are experiencing a political climate that's deeply concerning.

The rise of right wing politics and the arrival of a conservative government has generated a climate of uncertainty. We are seeing and feeling significant setbacks in legal and social protections, as well as in the widespread climate of violence from individuals and institutions. There are funding cuts to gender and diversity programs, inflation that brutally affects the most vulnerable sectors, and hate speech that seeks to delegitimize the rights we have fought so hard for to achieve.

In this hostile environment, the Mocha Celis Civil Association has become a bastion of resistance. Our very existence is an act of activism. The continued existence of this organization is crucial for several reasons:

El camino en la Mocha Celis

- **Guaranteeing access to education:** at a time when public education is facing serious challenges and the inclusion of vulnerable people is at risk, Mocha guarantees that trans folks have a space to educate themselves and plan for their future, regardless of obstacles.
- **Protecting our rights and highlighting our realities:** in the face of attempts to make us invisible or cast doubt on our identities, The Mocha remains a beacon for affirming our identity, fighting for our rights and denouncing discrimination.
- **Providing a vital support network:** in this economic and social crisis, where support networks are essential, The Mocha functions as a true community, providing emotional, psychological, and material support to our students and the community at large. We are a family.
- **Keeping hope alive:** in times where disappointment and setbacks can seem overwhelming, The Mocha's existence and success are a powerful reminder that the fight for rights and inclusion is possible. We prove every day that education is the most powerful tool for building a more just and fair future for all.

Mocha Celis is not just a school; it's a movement, it's a home, and it's a symbol of trans resilience and dignity in Argentina. My work, and that of all the people that make Mocha, is a living testament that education is a tool for liberation and that we must continue defending the rights of the most vulnerable people, especially in these challenging times. And it builds international connections in order to sustain ourselves.

For us, The Mocha Celis is the path to a future where we can all live with dignity, education, and abundance.

Virginia Silveira, Argentine travesti
President of the Mocha Celis Civil Association
June 2025

Translated by XAOS

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Author Biographies

Adanya Dunn is a Canadian-Bulgarian opera singer, multidisciplinary artist, and creative entrepreneur. They co-organized the Queer SW Day as part of Queer & Pride Amsterdam in 2023, and are the co-founder of HXSSY and of Red Light Arts & Culture, a foundation connecting residents, businesses, artists, and social organizations to enrich and promote the area's cultural diversity. As a singer, Adanya's performed with the Canadian Opera Company, Santa Fe Opera, Orchestre philharmonique de Radio France, and Warsaw Chamber Opera.

Alejandra Ortiz fled from Mexico to the Netherlands in 2015. In 2022 the translation of her book was published, *The Truth Will Set Me Free*, her poignant story as a trans refugee looking for a safe home. In the Netherlands she is committed to a better life for trans persons, in particular trans persons of color. She is a co-founder of Papaya Kuir.

Anna Torres is an architect, artist, independent researcher, educator and co-founder of pleasure space collective Team Hot Space and was architect-in-residence of HXSSY. She runs architecture practice Studio Anna Torres, where she researches changing spatial narratives, and collaborates with local sex work communities. Her work is rooted in De Wallen and explores how sexuality, feminism, queerness and spatial justice influence power structures in Red Light spaces.

Author Biographies

Beau Velvet is a stripper, erotic performer, proud whore and queer as fuck. She is also an activist who fights for the rights, freedom and dignity of sex workers and other groups in the margins of society. She is most happy when she dances naked in her living room or when she's with her comrades.

Cass Traitor is a multidisciplinary artist and writer, and they are an editor for Red Insight—an independent media platform for sex workers. Their first short film *Oubliette* was screened at two film festivals last year, and they are currently co-devising a live art piece about sexuality and neurodiversity.

Comics Slut is a semi-retired stripper, an illustrator and a lover of pop culture, camp and anything femme. She makes art about a sexy, sometimes unsettling, and always cute unreality.

HXSSY is a former Red Light-based queer sex worker-centered collective. Between 2023 and 2025 they produced and created events in Amsterdam's Red Light District, including the Queer SW Cabaret Series at Casa Rosso and various fundraisers, promoting the visibility and self-determination of the sex worker community.

Jan Hoek is an artist and writer. In his work, he is always attracted to the beauty of outsiders worldwide and always keen to collaborate intensively with people that normally are overlooked, and together create a new image. In Hoek's universe, the "normal" people are the strangers and the outsiders are the funky rulers

Author Biographies

of this planet. Hoek's work is shown at places such as Foam (Amsterdam), Unseen Festival (Amsterdam), Photoville (New York), Fomu (Antwerp), and Lagos Photo (Lagos).

Jeanne van Heeswijk is an artist who facilitates the creation of dynamic and diversified public spaces in order to “radicalize the local.” Her long-scale community-embedded projects question art's autonomy by combining performative actions, discussions, and other forms of organizing and pedagogy in order to assist communities to take control of their own futures.

Kaiden Ford is an evocative sex working artist who encapsulates their subjects through raw emotion. Through dance, physical self-discovery, poetry, books, film and the rare art of “just being.” They use all of their practices in all of their work, crossing the boundaries of fantasy and reality.

Kami Million is a chameleon who cycles between different alter-egos depending on each context—the mystical pigeon, the farmer dyke, the super-femme stripper, the caring facilitator. They hide in order to reveal. They use performance, community gatherings, ceramics, paintings and writing as tools to communicate and feel through, working to destigmatize and decriminalize sex work and deconstruct power relations. They organize talks, dinners, collective writing sessions, film screenings and club nights for Sex Workers and their allies to generate more care and visibility for the community of Whores.

Author Biographies

Leslie is a Cuban girl of 28 years who lives in Amsterdam. Leslie is a sex worker activist, trans activist, and BIPOC activist. She is a part of Papaya Kuir, a member of Trans United, Hvo Querido.

Lev is part of the squatting collective Mokum Kraakt.

M. Alberto is a Euro-Caribbean sound+word artist. They perform and compose music for concerts, theater and film, and work as a musical dramaturgist, poet and artist-researcher on both sides of the Atlantic. Born in Curaçao and currently based in the Netherlands, M.'s work is explicitly political, and always critical of colonial structures, which they seek to dismantle “by any means necessary” – but often from artisanship and radical vulnerability.

Mariska Majoor is a Dutch writer, speaker, entrepreneur, and former sex worker. Her life's work is deeply rooted in Amsterdam's Red Light District. She continues to be a prominent activist, advocating for sex workers' rights and challenging societal misconceptions about the profession.

Marthe Singelenberg is a researcher, sex positivist and resident of De Wallen area in Amsterdam. She has been an advocate of sex workers' rights since she became involved with the neighborhood in 2016. In 2020, she published her article “Red Light Gentrification in Soho, London and De Wallen, Amsterdam,” after extensive research in both Red Light Districts. She hopes to contribute to the debate on the future of sex work in the city by continuing her research in close collaboration with sex workers.

Author Biographies

Mercy St. J is the producer behind Full Service Productions and co-founder of HXSSY. They are a FSSW, dominatrix, writer, photographer, and community organizer. Interested in all things debaucherous, raunchy, kinky, and profane they envision whoring as both a creative form and important political tool to upturn systems of oppression. Their first short film, *Fuck You Pay Me*, a campy homage to the window workers of the Sint Annenkwartier, has been screened in several festivals across Europe and the US.

Odisea. Writer and performer. Born and raised in a little town in the north of Argentina. Wrote the books *Diario de Una Marica Mala* and *Manifiesto Marica Visible*. Worshiper of Paola Bracho and Soraya. Teacher and Hooker.

The Majestree (she/tree) is a disabled erotic performer and a lesbian dominatrix for men. Tree observes the world around her and acts accordingly. Tree gives lectures about ableism and protests against israhell. Free free Palestine!

Image Credits

7 Mercy St. J, 2024. A small statue of St. Anne fixed to the facade of a building, looking out over the street that carries her name.

16 Mercy St. J, 2024. Taken during the Hoerenhuys squatting action by Mokum Kraakt in January 2024, in solidarity with the sex workers against the closing of brothel windows.

24 *Mapping of Closed Windows in De Wallen from the early 2000s to 2024*, Anna Torres, 2024.

27 *Mapping of Closed Queer Venues in De Wallen from the 1910s to 2024*, Anna Torres, 2024.

32–33 *Sex in the City*, Anna Torres, 2024.

39 *Adanya Dunn*, Bart Peters, 2025. Video still. From the Queer Sex Worker Cabaret series at Casa Rosso produced by HXSSY.

42 M. Alberto, 2024. Self-portrait.

52 Mercy St. J, 2024. 17 Oudezijds Achterburgwal, window brothel operated by Office Boomsteeg. A regular, rainy day at work, looking over the canal. Sent over WhatsApp to M. Alberto as a nod to their poem.

59–63 *Sex Workers are Artists, Slither, Fairies Dancing, Comics Slut*, 2023–2024.

Image Credits

64 *Eden*, Micklin Korsuize, 2024. From the Queer Sex Worker Cabaret series at Casa Rosso produced by HXSSY.

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90 Micklin Korsuize, 2024. From the Queer Sex Worker Cabaret series at Casa Rosso produced by HXSSY. Finale moment, featuring members of GOSH! the Show and the House of Løstbois.

100 *Kaiden Ford*, Micklin Korsuize, 2024. From the Queer Sex Worker Cabaret series at Casa Rosso produced by HXSSY.

102 Mercy St. J, 2024. The Majestree and tree's dildo-chair.

115 Mercy St. J, 2024. Mirror selfie on a summer day at the brothel at 17 Oudezijds Achterburgwal.

116 *Odisea*, Annie van der Werff, 2023. From the Queer SW Day program, organized by Mercy St. J and Adanya Dunn at the Oude Kerk, Amsterdam as part of Queer & Pride Amsterdam.

122 *Kaiden Ford*, Annie van der Werff, 2023. From the Queer SW Day program.

126 *Kaiden Ford*, Charlie McKee, 2023. From the Queer SW Day program.

Image Credits

130 *Beau Velvet*, Charlie McKee, 2023. From the Queer SW Day program.

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136–137, 144–145 *Beau Velvet, Madame Ava la’Affaire, Chyra*, Mercy St. J, 2024–2025.

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165 Mercy St. J, 2024. Taken on the day of the Hoerenhuys squatting action.

168–169 Mercy St. J, 2024. Altar to St. Anne for the “funeral” of the Hoerenhuys squatting action prior to the eviction.

200 Mercy St. J, 2024. The Majestree with Palestine flag at the Royal Hooker’s Ball: Whore Power! at Sexyland World, Amsterdam.

