The Art of Sex Work: The Figure of the Sex Worker in Modernist and Contemporary Art

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THE ART OF SEX WORK: THE FIGURE OF THE SEX WORKER IN MODERNIST AND CONTEMPORARY ART

by

Francesca Rose Manard

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Abstract

The figure of the sex worker has been a recurring theme throughout modernist and contemporary art, signifying a variety of meanings that have been continually redefined by cultural conditions. This thesis analyzes how sex workers’ identities have been constructed through the visual arts, beginning at the advent of the modernist movement in the nineteenth century and concluding with twenty-first century contemporary art. The ways that the lived experiences of sex workers have manifested themselves in visual art grounds the discussion alongside analysis of the historical context for each artwork. While art prior to the advent of the women’s art movement tended to represent sex workers through the lenses of sexual objectification and the male gaze, art of the late twentieth century and of the contemporary era tends to subvert those misogynistic discourses, particularly through the genre of performance art. Sex workers themselves began creating art that expressed their lived experiences, and art has become an important tool for pro sex work activism, platformed by community projects that empower sex workers. Art remains an important tool for expressing sex worker’s experiences as a means to enact progressive social change.
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Chapter One: Introduction

In modernist and contemporary art, the figure of the sex worker has been a recurring theme, signifying a variety of meanings that have been continually redefined by cultural conditions. Those who seek to understand how sex workers’ identities have been constructed through the visual arts acknowledge the contradictions that exist across the different works produced by artists in response to this motif, as the notions of empowerment and exploitation associated with sex work have operated in close quarters with one another.

In her 1994 book, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, Shannon Bell considers how the “prostitute body” is constructed. Ultimately, Bell claims that the dichotomy between “whore” and “madonna” (in the Western tradition, as the reference to the biblical “Madonna” would indicate) is unified and dissolved only in “prostitute performance art” of the 1980s and 1990s. In the years since Bell’s book was published, subsequent works by contemporary artists have also considered the field of sex work and the role played by the sex worker (as either the subject and/or as the artist herself). Many of these contemporary artworks are socially engaged and involve direct participation from sex workers in efforts to destigmatize, desensationalize, and reclaim harmful histories related to sex work, calling attention to social problems related to the subject from an activist perspective. In the most effective artworks, the actual lived experiences of sex workers are centered in such a way as to enact social change, especially those which are created by individuals who occupy a dual role as artist and sex worker. This connects to the phrase “the personal is political,” originally popularized during second wave feminism to emphasize the innate connection between personal experiences and sociopolitical concerns.

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In this introductory chapter, the term “sex work” will be defined and clarified. Additionally, I will conduct a review of scholarly literature regarding the ways feminist art historians have understood visual representations of the female body, particularly the nude, through the concerns of idealization vs. objectification through the male gaze and the treatment of the female body as an eroticized image. These ideas will be helpful for understanding how representations of sex workers construct and contribute to one category of the feminine sexual body. In some instances, particularly in art which predates the feminist movement, visual depictions of sex workers’ bodies reinforce sexual objectification, particularly through the male gaze. Conversely, artwork born out of more overtly feminist perspectives will often resist or subvert these misogynistic discourses on the female body and sex work. Further discussion of the subject of sex workers throughout modern and contemporary art will be explored in this chapter and in subsequent chapters, grounded within concerns about sexual objectification and the male gaze as well as an interest in how the lived experiences of sex workers manifest themselves in visual art.

**Definition and Background of the term “Sex Work”**

Before discussing the theme of sex work in modernist and contemporary art, it is helpful to define the term “sex work” by situating the term within its original context and clarifying why it is the most objective and most versatile term for the topic from a contemporary feminist perspective. The term “sex work” is descriptive and straightforward, serving as a catch-all for activities that are connected to the sex industry, such as prostitution, stripping and exotic dancing, or participating in the production of pornography in exchange for money. These
professions are closely related, and sex workers often fit into several of the roles included in the umbrella definition of sex work. Many terms that have traditionally referenced sex workers, such as “whore,” have functioned as slurs, whereas “sex work” is a preferred term because it neutralizes those stigmas. The term “sex work” was coined in the late 1970s, during what was a pivotal moment in the history of modern feminism. Feminism, sometimes referred to as the women’s movement, broadly refers to activism that champions women’s rights and the notion of equality between men and women, although the study of the movement reveals many nuances and conflicting perspectives among those who consider themselves to be feminists. We often think of the chronology of feminism in the Western world in terms of “waves” or phases of the movement, and each of the four waves has a unique set of problems that feminist activists at the time prioritized. The “waves” metaphor may be ineffective in capturing the complexities of the women’s rights movement, but it will nonetheless be utilized in this thesis to establish a baseline chronology of the broad topic of the history of feminism.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the women’s movement reignited in its “second wave,” in part due to other politically charged movements that had gained momentum in recent years such as the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. Many American women began questioning the traditional role of women as homemakers following the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, which challenged the idea that all women should feel fulfilled in these traditional roles. Feminist activists also fought against discrimination in the workplace. Critical discussion about the historic oppression of women in academia began taking form as women’s studies departments became established in colleges and universities across America.

The women’s art movement, also known as the feminist art movement, emerged from the broader second wave feminist movement and deals with its relationship to the visual arts. It
reflects the efforts of artists, art historians, and theorists who have explored art’s connection to the beliefs and goals of feminism: equality among genders. Peggy Phelan, in her discussion of feminist art, defines feminism as “the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture that usually favors men over women.”

The activist-artist Carol Leigh is credited with having created the phrase “sex work.” As a budding activist in the 1970s, she was confronted with the reality that many feminists held views about sexuality and sex work that did not match her own. Leigh was troubled by certain feminist activist groups such as Women Against Pornography, who expressed contempt for women who were prostitutes and porn actors instead of recognizing them as real women exercising their free will. One of the problems Leigh observed was the language often used by these groups to describe women in these roles, such as “hooker,” “whore,” and even “prostitute,” which are ultimately negative epithets used to judge and debase sex workers. Therefore, she coined the more neutral phrase “sex work” in 1978 as a means of equalizing women in the sex industry with other feminists and beginning the process of destigmatizing the field of sex work. Today, the term is in widespread and nearly universal use, but it was first used in a performance art project of Leigh’s as her comical alter-ego, Scarlot Harlot, which will be discussed at length in a subsequent chapter on performance art.

A significant antecedent to Leigh’s work in the late 1970s was Suzanne Lacy’s 1974 project Prostitution Notes, a creative research project in which the artist conducted personal research on prostitution in Los Angeles, and which revealed some of the stigma and lack of knowledge surrounding sex work. Lacy’s project involved the artist’s creation of notes,

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drawings, and maps alongside collected ephemera which documented her conversations with prostitutes and her experiences in tracking and learning about the world of prostitution by visiting social spaces frequented by prostitutes. In describing the goals of the project, Lacy wrote “Most of what we knew at that time came from literature and films that greatly glamorized the life. I didn’t want to flirt with their reality as a performance, or to relate their stories as an anthropologist might. Rather, I would locate the work inside my own experiences and record the process of my research. ‘The Life’ as it was called wasn’t far from mine.” Like many other feminists in the 1970s who did not participate in sex work, Lacy had known little about the realities of being a part of the sex industry. Lacy’s work grounded her understanding of prostitution through personal engagement with the subject and how it related to her life, friendships, and experiences.

Julia Bryan-Wilson highlights a particular selection from *Prostitution Notes* that is especially relevant to this discussion: in “July 23: Miscommunications,” Lacy describes asking for change at a hotel bar known as a pickup place for prostitutes, and she noticed how male patrons gave her condescending smirks, prompting her to write on the note “I wondered if they thought I was one.” Bryan-Wilson explains that Lacy’s speculation reveals how class and gender contexts tend to shape expectations about women’s identities, which ultimately enforces stigmas as well.\(^5\) One might also read the note as Lacy’s own internalization of the stigmas associated with prostitution, even as she seeks to find herself in the experiences and terrain of the profession. Admittedly, Lacy’s *Prostitution Notes* does not come from the perspective of a sex worker, so it may not be the most effective vessel for understanding sex worker’s perspectives.

Nevertheless, it does help to expose some of the stigma associated with prostitution and anticipates the deconstruction of that stigma that would be seen in works by performance artists like Leigh and Annie Sprinkle (who are or were sex workers) in the late 1970s and 80s.

**Constructing the Role of the Sex Worker in the Context of Patriarchy**

One important question is where the stigma around sex work comes from. Shannon Bell, in the introductory chapter of *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, discusses the process of “othering” through which the “prostitute body” is constructed as an object of shame. Essentially, she explains that at the foundation of Western thought the binary categorizations of gender into “male” and “female” privileges the role of the masculine while positioning the feminine in the role of the “other.” The prostitute (and sex workers more generally) can then be thought of as a deviant “other” within the realm of the feminine, making sex workers an even further excluded and demonized group. Ultimately, she argues that the various constructions of the female body tend to reinforce problematic dichotomies like this even as it tries to resist them.6

Bell echoes the ideas of feminist theorists like Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock, and Roszika Parker, all of whom consider femininity as constructed by a patriarchal culture.7 These feminist critics have argued that representations of women function as signifiers of male dominance because the notion of woman is a patriarchal construct in the first place. Furthermore, the male gaze (a term popularized by Mulvey, who understood it through the lens of Lacanian

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6 Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, 2.

psychoanalysis) is inherent to all images of women because art is a text reflective of patriarchal society. As Mulvey has suggested in her essay on the male gaze, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “woman…stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other… as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.” 87 Because gender is socially constructed under a male dominated society, there is nothing which is essentially or inherently feminine. According to Pollock and Parker, our ways of understanding images of women are rooted in these constructions that necessarily reflect engagement with the male gaze. However, by acknowledging that gender is culturally constructed and reinforced by the male gaze, space is then created for subversion and resistance to patriarchal society, which allows for female empowerment, increased agency of women over their bodies, and the redefinition of the feminine in a sex-positive way.

Representations of the female body become even more complicated when considering the role of the sex worker—particularly, in how the sex worker’s body is affected by issues of idealization, the male gaze, and sexual objectification. In many ways, the modern and contemporary artists that I will be examining in this thesis are aware of their engagement with these topics and are actively exploring how they influence the experiences of sex workers.

**Review of Scholarly Literature: Idealization, the Male Gaze, and Sexual Objectification of the Female Nude**

To understand the issues of idealization, the male gaze, and sexual objectification and connect them to the representation and imaging of the bodies of sex workers, we must look back

into the history of the female body in art. It is helpful to begin this investigation with Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, a book based on a series of lectures that Clark delivered at the National Gallery of Art in 1953. *The Nude* is a useful place to start because several feminist scholars have critiqued Clark’s ideas about the nude form, and they have seen his ideas as exemplifying a misogynistic ideology. In the first chapter, “The Naked and the Nude,” Clark distinguishes between the words “naked” and “nude,” ultimately asserting that while to be “naked” means to be without clothes, “the nude” suggests an idealized and beautiful body which is reframed beyond reality by an artist’s compulsion to perfect and make those bodies conform to notions of what the ideal body should be. While Clark did not distinguish the sex and gender of the nude bodies as explicitly female, the pages of his book are illustrated with images of reclining nude women as examples of the ideal beauty. He also frequently refers to the models as she/her, suggesting that, while he discusses the ideal form as it relates to men, women’s bodies are a more primary concern. From a more contemporary feminist perspective, these male artists are creating a powerful and impossible beauty standard with which to judge real women, but this is not something that Clark addresses.

A feminist reinterpretation of this subject of the nude was necessary since Clark seems to have believed that beauty is a timeless ideal as opposed to a culturally-based construction. Furthermore, the representation of the female nude body usually objectified the female form and failed to convey the lived experiences of real women with agency. In direct response to Clark, John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing* (based on his television series of the same title) posits that women are in a constant state of visualizing their own presence, surveying their own image as it appears to men. He explains that Clark’s definition of the nude in art as perfect and ideal suggests that female nudes are objectified bodies on display, defined by how they are seen by the

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purveyors of the male gaze. Berger goes on to suggest that nude representations of women in art are connected to the experiences of actual women who are in a constant state of self-visualization, because the conventions of ideal beauty prescribed by the female nude form in art inform the conventions used by patriarchal society to judge, objectify, and ultimately control actual women based on their physical appearance.\textsuperscript{10}

Lynda Nead, a feminist art historian who has written extensively on the topic of the female nude in Western art, continues this discussion of conventions that regulate representations of the female nude, arguing that “one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body.”\textsuperscript{11} In her critique of Clark’s concept of the “nude,” she draws an analogy between Thomas More’s Utopia and the idealization of the female body. In the story of Utopia, the founding king, Utopus, civilizes an uncouth society and proceeds to carve out an island with an impenetrable coastline where the perfect society will exist in isolation. Nead equates the pre-Utopian land with the female sexual body and suggests that the process of idealizing the female body corresponds to the civilizing process that Utopus undertook to create the island of Utopia. The female body goes through a similar transformation when it is transformed from the real to the idealized. In this way, the elements of the individual female body (which Clark suggests “disturb” viewers with its “wrinkles, pouches, and small imperfections”) are transformed from their raw state into the ideal, cutting off the idealized body “from the continent of the female sexual body and female desire.”\textsuperscript{12} Nead ultimately suggests that Clark’s “Utopian Vision” stemmed from a longing to escape the new social reality in post-World War II England, in which female sexuality was becoming redefined as more

\textsuperscript{10} John Berger, \textit{Ways of Seeing}, 54-55.


liberated, and reflected a potential diminishing of control over feminine sexuality. Thus, Clark’s concepts of nude representations of women as ideal beauty reflect sexual objectification as a means for controlling the sexuality of women by reducing human subjects to the status of things rather than individuals with sexual agency.

Nead’s ideas about sexual control can be connected to the social stigma associated with sex work and the negative reaction to the advocation of sex worker’s rights. In some cases, that stigma stems from a negative reaction to the increased liberation and autonomy of female sexuality that exists when sex workers have control and agency over their own bodies. Sex work, particularly prostitution, has taken many forms in Western history and it is frequently exploitative. In other situations, though, sex workers have asserted ownership over their bodies in resistance to patriarchal society. Advocates for sex workers’ rights promote a range of issues related to sex workers’ experiences, from championing legalization, regulation, and increased safety measures to challenging social stigmas. Addressing these issues could ultimately increase the agency of sex workers over their bodies and reduce the exploitation of women in the sex industry.

Thus, patriarchal control over sex workers’ bodies can be challenged through increased advocacy and changes to the social structures surrounding sex work. The sex-positive pornography director Candida Royalle furthers the notion of agency in her discussion of Deep Inside Porn Stars, a performance piece based on consciousness-raising conversations between porn stars which provided a new feminist perspective on porn from the actors themselves. She explains in an interview with Bell: “The media suddenly took a tremendous interest in us from a whole new angle…We were women who could really think…It was controversial because people would rather think of women who choose to be sex workers as stupid or victims. The idea in this
kind of culture that women would choose in their right mind to do this work was very
threatening.”

An important term related to the female body in general, and to sex work in particular, is
“sexual objectification.” Sexual objectification is an unavoidable yet not always problematic
facet of sexuality. It does, however, connect to the ways power can be reflected and
conventionalized in visual art. A.W. Eaton defines sexual objectification as “to treat something
that is not a thing as merely a thing.” Regarding unclothed women in visual art, Eaton delineates
nine specific things that convey objectification. The three passages that are most pertinent to
representations of sex workers are: “generic body”, “eroticization of violation”, and “gratuitous
nudity.” “Generic body” is perhaps most closely related to Clark’s definition of the nude body’s
idealization in art. Eaton posits that the generic body is a convention that suggests that the body
depicted is simply one of many available sexual bodies, with their individual qualities effaced.14
“Eroticization of violation” plays into the subject of control and the sexualization of gender
hierarchies. Lastly, “gratuitous nudity” is either nudity that is not called for in the narrative of the
artwork or nudity which may be loosely necessitated by the narrative, but which is only as a thin
veil justifying the inclusion of a naked woman as a titillating or erotic element. The category of
“gratuitous nudity” questions the convention of painting idealized female forms by suggesting
that it is (or has been) primarily for erotic purposes, as many feminist critics would suggest.15

In some instances, images of sex workers suggest sexual objectification simply because
they often feature all three of these categories: generic bodies, eroticization of violation, and
gratuitous nudity. Following the advent of the women’s art movement, though, sex workers

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13 Bell, Reading, Writing, and Rewriting, 143.
14 A.W. Eaton, “What’s Wrong With the (Female) Nude?” in Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays, ed. Hans
15 Eaton, “What’s Wrong With the (Female) Nude?” 290-291.
began creating art that reframes their experiences using their actual, non-generic bodies, particularly in the case of performance art. In those situations, sexual objectification under Eaton’s definition is avoided. For example, *Deep Inside Porn Stars* individualized those involved as they discussed their personal experiences, and instead of eroticizing violation, it created a safe space for discussion of those personal experiences.

Eaton also helpfully clarifies Mulvey’s definition of the “male gaze.” She explains that while any viewer might take erotic pleasure in viewing naked women, the male gaze is the normative way of seeing in a patriarchal society, so representations of the female nude body necessarily speak to the erotic desires of heterosexual men (for example, poses that suggest sexual availability or which highlight erogenous zones, as seen in classical and Renaissance depictions of Venus). Eaton harkens back to Berger as she suggests “the nude is one of those cultural forms that teaches women to see themselves in terms of masculine interests.” Eaton seems to suggest that representations of the female body both address the erotic interests of men while simultaneously prescribing to female viewers the characteristics of what makes women sexually attractive (through the male gaze); the female audience will then internalize the male gaze as they develop their own view of themselves as the observed.

While it is clear why this process of eroticized objectification is problematic to feminist art historians, the issue of the male gaze is turned on its head in the context of sex work, as the sexual interests of men are integral to the field of sex work. Female sex workers exercising an understanding of the male gaze and using it to their own financial advantage is an empowerment, in a way that has not been considered by those writing about the problems associated with the male gaze in the female nude as traditionally depicted in the fine arts.

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16 Eaton, “What’s Wrong With the (Female) Nude?” 292-293, 298.

17 Eaton, “What’s Wrong With the (Female) Nude?” 294.
In this thesis, I will trace the development of the image of the sex worker through modern and contemporary Western art. This introductory chapter introduced the topics of sex work and the modern feminist movement, and a review of scholarly literature on representations of the female nude body from a feminist art historical perspective. Chapter two presents a study of pre-feminist depictions of sex workers during the 19th and early 20th centuries. This discussion will begin in 19th century France, as the advent of the Realist movement marks the first time that sex workers were depicted as modern sex workers rather than mythological characters or historical references in Western art. Chapter two also includes a discussion of the American photographer Ernst Joseph Bellocq’s *Storyville Portraits*, portraits which he captured in New Orleans’ red-light district in the early 20th century, for further comparison with the French artists. Chapter three focuses on performance art’s connection to pro sex work feminist activism, with an emphasis on the performance work of Carol Leigh as Scarlot Harlot and Ellen Steinberg as Annie Sprinkle. Chapter four explores artists at the turn of the 21st century and beyond, including works by Ann-Sofi Sidén and Santiago Sierra utilized documentation of sex workers as a means to highlight their exploitation through visual art installations. Chapter four will also consider more recent projects by artist-activists, and will emphasize how they exercise an even more inclusive approach to making art about sex work, with community organization utilized to promote pro sex work activism. These contemporary projects will be seen as empowering sex workers by providing platforms for further discussion of sex workers’ experiences through visual art.
Chapter Two: Depictions of Sex Workers in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

Depictions of sex workers, as sex workers, did not become acceptable in the fine arts until avant-garde artists, especially the Realists, began representing scenes of modern life in nineteenth-century France. French Realists responded to contemporary social conditions by representing modern reality as they perceived it rather than distorting it through idealized and romanticized imagery. These realities included the prostitutes of Paris, who became a common subject in contemporary painting and literature. The number of sex workers and their social presence had increased as a direct result of the Industrial Revolution.

Historical Background of Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Paris

The Industrial Revolution sparked an increase in migrants from rural areas to Paris seeking jobs. The increase of male laborers, many of them single, meant that there was a market for prostitution that unemployed women could easily capitalize upon. As Alain Corbin has explained, French authorities in Paris enforced legal regulation of prostitution in order to maintain public morality for young men and women, to help preserve Parisian men’s finances, and to protect public health due to a rise in cases of syphilis. Prostitution was an understood, if not wholly accepted, facet of Parisian life in the nineteenth century. Prostitutes were categorized as either filles de maisons, who were registered brothel workers, filles de carte, who were registered but did not work in brothels, and filles “insoumises,” who were unregistered and

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operated illegally.  

Corbin also describes a way of imaging prostitutes that was popularly disseminated by medical professionals and hygienists that emphasized a connection between prostitutes and waste, the presence of odorous flesh, and an overall identification to the “putrid body” of corpses as a way to imply that prostitutes were a threat to public health. This connected to the principles of humoral theory, an accepted medical principle in nineteenth century France which emphasized the importance of maintaining balance of the four humors (fluids) in the human body in order to maintain one’s health. Seminal fluid from excessive sexual relations was thought to be excreted by prostitutes’ bodies, threatening this equilibrium and causing their bodies to become literally putrid and odorous. The connection to putrification and rot lent itself to associations between the prostitute body and a kind of “living death.”

T. J. Clark posits that this way of imaging prostitutes was an accepted way of classifying women for Parisians, as prostitutes were simply a possible category of the feminine as they had become a typical figure in Paris.

The increase in prostitution (and the public’s awareness thereof) brought a sense of unease due to the perceived inability to control women’s behavior and morality in the modern age of economized sexuality.

Additionally, there was an unease related to the class divisions of prostitutes, as brothels varied based on the class levels they served. Wealthy demimondaines and those who worked in luxury brothels came to hold a position in society that was far from the expected role of the prostitute as poor and putrid.

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Images of Sex Workers from Nineteenth Century France

19th century Paris was certainly not the first or only society to have a significant demographic of prostitutes, which begs the question of why in this particular age witnessed such a great number of depictions of these figures in art. It was due in large part to the number of sex workers that were active in nineteenth century Paris, as previous historical eras which had a significant population of sex workers were simply not on the scale which could be found in the urban population of nineteenth century Paris. Additionally, the ideals of the Realist movement and its connection to the subsequent Impressionist movement clarify some of the reasons artists were responding directly to their present sociocultural contexts in ways that their predecessors in the French school of painting largely did not. The Realists began painting images of modern life, often to a great deal of criticism from the Parisian art world. The writings of Gustave Courbet, a pioneer of the French Realist movement, emphasize that the significance of the Realist style lies in the artist’s unique ability to reproduce the epoch which is their own present by painting things which exist before them, meaning an artist should paint what they know, not what they can only imagine. Edouard Manet, another pioneering Realist, made fewer statements on his theoretical principles than Courbet did, but he too emphasized the individual role of the modern artist in distinguishing his style from the more idealized, Romantic stylistic conventions of the Academie des Beaux-Arts. Thus, an interesting dynamic began to appear in depictions of sex workers, as Realists differed from the Romanticists by representing prostitutes as modern sex workers, rather than the more accepted choice to represent sex workers as harem women or characters from


Romantic artists depicted sex workers as harem women, exoticizing and othering them using the lens of Orientalism, as exemplified by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Grand Odalisque* (1814). Jean-Léon Gérôme’s *Phryne Before the Areopagus* (1861) depicts a sex worker from classical history, the ancient Greek hetaira (courtesan) Phryne while on trial for impiety for being naked during the festival of Poseidon at Eleusis. The painting shows her after her robe has been removed by her defending counsel to reveal her idealized, eroticized naked body to the judges as she covers her face in vulnerable shame. She was famously acquitted by her judges after being disrobed due to her divine physical beauty.\(^8\)

Interestingly, sex workers were known to have modeled for Romantic depictions of mythological characters. For instance, the wealthy demimondaine Apollonie Sabatier modeled for Auguste Clésinger’s *Woman Bitten by a Serpent*, a marble sculpture of a reclining nude woman with a bronze serpent encircling her leg after having bitten her, which Wendy Nolan Joyce explains implies that the figure is meant to be either Eve or Cleopatra. Viewers were aware that the sculpture depicted Sabatier when it was exhibited at the 1847 Salon, and that “the true subject pertained to the tangible pleasures of a living woman rather than any dramatic incident from ancient history or myth.” Despite its eroticized, sexually provocative nature and obvious reference to the sex appeal of a modern day courtesan, the sculpture was celebrated for breaking traditional sculptural styles when it was unveiled and the nudity was acceptable to the conservative Salon jury due to the presence of the serpent suggesting that the nude figure was allegorical.\(^9\) This presents an interesting contrast to the reaction to Manet’s *Olympia*, which was heavily criticized for depicting a modern day Parisian prostitute as a reclining nude without the

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pretext of representing a more acceptable nude figure, such as a character from mythology or history.

In contrast, Realists like Edouard Manet responded to their social surroundings by depicting modern day sex workers. Manet’s *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*, originally titled *Le Bain*, was rejected from the official 1863 Salon and found its place in the Salon Refusés, an exhibition created by Napoleon III to display works rejected from the Salon. The painting is a scene of four figures that seem to be enjoying an outdoor picnic: two men dressed in modern Parisian style clothing, a nude woman seated on the grass with them, and another woman who appears to be partially undressed bathing in a body of water behind the other three figures. The figures are unidealized and minimally modeled, and there is little illusion of depth, both examples of the ways Manet ignores the conventions of painting revered by the Academy. The presence of modern Parisian men suggests that the women are indeed modern Parisian women, likely prostitutes as reinforced by the presence of a toad in the foreground, as the French word for frog, *grenouille*, was a slang term for a prostitute. The women do not represent mythological figures, like Venus, which would have given their nudity a veneer of acceptability from the fine art world that it was not afforded by viewers and critics. Instead, the painting was shocking, scandalous, and unconventional in its subject matter and style, although the composition was clearly influenced by two artworks from the past: Titian’s *Concert Champêtre* and Raphael’s *Judgement of Paris*. Manet showed his understanding of the canon of art history in these references, which emphasizes even more his efforts to break convention.

The presence of men who are fully clothed while the woman in the foreground, the most obvious focal point, is naked immediately suggests a kind of power imbalance among the more vulnerable unclothed woman and the clothed men that is similar to Gérôme’s depiction of
Phryne’s trial. The figure’s vulnerability due to her lack of clothing visually suggests her role as being subjugated by the men of the scene. She gazes out at the viewer rather than shielding her face, though, seemingly aware that she is being looked at. In a sense, the figure is reclaiming some of the power taken from her by the voyeur, the viewer. It seems that Manet is looking to call attention to the facets of Parisian life that are thought of as immoral, such as the purchasing of services from prostitutes, and painting them on the scale of history painting in order to both shock and criticize. The figure’s deliberate gaze plays on the previously mentioned unease incited by being unable to control the sexuality of the many women in Paris who worked in the sex industry as they began to occupy a more central role in society. I would argue that Manet’s effort to turn the mirror to the Parisian viewers through this painting suggests his way of mocking the double standard which allowed for the sex industry to be widespread and heavily patronized by Parisians who also held negative attitudes towards sex workers and their rising role in French society. Additionally, the scene is imaginary, a reference to both Parisian lifestyles and the history of art. In both Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe and Olympia, the figure is modeled by another artist, Victorine Meurent, not an actual prostitute, so it can not be said to explore the lived experiences of Parisian sex workers but rather to call attention to the hypocrisy of French double standards regarding prostitution.

Two years later, in 1865, Manet’s Olympia (1863) was accepted into the official Salon where it became infamously scandalous and universally criticized, for many of the same reasons that Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe was. Olympia was far more intensely criticized than Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe due to the widespread consensus that Olympia was a reference to sex workers, something that was far less notable to viewers of Le Déjeuner. In Olympia, a naked woman reclines on a bed with a defiant, sour-looking gaze out at the viewer and a hand covering her
pubic area as if to remind us that she is unavailable without payment. She does not have the soft, fleshy quality of more traditional nude paintings of women’s bodies. *Olympia*, it would have been clear to Parisian viewers, depicts a prostitute painted on the elevated scale generally reserved for heroic depictions of history and mythology. However, Clark explains that critics did not explicitly identify her as a sex worker, although the implication is clear, they instead allowed it to come forth in terms of the associations with filth, corruption, and death that Parisian society equated with prostitutes. Like *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*, the painting makes reference to a Titian painting: the *Venus of Urbino*. Few critics at the time made note of this reference, perhaps because they were all so focused on criticizing the unidealized representation of Olympia. The lack of idealization and harsh chiaroscuro with abrupt transitions from light to shade rather than the smooth gradations of Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* negates some of the elements of the traditional nude which constitute sexual objectification because the figure does not exist solely to satisfy the sexual interests of the purveyors of the male gaze. Instead, she counters the gaze with her own. This is complicated by the fact that the figure’s body is suggested to be available only through commercial exchange, so while she does not submit to the viewer in the same ways that a traditional nude suggests, she still presents herself as a sexual being. Ultimately, it seems that Manet was not necessarily representing *Olympia* this way in order to criticize the subjugation of women through the male gaze, but his attempts to break convention bled into this realm in an interesting way.

The shift from Realism to Impressionism brought a stylistic change from the straightforward, unidealized mode of Realism to the highly stylized, fleeting moments captured in the swift marks of Impressionism. The Realist subversion of social convention and the

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10 Clark, “Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of *Olympia*, 1865,” 23.

representation of scenes from modern life lived on in the work of Impressionists like Edgar Degas and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, among others, many of whom also depicted prostitutes, brothels, and other aspects of sex worker’s daily lives. The progression into Impressionism reflected a continuation of the less moralizing perspective on the topic of prostitution which furthered the trend enacted by the Realists, as the artists elected to represent scenes that were more closely related to the actual lived experiences of sex workers, although not necessarily without exploitation of the figures depicted. The scenes of sex workers depicted by the Realists and Impressionists have less straightforward intention and meaning when compared to the popular moralizing theme of the “fallen woman” which was commonplace in Victorian painting and literature at the same time that painting prostitutes became a trend in France.

As a new generation of painters came onto the French art scene, the spontaneity of Impressionism gave way to other instances of representations of prostitutes in a mode that differed from the detailed paintings of Realism as artists became preoccupied with capturing the fleeting. Artists began to represent sex workers in ways that had a sense of being more truthful (whether they truly are is debatable) than their counterparts which lie under the umbrella of Realism. Greenberg suggests that the spontaneous quality of the style connects to efforts on the part of the painters to capture a fleeting moment by transcribing how it seems to look and feel, rather than focusing on the minute details, making these paintings feel in a sense like a swiftly produced record of a scene as it was experienced by the artists.\(^\text{12}\) One notable example is Edgar Degas’ monotype prints of brothel scenes, which were on a much smaller scale than the massive canvases Manet and Courbet painted on, that Clayson argues counter Greenberg’s notion of the fragmented impressions as documentary. To reiterate a previous point, it is important to remember that images of sex workers from this time period are, for the most part, necessarily

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filtered through the perspective of male artists, so they are not free from the exploitative qualities of sexism, voyeurism, sexual objectification, or the uncompassionate perspectives of the artists rendering them, particularly in the work of Degas.

The monoprints produced by Degas of brothel scenes mark his own attempts at working with the subject of the nude in a modern way, just as Manet did. The prints often depict both prostitutes and clients. One of the prints, *Repose*, includes three figures: two unclothed women lounging on a couch and a man, seen only as a fragment as he begins to enter the room. The women are not reclining nudes in the traditional sense, rather they are relaxed and unposed, not seeming to express any awareness of being looked at. None of the figures interact with one another at all, suggesting the idea that this is simply a snapshot of life in a brothel without additional narrative. *The Serious Customer* contrasts with *Repose*, as it depicts several nude women ushering a nervous client into the brothel. The unclothed bodies of the women contrast with the clothed body of the male client, even in the gestural, fragmented style of the monoprint. Clayson describes the disparity between the figures: “His unmodeled, suited body appears flat and insubstantial next to the sculptural roundness of the women’s ample bodies.”¹³ She is right, the male figure tends to almost blend into the background. He might even be unnoticeable were it not for the group of shapely women beckoning to him. The eye is drawn immediately to the buttocks of one of the women who has taken the man by the wrist, the unequivocal focal point of the work despite an apparent effort on the part of Degas to imply that the scene does not have a singular focal point as each of the figures is partially cut off by the edge or otherwise obscured. This is one of many of the brothel monoprints which emphasize and ultimately sexualize the

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buttocks of one of the prostitutes depicted, even as they are not classically idealized. In a 1958 publication, Benedict Nicholson described them, writing

For the cold purity and detachment with which crude sex is here treated are sufficient to cancel out any unsavory interest that the subject might arouse. Degas seems to be saying, pleasure may be sought for in these rooms, but it is not found there, not by these middle aged visitors; as for the professional ladies…nothing can mitigate the wretchedness of their existence.\(^{14}\)

It is true that Degas represents these scenes and the women with a lack of emotion. The sense of emotional alienation between viewer and subject is typical of Degas’ work, even in his painted portraits of his own relatives. Still, Clayson explains that this is likely to reflect Degas’ personal idea of the brothel as a brutalizing, cold place characteristic of the modern world. By the 1870s, though, luxury brothels were becoming much more warm, comfortable, high-class places. The gratuitous nudity of the figures and luxe decor of the brothel scenes suggests that it was a luxury brothel that Degas based these scenes on, which further emphasizes that they reflect his somewhat outdated concept of the brothel.\(^{15}\)

**Splendor and Misery**

The first major exhibition on the art and culture of Parisian sex workers of the nineteenth century was Musée d’Orsay’s 2015-16 exhibition, *Splendor and Misery*, which featured representations of prostitution in nineteenth and early twentieth century French painting alongside archival objects including police reports, photos, and periodicals from the era. However, critics of this show, Lynda Nead in particular, maintain that this show perpetuated

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\(^{15}\) Clayson, *Painted Love*, 34-35.
stereotypes instead of deconstructing them. Nead suggests that paintings of sex workers (which were commonplace across painting styles and genres from the Realists, Impressionists, and Neoclassicists alike) still require interrogation from the perspective of twenty first century feminism, something that Nead felt the curators of Splendor and Misery glossed over. To briefly summarize her criticism, Nead asserts that the curators have essentially equated the gallery space of the exhibition with the brothels of the nineteenth century, encouraging the sexualization of images on display. Instead of offering visitors the opportunity to interrogate the role of the gaze, they are only led to participate in the problems of it.16 Sex work is a complicated and touchy subject for many, and the curators of Splendor and Misery seemed to have relied on glamourization of the higher class Parisian prostitutes of the maisons de luxe, luxury brothels which were known for luxurious decor that the gallery emulated, as the primary draw for the exhibit.17 In the Musée d’Orsay’s detailed presentation of the exhibit, the text focuses on providing a historical account of prostitution in Paris while emphasizing the fascination of artists with prostitution. The text’s introduction implies a potentially feminist-leaning perspective when it states “However distinct they may be, all these perspectives on the world of prostitution were the exclusive preserve of male artists. What emerges from the depiction of pleasure and pain, meteoric social ascents and wretched lives is the burden of being a woman in modern society.”18 The varied social positions and activities of sex workers are described in great detail, and Toulouse-Lautrec is presented as uniquely capturing the “human face of the prostitutes of his day.” Overall, though, the text falls short of any substantial attempt to guide visitors to consider

16 Nead, “This Exhibition Conflates the Gallery and the Brothel.”
17 Clayson, Painted Love, 28.
their own ideas about the visual and historical control of women’s bodies, themes which would have effectively played into the display of this topic. Nead’s criticisms ring true in their general sentiment, although it is important to remember that displays of wealth were a part of the culture of sex work in the Parisian upper classes, making the decor for the boudoir-style exhibition rooms a fairly logical if potentially problematic aesthetic choice.

In her review of *Splendor and Misery*, Nead contrasted it with her own curatorial technique for representing Victorian paintings of the “fallen woman” trope, which are overtly moralizing depictions of women who have had sex out of wedlock, whether it be through seduction, adultery, or prostitution, and who in turn have lost their sacred place in the family home. Like the French artists, English artists were responding to issues of modern society, but these paintings had the clear intention of warning women of the dangers of becoming a fallen woman and the necessity to repent in order to regain their place within the familial structure.  

Nead describes how she made curatorial decisions to present images of the Victorian fallen woman made by artists including Dante Gabriel Rosetti, George Frederick Watts, and Richard Redgrave, alongside archival objects from London’s Foundling Hospital. Unmarried women would write petitions to apply for their babies to be accepted for care from the Foundling Hospital. These women would then be interviewed and fact-checked by the hospital before the decision was made about whether she could be relieved from the responsibility of her baby’s care based on whether the hospital’s board felt that the mother could then recover from her status as a fallen woman back into respectability. Archival objects in the exhibit included some of the written petitions for care, which gave visitors a glimpse of the formerly respectable women’s experiences through their own writing, as well as things like newspaper illustrations and

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20 Nead, “This Exhibition Conflates the Gallery and the Brothel.”
stereoscopes to help visitors understand the place that the “fallen woman” trope held in Victorian popular culture.\textsuperscript{21} Nead’s curatorial approach allowed visitors of the exhibit to consider the ways that art and literature immortalized social concerns that had a legitimate impact on the women who lived during the eras it was produced and disseminated, in a way that \textit{Splendor and Misery} ultimately fell short of.

\textbf{Henri Toulouse-Lautrec}

Another artist whose Impressionistic work was featured in \textit{Splendor and Misery} as a more humanizing example of sex worker representations was Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. His work ultimately resounds more powerfully with the interests of feminism than do the work of artists like Degas and Manet. Lautrec was unable to participate in many of the upper-class activities of his aristocratic family due to physical maladies of both legs, which is in part what led him to befriend and paint individuals who were on the outer perimeter of Parisian society. These were the people that he befriended and identified with as an outsider himself. Lautrec created a series meant to document the lives of Parisian prostitutes, which he himself frequented. One of these paintings, \textit{Rue des Moulins}, depicts two prostitutes who worked in a \textit{maison de luxe} waiting for the required weekly gynecological exam for prostitutes working in brothels as a condition of their legal registration as brothel workers. This requirement came from efforts to stop the spread of venereal diseases, particularly syphilis. The medical examination procedure involved a speculum exam and full body inspection, surely an unpleasant experience to have under the watchful eye of a police officer. One of the women in the painting, the redhead who stands

second in line, has a sickly-looking array of colors to her face, which suggests that she has contracted syphilis as one of the symptoms is blotchy patches of red and purple on the face. Lautrec depicts these women in a much more individualized way than Degas’ previously discussed figures expressed. The sense of being exhausted by the long wait time and impending violation is palpable in the women’s body language and facial expressions. It suggests the artist’s empathy for the figures and in turn evokes it from the viewer. Lautrec seems to have been inspired by their lived experiences as these women experienced them. Rue des Moulins does not intend to invoke the sense of coldness that Degas’ monoprints do or the intention to scandalize that Manet’s previously discussed works did.

Ultimately, the interest in depicting a modern reality pushed nineteenth century French artists to consider the subject of the sex worker/prostitute in ways which reflect their social context, to varying degrees of effectiveness at capturing truth. While Lautrec was arguably the artist included in this discussion with the deepest understanding of the actual lives of Parisian prostitutes due to his social proximity to them, it will become clear as progresses into the realm of feminist artists’ interpretation of the topic that a more direct involvement from sex workers themselves in the production of art leads to a more deeply honest representation of it.

**Ernst Joseph Bellocq’s Storyville Portraits**

Another body of work that represents prostitutes in a way that evokes questions about truth and the artist’s intention, but which resulted from some form of collaboration with actual sex workers, came from a photographer who was a first-generation American of French parents:

Ernst Joseph Bellocq, usually referred to by his initials as “E. J. Bellocq.” Bellocq captured a compelling series of images of the women in Storyville, New Orleans, which was north of Rampart Street in what is today’s Tremé neighborhood. Storyville was the red-light district of New Orleans, Louisiana and the only legal red-light district in the United States at the time, in 1912. Prostitution was legal in the Storyville district from 1897 until 1917, when legalized prostitution ended there due to a federal order that sought to end prostitution near naval bases.23 According to Craig L. Foster, New Orleans society held a viewpoint similar to the Victorian sensibility concerned with the fallen woman. He explains, “Once fallen, women were regarded as evil, tainted, and a threat to common morals.”24 Foster goes on to describe some of the horrors experienced by prostitutes in New Orleans, including operations to forcefully remove reproductive organs in efforts to prevent hysteria caused by “sexual excess” (literally a hysterectomy), addiction to drugs and alcohol to escape the harsh reality of their lives, contraction of venereal diseases, and instances of depression and suicide. Storyville had one thing in common with Paris: the brothels were differentiated by class level, with lower-class brothels called cribs and upper-class brothels called parlor houses. Cribs served and were worked by individuals of varied races and nationalities, offering brief services at lower prices. Rooms at the crib were used by multiple women who worked in shifts. In contrast, Parlor houses had an air of elegance, with drinks and entertainment offered alongside sexual services, and were primarily for well-to-do whites looking to be served by white prostitutes. The women working in Storyville parlor houses had their own rooms to serve clients.25

23 Erica A. Powell, “Tales from Storyville,” *Archaeology* 55, no. 6 (November/December 2002): 26, JSTOR.


Photographer Lee Friedlander printed Bellocq’s eighty-nine Storyville negative plates, which were found in Bellocq’s desk after his death in 1949 and purchased by Friedlander from an art gallery owner in the late 1960s. In 1970, Friedlander exhibited the prints at the Museum of Modern Art and published them alongside conversations with individuals who were acquainted with Bellocq in order to piece together the minimal available information about the artist.26 The portraits of Storyville prostitutes make up the majority of any known work of Bellocq’s to have survived, and Friedlander’s are some of the only prints. The photographs have an unexpectedly relaxed and even playful quality to them which suggests the women were familiar with the photographer and amiable to being photographed. The portraits, while all clearly posed, are quite varied. Some show the women nude or in states of undress, reclining and gazing into the camera in poses reminiscent of Manet’s Olympia. Others show them fully clothed, wearing masks, or posing with their dogs. One woman extends a shot of rye whiskey towards the camera in her portrait. There are images in which the women appear before a plain, solid backdrop while others are shown outside or in boudoirs decorated with furniture and pictures. Some of the women smile playfully at the camera and others avoid it with their gaze. The variations in the portraits give the sense that Bellocq was attempting to capture the unique qualities of each woman’s personality by collaborating. The result is a series of beautiful images that seem to celebrate the spirit and beauty of the women photographed.

In Friedlander’s Storyville Portraits, Bellocq is described as something of an easily teased outsider akin to Henri Toulouse-Lautrec: a man of small stature with a condition that affected the shape of his head, referred to by Johnny Wiggs, a cornettist who knew Bellocq at the time he created the Storyville negatives, simply as “some kind of brain disease.”27 Bellocq was a


27 Storyville Portraits, 8.
commercial photographer, known to have worked for a shipbuilding company capturing images of boats and boat parts. This is interesting because the *Storyville Portraits* are in a much different style than the sharp, straightforward realism that such a job would have required. It is unclear whether or not the *Storyville Portraits* were a commercial assignment given to Bellocq by the brothels, but the quality of the photographs and the absence of almost any surviving prints from Bellocq’s time suggest that they were a personal project for the photographer.

Bellocq’s portraits seem to depict women of the higher class parlor houses of Storyville, as the women depicted in the prints Friedlander published are white and many are shown in what are likely their own rooms at their respective brothels which are decorated and appear to house some of the women’s personal belongings. Additionally, some of the women appear to wear fine clothing, including one woman who adorns a fur capelet, beaded dress, and jewelry, alluding to the reality that the women working in parlor houses made as much as four times what the women in the crib were earning.28 The women appear overall to be healthy and happy in Bellocq’s photographs, with many of them displaying their voluptuous nude bodies and grinning for the camera. With this in mind, it seems that Bellocq’s portraits only represent the more elite demographic of sex workers in Storyville, rather than the struggles of the district as a whole, as there was an extremely wide range of racial, national, and ethnic backgrounds among the women who participated in sex work in Storyville.

Despite the somewhat limited scope of the series, Bellocq’s *Storyville Portraits* represent the value of the emerging medium of photography as an art form at the turn of the century. By necessity, the *Storyville Portraits* involve more direct involvement with sex workers than the work of the French painters, whose models were not necessarily sex workers as far as we know. The involvement of actual sex workers is of the utmost importance in effectively translating the

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28 Foster, “Tarnished Angels,”
experiences of sex workers into the terms of visual art, as this thesis will ultimately convey. It is true that the portraits come from the gaze of a male artist who is not himself a prostitute, which may be one reason why the portraits emphasize and celebrate the conventional physical beauty and sexuality of the women photographed. Still, it is arguable that the portraits also celebrate the women’s unique qualities and express something deeper about them beyond concerns of physical appearance.

**Chapter Conclusion**

Overall, the works discussed in this chapter do not reflect the most effective instances of artists depicting a sincere, empathetic, and realistic understanding of the experiences of sex workers, due in large part to the fact that they were all created by artists who were men and who were not purveyors of sexual services, although some were certainly clients and all were aware of other men who sought out sexual services. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and E.J. Bellocq, I would argue, were able to create more realistic and empathetic representations of sex workers than Manet and Degas. I believe that this is in large part due to their own position as outsiders in societies that were isolating towards many demographics, including those with physical ailments and those who worked as prostitutes alike. Additionally, Bellocq’s utilization of the medium of photography allowed for a stronger sense of the “real” due to the often documentarian nature of the medium.

It is important to conclude with an emphasis on the point which I have dwelled upon throughout this chapter: that the wave of representations of prostitutes in nineteenth century French art were created almost exclusively by male artists, just as Bellocq’s portraits were
created by one. Linda Nochlin’s groundbreaking 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” delves into some of the obstacles for women artists which were part of a system that favored men becoming skilled and successful “genius” level artists over women in the Western art world historically. The essay marked a starting point for the reinterpretation of art history to consider the structures which controlled the production of art and its conventions, a conversation that continues to unfold today. I will not recount the essay’s main points here, except to emphasize that the meanings being put forth in this era via representations of sex workers are necessarily filtered through the male gaze and the privileged experience of male artists to become skilled and educated enough to pioneer the new movements of Realism, Impressionism, and photography even as they were criticized by the art world. There are times when these images reflect meaning that is not wholeheartedly negative when viewing them from the lens of feminist critique, but it is nonetheless important to always maintain an acute understanding of the reality that men were the ones putting these images into the world when analyzing them. As Clayson thoughtfully muses, we will never have the opportunity to uncover the voices and subjectivities of the women (real or imaginary) depicted in these paintings and photographs; we may only hope to use the lens of feminism to reframe their representations.


30 Clayson, Painted Love, xix.
Chapter Three: Sex Work and Performance Art

During the 1980s and early 1990s, many feminist artist-activists in America turned to the genre of performance art in response to the negative perceptions of sex workers held by the general population, including many self-proclaimed feminists. By this time, performance art had become a fairly popularized (albeit non-traditional) method of art making among avant-garde artists and collectives who wanted to explore the meanings imbued by artists’ actions and bodies in real time and space rather than by producing material artwork.

For many artists, the use of performance connected to, and continues to connect to, an interest in creating art which transcends the traditional realms of the gallery or the art museum.\(^1\) Performance art engages viewers, intriguing audiences in that its content occupies a place between “reality” and representation. Roselee Goldberg describes performance art as “…a way of bringing life to the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based. Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art.”\(^2\)

In many cases of activist art, including the ones that this chapter will explore, the power of performance lies in its ability to directly antagonize viewers into thinking about social issues that they might rather ignore. The experience is often intense, embarrassing, and intimate between spectator and performer. Bell constructively describes the value of performance art for sex worker activism. She writes “Those, such as prostitutes, previously coded as ‘obscene’ and contained as carnivalesque transgression can reconstitute themselves in the performance medium as living embodiments of resistance, remapping, redefining, and reclaiming the deviant body, the

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body of the sexual outsider and social outcast.”” Thus, it is through performance art that sex worker artist-activists have been able to reframe their social roles through performance which explores their own experiences in the sex industry.

A Brief History of Performance Art in the 1950s and 1960s

Performance art had become an accepted medium of artistic expression in the 1970s, preceded by several mid-twentieth century artists whose work was rooted in utilizing performance as a means of expressing both formal and conceptual ideas. These artists ultimately paved the way for the art world to embrace the medium of performance as a legitimate genre within the history of the visual arts.\(^4\) Performance had been utilized by even earlier artists, such as the Dadaists performing sound poetry in Hugo Ball’s Cabaret Voltaire during the First World War. Performance art would also anticipate (and often overlap with) the genre of conceptual art, which emphasizes the artistic idea over the product and is by nature experimental, paving the way for performance art’s acceptance into the canon of fine art. In 1952, an untitled event was staged at Black Mountain College by several visual artists, musicians, and dancers including Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, and Merce Cunningham, in which various experimental performances of music, dance, film, and readings occurred. Allan Kaprow would model his “happenings” after the Black Mountain College event while expanding the range of participants to include the audience rather than limiting it to fellow artists.\(^5\) Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts, for instance, were a series of fragmented performances which audiences engaged with

\(^3\) Shannon Bell, Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 138.

\(^4\) Goldberg, Performance Art, 7-8.

through both experience and participation as their programs instructed them on how to behave and move through the experience, conducted by Kaprow and others at the Reuben Gallery in 1959. Kaprow’s happenings were somewhat similar to Black Mountain College event and included the playing of musical instruments, live painting, reading from placards, slides, and other things. The artist coined the term “happening” to describe the events, rather than calling them performances, to imply to viewers the idea that the events were spontaneous and unrelated to the realm of traditional theatrical performance, although in reality they were carefully constructed and rehearsed. Kaprow’s ultimate goal was to “increase the responsibility of the observer”, something which ultimately became a key element in performance art geared towards promoting activism. Kaprow also became involved with another group relevant to the discussion of early performance art: the collective associated with Judson Memorial Church, a church turned gallery and art space run by Reverend Howard Moody. Reverend Moody invited artists to utilize the space for various art forms including avant-garde performance art and dance in the 1960s in an effort to advocate for freedom of expression. An Apple Shrine (1960) was the first happening that Kaprow would stage at the Judson Memorial Church’s gallery.

Shortly after Kaprow’s first happenings, the group Fluxus emerged as a loosely associated, international collective of anti-war artists, including several women and minority artists. Fluxus members conducted performances that were referred to as theater of mixed means, a term coined by Richard Kostelanetz to describe the various types of experimental

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6 Carlson, Performance, 113-115. Kaprow was opposed to the term “happening” becoming a trendy, catch-all term for this sort of work, which it apparently did.

7 Goldberg, Performance, 128.

performance that were emerging in the 1960s. Fluxus artists had a wide range of performance styles, but the performances tended to be collaborative, antiwar, randomly staged, and they utilized whatever materials were available. Fluxus artist Meiko Shiomi’s *Spatial Poems*, for instance, were created by the artist mailing brief instructions to individuals worldwide, who were asked to respond with their interpretation of the instructions provided. Together, the responses formed what Gillian Young described as “a poetic document of connectivity and chance that spanned Europe, America, and Japan, forming a counter image to the geopolitical divisions and informational protocols imposed by the Cold War.”

Shiomi compiled responses to various sets of instructions in the form of maps, collections, and audio experiences.

**Women in Performance Art: Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Marina Abramović**

The role of performance art in challenging and changing viewer’s perspectives is reflected in the work of several of the women artists who were involved in these groups and art collectives, Yoko Ono (associated with Fluxus and Judson Memorial Church) and Carolee Schneemann (associated with Judson Memorial Church). Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964) was first performed in Kyoto, Japan, and has ultimately served as a prototype for the development of performance and participatory methods in art making to explore social issues related to women’s experiences, making it one of the earliest examples of decidedly feminist performance art. In the performance, which was the final of several performance works performed by Ono that night, she knelt on a stage in the formal Japanese sitting position *seiza* and verbally instructed audience members to approach her and cut away a piece of her clothing with a large pair of scissors that

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she placed in front of her. The hesitant audience members were to keep the scraps of clothing they cut from Ono’s body, and the performance ended when the audience stopped cutting.

Cut Piece can easily be read (and often has been) as responding from a feminist perspective to many of the concerns previously discussed in this thesis regarding representations of women’s unclothed bodies: sexual objectification, voyeurism, gender subordination, and the general notion of victimization of women’s bodies by overpowering forces. However, Bryan-Wilson claims that this perspective limits the scope of what Cut Piece meant. She posits that the exposing of Ono’s nude body did not connect only to the scandal of nudity and violation of women’s bodies by the patriarchal gaze, but that her nudity signified a sense of vulnerability that connects more closely with Ono’s intended topic of exploration: the aftermath of war. Bryan-Wilson’s ideas are helpful to the discussion of audience roles in performance art, as audience engagement and participation are what make performance art (especially as practiced by Kaprow, Fluxus, and the Judson Memorial Church artists) a profound art form. She emphasizes the uneasy, but necessary, relationship between performer and audience in this situation, in which a certain level of generosity is afforded by the audience to Ono:

Rather than tidily offering the body up to be assigned a single meaning, Cut Piece stages its unease with the interaction between the performing body and the interpreting audience. . . . In Cut Piece, the body announces itself not only as a recipient of risks and threats, but also as a source of gifts. This dualism of aggression and generosity has complex implications for the audience of this work, whether these audiences are viewers with scissors in hand or art historians some forty years later.10

This interaction results in an activated audience that is not simply the aggressor for a metaphor on women’s victimization, but a dynamic role holder which allows for Ono’s body to represent the memory of vulnerability in the aftermath of aggression, a broader identity.11 This discourse


11 Bryan-Wilson, “Remembering Yoko Ono’s ‘Cut Piece’,” 103-104.
on the performer-audience relationship is an important takeaway for the main focus of this chapter, as the artists who will be discussed intend to connect with audiences in relatable ways to rewrite oppressive narratives held about sex workers. Thus, both parties must be generous enough with one another to let the experience produce a new perspective collectively. This is not to say that full participation of congruent perspectives is required for the performances to achieve the goal of rewriting problematic ideas, but simply that a level of audience engagement is required for it.

In addition to Ono’s work, the performance work of Carolee Schneemann, a founding member of the Judson Memorial Church, is an important facet of early feminist performance art. Schneemann conducted one of her most well-known works, Meat Joy, at the Judson Memorial Church in New York in 1964. In her early artistic career, Schneemann worked primarily in painting, which led her to begin exploring the significance of the movement and physical process of image and mark-making in what became known as “kinetic theater,” her signature art form. Meat Joy, one of the most famous examples of Schneemann’s kinetic theater, involved eight performers, both men and women including the artist herself who, while not entirely nude, were mostly dressed minimally in underwear. The New York Museum of Modern Art describes Meat Joy as “Eight performers— including Schneemann—covered in paint, paper, and paint brushes crawled and writhed together, playing with raw fish, meat, and poultry.” 12 The dancers writhed together on the floor, seemingly in a kind of ecstasy, in what Marcum describes as “excessive, indulgent, and a celebration of the flesh as material.” 13 Meat Joy addresses ideas about repressive sexual conventions, the ideal, and the taboo, as the writhing idealized bodies suggest the erotic

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13 Marcum, “Carolee Schneemann’s Kinetic Theater.”
while the raw animal flesh they squirm and play in also suggests a sense of the abject. The performance implores viewers to explore how these elements interact with one another.

Schneemann pondered the role of the female performer’s conventional beauty in an interview with the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art in 2009, stating the following:

> It's odd, but I never thought that I was beautiful. I always thought other women were beautiful. But I knew that I was ideal enough that I could use this ideality to disrupt and displace the conventional expectations of what an appealing looks, appealing, arousing body could do or mean in its culture. And as I've often said, I was very disturbed by the depiction of female nudes in Pop Art. And one of my motives - it wasn't programmatic, but a cultural motive - is that I felt was to disrupt those mechanistic, perfected, machine-like depictions of female forms that were so common during Pop Art.14

Schneemann addressed and pushed back traditional representation of women’s bodies by making the bodies in the performance active in their representation rather than passive as the performers use their bodies to experiment with the conventions prescribed to the ideal sexual body.

Another of Schneemann’s kinetic theater performances which anticipated how sex worker performance artists would rewrite problematic ideas about their own bodies and experiences via performance is Interior Scroll, performed in 1975 at the group exhibition Women Here and Now in East Hampton, Long Island. She conducted the performance by standing naked before an audience and slowly unraveling a scroll from her vagina which she read aloud from. According to the Tate, “It recounts a conversation with ‘a structuralist film-maker’ in which the artist sets intuition and bodily processes, traditionally associated with ‘woman’, against traditionally ‘male’ notions of order and rationality.”15 Hopkins explains that Interior Scroll connects to both the concepts of internalizing criticism and of écriture féminine, a form of essentialist theory from

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French feminism. Écriture féminine, espoused most notably by Hélène Cixous, suggests the idea of a decidedly feminine, ergo anti-patriarchal, method of writing which is outside the “phallocentric” tradition of knowledge construction and emphasizes the long-repressed female body and essence. Schneemann represents the idea of écriture féminine, if not the practice itself, in a physical sense as she gradually unrolls the scroll from her vagina, as though the writing which appears on it comes directly from the feminine essence which is represented by her vagina. Schneemann’s focus on female physical traits is typical of second-wave feminist artists, whose essentialist beliefs about gender identity and the body have since been rejected by intersectional feminists in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, Interior Scroll is a significant exploration of how a woman’s body can occupy a dual role as image and creator of images, which is also an important part of how art created for sex-work activism is relatable and able to change perspectives.

Another prolific performance artist who contributed to the foundations of feminist performance art is Marina Abramović. As a performer, Abramović has subjected herself to situations which push her physical and intellectual limits, and which create powerful scenes that tend to leave viewers feeling transformed. Since the early 1970s, Abramović has made her most vulnerable fears and limitations—alongside a healthy dose of shock value—an invaluable facet of her process. Before 1980s artists like Scarlot Harlot, Annie Sprinkle, and others began to blur the line between sex work and art or sex worker and performer, Abramović had already challenged those boundaries in her 1975 performance project Role Exchange. The project involved Abramović trading places with an anonymous prostitute in Amsterdam who had worked in the red-light district for ten years, the same amount of time that Abramović was an

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artist. The prostitute attended the four hour art opening at De Appel Gallery in Abramović’s place while the artist stayed in the woman’s storefront-like brothel window, trying to solicit clients (which she was apparently unsuccessful doing). Afterward, Abromović split the stipend awarded to her from the gallery with the anonymous woman who attended in her stead.

Abramović described her motivations for the project:

So, coming to Amsterdam, first time in my life, and seeing prostitutes standing in the window, it was something that is the lowest you can get you know to become prostitute. And this fear was enormous. So that was exactly what I wanted to confront. Every time I get idea, if I’m afraid of that idea, and I'm panicking about that idea, this is exactly the idea I'm going to do to liberate myself and also to understand where fear comes from.  

Abramović’s approach to the topic of prostitution, namely her own fears and stigmas about it, is as much or more about the notion of identity formation than it is about the social issues and ideologies surrounding prostitution. Still, Abramović’s fear of being forced into the role of the prostitute, presumably due to financial hardship, alludes to the economic situations which lead to exploitation of impoverished individuals who might find themselves participating in the field of sexual commerce as a last resort, but it falls short of addressing it overtly. The most valuable aspect of Role Exchange for pro sex work feminism lies in the way the artist chose to involve an actual sex worker and connect the identities of the artist and sex worker, bringing the reality of the sex worker’s experience into the life of the artist. Additionally, the artist’s decision to split the stipend given to her by the gallery for the project she conducted with the anonymous prostitute suggests a sense of equal value between the two parties. Role Exchange is certainly an important predecessor to the performance works that will be discussed subsequently, although these performances address the realities of sex workers’ experiences more deeply than Abramović did. Abromović’s brief immersion in the field of sexual commerce and resulting

artwork, while based in the realities of the two identities of artist and sex worker, ultimately does not fully unite those identities as artists like Scarlot Harlot, Annie Sprinkle, and others do. The identities of sex worker and artist, united, are where the power of these artists’ work lies for producing a paradigm shift in the field of feminism. Performance art about sex work necessarily brings the idea of sex workers as inherently on display into the meaning of the artwork. Sex workers must rely on a certain level of idealization and objectification by clients and viewers to stay in business, but it means something different when those bodies are on display, in the dual roles of being vessels for performance art and working prostitutes.

**Historical and Social Background of Artist-Activists in the 1980s-1990s**

In order to best understand the performances by American sex worker artists of the 1980s and early 1990s, it is important to situate them in their social-historical context, particularly in terms of the AIDS crisis and cultural debates about morality. AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) was first recognized as an epidemic in the early 1980s, and concern about the spread of HIV/AIDS led to increased stigmatization of groups that were considered deviant. Women prostitutes were thought of as casual spreaders of HIV/AIDS, and the moral panic caused by the disease’s prevalence in marginalized groups (including gay men, prostitutes, and drug users) increased hostility towards them. The reality of some prostitutes turning to the profession to support intravenous drug use habits only increased the social discrimination endured by these women, as prostitutes who were also IV drug users had infection rates that were four times higher than other prostitutes.19 Concerns about the health and safety of prostitutes in light of the

AIDS epidemic became an important part of sex worker activism, even as many people in American politics and media treated them, along with gay men, as scapegoats for the spread of HIV.

In many ways, the AIDS crisis echoes the syphilis crisis of nineteenth century Europe in that the earlier epidemic informed the stigmatization of sex workers in that era as well as impacted the representations of these figures in French art, such as Toulouse-Lautrec’s paintings which emphasize the physical symptoms of syphilis in representations of prostitutes. One important difference between nineteenth century France and late 20th century America for sex workers in the 1980s and 1990s, specifically prostitutes, is that laws in most U.S. states suppressed prostitution, rather than regulating it as the French had done. Thus, sexual services had to be performed clandestinely and covertly to avoid legal intervention for prostitutes and their clients, and there were no rules to maintain the health of either group. Law reform would therefore become a central concern of pro sex work activists in the 1980s and 1990s.

Another issue which affected sex workers and sex work activists in the United States in the 1980s was a widespread anti-pornography movement which was put forth by conservative Republicans as well as some radical feminists. This is in part due to President Ronald Reagan’s interest in studying the effects of pornography, which resulted in a report by the Attorney General’s Commission on Pornography, often referred to as the Meese Commission due to Attorney General Edwin Meese heading the 11-person panel, in 1986. The 1,960-page report concluded that pornography can cause sexual violence and punitive behavior toward women, and that it presented an overall threat to American public health. The report urged lawmakers to reform prostitution and labor laws to allow for porn producers to face legal ramifications, among other law reforms which would crack down on the distribution of pornography. Henry E.

Hudson, the U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of Virginia in 1986, described the link between pornography and violence as having been established by the commission using “common sense” and stated that “If we relied exclusively on scientific data for every one of our findings, I'm afraid all of our work would be inconclusive.” In response to the report, American Civil Liberties legislative counsel Barry W. Lynn stated “All that this government study proves is that if you give a biased pro-censorship commission a half million tax dollars and a year, they will write a lopsided pro-censorship report.”21 From the 1970s to the early 1990s, the radical feminist group Women Against Pornography held a similar viewpoint to the Meese Commission regarding the idea that pornography was reflective exclusively of a culture of misogyny and violence against women.

**Sex Workers as Performance Artists: Carol Leigh as Scarlot Harlot and Ellen Steinberg as Annie Sprinkle**

In their work, many performance artists of the 1980s and 1990s who were sex worker advocates (and often sex workers themselves) revived elements of the theatrical tradition that earlier performance artists had avoided, such as the use of characters and plot devices. Both of the artists from this era who will be discussed created alter-egos which were semi-autobiographical in order to express their experiences in the sex industry, while simultaneously offering a degree of separation of their true-life identities. Carol Leigh, previously discussed as the individual who coined the term “sex work,” created the character

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“Scarlet Harlot” as her alter-ego. In fact, she first used the term “sex work” in the role of Scarlet Harlot, for her 1980 one woman show The Adventures of Scarlet Harlot, also titled The Demystification of the Sex Work Industry. This show was a multimedia performance piece that focused on sex worker’s experiences and on the issue of law reform. Leigh, as her comedic, drag-queen-like prostitute alter-ego Scarlet Harlot, delivered a stream of consciousness narrative of the character’s experiences “coming out” as a prostitute. The character is obviously fictional, but based on Leigh's own experiences. Leigh relied on humor to make the performance relatable and entertaining for spectators. In one scene (the script for which was reprinted in Leigh’s book Unrepentant Whore), Scarlet Harlot tells her mother that she is a sex worker, to which her mother (also played by Leigh) responds “What are you saying? You’re working in a dildo factory?” Her mother ultimately accepts Scarlet Harlot’s role as a sex worker, proclaiming: “Women have to start telling it like it is. When people start hearing the truth about our lives, then and only then can they become sympathetic.”

In other moments during the performance, Leigh’s character mused about the stereotypes of being a sex worker: “I would like to portray myself as the cool, independent, efficient business woman that a feminist is supposed to be, not as a rotten slut! . . . although everyone appreciates that image so much.” She interacted with the audience as well, imploring them to see sex workers as working individuals like anyone else, without the social stigma. She changed into a t-shirt which read “We’re all prostitutes” and engaged the audience by asking them what they do for a living, making them a part of the performance through participation that challenged the notions they held about prostitutes.

23 Carol Leigh, The Adventures of Scarlet Harlot, video.
24 Bell, Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body, 175.
Scarlet Harlot became a recurring figure in Leigh’s political art interventions following *The Adventures of Scarlet Harlot*. Leigh abandoned the one-woman-show format once the AIDS crisis came into full effect during the mid-1980s, as her activism goals expanded beyond removing stigma from sex work and championing prostitution law reform to include concerns about the lack of assistance available to people suffering from the AIDS epidemic.\(^\text{25}\) Leigh brought her performance as Scarlet Harlot into the public space in guerilla-style actions which served as political protest, often responding to the lack of assistance for people with AIDS. For instance, Leigh as Scarlet Harlot dressed in a gaudy American flag gown (an outfit that Scarlet Harlot would adorn in many future performance endeavors), red gloves and boots, and political buttons on her breasts. Dressed in character, Leigh would tie up other protestors in red tape to call attention to the bureaucratic red tape, or excessive rules and standards, that hindered people with AIDS from receiving public assistance.\(^\text{26}\) Leigh was also an original member of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), an HIV and AIDS activist organization that conducted performative demonstrations and had involvement from notable creative figures including artist David Wojnarowicz and playwright Larry Kramer.\(^\text{27}\) Leigh as Scarlet Harlot was arrested during protests on multiple occasions.

Leigh would often film her public demonstrations, creating clips from which she would create political films that she would incorporate into live performances. After the performances and film showings, she would engage audiences in political discourse about feminist activism. One of these films, titled *Sex Workers Take Back the Night*, explores the varied opinions of

\(^{25}\) Leigh, *Unrepentant Whore*, 80.

\(^{26}\) Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, 176.

feminists interviewed at the 1990 Take Back the Night march in San Francisco. Take Back the Night is a feminist organization focused on ending sexual violence, domestic abuse, and discrimination against women, and part of their approach involved holding marches, events, and rallies to incite change.28

However, unlike Leigh, many feminists who became involved with Take Back the Night regarded pornography and prostitution, which they believed occurred primarily through coercion, promoted violence against women.29 In the 1990s, as laws became even more oppressive for sex workers, a more radical and sex-positive feminism emerged in reaction against anti-pornography feminists. Leigh and members of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics, a sex workers’ rights organization) attended the 1990 march in San Francisco to inspire and document discourse among anti-pornography feminists whose opinions about sex work were at odds with those of COYOTE. In one clip, a mobile installation apparently created by anti-porn feminists is shown which reads “Erotomisogynist speech incited femicide” alongside pictures that Shannon Bell described as depicting “nude women, battered women, and women in mainstream pornography poses.”30 One of the marchers whom Scarlot Harlot interviewed for this documentary was an anti-pornography feminist, who, when questioned about her thoughts on the women who posed for the pictures, responded “I think they are traitors to their sex.”

Leigh regarded such anti-porn perspectives as minimizing the actual experiences of the women depicted in such images, who may not have felt coerced or degraded by posing for these images and instead felt empowered. A young sex worker who attended the rally responded to the notion of pornography as problematic for the goals of feminism:


29 Leigh, Unrepentant Whore, 119.

30 Bell, Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body, 181.
We don’t believe that violence against women is perpetuated through pornography and that censorship in the name of protecting women isn’t actually protection at all, in fact, when it’s done in the guise of protecting women against violent sexual imagery, a lot gets cut out, including women’s sexual voices. There’s a groundswell of female produced and feminist produced pornography these days that’s also getting silenced by censorship, and we came down here to say that we’re sex-positive sex workers…

Another interviewed woman reflected on her experiences working in the sex industry: “Working in the sex industry has given me a new perspective on my body and my sexuality that’s been really positive and good.” Ultimately, the film reflects the progressively changing attitudes about sex work within the feminist movement as a result of artists like Leigh and other pro sex work activists by presenting those ideas alongside anti-porn discourse for viewers to compare and ponder their own constructions in the antiporn/proporn debate that was a contentious topic within the feminist movement of the 1980s and 1990s.

Like Carol Leigh as Scarlot Harlot, Ellen Steinburg chronicled her experiences as a sex worker through her alter-ego “Annie Sprinkle” (a moniker under which she performed in multiple porn films as well as her art, and which she later adopted as her legal name, which she continues to go by). In her performance piece titled Post-Porn Modernist Show which she performed several times in the 1990s, Sprinkle brought aspects of pornography into the fine art space as she performed various roles as pornstar, performance artist, feminist activist, and autobiographer. Sprinkle explained that the title Post Porn Modernist “is a term we use to describe a genre of sexually explicit material: more experimental, more political, less exclusively political.” In Post-Porn Modernist Show, Annie Sprinkle put on a show in which she simultaneously performed pornography and art which is informed by her feminist activism. She

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31 Sex Workers Take Back the Night, video.
32 Sex Workers Take Back the Night, video.
33 Quoted in Bell, Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body, 148.
began by describing her transformation from Ellen Steinberg into Annie Sprinkle, during which she shared photographs of her shy pre-pornstar self which are contrasted with flashy, eroticized images of herself as Annie Sprinkle, while she described the positive impact that the shift brought to her personal experiences. She went on to conduct costume changes which transformed her from Ellen Steinberg in her long dressing gown into Annie Sprinkle in various lingerie outfits and states of undress, as she spoke directly to the audience with a coy sense of humor. Sprinkle seems to parody her pornstar persona as a means of deconstructing it. The set for *Post-Porn Modernist Show* consisted of a bed, vanity, and toilet for her to interact with while she spoke to the audience as well as a screen or place for a projector that displayed images.

In another scene, Sprinkle displayed photographs of other pornstars in their roles outside of the sex industry: as mothers and in various careers which included a high school teacher, a law student, a writer, a court stenographer, a nurse, a hairdresser, and other jobs. She presented these photographs alongside images of these women as pornstars. She proclaimed to the audience, “There is a lot of you in every pornstar,”\(^{34}\) emphasizing the relatability of sex workers to those in any other profession to the audience, just as Leigh did in *The Adventures of Scarlot Harlot*. Bell suggests that Sprinkle’s method of displaying images of these women as pornstars alongside images of them in their everyday lives, Sprinkle included, “break down the male-created binary division between good girl and bad girl.”\(^{35}\) This was clarified when Sprinkle mused “As impossible as it is for me to believe, Ellen Steinberg really must be Annie Sprinkle. And the truth is, Annie Sprinkle is still very much Ellen Steinberg.”\(^{36}\)

\(^{34}\) Annie Sprinkle, *Post Porn Modernist Show*, video, 23:00-27:26, [https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/pg4f4t4g](https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/pg4f4t4g)

\(^{35}\) Bell, *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, 148.

\(^{36}\) Annie Sprinkle, *Post Porn Modernist Show*, video, 32:00-35:00.
In another scene, Sprinkle played audio clips of police sirens overlaid with the voices of people talking to or about women in the sex industry in negative or degrading ways while she frantically performed oral sex on several dildos attached to a board that she pulled from under the bed onstage. The audio became progressively faster and the layers of speaking voices increased to the point of being impossible to understand, and Sprinkle’s frantic actions became faster as the sound clips increased. She seemed to reach a point of exhaustion that kept her from continuing, and the sound finally settled back into instrumental music. While this intervention is intentionally comical, Sprinkle is bringing attention to the exhausting verbal and even physical abuse experienced by women in the sex industry in part due to the stigma surrounding it and laws against it, but perhaps also due to elements of the violence and coercion which concerned anti-porn feminists. She describes her experience conducting this aspect of the performance:

You know, the first ten times I did that little performance, I really cried a lot. I felt my pain, and then the next ten times I got really angry. And now every time I do it, it’s, like, less and less. It’s performance therapy. You know, it really works. I recommend it to all of you.  

This quotation seems to express the reality that sex workers are forced to experience violence, abuse, and misogyny, all of which are connected to the arguments made by anti-porn feminists, but the overall spirit of the show emphasized that there are positive aspects to a sex-positive and porn-positive feminism in terms of the importance of women’s agency over their physical bodies.

Later in the show, Sprinkle performed the most controversial moment in the performance: she invited audience members to view her cervix through a gynecological speculum. First, Sprinkle invited an audience member to remove her panties, then walked to the set toilet and performed a douche on herself, and conducted a brief and comical anatomy lesson using an illustration of the female reproductive system in an ornate frame. Finally, she inserted the  

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speculum, invited audience members to the stage, presented them with a flashlight, and allowed them to look inside.\textsuperscript{38} Other elements of the show further its pornographic nature, including Sprinkle being partially nude at various points throughout the show and dancing erotically with sex toys.

Sprinkle’s performance of the \textit{Post-Porn Modernist Show} at the Kitchen Center in New York City, an arts space notorious for its support of avant-garde performance, became a controversy due to a funding bill enacted in 1990 intended to “prohibit the support of obscene work,” by the National Endowment for the Arts, which had indirectly funded the Kitchen Center.\textsuperscript{39} This was just one instance in the widespread saga during which conservative members of the United States Congress, particularly Rep. Dana Rohrabacher and Sen. Jesse Helms, sought to eliminate government funding for arts which they considered to be offensive. National funding for the arts became widespread in the United States since the New Deal in FDR’s administration, and the funding debates of the 1990s resulted in the first content restrictions on government-supported art in United States history as artists were forced to meet standards that censored a variety of topics.\textsuperscript{40} Artists including Robert Mapplethorpe and David Wojnarwicz, both gay and victims of the AIDS crisis, also exhibited work with NEA funding which was subsequently cited as “obscene” and unworthy of federal support.

The Kitchen received funding from the NEA as well as from the New York State Council on the Arts (which also received grant money from the NEA) in 1990, funds which Rohrabacher

\textsuperscript{38} Annie Sprinkle, \textit{Post Porn Modernist Show}, 40:30-49:36.


claimed ultimately supported Sprinkle’s performance, meaning the Kitchen was in violation of the funding bill.\footnote{Robert W. Stewart, “Queen of Kink Not Taking it Lying Down: Erotica: ‘Post-Porn Modernist’ Annie Sprinkle, who has been criticized by an Orange County congressman for receiving federal arts funding, says she is the target of a censorship effort.” Los Angeles Times, Feb. 17, 1990, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-02-17-ca-777-story.html?_gl=1*1uye217*_gel-au*MzgyMTI5MDUwLjI3MDg2MTI5NTEU.} However, it seems that there was no direct funding for the performance by Sprinkle from the NEA’s grants to the Kitchen, suggesting that arts institutions with any NEA funding were being subjected to content restrictions for all activities, whether those activities were directly funded by the NEA or not. Sprinkle made little comment on the incident, but she did ponder the issue of how ideological perspectives dictate government spending: “My (tax) money goes to a lot of things I don’t like. I’m paying for nuclear bombs. I’m paying for wars. My tax dollars are going for art that I think is really stupid and boring and trivial.”\footnote{Quoted in Stewart, “Queen of Kink.”}

The NEA funding concern sparked debate on several concerns related to Sprinkle’s performance, most notably on the issues of censorship, freedom of speech, how content becomes classified as art, and the crossroads between art and pornography. Based on the previous descriptions of the \textit{Post-Porn Modernist Show}, it should be clear that Sprinkle’s performance goes beyond simply being erotica, and strove to explore deeper ideas about the nature of sex work and her own experiences as a sex worker in the United States. It is not necessary to defend the idea that her work is either art or pornography, as it decidedly occupies both realms, realms which have never truly been exclusive of each other. Linda Williams poses the question, “What is the political value, in terms of women’s agency, of not drawing a firm line between obscene pornography and on the one hand and legitimate art on the other?”\footnote{Linda Williams, “A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance of Annie Sprinkle,” Social Text, no. 37, (Winter 1993): 118.} Furthermore, it can be argued that if this sort of artistic exploration, which requires an element of conventionally
pornographic imagery, is censored due to the sensibilities of those to whom its value for activism does not apply to (namely right-wing politicians who are not, themselves, sex workers) then American society will lose the potential ideological benefits to be gleaned from it.

Ultimately, Scarlot Harlot and Annie Sprinkle both utilized their individualized experiences in the sex industry combined with humor to inspire discourses about pro sex work activism. Through the method of performance, these artists were able to use their bodies as vehicles of expression and utilize the ability of the performer’s body to highlight the abuses experienced by the body of the prostitute due to its social status as taboo and stigmatized in the cultural climate of the AIDS crisis and anti-pornography hysteria. Scarlot Harlot and Annie Sprinkle became important predecessors for future artists exploring the topic of sex work, as art about sex work in the twenty-first century has come to focus predominantly on pro sex work activism, just as Harlot and Sprinkle did in the 1980s and 1990s.
Chapter Four: Art and Sex Work in the Twenty First Century

Artists and activists in the 21st century are continually emphasizing the importance of an intersectional approach to feminist activism by calling attention to issues of discrimination experienced by a wide range of marginalized groups and considering how those issues overlap and connect with one another. Many of the artists who have responded to the theme of sex work during the 21st century so far did so in reaction to the social conditions that affect sex workers in problematic ways as a means of promoting change, reclaiming abusive histories, and allowing sex workers to speak for themselves rather than be spoken for. The progressive ideals of twenty-first century activism have also resulted in several group exhibitions and community organizations that support art created by sex workers which will be discussed in this chapter.

Documentation of Sex Workers Presented as Fine Art: Ann-Sofi Sidén and Santiago Sierra

Sex workers and their bodies have been documented by many artists to explore social, political, and economic issues related to prostitution, particularly in countries experiencing political turmoil and economic upheaval. Two instances of this phenomenon will be discussed at length: Ann-Sofi Sidén’s Warte Mal! and Santiago Sierra’s 160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People. Both projects are video installations that reflect influences from conceptual art, performance art, and documentary photography and filmmaking while intentionally highlighting the experiences of sex workers in what are ultimately problematic and exploited positions. Both artists situate their work in traditional locations of fine art—that is, in museums and galleries—a decision that
platforms and calls attention to the social situations they are documenting while also falling under the category of fine art.

Ann-Sofi Sidén created the material for Warte Mal!: Prostitution After the Velvet Revolution, a documentary video installation focusing on a town in the Czech Republic, in 1999. The project acted as a means to unpack the impact of Czechoslovakia’s 1989 Velvet Revolution and the ensuing economic and power shifts associated with it on the town of Dubí. Dubí is situated at the border between Germany and the Czech Republic, a border that separated a Western European society and a newly post-communist Eastern one in 1999. Following the Velvet Revolution, Hubbard explains, Dubí became a notorious hub for sex work that was particularly popular with tourists and truck drivers traveling from Germany. Over 200 brothels were estimated to be operating in the town, a striking number as it equates to one brothel for every 25 inhabitants.¹

The initial motivations for Warte Mal! originated from a video project for an exhibition project titled Midnight Walkers and City Sleepers which took place in Amsterdam in 1999. Sidén was initially tasked to focus on Amsterdam’s Red Light district, but instead, she conducted her first interviews in Dubí which were displayed in a café window in Amsterdam’s Red Light District. This exploration prompted Sidén to shift her focus more deeply on the town of Dubí. Sidén made several trips to Dubí in 1999 to document the sex industry there, resulting in a large collection of videos, photographs, interviews, and diary entries which the artist compiled into a documentary that was presented as a walk-through video installation in Vienna (and later in other cities throughout Europe). She lived with the people she documented at the Motel Hubert, spent time with them in bars, and, through easy going conversations with the help of a translator, she

¹ Phil Hubbard, “In the border-zone, Warte Mal! - a video installation by Anna-Sofi Sidén,” Cultural Geographies 10, no.1 (January 2003): 113, JSTOR.
came to know their often-heartbreaking experiences which followed the Velvet Revolution. *Warte Mal!* highlights the exploitation of the many Eastern and Central European women involved in prostitution in an individualized and non-judgemental way which allows viewers to draw their own conclusions and relate to the women whose experiences were documented. The walk-through installation consisted of video interview footage in glass booths, which allowed visitors to hear and focus on individual video interviews in which the women she met described their lives before and after the revolution. There were also large scale projections on the walls and on screens that hung from the ceiling which recreated the town of Dubí as Sidén experienced it as an immersive environment through videos which depict driving through roads flanked with prostitutes, various individuals living and working in the Motel Hubert, idyllic scenes of the town during varying seasons, and other slow-moving visuals which touch on the human experiences which occurred in Dubí. Hubbard emphasizes the variety of ways that the installation can be experienced, from those who simply performed a cursory walk-through to those who engaged with every element of the installation to soak up every detail of the town and the lives of its residents, which allowed visitors to draw their own conclusions.² Sidén’s diary entries were included as a part of the work as well for viewers interested in additional details, with scrolling text projected on the screens alongside the video footage in earlier iterations of the installation and ultimately published in conjunction with its being exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2002.

A brief summary of Czech history regarding the 1989 Velvet Revolution and its aftermath will help clarify the situation that Dubí found itself in when visited by Ann-Sofí Sidén in 1999. On November 17, 1989, the Velvet Revolution began during a communist-sanctioned student demonstration in Prague commemorating the death of Jan Opletal (a Czech student murdered by

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² Hubbard, “In the border zone,” 115.
Nazi forces 50 years before). Opletal’s martyrdom was adopted as a symbol of Czech resistance for many demonstrators, and the demonstration quickly became anti-communist in nature. Several students were beaten by riot police, which resulted in the formation of the nonviolent group Civic Forum, which coordinated the movement to end the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia’s single party control over the state and its economy. Ten days after the initial protest on November 17, a two-hour general strike clarified the widespread dissent with communist rule and led to the resignation of most governing members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The 11 days following the November 17th demonstration became known as the Velvet Revolution, which resulted in a nonviolent transfer of power from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia to a democratic government. This marked the end of 48 years of authoritarian communist rule in Czechoslovakia, lifting the Iron Curtain which separated the country from the West and allowed for travel across the border with West Germany.

Following the collapse of communism, Czechoslovakia formally and peacefully dissolved in 1993, becoming the separate states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in what is known as the Velvet Divorce. The fall of the Eastern Bloc (and of the Soviet Union itself) contributed to an overall sense of uncertainty in post-communist Eastern Europe. Shabad, Shible, and Zurovchak explain that this uncertainty ushered in a resurgence of ethnic nationalism among the political elites of Czechoslovakia, which led to its dissolution despite the initial lack of support for the dissolution by the Czech or Slovakian public opinion. Ultimately, the two groups chose to separate based on ethnic territorial divisions, despite the generally good-natured

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relationship between them, as there came to be a division among the ways in which these groups wanted to develop the economic and political formation of their post-communist state.4

Here we can begin to understand the situation which Ann-Sofi Sidén found in Dubí in 1999. The Czech Republic and Slovakia had both established free market economies, but the Czech Republic took a more laissez-faire approach to the economic shift, with minimal state intervention in economic affairs.5 The shifting economic system’s instability, alongside the geographic location of Dubí on the border with Germany, allowed the town to become what Hubbard describes as “a space that is poised between hope and despair, its location on the geopolitical fault line between East and West mirroring its status as a liminal space where practices outside the norm are tolerated (if not always encouraged) by the authorities.”6

Discussions of Warte Mal! by scholars and art critics tend to emphasize the source of the project’s title: on the E55 highway, which travelers can take from Dresden to Prague, Sidén documented prostitutes standing along the stretch of the highway that passes through Dubí shouting “Warte Mal!” (“Hey wait!” in German) to entice travelers to partake in the services they offered. This method of solicitation is risky and dangerous, so the video footage emphasizes the desperation these women faced to be chosen among the many competitors, all standing on the roadside in what Fleck describes as “relentless mass exploitation of young girls and women.”7 At the first installation of Warte Mal! in the Wiener Secession Building, some viewers reacted negatively to the work because they thought it to have been staged by Sidén. This was simply

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6 Hubbard, “In the border zone,” 117-118.

because the footage showed how extreme the situation in Dubí was and it was considered too hard to believe. While the images of women calling out to drivers on the highway are powerful and highly expressive of the extreme situation, it is in other facets of the material that viewers can come to know the sex workers as individuals with whom Sidén spent her time in Dubí, becoming immersed in their life experiences just as Sidén did. The power of the installation lies in part from the presence of the artist’s hand in the documentation. While the project’s material is an entirely unfictionalized documentary, and although Sidén emphasized that the installation’s goal is simply to convey what life was like in the unusual town, her approach has a deeper impact as art because it explores the human psyche as it is keenly conveyed with intensity and intimacy through Sidén’s video interviews and diary entries. Of course, Sidén was not an impartial party observing the women she documented. Her diary entries serve to document her observations but also to express her feelings and opinions, and the interviews suggest a sense of closeness between the women and the artist which could only be achieved through a level of trust and familiarity with one another.

Hubbard discusses Warte Mal! In the context of ‘non-representational theory’ which suggests that “visual art can convey aspects of lived experience that are unspoken or unsayable.” He goes on to write

Sidén’s work offers a useful signpost as to how researchers may develop a sense for the Other through a dialectic process of immersion and construction: a self-reflexive endeavor where life-worlds are felt and experienced to be subsequently re-presented in visual, poetic, and artistic forms. For the sociologist Maggie O’Neill, this is a quintessentially feminist research strategy, and a means by which women’s lives can be rescued from the shackles of ‘male rationality’ in the social sciences.

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8 Fleck, “Warte Mal! (Hey Wait!),” 135.

9 Hubbard, “In the border zone,” 115.

10 Hubbard, “In the border zone,” 115.

11 Hubbard, “In the border zone,” 116.
O’Neill, in conjunction with her work with choreographer Sara Giddens, created the term ‘ethno-mimesis’ to describe the practice of combining ethnographic research with the re-representation of life stories through visual art. In a work closely related to Warte Mal! methodologically and thematically, O’Neill and Giddens created Not All the Time...But Mostly... to combine research on prostitution with the live art forms of video and performed movement. They explain that “In re-presenting ethnographic data in artistic form it is hoped that we can access a richer understanding of the complexities of women’s lived experiences that can throw light on broader social structures and processes.”

This concept applies aptly to Sidén’s process for Warte Mal!, which creates a richer understanding for viewers of the microcosm of Dubí following the fall of communism in the Czech Republic.

Like Sidén, Santiago Sierra highlighted the exploitation of sex workers through documentation in his 2000 work 160cm Line Tattooed Across 4 People, albeit in an approach that is starker and less empathetic, yet still poignant. Sierra created the installation, which documents a participatory action performed in Salamanca, Spain at El Gallo Arte Contemporáneo before a live audience. A black and white video was recorded which has been displayed in galleries including Tate Modern as a video installation work. Four women sit with their backs to the camera, naked from the waist up, and spend 30 minutes being tattooed by a woman who draws a single line across their backs while two men in dark clothing periodically measure the length of the line. Sierra’s website describes the video:

Four prostitutes addicted to heroin were hired for the price of a shot of heroin to give their consent to be tattooed. Normally, they charge 2,000 or 3,000 pesetas, between $15 and $17, for fellatio, while the price of a shot of heroin is around 12,000 pesetas, about $67.

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12 Sara Giddens and Maggie O’Neill, “Not All the Time… But Mostly…,” Feminist Review, no.67 (Spring 2001): 109, JSTOR.
With only this simple explanation, Sierra elucidates the exploitation experienced by the women who agreed to participate in being permanently marked and filmed. The extreme action seems by nature to serve to humiliate the individuals involved, forcing them to weigh the embarrassment and physical pain of being tattooed against the potential gain due to their financial realities and apparent heroin dependence. Since there are no interview segments with the subjects, viewers know almost nothing else about the four women and their lived experiences beyond their statuses as sex workers and their drug addictions. Sierra’s approach is fairly problematic as it takes advantage of the vulnerability of the women involved as a means to emphasize the problem of their willingness to be exploited by agreeing to participate. In response to this sort of criticism, Sierra is quoted as proclaiming “The tattoo is not the problem. The problem is the existence of social conditions that allow me to make this work.”

In her discussion of 160cm Line Tattooed Across 4 People, Dizdar suggests that the work has facets with align with torture practices, although not enough to overtly define the practice as torture. This is due to the work’s position in the complex conceptual space between civilization (where art belongs) and decivilization (where torture belongs), a division that Elaine Scarry delineates in The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World. The elements that align with Scarry’s definition of the structure of torture, according to Dizdar, include “The infliction of pain, the objectification of that pain, and the conversion of the victim’s pain into the perpetrator’s power.” The infliction of pain is an unavoidable reality of being tattooed, and the video recording which enforces Sierra’s conceptual goal reflects the objectification of the women’s pain and

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conversion of the pain into power as “one naturally interprets the women’s pain as an expression of Sierra’s implicit dominance and control.”

It is important to note that Dizdar also discusses the ways in which 160cm Line Tattooed Across 4 People deviates from Scarry’s notion of torture. For example, the parameters of the action were clearly defined for the women who consented to participation in the thirty-minute action, while torture tends to be permanent or indefinite and does not involve consent. However, It is arguable that while the participants did consent to their involvement, their economic disadvantage suggests that the decision was, at minimum, coerced. Additionally, Sierra’s goal to make commentary on the social situation (which still left these women exploited and addicted to heroin) deviates from the goals often associated with torture, namely extraction of information.

Documentation of sex workers which is presented in fine art settings proves to be a profound way for viewers to understand the experiences of sex workers and an effective platform for casting light on problematic social situations. In the case of the artists discussed, Ann-Sofi Sidén certainly worked using a process that is more in line with feminist goals of understanding sex workers’ experiences as a means to avoid Othering them, while Sierra’s work served to further Other them. The extremes that Sierra resorts to are not without value, as the over-the-top quality of his work allows his points to be heard and be the topic of widespread discussion. Ultimately, though, Sidén’s work is more effective at discussing social issues through the experience of installation art.
Community Organization and Group Exhibitions in Support of Sex Worker Artists

Certain areas of society are progressively becoming more accepting of the field of sex work, resulting in a variety of organizations and exhibitions which support sex worker artists by empowering them to speak out about their experiences. Collaborative group efforts are an effective way to widen the scope of how viewers are guided to understand the realities of sex work. Many examples of groups working together towards a common exhibit or project include perspectives from a wide range of individuals involved in different forms of sex work in varied locations, displayed or disseminated from a common location or organization.

San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival

The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival was established in 1999 and has been held biennially as a forum for film, visual art, political organization, and network expansion for sex workers and sex workers’ rights advocates. Film screenings, events, panels, and workshops on issues related to pro sex work activism are some of the things held at the festival each year. According to its website, the festival champions an intersectional mission:

We are anti race, class, gender, age, ability, size and sexual identity oppression. We strive to increase the involvement of politically underrepresented sex worker communities such as trans folk, workers of color, street-based workers, and workers who transcend the racist, sexist, heterosexist, white-supremacist norms and standards of mainstream beauty.

We push the margins of the movement into the center, working to shift paradigms in joint struggle, we strive to cultivate leadership of sex workers that are marginalized within the sex workers movements. We highlight the artistic endeavors of workers in all aspects of the sex industry because whore culture is real, present and on a corner, in a bar, in a hotel or in a bedroom community near YOU.
The festival also has an online film archive in conjunction with the Sex Worker Media Library, where viewers can access many of the 300 films which have been screened at the San Francisco Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival since 1999, as well as many other relevant videos and films. In its first year, the San Francisco SWFAF screened a film directed by Annie Sprinkle and Carol Leigh (AKA Scarlot Harlot) titled *Annie Sprinkle’s Herstory of Porn*, which featured clips from many of the 150+ pornographic films made by Annie Sprinkle between 1973 and 1999, presented as an experimental documentary. Since then, films of varying genres, including documentary, comedy, horror, and sci-fi, which involve topics of sex work, have been featured by the festival.

**Veil Machine’s E-Viction**

The art collective Veil Machine was formed by a group of artist activists in the United States in response to new legislation which limited sex workers’ use of internet platforms. In 2018, a set of laws known as SESTA (Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act) and FOSTA (Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act) were passed in the United States under the Trump administration. These laws suspended section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, which states that “No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher of any information provided by another information content provider.” This section of the CDA has allowed for freedom of speech in the virtual world by maintaining that websites and social media platforms cannot be prosecuted due to any user-generated speech or content. Following the suspension of section 230 of the CDA, social media platforms like Instagram, Reddit, and Facebook were forced to automatically censor some user-generated content, as they could be
held liable for any sexual speech on their platforms. Decriminalize Sex Work, a U.S. organization which promotes the legalization of consensual prostitution and improvement of all legal policies related to sex work, explains that this has become problematic for those who engage in consensual sex work, as the internet has allowed those individuals to avoid dangerous situations. With the help of social media, consensual sex workers have previously been able to advertise, screen clients, and plan meetings ahead of time. Without this valuable resource, many are forced back onto the street to conduct services where there is a risk of violence and police brutality. Additionally, SESTA and FOSTA make it easier for sex traffickers to evade law enforcement and reduce evidence that can be used to prosecute them.15

Veil Machine created the fully online “virtual arthouse/whore gallery event” E-Viction to respond to the idea that sex workers were being steadily evicted from the internet in what Lena Chen, one of the participating artists, described as “a wave of digital gentrification with devastating consequences for erotic laborers.”16 According to Veil Machine’s website,

In the midst of this global health crisis, most sex workers must work, gather, and organize online despite being targets of pervasive surveillance and deplatforming. By engaging on a platform that violates SESTA/FOSTA, visitors and performers alike will engage in a new form of civil disobedience.

E-Viction lasted only twelve hours on August 21, 2020, the limited timeline of the live internet variety show echoed the unexpected deplatforming of sex workers on social media, as according to Veil Machine’s website, “E-Viction is the only deplatforming you can prepare for in advance.” In a reclamation of the virtual spaces lost to censorship, Veil Machine artists created a website reminiscent of the personals section of sites like Craigslist and Backpage. Empress Wu, one of

15 “What is SESTA/FOSTA?” Decriminalize Sex Work, accessed February 23, 2024, https://decriminalizesex.work/advocacy/sesta-fosta/what-is-sesta-fosta/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAiAivGuBhBEEiwAWiFmYdEfqxZhKixKP1eqlC5K1slZbib6GikFbTV8TvX-VbrspqYKhqoFSx0CFAyD_BwE

the curators for *E-Viction* said: “It had the feel of the early 2000s, before FOSTA/SESTA, when
the internet still seemed like a wild frontier, without any boundaries and restrictions—a time when
you could literally put anything online.”

The event featured several artists in live performances of sex shows, nude artmaking, and
espousing educational content about the impact of legislation that limits free speech and
consensual sex work on the internet. Chen explained that Veil Machine partnered with Harvard
University’s Berkman Klein Center for legal advice to understand the risks of staging *E-Viction*,
as its organizers risked potential prosecution as traffickers under FOSTA/SESTA.

**Decriminalised Futures at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London**

In 2022, the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London held an exhibition curated by
community advocate Elio Sea and curator Yves Sanglante titled *Decriminalised Futures*, which
celebrated the efforts of sex work activists towards full decriminalization of sex work across the
world. According to the Institute of Contemporary Arts’ press release for *Decriminalised
Futures*, “The exhibition covers different feminist perspectives on sex work and the interwoven
issues faced by sex workers, people of color, trans people, migrants, and disabled people ” and
“highlights the history of the sex worker rights movement and its inextricable links to issues of
racial and social justice, migrant rights, labor rights, anti-austerity work, and queer and trans
liberation.” The exhibition featured work from 13 international artists selected from an open
artist call seeking art which explored the complexities of sex workers’ experiences.

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One installation included in *Decriminalised Futures* titled *This is Not For Clients* (2021) was a collaboration between London-based Spanish Letizia Miro and London-based Canadian born Hong-Kongese artist Yarli Allison. The installation featured a two-channel video screen installation which played two nine minute films which are “a semi-fictional documentary,” written by the poet, philosopher, and Ph.D. Miro to echo her experiences in the sex industry.\(^{19}\)

The film follows the story of a sex worker who grapples with the complicated task of meeting the imaginary ideals of her clients while navigating the dangers of participating in sex work. Allison created the visual elements of the installation, including videos and large sculptural elements. The videos show bright, playfully colored animations of a virtual BDSM dungeon, video footage of Miro filmed by Allison, and displayed text read by Miro. Sculptural elements that surrounded the videos included doll-house scaled BDSM dungeons, framed images and text, and oversized steel sculptures of flowers and plants which contribute to the sense of being in a fantasy world created by Allison. As Naomi Rea described it, “Through digital modeling and animation, Allison has created a kind of hyperreal narrative that transcends Miro’s real-life experiences into a fantasy realm, making visible the complexities—some of them dark—that go into clients’ imagined ideals, and the precarious position of sex-workers.”\(^{20}\) The character assumes a variety of fake names for her different personas, including “Gala the Escort” and “Laia the Low-Cost Whore,” which serves to unpack the “elaborate theater of sex work that can serve to fuel client fantasies while also granting workers crucial protection and emotional

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distance.” This method of storytelling, which offers a degree of separation for Miro between the art and her personal experiences by being part fiction and part autobiography, is reminiscent of the alter-egos created by Leigh and Steinberg to reflect on their experiences while being, in a sense, separated from them. A voice-over powerfully states at the start of one of the films, “Only we know when we survive, dirty with their opinions,” implying the notion that the film explores a more personal, less widely understood side of sex workers’ experiences.

Miro, who advertises her services as a “kinky companion” and “sensuality coach” online explained that the title, This is Not For Clients, was meant to speak to the things that are not discussed in client and sex worker interactions:

The website is client-facing, which means it doesn’t expose the complexities and darkness. Talking about precariousness is not sexy. My brand is very positive, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. I’m a positive, empowered woman but I’m also struggling like everyone else to feel alive and to be financially independent in a capitalist system I did not choose. Miro’s commentary suggests that having channeled her experiences into artwork allowed her to process some of the more challenging aspects of her involvement in a rewarding way. She told Artnet News,

What do I feel about being objectified from an art perspective, as opposed to a sex worker’s perspective? I think it’s great. I was just talking to a colleague about this and I feel celebrated in a way that goes beyond activism. The beauty and experience and depth of emotion is being celebrated, as opposed to being super politicized or victimized or glamorized.

This quotation emphasizes the benefits of displaying art created by sex workers, as it allows for the artists to be empowered and understood more empathetically by viewers.

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22 Quoted in Armistead, “The ICA’s Controversial Show on Sex Work.”

23 Quoted in Armistead, “The ICA’s Controversial Show on Sex Work.”

24 Quoted in Rea, “a New Show at the ICA.”
Another London-based artist featured in *Decriminalised Futures* was Pakistani-Egyptian artist Aisha Mirza (they/them). Mirza’s multifaceted career includes work as a DJ, stripper, dominatrix, writer for *Gal-dem* magazine, and founder of Misery, a sober night club and mental health collective for queer and trans people of color. Their contribution to the exhibition was an altar-like installation titled *the best dick I ever had was a thumb and good intentions* (2022). Mirza turned the lower gallery of the ICA into a makeshift living room including a plush pink rug, a window seat, several plants, and a mirror hanging on one of the walls. Above the mirror hung whips, gags, and other objects emblematic of Mirza’s work in the sex industry. Other objects personal to Mirza including sex work zines and a striking bedazzled dildo are placed around the room. The work considers the closeness for Mirza between things like pleasure, pain, sacred spaces, mental health concerns, and selfhood by allowing these ideas to occupy a comfortable and familiar place together. Mirza considers themself to be more privileged than the average sex worker today, stating

> With chronic mental health difficulties, sex work has seemed more appealing and attainable than many other jobs. If I can make three months’ rent kicking a man in the balls for 30 minutes, why wouldn’t I? Due to my privileges and safety nets, I’m able to choose what jobs I want to do. I’m able to have firm boundaries around what is comfortable for me. This is not the norm.\(^{25}\)

This quotation is an effective example of the benefits of decriminalizing sex work, which is legal and heavily regulated (sometimes problematically) in England. For Miro, sex work is like any other job: one of many avenues to earn money and afford the cost of living, rather than an exploitative, clandestine last resort or result of being trafficked, as the job is for many.

Another artist, identified by the moniker Hanecdote, also focused on personal belongings as a means of expressing experience in an embroidery piece for *Decriminalised Futures* titled *Still Life for Sex-Workers* (2020). The piece depicts a dressing table cluttered with a sex worker’s

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\(^{25}\) Quoted in Armistead, “The ICA’s Controversial Show on Sex Work.”
belongings, including makeup, knick-knacks, candles, a cell phone, pictures, an ashtray, sex toys, and books with titles including Decriminalise, Swarm, Affirm, Community, and Safety. The illustration is interesting in that it offers a detailed description of the personality of the individual we can assume possesses the dressing table and objects, although the individual is not depicted. Viewers can relate to the familiarity of the personal objects and in turn become drawn into the other objects that express ideas about pro sex work activism.

Liad Hussein Kantorowicz’s contribution, Mythical Creatures (2020), was a film which centers around the Argaman Alliance, the first sex worker organization to exist in Israel-Palestine. Kantorowicz had been an outspoken pro sex work activist (and sex worker herself) in Israel-Palestine before the formation of the Argaman alliance. The artist was responsible for creating the term for “sex work” in Hebrew. When the Argaman Alliance formed in 2019 it was in response to Israel’s planned criminalization of the purchase of sexual services. Mythical Creatures focuses on a particular incident which occurred before the new law was implemented, when a meeting of political lobbyists about sex work in Tel Aviv was held without any input from local sex workers. Sex workers and pro sex work activists stormed the stage in protest, toting banners and wearing balaclavas (a reference to the Russian feminist punk band turned performance art protest group Pussy Riot). The Argaman Alliance, along with another grassroots pro sex worker organization called Transiyot Israel, had published a report which condemned the lack of involvement from sex workers in the development of policies regarding sex work and emphasized the increase in police brutality which was already being experienced by sex workers even before the ban was implemented, which prompted the protest.26

Mythical Creatures stars Kantorowicz wearing a bridal-looking dress made of plastic and bubble wrap, red gloves, and a lace mask over her face. In one scene, she holds up a hand painted sign which reads “The police is never on our side,” while in a voice-over she says

My role here is that of someone who wants to document your history, to bring it to light, and through the format of art to represent you and your actions. I know that no one else will do it for you. Your story is my story, too.

Of the legislations in Israel-Palestine that criminalized sex work, Kantorowicz said, “For ten years, sex workers knew that, once it passes, this law will be like a death sentence cast upon them.” She goes on to explain the title of the film:

We are mythical creatures. We don’t exist. Every missionary service, anti-trafficking coalition, white feminist organization, and just about everyone else in the world told us so. And yet, here we are.

With these proclamations, Kantorowicz clarified her intention to document her own history and that of other sex workers in Israel-Palestine, even as laws seek to erase them. Art galleries and museums have proven to be effective places to stage efforts to highlight perspectives and ideas one hopes to instill into popular culture, a reality which Kantorowicz utilized as a means to discuss the problem of criminalization lobbyists happening not just in Israel-Palestine, but universally in countries worldwide.

Decriminalised Futures was presented in partnership with UK-based organizations Arika, a political organization interested in the influence of art on social change, and with SWARM (Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement). The exhibition was inspired by a festival put on by SWARM in 2019 called Decriminalised Future: Sex Workers’ Festival of Resistance.

According to the ICA’s press release for Decriminalised Futures, quotations and recordings from the festival were included as a means to connect the artist’s work to the broader sex worker’s rights movement. In her review of the exhibit, Meg Weeks proclaimed that the information and
content collected from the SWARM festival were some of the most hard-hitting elements of *Decriminalised Futures* as she emphasized the importance of archiving as a political tool.

Chapter Conclusion

The platforming of art that portrays, unpacks, and celebrates the actual lived experiences of sex workers in fine art spaces is an effective method for expanding knowledge and awareness of the fight for the rights of sex workers in a profound way. As is the case for many of the works discussed in this chapter, art has the power to expose viewers to social and political realities that they may not have been aware of previously or may not have taken the time to understand if they were not compelled to by the experience of art. This is where the power of the crossroads between art and activism lies.

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27 Weeks, “Decriminalised Futures.”
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Since the 19th century, visual images of sex workers and artworks which explore sex workers’ experiences have shifted significantly towards being tools for activism. It is true that some pre-feminist artworks suggest a kind of empathy for the figure of the sex worker on the part of the artists, as in the cases of Henri Toulouse-Lautrec and E.J. Bellocq. Nevertheless, until the late 20th century, most artists, even the most sympathetic, still adhered to the conventions of depicting the female body in general, and the sex worker’s body in particular, as an object for the male gaze. Ultimately, it is artwork which was produced after the advent of the women’s art movement which truly communicates the personal experiences of sex workers (which can be both empowering and problematic, often simultaneously) as a means to express and reframe those experiences.

Within the genre of performance art, themes from sex work have been reframed by late 20th century and contemporary artists to invest women with the empowerment to act as free agents and to resist patriarchal constructs by which sex workers have been objectified and “othered.” This has been accomplished by empathetic portrayals of sex workers whose inner lives have been given expression through experiences shared through the interactive environment of a performance, with audience participation and collaboration as key components. Not only has the format of performance allowed artists to engage more directly with their audiences, it has also created a confrontational yet still safe space in which viewers are challenged to compare their own experience of womanhood with the lives and careers of sex workers. Viewers, especially women, may come to recognize some of their own experiences being objectified and othered in the experiences of sex workers, and through this recognition, the binaries that have pushed sex workers to the edges of society and allowed them to be negatively stereotyped can
become less rigid. An intersectional approach is important to this process, as the most effective way to make social progress is to understand the struggles of a diverse range of people and how they are interconnected.

As the social terrain of the contemporary sex industry shifts worldwide, artist-activists (especially those discussed in Chapter 4) are continually responding to changing laws and social structures that govern the experiences of sex workers. An intersectional approach is key to pro sex work activism, as inequalities of race, gender, and class influence the ways in which policymakers, criminal justice professionals, and even medical service providers marginalize certain groups of sex workers and deny them rights. It is difficult to capture the complexities of the global sex industry, which is why art is an effective tool for clarifying the frequently misunderstood cultural practices of sex work and experiences of sex workers: it translates and reproduces those concerns in ways that allow for viewers to understand them more critically. In turn, stereotypes and preconceived notions about sex workers are able to be broken down through the experience of art.

Sex worker artist-activists are platformed more today than they have ever been, suggesting a progressively greater acceptance of the role of sex workers in society, although there is still much work to be done in the field of pro sex work activism. Sex work remains criminalized to some degree in many developed countries, with vast variations in laws enacted to regulate the sex industry. Studies have shown that those who participate in sex work in areas where it is legal or decriminalized are more likely to seek out health services, have better health overall (including mental health), and have better awareness of the health risks associated with participating in sex work.¹ As pro-sex work activists continue to push towards a global culture

that accepts sex work as a legitimate profession and enacts policy which helps maintain the
safety of sex workers, art (especially in the forms of feminist and performance art) will remain a
powerful tool for expressing why such a cultural shift is necessary.
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