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Sex Sells: The Iconography of Sex Work
in Contemporary Art Since 1973

An Honors Paper for the Department of Art

By Mackenzie Philbrick

Bowdoin College, 2020

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MCP
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“Prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer, and since it is a relationship in which falls not the prostitute alone, but also the one who prostitutes—and the latter’s abomination is still greater—the capitalist, etc., also comes under his head.”

- Karl Marx

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

“Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: That which is most one’s own, yet most taken away.”

- Catherine A. MacKinnon

“Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State:
An Agenda for Theory,” in *Signs* 7 no. 3, Spring
1982.

Introduction

This honors project investigates how and to what end the identity of the sex worker has been employed in Western contemporary art. Coined in 1987 by Scarlett Harlot, the title of “sex worker” refers to a person who receives money or goods in exchange for sexual services, encompassing those who participate in filming pornography for money. The term “sex work” will be used across this project when referring to the labor of sex workers in the contemporary context, while the term prostitute will be used to call attention to the historical identity and myth of ‘the prostitute.’ My analysis spans 1973 to 2018, and is divided into three chapters by media so as to explore the affordances of each in critiquing the position of the voyeur as well as the larger capitalistic system. The works fall under the postmodern period, as the post-structural emphasis on discourse gained traction in the 1970s, coming into full force by 1980. This historical moment signalled a shift away from the idealism of modernism to something new entirely, as capitalism saw the effects of extensive globalization and further deregulation. This period is categorized by a loss of faith in master narratives such as religion or science, suggesting a sort of lack of depth in the world in favor of an obsession with surface appearances. It is in this context that Foucault argued that discourse is power, resulting in a subsequent shift in emphasis to reveal its construction. Although postmodern theorization has had various impacts on feminism, one of the most notable was the way in which it opened the dialogue to the “others” of feminism in an attempt to mitigate the oppression of certain narratives and ultimately encourage multiplicity.¹

The first chapter analyzes how contemporary painting and photography has appropriated the rhetoric of pornography to undermine the modernist gaze. The second investigates the role of body art in subverting traditional viewing positions in the art world, and the final chapter deconstructs the dynamics that characterize the larger sociopolitical system. The works were selected based on existing research and documentation of the contemporary sex worker. While the works discussed are fairly well-known within the art historical discourse, they display a general homogeneity and lack the representation of colored artists. In “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists,” prolific artist and woman of color Adrian Piper illuminates the ways in which postmodernism itself has actually repressed colored woman artists (CWAs) from participating in the Euroethnic art-historical canon.² Given that professional artistic success is defined by one’s admission into a certain set of mainstream art institutions—which are characterized by their European tradition—the structure of the art market itself undermines CWAs by marking them as ‘other’ against a background of white homogeneity.³ Piper argues that “postmodernism’s attitude of mourning assumes our arrival at the end of the art-historical progression, and therefore the impossibility of further innovation indigenous to it.”⁴ The concept of postmodernism serves to reinforce the exclusionary nature of the canon itself, refusing to acknowledge the innovations of artists outside of the mainstream white identity.⁵ She suggests that it is precisely this alternative art-historical narrative—which includes repression, prejudice, and exclusion as it looks towards a better future—that has threatened the Euroethnic art tradition, forcing it to shift its goals away from the search for objective truth.⁶ While it is a problematic historical movement, postmodernism marked a legitimate shift away from modernist ideology, a cultural development that clearly impacted the artists’ interpretations of the sex worker in this honors project.

Although individual artists' takes on the sex worker have been discussed in the contemporary period, as have the links between feminist art and performance-based interpretations of the prostitute, Julia Bryan-Wilson is the only art historian that has addressed this theme across the work of various artists. Her article "Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work Since the 1970s," explores the various ways in which artists have addressed sex work since the 1970s, emphasizing the economic similarities between the artist and the sex worker in late capitalism. Her argument does not address the benefits and pitfalls of various media, or the ways in which postmodernism has influenced these portrayals of the sex worker, but it does draw meaningful parallels between the artist and the sex worker by comparing their working conditions under capitalism. She suggests that artists turned to the figure of the sex worker because it made legible a number of developing conditions such as the professionalization of the art market, the increased instability surrounding class formations, and the rise in affective labor.⁷ Ultimately her focus on the economic allows her to argue the Marxist position that artists and sex workers alike must come together in organization of a more just economy.⁸ Drawing on Bryan-Wilson's work as well as Marxian and Foucauldian theory, this honors project will analyze the position of the sex worker and the artist in capitalism, parsing out how these identities have interacted and overlapped with each other as contemporary artists respond to the modernist lineage of the female nude and the commodification of the art object.

In this honors project, I will explore the iconography of sex work in contemporary art as a response to the heavily constructed formalist ideology of the "pure gaze," which privileged the heterosexual male voyeur. My prolonged visual analysis of the representation of sex work across various art media—all of which critique the position of the voyeur and more abstract systemic processes differently—demonstrates contemporary artist's motive to undermine

modernist viewing dynamics. As an undergraduate interested in pursuing a career in law, my proclivity towards social justice led me to a less traditional and more ethically complex art thesis than most. Given that the body of the prostitute has historically been regulated by those in power, and today, human trafficking is estimated to generate \$150 billion annually, I knew that much more was at stake here than the analysis of some pretty paintings.⁹ In a world where policy and ideology have direct implications on the regulation and censorship of female sexuality, and by extension, the sex worker's ability to leverage their service to empower themselves, visual representation and the power dynamics it promotes, can have tangible impacts on real bodies. In a sense, each work makes a claim to the truth of what it means to be a sex worker, creating space for multiplicity and individual expression. As contemporary artists redefine and reinterpret what sex work—and art—can be, they oftentimes recreate the very thing they seek to critique—such as pornography, prostitution, and exploitation. The artists highlight the way in which capitalist production and modernist ideology have worked in tandem to commodify viewing in our increasingly globalized and consumer-based world, which has only served to magnify inequality and exacerbate class divisions. Re-enacting the overt commodification of the female body, the works compare the sexual desire of the voyeur to the satisfaction derived from the ownership and consumption of the art object to emphasize the larger artistic discourses and class processes which inform one's privilege and place within society, and which have materialized in the proliferation of visual media on the Internet and social-media platforms today.

This introduction will discuss the theoretical and historical contexts that inform the works throughout this project. Beginning with the theorization of the sex worker, I will explain how the Marxian and Foucauldian frameworks are significant in understanding power and the

construction of artistic discourse. Then I will move back in time to post-World War Two New York to unpack the formalist ideology that characterized modernist art viewing and reception. Afterwards, I will chart the feminist response to formalism, and the subsequent shift in focus—which the works in this project embody—to transgressive representations of the female body in capitalism.

The Sex Worker in Theory

The identity of the sex worker has historically been an area of interest for scientists and economists due to their unique economic and political position in capitalism. Karl Marx supposed that the most important determinant within society was not in the political or the social, but within the economic sphere. As predicted by Marx, the economic power of capitalism and globalization has come to dominate our world, particularly since the rise of America after the second world war and with the subsequent deregulation and globalization that occurred. Although he spent little time pondering how capitalism influenced gender relations, Marx acknowledged sex work as a legitimate form of labor. He explicitly addressed prostitution, drawing a comparison between the prostitute and the laborer in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in which he states “prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer.”¹⁰ This reflects Marx’s opinion that capitalism forces the laborer to sell their labor power to the capitalist in order to earn a wage and survive, ultimately rendering all work exploitative.

Although Marx’s initial writings suggest that he associated prostitution with selling the body, in Marjolein van der Veen’s article “Rethinking Commodification and Prostitution: An Effort at Peacemaking in the Battles Over Prostitution,” the author suggests that in his later

writings, Marx understood prostitution as selling a service. This shift is embodied in his masterwork *Capital*, in which developed the concept of labor power alongside his ideas about the fundamental class process. Van Der Veen argues that employing these abstract concepts allowed Marx to shift his focus from the commodity to class, and thus “produce the concept of *labor power* (the ability to work for a particular period of time at a particular level of intensity) and the concept of class as a process of the production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor.” Marx’s theory posits that a worker will perform a certain amount of labor to survive and meet their needs, so that capitalism is no longer personified, but a larger process without a particularised subject. Within this framework, Marx recognized the sale of the prostitute’s labor-power in the form of a service sold to clients, and the exploitation of the resultant surplus by the capitalist employer or pimp. Marx’s account of prostitution is further complicated by the violence and coercion that is rampant within the sex industry and propagated by the lack of effective regulation and monitoring due to its illicit nature. Much of the feminist debate over sex work centers around whether prostitution and its commodity form are inherently degrading and alienating, or potentially empowering. According to Van Der Veen, “each position is asserting a “truth” about the process of commodification in prostitution,” which are shaped by different processes, particularly class—such as slavery, independent commodity production, and capitalism. Levels of exploitation and job satisfaction vary depending on who has command over the sex worker’s labor power, leading to multitudinous experiences of sex work as opposed to one uniform truth about prostitution.¹¹

Like the sex worker, the artist defies the traditional relationship between capitalism and wage laborer. Both the artist and the sex worker essentially have power over their own means of production through their embodied creativity/sexuality. Although this allows them to transgress

the traditional wage-earner position in capitalism, they ultimately still produce an object or service that is commodified, as capitalism forces them to sell their labor power for survival. Today, the entrepreneurial sex worker has become increasingly common, allowing the sex worker to take control over their own labor power for financial empowerment. Catherine A. MacKinnon, a well-known second wave feminist scholar famously stated that “sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: That which is most one’s own, yet most taken away.”¹² Understanding gender as both natural biologically and learned ideologically, MacKinnon argues that “Woman” is a social construction.¹³ She postulates that issues of rape, incest, harassment, pornography, and prostitution are located not primarily in economics or authority, but in sexuality, and furthermore that they express relations, values, feelings, and norms that are embedded in the culture’s society.¹⁴ Therefore, sexuality becomes a form of power that relies on the ideological norms and constructs of gender, institutionalizing male sexual dominance over women.¹⁵ Third-wave feminists on the other hand, emphasized female agency, echoing Marx’s claim that prostitution is no different from the exploitative conditions of most labor. It is important to acknowledge the larger structural system that places certain identities at a disadvantage, oftentimes forcing women to commodify their bodies as a result of a limited labor market. It is particularly problematic that sex work has consistently been labelled a feminist issue by placing the onus on the sex worker to justify their labor instead of critiquing the consumer demand for sex work.

Published in 1976, Michel Foucault’s first volume of *The History of Sexuality* studies Western sexuality and refutes the ‘repressive hypothesis,’ which supposed that capitalism and the rise of bourgeois society had resulted in the repression of sexuality from the seventeenth to mid-twentieth century.¹⁶ Instead, Foucault suggests that the discourse surrounding sexuality

actually exploded during this period, as scientists and other experts attempted to study sexuality, often in a confessional format which required people to admit—and consequently, feel guilty for—their sexual desires and acts.¹⁷ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries especially, these experts sought to study so-called deviant sexualities that resisted the traditional marital bond and nuclear family.¹⁸ Foucault introduces the concept of *scientia sexualis* to explain how Western society has developed a scientific study and understanding of sex in attempts to unearth its mystic truth.¹⁹ For him, this contrasts with various Ancient and Eastern societies that display *ars erotica*, an understanding of sexuality that centers around the maximization of pleasure instead of the labelling and policing of certain ‘perverse’ sexualities.²⁰ Thus, through the medicalization and oppression of these alternative sexualities, power regulates and fosters the reproduction of life in capitalism. According to Foucault, biopower is evident in two forms. First, the idea of the body as a machine which requires discipline to reach its maximum potential, and second, the regulation of biological processes involved in the ‘mechanics of life’ such as birth, life expectancy, and mortality.²¹ He argues that it is this very concern with and reinforcement of biopower which allows for the rise of capitalism, as *scientia sexualis* allowed states to regulate and normalize power over life to ensure the presence of a labor force and its reproduction.²² This society categorizes and disciplines sexuality, constituting its own *ars erotica* around knowledge and power as pleasure. However, the failure to adequately address and regulate this industry in order to give sex workers more choice and a safer work environment has real impacts that play out across the commodified body.

Post-War America and the Emergence of Formalism

Foucault's theorization around sexuality arose after World War Two and the ensuing reinforcement of gender roles which made the state's concern with biopower increasingly obvious. During this period, the war campaign called women out of the realm of domesticity and into the workforce to replace the men at war.²³ Enlisting middle-class white women to join the workforce was a significant task given their traditional position in the home, so it required a hefty campaign to construct a new version of femininity that prioritized supporting their men at war by working.²⁴ Up to six million women in America joined the workforce from 1942 to 1945, as they maintained a precarious balance between their new masculine position in society and their socially constructed femininity.²⁵ Visual imagery in government propaganda was key to envisioning this new feminine identity, embodied in the iconic image of Rosie the Riveter. Rosie portrayed the ideal female factory worker, demonstrating her compliance and patriotic loyalty for her country while simultaneously—with her pretty white face, styled eyebrows, and makeup—maintaining standards of beauty. Advertisements like those for bobby pins assured the public by stating “beauty is her badge of courage. It's a tonic to the war-torn nerves of those around her.”²⁶ However, when the men returned from the war, they expected to return to their jobs, while women were to be reinstated in their role as homemakers. Gender in the postwar period once again became polarized, reverting to pre-war stereotypes to compensate for the increasingly public roles women had played in wartime society. At the same moment, American art sought to develop an identity separate from Europe's, with the goal to emerge a new global force in the art world, and masculinity became associated with the American identity itself.²⁷ American art of the Cold War period—which encompassed Abstract Expressionism—asserted its dominance over European art through its unabashed masculinity, as avant-garde production

shifted from Europe to New York City. In this context, art served to simultaneously reinforce gender roles and exclude women from becoming significant artists within these movements.

At this moment, American critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg were shaping people's understandings of abstract art with their influential and contradictory interpretations. Rosenberg's essay "The American Action Painters," presented this new and abstract American art as radical, connecting its importance to the creative act that demonstrated gesture and agency, a performance which the spectator could only attempt to trace with their eyes after the fact. American critic Clement Greenberg published his influential essay "American-Type Painting," which championed modern art, as abstract painting had allowed painting to return to its two dimensional essence, purging it of anything extraneous to the medium and no longer fictitiously duping the viewer into the portrayal of depth on a flat canvas. Formalism as a critical theory emerged from Greenberg's position, holding that the most important element of a work of art is its engagement with form—how it is made and how it appears visually. This position privileges artist's engagement with form over content or its relationship to the world and led to the development of a variety of abstract art, which dominated the development of modern art until the 1960s. Both Greenberg and Rosenberg's ideas not only relate Abstract Expressionism to its American origins, but also emphasize its inherent masculinity through their language, characterizing it by its large canvases, intense color, primal gesture and movement.²⁸

The emergence of the white cube gallery space as the central expressive mode for art corresponded with the construction of this formalist ideology, creating a space that served to completely isolate the work from any other context or cues.²⁹ With its closed and unspoken value system, Irish art critic and academic Brian O'Doherty suggests that the white cube creates

a unique and forceful space in which to present art that draws from the sacred nature of the church and the formality of the court room to create a “chamber of aesthetics,” without which art might easily fall back into the secular.³⁰ The white cube represented access to a world which exalted modernist art—concerned only with form—so as not to destroy the sanctity and timeless nature of a space so completely unconcerned by everything below it.³¹ Although modernists viewed the white cube and the objects residing inside of it as inherently sacred, the artists in this project demonstrate the ways in which modernist taste was heavily constructed by those in power. The insular world of art critics, dealers, museum personnel, and elite patrons function as exclusive arbiters of taste and promoters of learned artistic discourse, which ultimately constructs taste as a limited form of capital attainable to the enlightened few. As arguably the most significant art movement in postwar America, many of Abstract Expressionism’s creators and critics became celebrities, promoting the formalist theory that has had vast and persistent ramifications in the art world. As postmodernism has separated us from Greenberg’s formalist ideology, its employment of modernist tropes—such as obsessive binaries of idealism and degradation—as well as its political motivation, have become increasingly clear.

Deconstructing the Modernist Fetishization of the Art Object

As feminists sought to critique the constructed formalist viewing dynamics that privileged the male gaze/artist, women began to identify and deconstruct the modernist fetishization of the formal art object and its relationship to the commodified female body. Scholars like Carol Duncan emphasizes modern art’s reliance on the female nude across styles and movements, condemning the traditional narrative of artist-as-hero that has become so fundamentally tied to conquering the female body in its representation.³² She further argues that their artwork

reinforces masculine control in the public realm and prioritizes the male gaze, covertly reminding Woman of her place in society as subservient to men.³³ As Duncan points out in her article “Virility and Domination,” the modernist preoccupation with the female nude allowed the male artist to assert his dominance over women, maintaining his place in avant-garde painting—which has traditionally been associated with freedom—just before the First World War, when women were gaining new agency and freedoms in society.³⁴ Addressing the artist’s experience before the nude, Duncan suggests that “higher, more significant meanings are invoked, things about the human condition, freedom, art and creativity—or, if the writer is a formalist, about the artist’s coloristic advances, his stylistic precocity or his technical innovations. It is the moment of rationalization, the moment to back away and put abstractions between oneself and the real content of the paintings.”³⁵ Modernism had privileged formal qualities so much that no one was addressing the dominant pattern in its subject matter: the female nude.

In *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, Lynda Nead suggests that the lineage of the female nude has attempted to organize the female body and sexuality whilst reinforcing sexist viewing dynamics.³⁶ As the nude began to stand for the male erotic energy associated with art making—evidenced by the use of metaphor in many artist’s descriptions of the artistic process, in which the canvas is discussed as an empty, receptive surface without meaning until it is acted upon by the male artist via his paintbrush—a successful nude triumphed in its careful control of these sexual drives.³⁷ By drawing attention to the ways in which the female nude has repeatedly been framed to become culture, Nead emphasizes how the nude’s containment within the frame and context of the white cube allowed it to function as a socially valid form of cultural consumption, despite its sexual content.³⁸ In the 1970s, as advertisements and the proliferation of pornographic films constantly reinforced viewing dynamics that fetishized male dominance

over the female body, artistic success was increasingly based on selling oneself. The feminist art movement arose as a direct response to these cultural conditions, as women artists employed their bodies to refute the commodification of their artwork and bodies. Nead supposed that artists could deconstruct the modernist fetishization of the female nude by producing works that defied classification to question the edges of the socially constructed categories of art and pornography.³⁹ These works can simultaneously critique the existing system while promoting “new and progressive meanings for the female body.”⁴⁰ As she investigates how art and the obscene relate to one another, she concludes that instead of being entirely distinct from one another, they are in fact constantly caught in a state of mutual definition and redefinition.⁴¹

The Pornographic Art Object

The paintings and photographic project in chapter one appropriate the realism of pornography in their artworks to problematize the modernist ‘pure gaze’ by comparing it to the viewpoint of the pornographic viewer. In engaging with the transgressive identity of the sex worker, the artists overtly commodify the female nude within high art media, to ultimately draw attention to how art has become commodified alongside the female body. Both Betty Tompkins’ *Fuck Paintings*, which picture monochrome, magnified genitalia and Marilyn Minter’s *Porn Grid #1-4*, a depiction of money shots—the point of climax, and usually male ejaculation in pornography—centered around the penis, are photorealistic. They plainly reference the pornographic, refuting the modernist abstraction formalism relied on to distance itself from its content. They are clearly in dialogue with the male dominated modernist lineage that preceded them, as evidenced by Minter’s clear aesthetic references to Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein, and Tompkins’ parody of minimalism. In her *Dirty Windows* series, which consists of photographs of real sex

workers shot through a window, Merry Alpern makes the private public by capturing what would normally go unseen with her camera. In fact, her work pushed the boundaries of voyeurism so much that it was defunded by the National Endowment for the Arts for its explicit subject matter. Tompkins' graphic *Fuck Paintings* experienced similar censorship by the French government when she was travelling with them. By including the discernible iconography of the sex worker, Tompkins, Minter, and Alpern juxtapose the commodification of the female body in pornography with the fetishization of the art object as a commodity. In these works, the desire to own the art object is clearly analogous to the desire to control and objectify the female body. Drawing comparisons from across the cultural register, the artists comment on how the female body has been commodified in a variety of realms so that Woman has come to elicit desire and signal value.

Scholar of performance studies Rebecca Schneider, argues in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance*, that over the twentieth century, due to the combination of capitalism's insatiable desire for consumption and perspectivalism, Woman has come to stand for an impossible desire, always out of reach, even to women themselves.⁴² Therefore, the explicit body in its uncensored sexuality appeals to that insatiable desire while simultaneously disallowing the sensuous contact between the viewer and viewed, ultimately criticizing the very real effects of visual dynamics on bodies in circulation.⁴³ She suggests that through the re-enactment of social dramas across the bodies of the performers, they can speak back to the representation of "appropriate bodies" throughout Western history.⁴⁴ Schneider uses examples of explicit body performance across the feminist art movement and beyond to demonstrate that performance art has allowed artists to critique cultural viewing authorities.⁴⁵ The second chapter makes a shift to performance art as sex workers re-enact their physical commodification in the art world.

Performing the Prostitute

Fundamentally anti-formal in nature, body art originated in the feminist art movement of the 1970s to change the relationship between the viewer and the art object. Instead of presenting a formal art object for the viewer's consumption, the medium sought to deconstruct traditional viewing positions by presenting the overtly gendered and sexualized body of the performer within the space, allowing them to return the spectator's gaze and undermine the voyeur's disinterested gaze.⁴⁶ In *Body art/performing the subject*, Amelia Jones suggests that body art's power lies in its ability to destabilize the positions of subject, object, and voyeur.⁴⁷ As the culture wars of the 1980s divided the feminist movement, representations of the sex worker were clearly political. Sex workers Cosey Fanni Tutti, Scarlot Harlot, and Annie Sprinkle engaged with the art world, re-enacting the commodification of their body for the viewer's consumption while simultaneously leveraging their stage as a platform to educate the public on their career and destigmatize the profession. In so doing, they replace the fetishized art object with the commodified body to compare the consumption of desire that both the female nude and the art commodity provide, while confronting their audiences with their presence in the space and society more broadly.

As sex workers elevated their professional profile by entering into the art world, artists became interested in enacting prostitution as a larger metaphor to critique the art market. Heilman-C's *Sex Acts*, 1998, undermined the traditional distinctions between high and low culture by employing porn-stars to engage in sexual activities in the gallery setting. In *Untitled*, 2003, Andrea Fraser engaged in contractual sex with an art collector on film, which was later exhibited. In the work, Fraser aims to critique the larger ecosystem of the art world, its reliance on relationships, ethics, and its relation to objects of desire. Finally, Lindsay Dye's *Mr. Lonely*

cake-sitting, in which she re-enacts the fetish in public, made the overt analogy to the sexual fetish and the fetishization of the art object in modernism. The works emphasized audience participation to highlight the performativity of identity and porousness of subjectivity and objectivity as the performer and the audience alternated with each other. Body art ultimately changes the relationship between the viewer and the art object to break open the traditional boundaries in the gallery system and mark the art world as complicit in the commodification of the female body.

The Institutional Critique

While body art focuses on the individual, the artists discussed in Chapter Three seek to engage with the larger structural system that allows for and promotes the sex industry, conveying sex work as a legitimate form of employment within a larger exploitative structure. By moving beyond the formal art object and the individual, Ann-Sofi Sidén, Santiago Sierra, and WochenKlausur recreate the relationships within the current sociopolitical system to deconstruct its shortcomings. WochenKlausur's *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, 1994, moves beyond the symbolic, enacting real change in the secular world as the Austrian collective created a shelter for sex workers in Zurich. Sidén and Sierra's installations focus on the ephemeral interactions between the audience and art as they emphasize the presence of larger power structures, documenting its material ramifications across real bodies. Ann-Sofi Sidén's *Warte Mal!* 1999, is a video installation that portrays the artists year-long engagement with the residents of Dubí, a roadside town notorious for its prostitution. Her choice of media and its associated aesthetic tropes allow her to implicitly critique the formal conventions of the film and documentary genre, rejecting the idea that a documentary can tell 'the truth.' Employing the first-person camera, she

comments on the ways in which surveillance and viewing in general have become commodified. In *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, 2000, Santiago Sierra addresses the labor unfreedom that sex workers experience by embodying the capitalist and paying four women the amount of a price of heroin to tattoo a line on them. By marking the commodified body of the sex worker with the modernist line, Sierra comments on the ways in which the impacts of commodity fetishism play out on real bodies. The artists of the final chapter deconstruct the larger sociopolitical framework which has commodified sex, the art object, and viewing itself.

Formally, the works throughout this honors project are extremely diverse, but they are tied together by their references to and rejection of the formalist fetishization of the art object. Contemporary paintings and photography of the sex worker explicitly appropriate pornography's relentlessly realistic aesthetic, so that the desire elicited from the fetishization of the formal art object and female body are overtly entangled. Body art seeks to fundamentally reconstruct the relationship between the object and the viewer, breaking open new boundaries by presenting the sexualized, transgressive body to the spectator for consumption while returning their gaze. Installations and interventions deny their audiences a formal art object, opting to reveal the nature of relationships in capitalism to deconstruct the broader sociopolitical context that has allowed for the proliferation of commodified viewing dynamics. In deconstructing the existing system with the iconography of pornography, the sex worker, and capitalism, the works can easily fall back into that which they seek to critique—porn, prostitution, and exploitation. By juxtaposing the reality of the sex worker with the iconography of formalism—point, line, surface, solid—the artists critique the privilege inherent in an art world that is solely concerned with aesthetics across various media. The works throughout all three chapters present an

ongoing analogy between the consumption of the formal art object and the commodified body of the sex worker to overtly link the modernist fetishization of the art object to the desire to control the female body and sexuality. Together, the artists demonstrate the ramifications of the disinterested gaze on the reproduction of power dynamics, the construction of cultural space, and its impacts on bodies in circulation.

Endnotes

- ¹ Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 73.
- ² Adrian Piper, "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 240.
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I. Pornography in Contemporary Painting & Photography

This chapter investigates the ways in which contemporary artists have responded to the lineage of the female nude in painting and photography by generating representations of the sex worker that border on the pornographic. Given that the successful avant-garde nude in Western aesthetics has traditionally required the careful balancing of the transmutation of the artist's sexual drives while simultaneously controlling the risk of being too graphic, these women have undermined this unspoken rule and instead made nudes which are overtly erotic and pornographic.¹ Art historian Lynda Nead suggests that it is at the margins of these socially constructed categories that meaning can be challenged and questioned.² These artworks do just that, technically falling into the category of fine art because of their medium and cultural location, while capturing or appropriating pornographic imagery. Betty Tompkins' *Fuck Painting #6*, 1973, appropriates a graphic scene from pornography, magnifying and cropping it to only include the genitalia rendered in soft, airbrushed monochrome tones. In Marilyn Minter's *Porn Grid #1-4*, 1989, she renders a ben-day dot pattern of pornographic "money shots" as men and women service erect penises. Merry Alpern's photographic series *Dirty Windows*, 1994, captured illicit activities in the bathroom of a private Wall Street lap-dance club, where men trade women money and drugs in exchange for sexual acts. Each of these works naturalistically renders the sex worker—through photography or photorealism—thus responding to the modernist obsession with the female nude by making it explicitly erotic via the visual rhetoric of pornography which prizes realism instead of abstraction.

In *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, art historian Lynda Nead posits that the female nude not only sets beauty standards, but also reinforces and normalizes particular dynamics of viewing.³ Given its repetition as a significant aesthetic motif and its associations with value and desire, Nead argues that “the representation of the female body can therefore be seen as a discourse on the subject and is at the core of the history of western aesthetics.”⁴ Nead identifies the ways in which the nude has become representative of Western art’s obsession with processes of separation and ordering, resulting in the containment and regulation of the female body and sexuality as it has been oppressed in Western culture.⁵ She urges her readers to move past the act of the modernist disinterested gaze, questioning the boundary of the formal art object by focusing on the frame as a site of meaning where distinctions between high and low were made.⁶ Taking on Foucault’s post-structural stance, Nead states, “power lies at the margins of socially constructed categories,” suggesting that artists can question meaning by engaging with and disrupting these systems of classification to demonstrate how unstable the edges of these categories are.⁷ A large portion of her argument centers around the second-wave Western feminist art movement and the various ways feminist art can lay bare the traditional viewing dynamics that the modernist nude reinforced, thus critiquing existing values and opening up new meanings for the female body.⁸ Her investigation seeks to understand the interactions between fine art and the obscene, ultimately concluding that as opposed to two entirely distinct spheres, pornography and art are “caught in a cycle of reciprocal definition.”⁹

If we understand the cultural register as a continuum with these two extremes at either end, Nead argues that somewhere there is a frontier that is continuously changing alongside competing and ever evolving definitions of acceptability.¹⁰ The modernist pleasures one should derive from art have traditionally been defined as contemplation, disinterested gazing, and

transcendent value, while pornography embodies the opposing values of sight such as “motivation, promiscuity and commodification.”¹¹ Furthermore, Nead suggests that the ‘pure gaze’ characterizes a viewer with the cultural competence or capital to understand the significance of an image’s formal elements in its cultural context, allowing them to properly encounter the artwork.¹² This means that one could more accurately define the aesthetic encounter as “the recognition and confirmation of cultural power.”¹³ It is important to understand here that an image’s function is based only partially on its content, for its larger context, level of access, and the behavior surrounding it are clearly key factors that distinguish it as either a legitimate or illicit form of cultural consumption.¹⁴ Therefore, in its deviation from the norms of public viewing and complete lack of transcendent contemplation, sexual arousal is defined as an inappropriate reaction to an art object.¹⁵ Pornographic representations undermine the disinterested modernist gaze because they move the viewer to action, striving for immediate gratification in a culture of insatiable pleasure.¹⁶ This association illuminates the purpose for the connection between the economic and sexual metaphor—the female nude—that both fine art and advertising enact to persuade their viewers to spend.¹⁷ By repeatedly painting the female nude as culture, the privileged male avant-garde artist participates in the same organization and commodification of the female body that advertising has.

In order to appropriate the visual rhetoric of pornography, the artists must naturalistically render the female nude—something that modernist abstraction resisted. Both of the paintings addressed in this chapter are painted in the photorealistic style, which emerged in the 1960s and 70s in opposition to formalist abstraction. Due to its emphasis on naturalism, photorealism requires painstaking precision and skill in handling paint. The meticulous process of photorealistic painting contrasts with the quick and easy photographic production that has

become increasingly widespread in our society. Although there is a long lineage of nudes in art history, the naturalistic nature of photorealism, along with the content that Minter and Tompkins choose to depict, pushes their work to become increasingly associated with—and potentially not different from—pornography. Nead suggests that “the assumed immediacy and accuracy of the photographic image is invested with a pornographic intent; whereas the abstraction and mediation of artistic methods such as painting and drawing are believed to be contrary to the relentless realism of the pornographic project.”¹⁸ Therefore, engagement with the pornographic requires Minter and Tompkins to privilege accuracy over abstraction. Additionally, Alpern’s photographic medium lends itself to the realism of pornography, and it allows her to document the real-life experience of sex workers on Wall Street. Minter and Tompkins’ decision to paint in the photorealist style and Alpern’s use of the photographic medium are what allows each artist to engage with the visual rhetoric of pornography so as to problematize the lineage of the female nude by making their nudes too sexual.

This formal choice forces the juxtaposition of two supposedly separate arenas of culture, and compromises the viewer’s ability for disinterested viewing by making explicit parallels between the role of the voyeur in pornography and art. By deliberately engaging with the pornographic, they are able to deconstruct the categorization and association of the female nude with culture, instead labelling it for what it is—the desire to contain, regulate, and organize the female body and sexuality.¹⁹ This viewpoint overtly makes the spectator a ‘complicit voyeur,’ unlike modernist cultural nudes which allow the spectator to stare without shame in public. By constructing an explicitly pornographic viewpoint of the sex worker, these artists remark on the cultural viewing dynamics surrounding the female nude as it has become objectified and commodified under capitalism. Furthermore, Minter, Tompkins, and Alpern create a formal art

object, the consumption of which is inseparable from the consumption of the female body. Due to the fact that they operate on the margins of the obscene and fine art, their representations can easily fall back into pornography itself, a subversion which is often too much for the art world to handle. For these reasons, each artist has faced some form of censorship or discrimination in their attempts to display these works. All three women have been accused of being ‘bad feminists’ for their deliberate reproductions of pornographic and voyeuristic images. However, it is precisely these formal choices that allow them to draw parallels between the artistic spectator and the pornographic voyeur to undermine the sexist modernist viewing dynamics that aestheticized the female body for the pleasure of the male viewer. Due to the way in which the sex worker’s body is commodified under capitalism, these artists employ the identity of the sex worker in painting and photography to deconstruct the commodification of desire and pleasure that has been imposed on the female body, while simultaneously entangling the female nude with the fetishization of the art object in modernism.

Betty Tompkins, *Fuck Painting #6*, 1973

Betty Tompkins is an American artist, born in Washington DC in 1945 and raised in Philadelphia. She received her BFA from Syracuse University and then went on to graduate school at Central Washington State College. Today, she is a popular feminist artist known for her photorealistic paintings of intimate sex acts rendered in soft, airbrushed tones of grey. Tompkins’ first major body of work, now known as her *Fuck Paintings*, began in 1969 and depicted various bodies engaging in sexual intercourse. These scenes were directly based off of the pornographic magazines her husband had imported from Asia in the 1950s to get around American obscenity laws. After selecting and clipping images that the artist was drawn to, she

painted each with an airbrush to achieve a smooth surface similar to that of a glossy black and white photograph. In doing so, Tompkins not only appropriated the sexual content, but also mimicked the glossy finish and realism that characterized the aesthetic of the magazines from which these scenes originated. Throughout the series, the bodily forms are tightly cropped within the frame so that only the genitalia are shown. This formal choice magnifies the pornographic image far beyond their scale in magazines, making them available for public viewing. As Nead suggests, the decision to copy from low and illicit forms of cultural consumption, and import it into the realm of high art allows Tompkins to subvert the established politics of viewing in these spaces.²⁰

Fuck Painting #6, 1973, follows the similar monochromatic, airbrushed quality as the rest of the series (fig. 1). The massive 84 by 60 inch canvas depicts the cropped back side of a woman with a man's erect penis positioned directly above her anus, rendered in soft greys and touches of light and shadow. Its massive size make the private explicitly public, and call to abstract expressionism's obsession with large canvases. Other paintings in the series feature even more graphic sexual scenes of anal sex and double penetration, making the link to pornography more obvious. The *Fuck Paintings* confront the viewer with the pornographic iconography in a medium and space traditionally preserved for high art. By showing only the genitalia, Tompkins diminishes the power dynamic somewhat between the figures, although by clearly recreating content meant to fulfill the male gaze, her paintings implicate the spectator as a witness to a scene traditionally reserved for use in the privacy of one's home. Tompkins herself refers to these paintings as 'raw facts' stripped of any other meaning or pretense, understanding it simply as a point of contact between body parts free of any further narrative.²¹ However, the genre of pornography does not present an objective world. In reality, pornography is a heavily

mediated genre that provides its viewer a constructed viewpoint and version of sexual pleasure that is far different from those that dominate real life. In recreating the pornographic viewing position for the art viewer, Tompkins complicates the position of the voyeur in the context of the fine art institution, commenting on the dual fetishization of the female body and fine art object in modernism.

In the context of the 1970s, these naturalistic renderings of pornographic and obscene subject matter were not displayed without contention. Her explicit, photorealistic paintings were put on display the very year that it became legal to own pornographic images in America. In fact, when her paintings were originally exhibited, they were titled *Joined Forms*, a name more fitting with the minimalist/conceptual art that was popular in the artworld at the time.

Minimalism fundamentally extended the abstract modernist idea that art should be concerned with its own materiality instead of attempting to be something else. Originating alongside the conceptual art that flourished in the 1960s and 70s, minimalism sought to challenge the existing structures for creating, sharing, and viewing art, critiquing the fetishization of the art object as privileged. The movement was characterized by modular units that often came together to create geometric forms—which stressed unity, harmony, and symmetry—that maintained their ‘truth’ to form. *Joined Forms* would have elicited thoughts of pure, linear, abstract, geometric forms and instead would have presented the viewer with a mass of crude, graphic, sexually explicit imagery. Tompkins cleverly juxtaposes the minimalist movement’s purity with pornography’s obscenity to criticize the art world’s reliance on the transcendent to justify its place in society and question the edges of the constructed categories of cultural consumption. Instead of creating an art concerned with itself, Tompkins derives imagery from an illicit, mass produced source, using photographic precision to render pornographic magazine stills that are larger than life.

Tompkins has succeeded in shocking her audiences with the obscenity of these images. In fact, their pornographic content is so overt that it has alienated some audiences and critics. Although she is an established artist today, many New York galleries would not exhibit her work, particularly because of her identity as a woman who held a different opinion on pornography than many of her female contemporaries.²² In the context of the second wave feminist movement of the 1970s, it was considered reprehensible to replicate and elevate the very pornography that so many feminists saw as problematic. Tompkins also faced actual censorship when her canvases were travelling to France for exhibition and the government confiscated them for obscenity in the 1970s. Given their pornographic content and photographic precision, Tompkins' *Fuck Paintings* can easily fall back into simply being pornography, so overtly sexual and relentlessly real, that it automatically undermines the 'pure gaze,' and instead makes the spectator a complicit voyeur. In today's world, pornography is just clicks away, and these paintings do not elicit the same response that they would have in their original context. As the sacred frontier between high art and obscenity is continuously redrawn, Tompkins redefines the boundary, if only for a moment, by appropriating the rhetoric of pornography in the arena of fine culture.

Although she is considered a popular artist now, she had a turbulent career in the art world, particularly after the censorship of her *Fuck Paintings*. In 2002, her friend offered to show her work in his gallery in New York, ultimately reinvigorating her career and launching her into her next project, *WOMEN Words*.²³ The project involved Tompkins collecting a wide range of words from people on her e-mail lists, asking them to submit words used to describe women, words that she would later paint onto small canvases. Oftentimes, the background of the paintings made references to the twentieth century 'macho' art that she had experienced earlier

on in her career, and her techniques recall the ejaculative nature of Pollock's paintings in the abstract expressionist movement. One piece in particular explicitly makes this reference. Titled *I'm going to...* the pink words read "I'm going to Jackson Pollock All Over Her Face," across a painting of a woman's genitalia. In both her *Fuck Paintings* and *Woman Words*, Tompkins contends with her position as a woman in the art world and emphasizes how discourse can shape identities. As she contends with the lineage she operates in, she references the modernist movements associated with 'pure thought,' undermining the disinterested gaze by presenting the viewer with pornographic imagery normally associated with the fulfillment of bodily pleasure and immediate gratification. Her oeuvre calls attention to the ways in which femininity has been constructed and oppressed within the canon of art history, as she deconstructs the modernist viewing dynamics that reinforced male dominance.

Marilyn Minter, *Porn Grid #1-4, 1989*

Marilyn Minter is an American artist who has lived and worked in New York City since graduating from Syracuse University with her MFA in 1972. She has had a long career working across a variety of media such as painting, photography, and film. Her oeuvre blurs the line between fine art and advertisement, emphasizing the continuous objectification and commodification of the female body across the two genres. Her retrospective exhibition *Pretty/Dirty* at the Brooklyn museum typifies much of the work as it puts the viewer's expectations of how the female body is normally portrayed—in high art and the media—and its lived reality under tension. Her photography and photorealistic paintings are usually larger than life, depicting cropped and magnified parts of the female body. One such photograph titled *Soiled* depicts a cropped photo of a woman's dirt crusted feet, with her toenails painted lime

green. As her work seeks to engage with the realities and underbelly of female beauty and sexuality, she borrows motifs from various sources such as hardcore pornography and fashion to question the idealization of the female body in these realms, oftentimes appropriating and reinterpreting the content to focus on the physicality of the lived female body. Considering that one of the ways modernist painting regulated the female body was through its sanitization and aestheticization, Minter's consistent use of visual cues that mark the female body as dirty and imperfect directly critiques the existing ideals of feminine beauty, allowing her to construct new and progressive meanings for the female body.²⁴ Her interest in female upkeep gone awry is evident in some of her earliest work from the 1970s, paintings that featured domestic spaces covered in spilled liquids, raw food, and crumpled aluminum. Over her career, Minter has created an unusual, almost paradoxical world riddled with glamor and sinister optimism, a world so unusual to encounter photographed or painted that it forces the viewer to question capitalism's commercialization and sexualization of the female body.

In the late 1980s, as tensions mounted surrounding feminism's stance on sex work and pornography, Minter embarked on a series of paintings now informally known as her "porn paintings." In *Porn Grid #1-4*, 1989, four paintings hung in a rectangular grid, depict various figures engaging in pornographic 'money shots' as both men and women service erect penises (fig. 2). In *Porn Grid 1*, a man with a moustache licks an erect penis. *Porn Grid 2* shows three women with open mouths crowded around and holding the phallus, while the third depicts an erect penis poised over another open, red-lipped mouth. The fourth frame displays a blonde woman smiling on her back as a man ejaculates onto her. Deriving these shots from pornography, Minter selected scenes that characterize the pornographic genre and revolve around male pleasure/the phallus. For the most part, the scenes all center around the erect penis, and

with one exception, all of the people gratifying it are conventionally beautiful white women. These tightly cropped paintings of fellatio and ejaculation dehumanize the individuals within the frame, as they only reveal parts of their bodies—particularly their mouths with no inclusion of eyes or full faces. The focus of each painting is on heterosexual male pleasure, the same viewpoint that the female nude would have privileged. In her rendering, Minter captures and re-enacts the politics of viewing in pornography, allowing the viewer to stare at graphically rendered images they associate with something that is solely associated with ideas of pleasure and immediate gratification. In her formal choices, Minter clearly appropriates the rhetoric of pornography, presenting it to the viewer in the public context, thus making pornography—and by extension, sex—visible and available for the voyeuristic interest.²⁵

Minter's formal choices in this piece employ the rhetoric of two genres of male-dominated artistic movements: abstract expressionism and pop art. Each frame was rendered with enamel and then overlaid with a ben-day dot pattern which serves as a deliberate reference to the male-dominated pop genre. The enamel drips down the paintings, originating from the red lips and flesh tones, a formal choice that is further accentuated by the addition of white trickles down the canvas, which clearly reference male ejaculate and relate it to materiality of the paint itself. These splashes of enamel are splattered across the surface haphazardly, serving as a visible reminder of the physical activity of painting that has been long connected to Jackson Pollock and the machismo of the Abstract Expressionists who were initially dubbed the "Action Painters." In fact, as she has contended with the far reaches of the abstract expressionist lineage throughout her oeuvre, she has made other references to Pollock. In Minter's video *Green Pink Caviar*, 2009, a woman's mouth licks a green colored gel-like liquid off of a piece of glass that is positioned from below. This footage draws comparisons to Hans Namuth's famous film of

Pollock generating a composition on glass in 1950. In so doing, she deconstructs the hyper-masculinity that the expressionist movement relied so heavily on and contrasts it with the explicit sexuality of the woman licking the substance from the lens. Throughout her oeuvre, luscious female lips—frequently accompanied by some sort of liquid—are a recurring motif that comes to represent an unstable and sexualized boundary between image and viewer.

Pop art drew inspiration from mass consumer culture like comics and advertisements, gaining traction as a mainstream art movement in Britain and the US as the days of abstract expressionism's reign came to a close in 1961. The use of 'low' subject matter by artists like Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol horrified modernist critics and marked a return to representational art after the emphasis on personal gesture in abstract expressionism.

Lichtenstein would use perforated templates to recreate the ben-day dot pattern that is persistent across print media like comics, undermining the abstract expressionist obsession with the gestural passion of brushstroke by favoring the standardized and commercial. Although his scenes were sourced from real comics, he would often make transformations that limited the color palette, heightened contrasts, and cropped scenes to emphasize the flatness, clichés, and tropes typical of print imagery. In fact, many of Lichtenstein's scenes were derived from postwar romance comics that revealed gender representations as constructed.²⁶ Given that pop art celebrated the mundane, Minter deliberately makes formal choices that reference Lichtenstein—in the use of primary colors, ben-day dots, and traditionally beautiful women—painting pornography in this familiar style to suggest that the viewer engage with a form of mass media that is so widely consumed, yet so unspoken about.

Appropriating commercial and mass-produced media meant that pop artists could question the boundary between art and commerce, which allowed them to destabilize, reinterpret,

and ultimately reinforce social hierarchies of gender and class.²⁷ Whiting argues that since the beginning of the twentieth century, mass culture and consumerism have been associated with the feminine, while high culture has been coded masculine.²⁸ Therefore, the blurring of art and commodity not only had implications for the modernist fetishization of the art object, but also disrupted traditional gender categorization.²⁹ In a review of Whiting's book, Sally Markowitz suggests that pop art was so disruptive to gender constructions that it "required critics to fashion a new idea of male artist and aesthete, perhaps a shade more ironic than his modernist predecessor but just as detached, more intellectual, and most importantly, different from the female consumer, who, whatever her level of sophistication, was too preoccupied with shopping to separate artwork from commodity, let alone to appreciate the blurring of the distinction between them." By painting money shots in the pop genre, Minter draws a parallel between the ways in which pornography has objectified the female body for male pleasure, and the ways in which the female body has become commercialized in pop art and advertising to elicit feelings of desire. In doing so, she explicitly displays the sexist viewing dynamics that permeated the pop genre—and by extension, consumer culture—and offered the female body as an object of desire to be bought, owned, and consumed.

Explicitly replacing the cultural modernist nude with the eroticized, commodified nude, Minter comments on the power dynamics which permeated both modernist and pop art viewing. Since the boundaries between high and low are crucial for maintaining an order that is constantly evolving, Minter challenges the frontier of the traditional high-art aesthetic that the female nude symbolized by painting the sex worker within the context of pornography.³⁰ Nead suggests that an engaged feminist nude should undermine "the coy play on eroticism and aesthetic experience," replacing it with "a direct address to the relationship of desire, visual representation

and the female body.”³¹ In line with Nead’s advice, Minter places the sexually explicit nude in the art sphere for public consumption, projecting the pornographic viewpoint onto the art viewer to compare porn’s associations with gratification and pleasure to the experience of the voyeur’s consumption of the art object. The juxtaposition of these two viewing positions allows Minter to comment on the dual commodification/fetishization of the female body and the art object that has occurred alongside the construction of desire in capitalism.

In *Porn Grid #1-4*, Minter cleverly employed the rhetoric of two male-dominated artistic movements, pop art—which celebrated mass culture, consumerism and reinforced gender roles—and abstract expressionism, to deconstruct the nude’s association with desire by taking its sexualization and commodification to the extreme. Throughout her 40-year prolific career, Minter has investigated the dual commodification of pleasure and desire, asking provocative questions as she has fought for women’s rights to have agency over their own bodies. While the feminist community was divided over the sex-industry and the misogynist values it promoted, Minter chose to paint scenes appropriating that very subject matter. Although upon first glance, Minter’s *Porn Grid* might have appeared shocking for a woman to paint, the graphic subject matter allowed her to re-enact the politics of viewing in pornography, likening it to that of the masculine pop art and abstract expressionist movements. Addressing her own work, Minter explains that “the glamour is infused with knowing you’re never going to look like that, infused with the shame of even wanting to look.”³² Minter shocks her viewer with obscene imagery in a public setting, marking them as complicit. As her career has progressed, her move into fashion inspired photography demonstrates a fascination with female beauty and its deconstruction. Although her explicit, eroticized, and sometimes quasi-pornographic images have made her a contentious artist in the feminist movement, her nuanced, stylistic choices paint a picture of a

woman artist attempting to reconcile her place in an art world dominated by a hyper-masculine modernist rhetoric, a woman seeking to question the very foundations of her field as exclusionary and problematic.

Merry Alpern, *Dirty Windows*, 1994

Born in New York City in 1955, photographer Merry Alpern was an undergraduate sociology major at Grinnell College before she dropped out in 1977 to work in New York City as a printer in a commercial lab. Her works as a photographer have a surveillance quality to them, with her subjects often unaware that they are being photographed. Along with *Dirty Windows*, her more recent work *Shopping* captures photos from hidden cameras placed in department stores, fitting rooms, and malls from 1997-1999. Although she is now considered a successful photographer that has exhibited across America, her work *Dirty Windows*, 1994—in which she took photos of an illegal Manhattan sex club through a bathroom window—was extremely controversial. In that very year, the National Endowment for the Arts rejected Alpern's recommended photography fellowship along with Barbara DeGenevieve and Robert Mapplethorpe, as well as numerous others.³³ The NEA—an agency of the federal government designed to fund and support artistic projects—had traditionally been associated with Democrats, and in 1994 the 104th Congress, which was dominated by conservative Republicans, was looking to make massive cuts in the NEA's budget if not altogether eliminate it.³⁴ Since its formation in 1965, the NEA has fostered a much more diverse artistic landscape in America than before, when private funding was all that was available.³⁵ Despite and perhaps precisely because of its very successful track record, the congressional conservatives, led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich, attacked the NEA as wasteful, elitist, and controversial, particularly because of the artists it chose to fund.³⁶ In a *Los*

Angeles Times article covering the proposed budget slashes, Knight writes “without exception, every artist whose work has been assaulted by congressional conservatives has been either not white, not male, not heterosexual, or some combination thereof,” further reinforcing that the NEA was being brought down in fear of what freedom of expression might mean outside of the hands of white men.³⁷ Merry Alpern’s *Dirty Windows* were one of the very controversial works these politicians were attempting to defund.

The photographic series began in 1993, when Alpern’s friend brought her to a back room in his loft where, through his window, one flight down, about 15 feet away was the bathroom window of a low-rent brothel in the Wall Street district. Apparently, an illegal, private lap-dance club had just been opened where plenty of professionals and well to do businessmen frequented after working hours, handing over an abundance of drugs and cash to women in lingerie. Alpern’s film camera captured photos of women and men engaging in sex, doing drugs, handling money, dressing, and undressing. Alpern took her photographs for six months through the window pane, which simultaneously frames and obstructs the audience’s ability to see what is going on inside. The grainy, black and white aesthetic of the images have a peep-show quality to them, a result of Alpern’s choice to photograph in fast black and white film, due to the low amounts of light. In *Dirty Windows #5*, a woman stands in the window in a black, lacy one piece counting money in her hands (fig. 3). The viewer is not able to see the woman’s face, as it is out of frame, leaving the viewer with more questions about this woman and her life beyond this bathroom. Alpern noted in an interview that she took great care to edit out faces and remove any identifying marks on her subjects in order to maintain their privacy, and of course, lessen the possibility of a lawsuit. Another photo in the series captures the midsection and thighs of a man in a suit as he displays his penis through the zipper of his pants. As strangers engaged in one of

society's most private affairs — sex — Alpern photographed it for the world to see, raising questions about the ethical quandaries of photographing without the consent or awareness of your subject.

Since its invention, the camera has given the photographer the ability to capture scenes directly from 'real life' which can then be presented to the viewer. Given that photography is often invested with "an ideology of realism," as Nead suggests, the photographic image claims to record reality directly, instead of being mediated through the artist like other media.³⁸ This can be attributed to the scientific and intellectual uses of the camera, as well as its evolving surveillance techniques which have been closely tied to its technological development. The camera has been employed to police borders, gather information, aid in wartime reconnaissance, and more generally to "watch over" our society. Today, cameras are stationed on street corners, in malls and public buildings, and Google satellite technology ensures that there is no escape from its all-seeing eye. Photographers employ various tropes and viewpoints that investigate the audience's associations with and the formal limits of the medium. Modernist photographers sought to question the fine line between art and eroticism with their precise female nudes in the 1850s.³⁹ In fact, many of the French pioneers of photography were known to supplement their income with the sale of pornographic pictures that would be printed on small stereo cards.⁴⁰

Instead of abstracting the female body or rendering it in paint, Alpern carries on this tradition of the photographed female nude. Alpern takes on the language of surveillance by secretly capturing the actions of those who believed themselves to be alone. *Dirty Windows* positions the viewer to gaze openly at intimate and illicit acts that were thought to be private by those in the frame. In capturing what was not meant to be seen with photographic accuracy and publicly presenting it to the viewer, Alpern recreates the voyeuristic viewing dynamics

characteristic of pornography, implicating the viewer in the role of a peeping tom. This position poses difficult questions to the viewer, like whether or not they should reject this point of view. By directly capturing the real bodies of sex workers in the midst of their working hours, her photos provide a narrative that not only questions the line between high and low cultural consumption, but also corrupts the transcendent experience one is supposed to have in the presence of the art object by drawing attention to the commodification of the female body. In witnessing the exploitation of these women and commodification of sex, Alpern makes the viewer complicit in the larger politics of viewing that permeates the larger sociopolitical system. Focusing on the exchange of money and drugs, Alpern demonstrates how sex has been commodified and offered as a service for these wealthy men. By capturing these photographs and placing them in the context in which fine art is usually exalted, Alpern reveals how capitalism has simultaneously corrupted the female body and the art world in its relentless commodification and fetishization of the object.

The photos are fundamentally voyeuristic in their construction, offering the viewer a look into the sexual goings on of an illegal club where lap dances were only the beginning in a range of sexual offerings to please male customers. This is perhaps slightly complicated by the fact that Alpern is a woman. Despite this, Alpern leaves the viewer to make sense of the world she has discovered with her camera, questioning in the accompanying essay her own motivations for capturing the photographs in the first place. The photographer suggests that she was drawn into the drama of it all, unable to turn away from the interactions between sex worker and customer, eventually recognizing the recurring characters. Seeing her camera as a vehicle for exploration, Alpern suggests that she had been interested in capturing the city's fringe cultures. Alpern captures the illicit activities of powerful men who most likely have appearances to keep up

beyond the secret club, but whose power is just as evident behind closed doors. The large, male figures in suits stand in stark contrast to the smaller women who wear dainty lace outfits or nothing at all. Alpern's fixation with capturing the exchange of money and drugs between the actors highlights the transactional nature of their relationships, and makes her complicit in it as witness, recorder, and later someone who would profit from sharing this world with others.⁴¹

When Alpern submitted some of the photos to the NEA, she had not had much prior connection with the art world. A few months later, she received a phone call explaining that her work had been approved by the NEA for a grant that was then overturned. The caller also informed Alpern that she would be reading about this rejection in the papers the next day. Interestingly, the controversy sparked press coverage and fascination in the images that ultimately aided her career, as the New York and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art quickly deciding to exhibit the series. Today, the photographs from *Dirty Windows* have found their way into major private and museum collections, like the Museum of Modern Art. Although the NEA attempted to stifle the controversial photos, it seems that they only aided in advertising them. *Dirty Windows* ultimately took on a life of its own, as audiences became privy to the secret happenings of a private Wall Street club through the lens of Alpern's camera, fascinated with the exchange of sex, money, drugs, and desire, just as she was. Despite the artist's resistance to a straightforward feminist reading of her work or an emphasis on the implications of the female gaze, the photographs cannot help but raise questions about consumerism, power, exploitation, and surveillance.⁴²

All of the artists in this chapter employ the graphic imagery of pornography within the media of fine art to question the ways in which the categories between high culture and the obscene have

been socially constructed and constantly redefined by art. Through their deliberate choices of content and style, all three artists create a fine art object depicting obscene iconography. In explicitly reconstructing the viewing dynamics innate in pornography—which allow the voyeur to stare at something traditionally reserved for the private realm—the artists implicate the spectator. Drawing parallels to the pornographic voyeur and the art viewer, the artists undermine the modernist idea of the ‘pure gaze’ that characterized proper disinterested viewing, instead confronting their viewer with eroticized female bodies that they might normally encounter in pornography to trigger sexual arousal. Tompkins and Minter overtly utilize the visual languages of modernist formalism by referencing various male-dominated artistic movements like abstract expressionism, pop art, and minimalism. The juxtaposition of the modernist obsession over purity and truth with the illicit body of the sex worker allows the artists to critique the sexist viewing dynamics that permeated modernist art and which are indicative of the larger female oppression in Western society.

The motif of the sex worker allows the artists to overtly reference the commodification of the female body and sexuality, which has mirrored the commodification of the female nude in the art world and other cultural realms such as advertising as it has come to indicate value and significance. By drawing parallels from different realms of cultural consumption, the artists demonstrate how Woman has come to embody the insatiable desire innate in the capitalistic structure that prioritizes consumption. Ultimately, these artists question what capitalism means for the female body by demonstrating that the modernist politics of viewing are not so different from the very pornography that has objectified the female body for male pleasure. As alienated laborers seek fulfillment, visual media is indicative of the ways in which men have attempted to gain control over the female body and sexuality, whether through the purchase of a female nude,

its rendering, or the exchange of money to assert sexual domination over it. In each work, there is an analogy between the presentation of the female body and the art object for the viewer's consumption, revealing the dual fetishization and commodification of both in modernism. As other artists have sought to unsettle the relationship between the voyeur, female body, and art object, they employ the tactics of body art to dislocate traditional modernist viewing positions, fundamentally changing the interaction between the viewer and the object by forcing the voyeur to confront the embodied subject within the gallery space.

Endnotes

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- ³ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 2.
- ⁴ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 2.
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- ⁶ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 6.
- ⁷ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 32.
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- ⁹ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 91.
- ¹⁰ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 85.
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- ¹² Nead, *The Female Nude*, 84.
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- ¹⁴ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 86.
- ¹⁵ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 88.
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- ¹⁷ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 89.
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- ³⁰ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 33.
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- ³² Hannah Ghorashi, “‘I want women to look like they can’t get thrown away’: Marilyn Minter on her Retrospective ‘Pretty/Dirty,’” *ARTnews*, February 4, 2016.
- ³³ “THE NATION/THE CULTURE WARS: A Day in the Death of the NEA: Did Agency’s Success Cause Its Demise?” *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1995.
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- ³⁸ Nead, *The Female Nude*, 52.
- ³⁹ Tate Modern. “Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera, exhibition guide, Voyeurism and Desire” (web page). Tate (website). Accessed April 1, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/exposed/exposed-voyeurism-surveillance-and-camera-exhibition-guide-2>.
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II. Performing the Prostitute

This chapter will investigate performances of the contemporary sex worker by analyzing six works that—through the explicit use of the body—walk the line between performance art and prostitution. Body art is defined by art historian Amelia Jones as performance art that stresses the implication of the artist's body/self in the work, usually with an emphasis on particularity of the body and its various sexualized and gendered markings of identity.¹ Removing the division between the stage and audience, the subject and viewer, body art places the spectator in the action and fundamentally changes the dynamics of viewing.² It is important to note that Jones' definition of body art includes works that take place outside of the performance context and which are mediated through photography or film.³ While the first chapter discussed how artists used the pornographic female nude to demonstrate how modernist viewing dynamics led to its commodification, body art employs the lived female body to redefine the relationship between the viewer and the art object.

The shift in medium from the static art object to the ephemerality of body art have significant implications for the ways that these artists represent the identity of the sex worker. Firstly, the definition of artist is altered from 'producer of the art object/commodity' to performer. Given the implication of the identity of the sex worker in all of these works, this oftentimes means that those performing are also or have previously been involved in the act of sex work. The conflation between the identities of the artist and the sex worker is not insignificant, and does not occur with this amount of prevalence in other media. Given that sex

work is performative in the same way that performance art is, these artists push the bounds of easy classification and continue to consciously appropriate artistic language and discourse to legitimize their profession. Secondly, the move away from the formal art object disallows its commodification, replacing it with the body of the sex worker for the audience's consumption. By replacing the commodifiable art object with the body of the sex worker, which has been commodified in the sex industry, these performances mark the art world as complicit in creating and reinforcing the commodified viewing dynamics that permeate capitalism. Finally, the shift from the static image to the performance of real bodies in space parallels the move from a critique focused on appropriating the iconography of pornography to problematize the pure gaze, to one that re-enacts the act of prostitution. In drawing an analogy between the desirous viewing dynamics elicited by the female sex worker's eroticized body as it inhabits the position traditionally reserved for the presentation and fetishization of the art object, body art allows artists to comment on the art world's participation in commodifying the female body.

In the 1970s, both the commercialization of sex as a tool in advertisements and the commodification of art were on the rise, so that artistic success was increasingly based on selling oneself. In response, the feminist art movement leveraged body art to deconstruct the ways in which society had marked the female body via the historic, political, economic, and cultural discourses in attempts to regulate it.⁴ The explicit body performer consciously and explicitly grappled with the history of her body's explication whilst returning the gaze of the audience that is complicit in her objectification.⁵ Performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider suggests that the main tenets of feminist performance art are the replaying of the drama of gender across the body, engaging with perspective and the gaze, exposing the representational structures of desire embedded in capitalism, and critiquing the avant-garde/modernist obsession with shock-value.⁶

The feminist art movement—which immediately preceded postmodernism—played a vital role in crafting the tools these artists use to reinterpret the contemporary sex worker through their bodies, as they engage with the transgressive side of female sexuality.

As this chapter focuses on interpretations of the prostitute acted out via the body, body and performance art are important theoretical frames in understanding these works. In *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Jones examines the social and cultural significance of body art and its evolution through the analysis of select works in the genre. Jones explores the roots of body art in the 1960s feminist art movement, emphasizing the movement's reliance on body art in order to destabilize modernist discourse and its supposed objective judgement of value.⁷ At the time of its origination, body art was dismissed by many scholars as naïve, and was often negatively associated with attempts to debunk modernism. However, Jones argues that by stressing the integration of the body/self in the work, usually with an emphasis on the body's sexualized and gendered nature, body art places the body in the aesthetic realm as a political tool to deconstruct conventional modes of artistic evaluation.⁸ It also has tremendous potential to revise the relationship between the artist, subject, and audience, as the spectator is no longer a voyeur engaging with a painting of a nude woman, but is instead confronted with the embodied subject, placing the spectator within the action and changing the dynamics of viewing within the gallery. As body art is taken up by postmodern artists later on, Jones identifies numerous changes in the strategy, context, and emphases of these works.⁹ Postmodern body art stresses the body/self as simultaneously subject and object, deploying mediations through photography and film that further emphasize the self as unfixable in identity and meaning.¹⁰ Jones identifies the way in which these works increasingly seek to interact with their audience, engaging the spectators in the acts themselves so as to eliminate voyeurism and hold the audience accountable

for their own perceptions and interpretive judgements.¹¹ Although Jones does not touch on any of the postmodern works in this chapter specifically, her theoretical context is useful in understanding these performances because they all operate within this lineage of body art.

In accordance with postmodern theory, artists acknowledge the power of the discourse they are entangled in, ultimately attempting to reveal and deconstruct it. In Shannon Bell's *Reading, Writing & Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, the performance scholar argues that the position of the sex worker can be one of empowerment, framing her argument with an analysis of the ancient Greek prostitute, drawing attention to a cultural context in which she claims that prostitutes were considered spiritual and holy. Although factually murky, this comparison highlights the way in which Western society's obsession with binaries has actively relegated the prostitute to social other and functions as a template for future empowering interpretations of sex work. She suggests that performance art is at the forefront of postmodern theorization because of its ability to destabilize preconceived notions and bring postmodern theory into real life that refuses to be commodified.¹² The latter half of her book recounts the careers of various prostitute performance artists, two of whom are discussed in this chapter—Scarlot Harlot and Annie Sprinkle. Bell suggests that “those previously coded as merely ‘obscene’ and contained as carnivalesque transgression are using art space to reconstitute themselves as living artifacts of resistance. The main site of resistance is their own bodies,” an idea coming from Foucault's theorization of the body as potentially transgressive.¹³ In this way, the social “others,” in this case the sex worker, can destabilize the hegemonic discourse and make room for alternative identities.

Due to the controversial nature of the sex worker in the 1970s and 80s—as feminists were divided regarding their stance on prostitution and pornography—representations of the sex

worker in body art were highly political in the period. Beginning with COUM Transmissions' *Prostitution*, 1976, the European exhibition displays the documentation of Cosey Fanni Tutti's stint in sex work via photographs that subvert traditional categories of gender and genre. Moving into the American context, Scarlot Harlot and Annie Sprinkle's works offer deeply critical, post-structuralist critiques of the representations and discourse surrounding the prostitute, as these artist/activist/educators were some of the foremost figures engaging in the controversial debate surrounding pornography and sex work in the 1980s. Scarlot Harlot's *The Adventures of Scarlot Harlot*, 1980 is one such performance that serves to humanize the sex worker, drawing parallels between sex work and other forms of labor. In *Post-Porn Modernist*, 1989, Sprinkle performed a series of vignettes for her audience that presented the various sides of sex work while subverting the position of the voyeur. As they present their sexualized bodies to be consumed by their viewers, sex workers leverage their platform to educate their audience and destigmatize their profession while maintaining agency and choice over their bodies. Overall, performances of the individual sex worker seek to overcome blanket assumptions about them which inherently disempower their community, confronting the viewer with their presence as they make comparisons between the desire their commodified bodies elicit with that of the art object's viewing, purchase, and ownership.

Although the interpretation of the sex worker in body art originated as highly political, pertaining to the sex worker's identity and its deconstruction, artists became interested in enacting the language of prostitution to critique the art world. *Sex Acts*, produced by Heilman-C in 1998, involved porn stars performing sexual acts in a New York gallery, allowing Heilman-C to not only erode the line between high and low spheres of culture but also to emphasize the feelings of desire at the heart of art and capitalism. Andrea Fraser's performance *Untitled*, 2003,

in which the established artist engaged in contractual sex with an art collector on film to be exhibited called attention to commodity fetishism, while the implication of her own body allowed her to further critique what has traditionally been at the heart of much of modernist desire. In her cake-sitting *Mr. Lonely*, 2018, Lindsay Dye literally re-enacted the wet and messy fetish in a public setting to comment on the formalist fetishization/commodification of the art object and female body.

These artists' interpretations, although often critically overlooked due to their controversial subject matter, seek to deconstruct the stable, identifiable positions of subject, object, and voyeur. In doing so, other binaries regarding genre, gender, and sexuality are also addressed. Because of the sexual nature of the prostitute, these works often cross over into the realm of obscenity, evoking critical outcry surrounding the function and future of contemporary art and suggesting that these acts serve as signs of art's degradation. Despite this, artists knowingly choose to engage with these explicit themes because it allows them to expose the patriarchal discourse that has regulated the female body and sexuality for so long. All of these works emphasize the agency of the performer, as they address their position in the larger discourse while simultaneously seeking to break open boundaries to find new meaning. Through the use of the body marked by gender and other aspects of identity, the performer interacts with their audience, drawing parallels between the performative identities of artist and prostitute, both of whom sell desire to survive in capitalism. By employing the sex worker's commodified body, these artists, performers, and activists fundamentally question what prostitution really is, and why one form of it is revered in society while the other is considered reprehensible. Although the medium of body art has tremendous potential to destabilize traditional viewing positions, it is risky, as the use of the sexualized body can collapse into the very thing—prostitution or

pornography—that it aims to critique. Incorporating various elements like audience participation, comparisons between the economic aspects of art and sex work, the lineage of the prostitute in art history, and acknowledging and undermining the power of discourse allow artists to critique the female body's commodification in both the art world and the sex industry. By replacing the fetishized art object with their bodies for the audience's consumption, they comment on the larger viewing dynamics which have commodified the female body to elicit desire.

COUM Transmissions, *Prostitution*, 1976

COUM Transmissions' *Prostitution*, 1976, was a group work that effectively emphasized the discursive effects of media and questions of gendered authorship (fig. 4). Exhibited in London's Institute of Contemporary Art, the *Prostitution* installation lasted for just over a week in October 1976, but its impact endured. The show was extremely controversial, inspiring political debates surrounding the future of contemporary art in the House of Commons. COUM Transmissions, a music and performance art collective, originated when Genesis P-Orridge involved a cast of fellow artistic collaborators, one of whom was Cosey Fanni Tutti, an English performance artist, musician, and writer involved in the commercial pornographic world as a form of performance art. Best known for her work with the collective, Tutti worked for two years as a model for sex magazines and pornographic films so as to directly participate in the production of commercial images that were used in this revealing exhibition about both the sex industry and the art world. Alongside the photos, which the gallery only made available upon request due to the media outcry, the exhibition showcased previously used props such as bandages and syringes, as well as tampons arranged in various sculptures. Beyond the photos and articles, there were also

performances and punk music bands playing, and the opening night saw performances by punk band LSD as well as a stripper. The poster for the exhibition displayed Tutti reclined in the same position as *Olympia*, directly referencing the lineage of the representation of the prostitute in art history. Tutti explained her goals of the exhibition on the poster, emphasizing her awareness of her position within the industry as ironic. As stated by Genesis P-Orridge on the poster, “everything in the show is for sale at a price, even the people” (fig. 4). In this statement, P-Orridge overtly relates the commodification of the art object and the female body to one another, commenting on the bizarre implications of commodifying real bodies.

It was not the first time that COUM Transmissions, which later transformed into Throbbing Gristle, had shocked their audiences. Influenced by Surrealism, the Dada artistic movement, as well as underground music and the Beat generation, COUM sought to challenge conventional British society with their intentionally confrontational and subversive performances.¹⁴ In Wilson’s account of *Prostitution* she provides an overview of COUM Transmissions’ history and evolution, charting how *Prostitution* served as the climax of much of their previous work. The unreliable use of photographic documentation is a continuous theme in their oeuvre, as they often photographed their performances.¹⁵ Upon first inspection, the photographic documentation seems to truthfully tell the story of the performance, but in keeping with COUM Transmissions’s interest in media and representation, photography exists in a much more complex relation with the live event.¹⁶ In at least two of their performances, the photographic documentation was notably involved in the work, pushing the audience to question which functioned as the legitimate work, the performance or the remnants of it.¹⁷ They also attempted to transgress the institutional function of these photographs as purportedly truthful documentation.¹⁸ In one such work named *Studio of Lust*, 1975 Wilson demonstrates that the

iconic images were intentionally devised as pornographic quotations, making it appear as if they are records of live action pornography.¹⁹ This confrontation with the institutional standards of documentation and commodification were further emphasized by Christopherson in the same performance when he applied wound makeup to Tutti and himself, staging the fake lesions that appear to be real in the photographs.²⁰ These images then, are neither relics nor accurate documents of the performance, but instead served to undermine the institutional accuracy and function of documentation that photography provides in the realm of performance.

Prostitution further deconstructed the function of discourse by contending with the media through a constantly evolving media wall. The media wall demonstrated the story of the exhibition as told by the media through press clippings that were posted daily, so that the outcry against the ‘wreckers of civilization’ was actually incorporated into the show. In this way, Wilson suggests that the collective acknowledged the broader discursive frameworks that were used to understand the work itself, emphasizing structures of dissemination and the way in which they can distort and misrepresent the ever elusive truth. The media wall then, functions as a delayed feedback loop recognized the discursive nature of making meaning, and by extension, emphasized the way in which this meaning inevitably extends beyond the control of the artist. Interestingly enough, the media itself refrained from reporting on the media wall in its extensive coverage of the exhibition, completely overlooking and indeed misrepresenting an important aspect of the exhibition.²¹

In *Prostitution*, photographs of Tutti’s career in the sex industry operate as documents of prior performance. It is significant to note that Tutti began posing for small underground pornographic publications out of necessity and as a way of making money.²² Afterwards, COUM Transmissions began to archive the magazines to use in future work. Ultimately, the

exhibit displays Tutti's own labor within the sex industry, with which she identifies herself in relation to as sex worker. Past photography by the group has served to question photography's association with truth by actually making them purposely inaccurate or misrepresentative. However, here the photos mediate her performance as a sex worker within the industry. Although these photos conformed to the pornography genre and were not themselves transgressive, they functioned as defiant in their form and use. Tutti signs all of the photos of herself with her own signature, thus reattributing authorship from the anonymous photographer to herself—the model. This is significant because it brings gendered authorship into the spotlight as a central issue, allowing Tutti to claim the identity of the artist while conflating it with that of the sex worker. In the context of the modernist lineage in which men were constantly painting the female body and claiming authorship and ownership over it, this is a significant demonstration. Instead of allowing a man to be the sole profiteer of these photos, Tutti reclaims ownership over her own sexual capital, participating in her own commodification and display for personal gain. By replacing the formal art object with authored photographs of her commodified body, Tutti comments on the gendered, object-based desire that permeates artistic viewing dynamics and privileges the position of male viewer/artist.

The photos were especially transgressive in the context of the feminist art movement, because a woman artist herself arranged for her pornographic photos to be displayed within the gallery setting. Many feminist scholars took issue with this at the time, marking Tutti as complicit with objectifying women and debasing them as sexual objects. In 1978, feminist art historian Lisa Tickner suggested in her article "The Body Politic" that these parodic performances in quasi-sexist manners "as a political statement grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and

confusion.”²³ She suggests that despite Tutti’s intentionality in and agency over her own exploitation, conventionally beautiful woman run the risk of approaching standard stereotypes and moving from parody to titillation.²⁴ This outlook is a product of the second-wave feminism it came out of—which saw sex work as a feminist issue, placing the onus on women to police their sexuality so that the male gaze could not exploit it—while the third-wave feminism of the 1980s stressed agency and choice. Although scholars like Margaret Harrison and Tickner read Tutti’s display as potentially participating in the objectification of women, one can understand Tutti’s eroticized body engaging in the lineage of body art alongside other feminist artists like Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke. Wilson suggests that questions of gendered authorship by a sex worker herself along with defiance of genre from pornography to art lifts the exhibit beyond functioning as simplistic titillation.²⁵ In doing this, Tutti emphasizes what many other artists, like Schneemann stress in the feminist movement, that the problem with modernist art does not lie in the choice to portray nudity or the sexualized body, but in who has agency over the body that is displayed, as Schneider suggests in *The Explicit Body in Performance*.²⁶ By usurping the authorship of male-centered pornographic representations, Tutti claims authorship typically associated with the male gender, transgressing both gender and genre.

Wilson asserts that ultimately Tutti’s transgression of gender—in her simultaneous occupation of masculine and feminine positions—and genre—from “low” pornography to “high” art—embodies queer aesthetics that attack the stability of binary oppositions.²⁷ The emphasis on permeable boundaries is furthered by P-Orridge in their creation of *Tampax Romana*, a sculpture in the exhibition made of ink stained tampons. The tampon, usually a staple within feminist art for its association with dimensions of femininity historically occluded from culture such as menstruation and birth, is used in a sculpture by someone who was born male and later

transitioned to a female. Wilson further connects this to Julia Kristeva's ideas of abjection in her book *Powers of Horror*, which defines abjection as an effective psychological state provoked by objects that oppose desire.²⁸ While desire is object oriented and aimed at the discovery of meaning, abjection confuses subject and object so that meaning collapses.²⁹ Through COUM Transmission's use of queer theory and principles of abjection, Wilson argues that COUM Transmissions is able to disrupt the fixed symbolic codes of gendering, further deconstructing discourse in an attempt to find some sort of language beyond that which has been repressed by imposed social contracts.³⁰

Using tools of queer theory, *Prostitution* questions the use of the body, its representation, and its exploitation in the media, sex industry, and the art world. Employing the media-wall, subversive objects, and Tutti's critique of gendered authorship in the artistic sphere, COUM Transmissions demonstrates the modernist 'truth' and purity associated with a transcendent artform to be heavily constructed. In place of the art object, the collective presents Tutti's body for the viewer's consumption, commenting on the object-based fetishization in the art world that has simultaneously furthered the commodification of the female body. However, her position as a sex worker with agency, and particularly as a woman participating in her own objectification, made her actions shocking to the public and disgraceful to feminists. With the advent of the third-wave feminist movement—which emphasized female choice and agency over their own bodies—in the 1980s, Tutti's strategies would become more common, as sex workers go on to re-enact their commodification to deconstruct the commodity fetishism at the heart of capitalism and art viewing.

Scarlot Harlot, *The Adventures of Scarlot Harlot*, 1982

Perhaps few people were as interested in deconstructing these sexual dichotomies in the 1980s than the sex worker. The American debate surrounding prostitution and pornography changed radically in the 1980s as feminism evolved alongside postmodernism. Postmodern theory suggested that there was a shift away from the optimism of modernism to something new entirely, as capitalism saw immense changes such as globalization and further deregulation. This period is categorized by a loss of faith in master narratives such as religion or science, suggesting a sort of lack of depth in the world in favor of an obsession with surface appearances. It is in this context that Foucault argues that discourse is power, resulting in a subsequent shift in emphasis to reveal the constructions of this discourse. Although there have been many uses of postmodernist theorization within feminism, one of the most notable is the way in which postmodernism opened the dialogue to the “others” of feminism in an attempt to mitigate the oppression of narratives coming from those who did not identify as middle class white women, ultimately encouraging a multiplicity of voices and identities within feminism.³¹

The sharp conflict within feminism at this time came to a head in debates over the sex worker and pornography. While second-wave feminism suggested that women come together as a class to defend their rights around their sexuality, there were prostitutes that were beginning to ask for increased control over their own bodies. To radical feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Carole Pateman, prostitution and pornography embodied patriarchal male privilege and served as violation to women’s rights.³² Many of these second-wave feminists also took on an anti-pornography stance, claiming that it condoned and encouraged violence against women. However, post-modernist thought allowed for the reconsideration of prostitution as not an inherently oppressive act, removing the prostitute from the dichotomies of victim and

oppressor or whore and Madonna.³³ Gayle Rubin, one of the foremost contributors to these sex debates, opened space for a multiplicity of sexual voices by developing a radical pluralist theory of sexuality.³⁴ Central to this theorization is the development of pluralist ethics that do not privilege any noncoercive sexual act, identity, community, or object as morally or medically superior to another.³⁵ In doing so, Rubin created a positive concept of sexual variation from which new theorizations surrounding the prostitute body could be produced.

Throughout this period, prostitute's rights groups were campaigning for better working conditions and fundamental rights, while also attempting to reduce the stigma surrounding the profession, asserting that sex-work could actually promote sexual expression and economic freedom for women. In fact, it was at this time that activist, artist, author, sex-worker Carol Leigh, also known as Scarlot Harlot, coined the term sex-work in an attempt to further legitimize and destigmatize the profession. Born in 1951 in New York City, she is the director of the Bay Area Sex Worker Advocacy Network and currently chairs the *Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival*. Leigh moved to San Francisco in 1977 after graduating with a bachelor's degree in creative writing.³⁶ Broke, she began her career in sex work, which provided her a good income and the flexible hours that allowed her to pursue her creative interests.³⁷ Leigh was satisfied with her career until 1979, when two men raped her after invading the sex studio she worked in. Despite the fact that she did not report the crime to the police—fearing the establishment she worked at would be shut down—it was a defining moment in her life, transforming her into one of the most vocal advocates for sex worker rights in America. In her essay “Inventing Sex Work,” Leigh explains that she invented the term when she attended a *Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media* conference in San Francisco.³⁸ The workshop on prostitution used the phrase “Sex Use Industry,” which Leigh thought to be embarrassing and objectifying,

suggesting that it completely obscured her agency in the transaction.³⁹ As an alternative, Leigh suggested “Sex Work Industry,” stressing the work of the provider. Leigh later used the term in her play *The Adventures of Scarlet Harlot* and it saw increasing popularity throughout the 1980s, particularly after the publication of *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Industry* in 1987.⁴⁰

In this moment, body art and performance theory provided a fruitful medium in which some artists who also identified as sex workers were able to express their opinions, claiming feminist space for their work and the prostitute in its various manifestations. In *The Adventures of Scarlet Harlot*, 1982, Leigh performed a one-person play that consisted of a personal narrative about the experience announcing her new status as a sex worker at Studio Eremos in San Francisco (fig. 5). It was presented as a stream of consciousness, as Leigh told jokes and reflected on the co-existing feelings of pride and shame that come with the announcement of her new source of income. Her political aim was to demonstrate to the audience the stigmatization of sex workers, attempting to highlight that the stigma of sex-work, rather than the sexual acts themselves, is oftentimes the cause of discomfort for prostitutes. She then undressed, using nudity as a consciousness raising technique and subsequently redressed in pants and a t-shirt that read “We’re all prostitutes.” Embracing the Marxist idea that all work is coercive, Leigh forced the audience to examine their own prejudices about sex workers, asking individual members what they do for a living. In doing so, Leigh made the audience participate in the spectacle, transforming her monologue into a dialogue that further forced the viewer to confront their perceptions about sex work and their subservience under capitalism. Audience participation is often utilized in body art to destabilize the passive and transcendent gaze that formalism prized, undermining the viewing dynamics that allowed the voyeur to stare unencumbered.

A large part of Carol Leigh's work went beyond the artistic realm into education and activism. In her film *Sex Workers Take Back The Night*, Scarlot records the plentiful and conflicting attitudes of pro-porn and anti-porn feminists attending the *Take Back the Night* March in San Francisco in 1990 (fig. 6). Attempting to further understand and define women's opinions on pornography and violence, Scarlot begins the film by drawing attention to various acts of misogyny under the patriarchy in an attempt to bring feminists together. Scarlot asks the subjects she interviews what the most important issues are to them as they take back the night. One sex worker states that she does not believe pornography perpetuates violence against women, suggesting that censoring pornography will also silence women's sexual voices. Another sex worker states "we came down here to say we are sex-positive sex workers, we are not coerced into it, we are not manipulated." A woman identifying as a stripper stresses in her interview that the act of dancing naked in front of people is not degrading unless one allows oneself to be degraded. Here, Scarlot interjects, saying "I feel degraded constantly being a very big woman and I'm forty. Life is one big degradation, prostitution is sometimes degrading."⁴¹ The function of Scarlot's interjection is twofold: It allows for the comparison of prostitution with other feminist issues like age and size, suggesting that women are constantly striving to embody an unrealistic ideal that society has imposed upon them and it acknowledges that despite the perceived need for sex-positive sex workers to defend prostitution, a more nuanced understanding can acknowledge the various ways in which sex-work can be both fulfilling and degrading at times.

The many sides of sex-work and the multitude of opinions women had on it at this time were showcased throughout the film. Leigh shows a woman who states her opposition to erotic and misogynistic literature while tearing up a porn magazine. Understanding the divisive nature

of these debates, another women suggested that pornography should be a topic of discussion amongst women, something to fight with men about but not with each other. Another protester proposed that instead of an anti-porn stance, the feminist movement should focus on reforming and transforming images of women in pornography instead of eliminating them altogether. By showcasing so many conflicting opinions, Scarlot creates a film that is an effective a consciousness-raising tool to initiate dialogue between the two sides of the debate. As an activist/educator, she has hosted various open forums geared to discussions between sex-workers and anti-pornography activists.⁴² Some topics discussed involved issues of sexual representation and expression, various definitions of pornography and sexually explicit material, and individual sexual rights.⁴³ These forums served as a safe space where women with opposing views could engage with and listen to each other in hopes of increasing empathy and reducing stigma. Along with Leigh's other films and contributions—such as her activism surrounding AIDS—she and her alter-ego Scarlot Harlot can be seen taking on various roles, from that of crucial educator to activist and artist, seeking to use body art and film to deconstruct the stigmatization of sex work in an attempt to bring women together at a divisive moment in the feminist movement.

Annie Sprinkle, *Post-Porn Modernist*, 1989

Like Scarlot Harlot, Annie Spinkle worked in the sex work industry while simultaneously incorporating sex education and critique into her career within the art space and beyond. Born in Philadelphia in 1954, Sprinkle later graduated with a BFA in photography from the New York City School of Visual Arts. Six years later in 1992, she went on to earn a doctorate in Human Sexuality from the San Franciscan Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality. She had a prolific career in sex work, particularly pornography, having appeared in almost 200 films

throughout her career. Her work as an artist and sexologist came after her entrance into the sex work profession, and have allowed her to explore human sexuality for decades.⁴⁴

Annie Sprinkle's *Post-Porn Modernist*, 1989 was a collection of twelve shorter performance pieces she had performed around New York since 1984 (fig. 7). These vignettes were frequently rearranged, easily taken apart and presented in whole or part. The show was first performed at the Harmony Theater in New York and later presented in various venues across multiple countries. As the title indicates, the performance combines aspects of sex and art genres to describe the experimental, political, and less exclusively erotic sexual material it contains. Shannon Bell suggests that the performances sought to deconstruct pornographic images through the use of postmodernist techniques of parody, play, tracing, displacement, and overwriting.⁴⁵ The performance began with a biographical piece that juxtaposes the identities of Ellen and Annie, Ellen Steinberg being Annie's given name. She compares their appearance in two photos, each of her, in contrasting outfits and poses to deconstruct the myth of the pornographic woman. The intentional sliding between good girl and bad girl personas suggests that they are culturally produced identities, a theme that she further emphasizes in *The Transformation Salon Vignette*. In this vignette, Sprinkle shows before and after slides of regular people given makeovers and transformed into 'sex stars.' In doing so, she further breaks down the artificial, patriarchal division between good and bad girl, exposing the 'porn star' as artifice. This is perhaps best articulated by Sprinkle herself, who suggests "maybe there's a little porn star in you. Maybe not. But I can tell you from experience... there's a little of you in every porn star."⁴⁶ By drawing attention to the performative nature of femininity, these performances ultimately seek to humanize the sex worker as a nuanced individual with agency.

Pornistics is a short and humorous segment that reviews Sprinkle's prostitution and pornography career through the use of graph charts and slides weighing the benefits and costs of engaging in these activities. One slide, titled "Why I Did It: Advantages" displays a pie graph broken down into weighted percentages of these advantages, some of which were money, love and attention, to rebel against society, glamour, I don't know why, to overcome shyness, and sex. Some of the disadvantages Sprinkle identifies on another slide are irreversible psychological damage, social disapproval, feeling objectified, and physical danger. The presentation also charts Sprinkle's income in comparison to the average woman, which was much higher especially when adjusted for the number of hours worked. After running through the pros and cons, Sprinkle ultimately concludes that the pros outweigh the cons, although by a narrow margin. In doing so, Sprinkle paints a more nuanced story surrounding the decision to become a sex worker, creating an ambiguity that allows her to remove herself from the victim position normally imposed on the sex worker.

Bosom Ballet and *A Public Cervix* both seek to address the sexual fetishization of the female body and undermine it through exaggeration and satirical humor. In *Bosom Ballet*, Sprinkle wears evening gloves and is shown mimicking the movements of classical ballet by jiggling, shaking, twisting, pulling, and slapping her breasts to Strauss' "Blue Danube Waltz." Bell astutely identifies the way this parody of high culture form within a low culture striptease undercuts the division of the female form into high and low cultural forms, while poking fun at the conventional fetishization of large breasts.⁴⁷ *A Public Cervix* takes Sprinkle's agenda to desexualize the female body one step further. She begins by showing charts of the female reproductive system and explains her reasons for the performance, some of which include the goal to demystify women's bodies and create a reality in which there is no shame surrounding

genitalia. Sprinkle then inserts a speculum and invites spectators to view her cervix with the aid of a flashlight. She further blurs the line between performer and spectator, object and subject by maintaining dialogue with the voyeur, intermittently discussing the beauty of the cervix and asking the viewer what they see. By taking voyeurism to an absurd extreme, Sprinkle critiques and reshapes the viewing dynamics that were so emblematic of modernism. Ultimately, she challenges the patriarchal fear and disgust with women's internal organs, disallowing the fetishization of the external "pussy" and exposing the unified female sexual/reproductive organ on her own terms.

In the vignette *New Ancient Sex*, Sprinkle shifts from deconstructing the pornographic body to the presentation of the female body as a sacred temple. She tells the legend of the sacred prostitute, claiming a lineage of sacred prostitutes in the recovery of the *herairae* of Ancient Greece as sophistic philosophers and erotic teachers. This allows her to set up a comparison that exposes contemporary society's degradation of the prostitute and general disrespect for the sexual body.⁴⁸ She then recreates a masturbation ritual that once again involves audience participation as they are given rattles to shake in synchronization with her sexual sounds. Although this masturbatory ritual could be seen to cross the line into prostitution, the surrounding context of the other vignettes and her intentional placement of the sex worker in the context of the sacred prostitute prevents it from devolving simply into the sexual act itself. In connecting sexuality to the sacred, Bell suggests that Sprinkle is attempting to reclaim sex as a spiritual act that sex workers are experts in, fundamentally creating a new identity that can be traced back to the genealogy of the sacred prostitute.⁴⁹ Although rape culture pervaded Ancient Greece and it was not characterized by female agency in any way, the *herairae* serve as a powerful example for the empowered sex worker to aspire to.

Postmodernity allows for the production of discourse from numerous perspectives, including prostitutes themselves. In *Post-Porn Modernist*, Sprinkle rewrites the history of the prostitute, presenting her commodified body to the audience for their consumption while returning their gaze and educating them on her profession. The performance successfully balanced the presentation of the sex worker as simultaneously oppressed and empowered, refusing the bifurcation of Madonna/whore that has been so rampant in the interpretations of sex workers. Through a series of vignettes, she breaks down the dichotomization of the female body into sacred and profane, the destabilization of which erodes many equivalent couples as feminists/whores and good girls/bad girls. Throughout the performance, Sprinkle attempts to disrupt her audience's expectations, painting an increasingly nuanced picture of sex work. According to Bell, the shock value of these performances "makes space for the audience, through identification with the artists, to experience disgust and indignation at dominant cultural representations."⁵⁰ This agenda is furthered by the interactive and participatory nature of many of these performance, a feature that seeks to subvert any attempts at disinterested voyeurism, and as Jones argues, highlights the porousness of subject and object positions.⁵¹ Sprinkle addresses the objectification of women's bodies and critiques the underlying politics of vision in modern art by renegotiating the voyeur's position, ultimately reclaiming sex work as a spiritual act.

All of the artists in this chapter thus far have engaged in sex work, bringing their performances into the art world as they rewrite the identity of the prostitute from the perspective of female agency. Highlighting the porousness of this boundary, they conflate the identity of the artist and the sex worker by performing them. The iconography of the sex worker not only reproduced the sexualization or aestheticization of the female body most body art in the feminist movement did, but also signifies the literal commodification of their bodies. Cosey Fanni Tutti,

Scarlot Harlot, and Annie Sprinkle literally re-enact the commodification of their bodies in the art world as they present their bodies for their audience's visual consumption in place of the art object. They ultimately criticize the modernist viewing dynamics that have claimed ownership over the nude, denying the voyeur's gaze while maintaining ultimate ownership and agency over their body/human capital. Placing the commodified body in front of the spectator allows these artists to critique the commodified viewing within the art institution, corrupting modernist ideals of transcendence and purity. In reality, the artist and the prostitute both attempt to elicit and commodify desire under capitalism to survive. These women leverage the social capital of the artist as a platform, trading sexual consumption for influence as they tell individualized stories that refute broad assumptions of victimization that disempower and label the sex worker as other. While these performances emphasize the sex worker as an individual to critique the way that viewing has been commodified in capitalism, artists employ the iconography of the sex worker to critique the art world.

Heilman-C, *Sex Acts*, 1998

In Heilman-C's *Sex Acts*, 1998, the work crosses even more obviously into the realm of prostitution within the gallery setting (fig. 8). On a cold evening in New York at the Jack Tilton gallery, live pornographic sex acts were being performed in front of thousands of attendees. The event was produced by Heilman-C and involved sexual acts performed on a bed by porn stars, called in this context 'Sex Actors,' such as Anna Malle, Hank Armstrong, Missy and Mickey. The audience was rotated every five minutes as groups of thirty to forty people entered to watch live sex acts. Various people within the audience were asked to step in front of the velvet rope and 'direct' the actors in a porn scene. The actors had the option to decline requests, but most

often fulfilled the audience's demands. Several cameras documented and filmed the event, and the producer Heilman-C herself took photos from the back of the room, capturing shots of the audience and their expressions, which were often of shock. Other sex celebrities were in the crowd along with Norma Jean Almodovar, a famed sex worker advocate, who asked the audience about their views on pornography and art. Before entering the main exhibition room where the sex acts were located, viewers were bombarded with graphic artwork that superimposed Heilman-C's face on porn magazine covers along with a copy of "The 10 Commandments of Porn."⁵²

This interaction between porn actors and art patrons is significant, and it is even further emphasized by involving the audience in the direction of the work. Inviting audience participation that lets the viewer direct both moves the spectator from the position of voyeur to participant while also involving the audience in the making of the work itself, potentially shifting them into the role of artist, if only temporarily. Although accounts indicate that most people declined the opportunity to direct, some excitedly accepted, and even fewer actually stripped and joined in.⁵³ One viewer actually joined in the acts with the porn stars for an hour while another supposedly masturbated in honor of the art. Jones suggests that the increased move to involve the audience in body art in the 1990s makes the interaction increasingly complex for the viewer because their own embodiment is caught in an exchange of representational identities between themselves and the subject.⁵⁴ Essentially, including the spectator in the spectacle undermines their ability to participate in the disinterested gaze characteristic of the voyeur. This work resists labels and bifurcation, sliding between art and porn, while identities become increasingly unstable as well. Are the artists the performers who enact sex acts through their bodies, or is the artist the producer—Heilman-C, or is it the audience giving directions?

Gloria Heilman-C is an American born artist known in California for her involvement in the feminist art movement. Much of her work consists of iconographic renderings of the female body, particularly in bronze, as well as the production of performances. Her work often references pornography and blatant self-promotion, two themes which her contemporaries such as Jeff Koons and Lynda Benglis have addressed. However, these artists usually seek to critique or comment on ideas of feminism, media, representation, or appropriation. Heilman-C's relentless emphasis on sex positivity seems to prevent her from making an effective critique in both *Sex Acts* and her other works. Perhaps most similar to *Sex Acts* in her oeuvre, *Women Loving Women*, 1996, consisted of several of Heilman-C's largescale bronze sculptures of the female figure alongside paintings that are apparently self-portraits of the artist, both done with exaggerated breasts in an expressionistic style. Aside from the art, there were eleven naked starlets, some coming from the porn industry, shown gyrating to the beat of a techno track augmented with orgasmic women's moans. Within the cavernous warehouse hosting this piece, few members of the audience were looking at the art on the walls, as they could not take their eyes away from the girls. Women in the audience were allowed to participate alongside the starlets and thirty percent of the proceeds from the works sold that night were directed to "The Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture, and Education."⁵⁵ Like *Sex Acts*, there was much dispute surrounding this work and its relation to art. When questioned about it, Heilman-C claims that it is in fact about women loving women as the title indicates, stating "it's about free love."⁵⁶

Sex Acts fundamentally raises questions about art, destabilizing the boundaries between high and low sites of cultural production by placing an obscene act in the context of an art gallery. What is art? Is it about context? Why, out of all acts one can perform within the gallery,

is it considered so taboo to perform sexual ones? In fact, the gallery owner claimed that he had never seen such a large turnout for an art opening in New York, as an estimated 3000 people were in attendance throughout the night. Perhaps what is more important to ask than the question of “is this art” is if this is art, then what is it trying to do?

In its blunt emphasis on sexual positivity, this work misses important opportunities to critique or further engage with the lineage of art history. This is a relatively simplistic interpretation of Baudelaire’s metaphor of art as prostitution, with porn stars engaging in sex for money, just in a new context. Heilman-C draws an analogy between the act of prostitution in the gallery and the art object to critique their commodification and the art world’s supposed transcendence above the secular. After the anti-porn debates which took place a decade or so earlier, the low cultural mass-media pornography was performed live in a New York gallery, making a private matter public by inviting others to view and participate. Susan Block writes in her editorial of the night “to think that on the other side of town, New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was closing down peep shows, and here we were performing sex acts you couldn’t even see in the most explicit joints in Times Square! Maybe if the strippers called themselves “artists,” they wouldn’t be shut down.”⁵⁷ This quote highlights the ways in which society attempts to dictate appropriate behavior through categorizations, emphasizing the importance of context in appropriate cultural consumption. There is little else involved in the show to push interpretations beyond those boundaries, as the work refrains from engaging with larger discursive elements or the identity of the prostitute, easily falling back into cliché.

Andrea Fraser, *Untitled*, 2004

In 2002, Andrea Fraser—an artist interested in the nature of the art object and commodity fetishism—approached Friedrich Petzel Gallery to arrange a commission with an art collector on her behalf. The stipulations of the commission involved the engagement in contractual sexual activity with the collector to be filmed and later exhibited within the gallery. The film was produced as a DVD in an edition of five, the first going to the participating collector who paid Fraser \$20,000 and the others being sold to institutions and other collectors. Fraser's *Untitled*, was publicly exhibited in Friedrich Petzel Gallery in 2004 on monitors of modest size, required to be no more than 30 inches (fig. 9). The interaction itself was recorded in a hotel room on a mounted camera, resulting in footage reminiscent of that coming from a security camera. The video is about an hour long and it begins with talking and caressing, then moves into a sexual encounter with an emphasis placed on the satisfaction of both sexual partners, and finally ends with the two cuddling.

Fraser attempted to reduce the work's association with pornography by making certain formal choices, such as the static and distant placement of the camera as well as the deliberate exclusion of sound. Additionally, neither Fraser nor the collector acknowledge the camera itself throughout the performance. The camera's viewpoint and its subsequent display on the monitor employ the rhetoric of surveillance, as the tape captures something that we are to believe was not meant to be seen. While the placement of the camera implicates the viewer as a voyeur, the piece uses none of the conventions of pornographic representation such as close-ups, money shots, and heavy breathing.⁵⁸ These choices limit the spectator's capacity for any sort of spatial projection which has traditionally been a staple of pornography.⁵⁹ Her stylistic decisions in

combination with the context of the art gallery attempt to differentiate this work from pornography.

In engaging in contractual sexual activity with an art collector, Fraser brings the relationship between artist and collector to the fore while questioning the motivations of a wide range of cultural agents. While both sex and art are seen in society as inherently personal and intimate, they are simultaneously transactional. *Untitled* inevitably draws parallels between the act of sex and the creation and sale of the art object, displacing real dynamics within the global art market. The act of selling itself acknowledges how artists are forced to satisfy the demand of the art market, while often using their bodies and intimate thoughts to do so. While the artist typically creates an object for sale, this performance seeks to underscore the paradoxical nature of ownership. Instead of the relationship between the artist and art collector being mediated by the presence of the art commodity, the human interaction between the collector and Fraser is what constitutes the work of art. Additionally, the collector himself actually participates in ‘artistic labor,’ further blurring the functions and identities of various agents in the art world. According to Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism, capitalism results in the replacement of relations among people with relations among things. In the process, laborers become alienated from their own work when the relations of production assume material form that is independent of their control. Within this framework, the piece moves beyond a simplistic metaphor for art as prostitution and attempts to resist commodity fetishism through a reinvestment in the power of human relations. Fraser herself stresses *Untitled* as a rare demonstration of trust in the artworld between her and the collector.⁶⁰

Untitled’s debut was met with much publicity and controversy in the art world and beyond, as journalists and critics struggled to move past interpreting it as a sign of moral decline.

In an article for *The New York Times Magazine*, Guy Trebay wrote a feature on the exhibition in which he describes Fraser as a sexy brunette with her “hair swept fetchingly to one side” later comparing her to a hooker with a heart of gold.⁶¹ After quoting the artist’s intentions behind the work, Trebay proceeds to say that “it would be easy to conclude that Fraser’s intellectual apparatus might have cooled the ardor of the most passionate suitor.”⁶² Here, Trebay finds her ability to articulate her motivations as unfeminine and unattractive, placing her in the lineage of many provocateurs who have attempted to shake up the art world. Ultimately, he concludes that her critique is naïve due to the very real existence of sex-work within New York outside of an art world that deems it transgressive.⁶³ Other reporters also had a difficult time moving past the work’s most literal level, Joe Scarborough, the host of *Scarborough County* ridiculed her work, while Holland Cotter, a typically thoughtful critic, even concluded that “a porn film is just a porn film” in his *New York Times* article.⁶⁴ Jerry Saltz was one of the few art critics who saw beyond the visual content’s relation to pornography, commending Fraser for pushing boundaries within the art world, citing the irony that the very world that labels Fraser as a narcissistic show-off claims to preserve the artist’s freedom.⁶⁵

Despite its use of tropes of prostitution and pornography, Fraser claims that the work is not about prostitution. In her discussion of the work, Fraser places emphasis on her institutional critique of the art world and economic system. This makes sense in the context of the already established artist’s oeuvre, which consists of critiques of institutions involved in the sale, display, and economy of art. She states that her work aims to unveil what we as an audience want from art, “not only economically, but in more personal, psychological and affective terms.”⁶⁶ In the blurring of pleasure and work, the relationship between Fraser and the collector is complicated beyond just the economic. While the politicized critiques employ art to open up our

understanding of the sex worker, Fraser enacts the iconography of the prostitute to critique art world relations. Regardless of the piece's reception and complex relationship to feminism, Fraser suggests that the creation of the piece was empowering for her and in line with "her own understanding of her own feminism."⁶⁷ Whether or not Fraser is truly prostituting herself in this interaction is left for the viewer to decide, as countless spectators watch and make their own meaning. However, the role of Woman that Fraser enacts in this performance and the response it elicits in the art world are significant regardless of her intentions.

For spectators in the gallery of *Untitled*, the monitor becomes the site of the body so that the body is simultaneously present and outside of time and space. As technologized bodies are literally fragmented and dispersed across space, they further reinforce the dislocation of the notion of the identified subject as fixable in material and conceptual terms.⁶⁸ Filming herself as an artist engaging in contractual sex work akin to that of a "sex-worker," Fraser projects herself into space embodying multiple identifications that crossover expected categories, raising important questions. Is Fraser the prostitute, artist, or producer in her film? There is a deliberate gap between signifiers of identity and cultural positions or attitudes that they are normally assumed to entail, which allows Fraser to expose the performative nature of identity and the particularity of what it means to be an individual.⁶⁹ In doing so, viewers are held responsible for their own perceptions and interpretive judgements and she is able to renegotiate the ways in which we make meaning. However, there is no physical body within the gallery to be freed from oppressive representations, there is only the dispersal of the representation of her body across the five copies of the film, of which she intentionally and perhaps fruitlessly attempts to control.

Susan Cahan charts the creation and dispersal of Fraser's *Untitled* with a Marxian lens in her article "Regarding Andrea Fraser's *Untitled*." After its production and showing, Fraser

maintained the rights to the film and attempted to resist the alienation of her own work by controlling the distribution of the five DVDs made. In addition to her verbal contract with the participatory collector, the purchasers of the four remaining DVDs were required to sign contracts regarding the display and ownership of the film, putting stringent restrictions of the potential uses of the piece. Some of these stipulations include attaining her consent before it is screened, displaying it on a monitor no larger than 30 inches in a room without seating, and a restriction on lending it to other individuals or institutions for public display. This reflects Fraser's determination to exert her rights as the owner and authority over the redistribution of her film within the economy, thus attempting to resist the alienation of her work. Clearly, Fraser is attuned to the fact that a work of art is more than just the object, it is also how that object circulates. This decision brings up interesting quandaries surrounding the role and ability of an artist to control interpretations that may have little resemblance to Fraser's initial intentions or experience producing the piece. Although she can attempt to control the commodity she has produced, she is unable to control the diverse responses of her viewers.⁷⁰

Although Fraser attempts to distance the work from prostitution, it is significant that the critique is mediated through her sexualized body, a choice that inevitably draws parallels between art work and sex work. In Bryan-Wilson's evaluation of the work, she expresses the issues with this, suggesting "to state that art work and sex work are equivalent is to ignore the fact that they are shaped unevenly by choice, survival, and opportunity."⁷¹ Indeed, the two careers have very different relationships to criminalization, violence, physical danger, and regulation and they are impacted unequally by inequalities of class, race, age, sexuality, poverty, and addiction.⁷² In this context, drawing parallels between the two economies ignores the struggles of sex workers and diminishes the privilege of the artist. While actual sex workers like

Tutti, Harlot, and Sprinkle moved into the art world in an attempt to bring alternative, more humanized representations of the sex worker into the art historical discourse, artists employing sex work in the gallery setting to make larger points about the commodification of the art world inherently do so from a place of privilege.

In *Untitled*, Fraser exploits her visibility as a female artist in a contractual, sexual arrangement to engage the viewer in a complex exchange. Her use of her body as both subject and object, as multiplicitous and unfixable in its identification engages the viewer in relation to their projected desires as her contemporaries in other works of body art do.⁷³ In its deconstruction of the complex relationships in the art world, *Untitled* effectively critiques commodity capitalism and the persistent fetish of the author/artist function. However, her work fails to educate the viewer about the sex industry or acknowledge the institutionalized power she is wielding. Instead of opening up new meanings for the sex worker, she eschews any connection between herself and that identity. However, her choice to deploy the camera in the rhetoric of surveillance illuminate the structures of dissemination and viewing dynamics at a moment just preceding the rise of the Internet and the subsequent proliferation of social media. These themes of interactivity, surveillance, and broadcasting come into full force in the final work of the chapter, in Lindsay Dye's world of camming, celebrity, and Instagram.

Lindsay Dye, Cake-sittings, 2019

The Internet has been one of the fastest growing and transformative technologies in recent years. Although the first prototype was manufactured in the late 1960s, its impact was not truly felt by mainstream culture until the mid-1990s. Since 2000, the worldwide number of Internet users has gone from 413 million to over 3.4 billion in 2016.⁷⁴ It has changed how we collect, store, and

share information in an unprecedented way. With the emergence of social media platforms—in 2018 Facebook had 2.26 billion users, while YouTube had 1.9 billion—the world is connected like never before, and sex workers are taking advantage of it.⁷⁵ From their home or a studio, webcam performers can use their computer and webcam to connect with their audiences and fulfill their desires. These can run the gamut from conversations to explicit sex acts. In a University of Chicago study titled “I Get Paid to Have Orgasms,” Angela Jones explores the emerging field and its rates of job satisfaction for adult webcam models. Jones found that 86.6% of respondents were satisfied with their jobs, and only 3.9% were dissatisfied.⁷⁶ She suggests that the field experiences such high rates of job satisfaction “because the online context acts as a psychological barrier that allows cam models, for the most part, to manage the dangers of their work.”⁷⁷ In providing a relatively safe space removed from the physical risk the client can pose, it allows cammers to experience sexual pleasure and even fun while securing a flexible form of income.⁷⁸ Cam models offer an interactive experience that pornography cannot, so it is not unusual for emotional intimacy to eventually foster between the client and sex worker.⁷⁹ Jones notes that sex workers in these scenarios often emphasized the ‘touching encounters’ they would have with their clientele as a major benefit to their work experience.⁸⁰ Although it is not without its pitfalls—harassment, bodily tolls, stigma, and capping—camming has emerged as a more democratized and less exploitative option for sex workers as the industry evolves in tandem with technology.

Lindsay Dye is a New York based painter, sculptor, performer, and cammer known for her cake sittings, which have attracted an increasingly large audience. She was recently one of the contemporary artists—with an installation and performance—featured in the Museum of Sex’s exhibition *Cam Life: An Introduction to Webcam Culture*. Upon entering *Cam Life*, the

audience is confronted with her large and overwhelming peep show wall, covered in a grid of webcam streams and surveillance camera footage unfolding in real time across the world. Serge Becker, the museum's artistic director emphasized that the performers are unaware of the fact that they are being broadcasted in the exhibit, which serves to underline one of the its central themes—voyeurism. Dye's installation recreates the commodification of surveillance and female body in capitalism, demonstrating how it has normalized the sale of desire and sex for consumption. While sex has long been regarded as a private act, webcams allow cammers to broadcast their sexual activities from the privacy of their bedrooms. As the pornography and webcam industry have evolved alongside technology, the ways we communicate and consume information have changed. The exhibit explores the stories of such pioneers in the 1990s like Josh Harris and Tanya Corin, some of the first people to broadcast their day to day activities online, including their intimate moments as a couple. When addressing the show, curator Lissa Rivera spoke about the way in which *Cam Life* highlights how technology simultaneously connects and alienates us, positing that “as we strive to become more connected, the more distant we become.”⁸¹ While technology can connect us more than ever before, it can also exacerbate feelings of alienation and loneliness. *Cam Life* paints an inclusive and diverse picture of who cams and what it can mean to them, from sexual empowerment to financial stability to artistic inspiration and everything in between.

Stills on Dye's website chronicle her various live performances in front of audiences across America in which she sits on cakes, publicly enacting an almost comical fetish. Many of them have centered around New York and Brooklyn, taking place at various parties, malls, galleries, and event spaces. Dye was trained in photography at Pratt Institute, where she first became interested in sex work and camming culture.⁸² In her performance *Mr. Lonely*, 2018 at

the *Phile Magazine* issue release party—a journal that explores sexual subcultures, trends, and communities with a sociological lens—in New York City, Dye slowly crushes a cake while singing along to Bobby Vinton’s Mr. Lonely (fig. 10). Set in the Mehanata night club, Dye sports a sheer neon green nylon top with perforations over her purple g-string and black heels. She makes deliberate aesthetic choices for each performance, with her cake, outfits, and makeup complimenting each other—in this case her purple undergarments match the cake while her eyeshadow echoes her neon green outfit. She begins the performance by singing along to the melancholic song as she twerks above the cake. About one minute into the song she finally begins sitting on the cake and the audience goes wild, recording the spectacle on their phones. She moves faster, crushing the cake as she uses her hands to spread it and the frosting onto her skin, until eventually the cake is reduced to a colorful pile of mush. After rolling around in the mixture, she jiggles her posterior to the hollers of the audience as she hits the final high note of the song. The song, far from sexy, disrupts the viewer’s expectations, and potentially comments on the ways her customers use her for more than her sexualized body, oftentimes seeking emotional comfort as well. She also encourages audience participation in some of her cake-sittings by bringing fake bills that the audience can throw at her while she performs.

The public performances are completely orchestrated by Dye, who bakes the cakes and does her wardrobe, makeup, and hair. Although she does not consider her work as a camgirl performance art, she posits that performing cake-sittings in public and labelling it as art functions to elevate the fetish itself. Dye cleverly uses subversion to achieve this, moving from her private room to a public setting and pairing each cake-sitting with a sad, slow song that she sings along to. These two choices confuse her audience, particularly because while her performance overtly re-enacts her body’s objectification, sexualization, and commodification through the fetish and

the audience's documentation of it, she deliberately selects songs which are not loud or upbeat like the songs characteristic of the pornography genre. For example, Dye explains that she has used R. Kelly songs before because she idolized him so much as a child, despite knowing that he was a pedophile. She says "He liked younger girls and I was the younger girl, I wanted that. I've used his music to go back to that confusion of childhood sexuality." His songs allow her to communicate her experience with sexuality when she was younger as she attempts to deal with those feelings as an adult. When she performs, she keeps her back to her audience as she grinds against and crushes the cake beneath her, intentionally maintaining the chat room dynamic in which her audience sees her but she cannot see them. While she is in control as the dominant party during the cake-sitting, her singing seems to contradict her actions, which allows her to disrupt the underlying sexist power dynamics in the performance. According to Dye, the goal of each cake-sitting is to have the audience get past the sensationalism that is associated with performing a sexual fetish, so they can arrive at an emotional reaction—it is not unusual for audience members to cry during her performances.⁸³

Learning performance via sex work, the artist stresses the way in which her job as a camgirl is essential to her art. Dye explains "I did not want to make their work mine unless I was participating in the community. So that became my full-time job, and it's still my full-time job now. I like things to be circular."⁸⁴ Camming functions as both income and inspiration for her artistic ventures. Similar to Tutti, Harlot, and Sprinkle, Dye is working in the sex work industry to financially support her artistic ventures while simultaneously making art about to deconstruct the public's perception of that identity. Her cake-sitting performances are deeply connected to her work as a camgirl. In a different interview with *Ravelin Magazine*, she explains that, unlike most cammers, she often leaves her webcam on while she eats meals.⁸⁵ This tactic

both humanizes Lindsay and attracts viewers that have fetishes related to food, which eventually led her and her chat room to cake-sitting.⁸⁶ Cake-sitting itself falls under the category of wet and messy fetishes, in which people are turned on by the tactile sensations of substances.⁸⁷ The cake itself is significant because it cannot be divorced from the viewer's past experiences and associations—a common object reminiscent of the childhood birthday parties we once frequented—as it becomes defiled and sexualized. Lindsay then re-enacts this sexual fetish in front of her audience, recreating the dynamic of her chatroom as she allows them to consume and document the performance in a variety of public spaces—galleries, malls, events, or bars.

In performing her cake-sittings and labelling them art, she relates the fetishized art object to the commodified female body, demonstrating the politics of viewing that are pervasive in capitalism and reproduced in modernist art. A fetish can be defined as a “form of sexual desire in which gratification is linked to an abnormal degree to a particular object, item of clothing, part of the body, etc.”⁸⁸ Fetishism essentially entails the irrational attribution of inherent value to an object in a manner indicative of larger ideological social behaviors and thought processes. She relates the formalist's ideological obsession with the art object and the objectified female body, entangling their fetishization/commodification in the construction of modernist desire. As she performs, her audience captures the performance on their phones from various vantage points for proof and documentation that they attended the spectacle. In her stills and throughout the performance, she keeps her back to her audience, rarely exposing her face in her performances and never in her documented stills. This formal choice marks the overt objectification of her own body. Appropriating the discourse of the art world allows Dye to legitimize her actions while commenting on society's regulation of female sexuality. Given the sexual nature of her

performances, Lindsay’s content has faced heavy regulation, complicating its circulation and her ability to engage in a safer form of sex work online.

In 2018, President Donald Trump signed the controversial House bill FOSTA—Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act—and the Senate bill SESTA—Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act—both of which were intended to cut illegal sex trafficking on the internet, hailed by their supporters as a progressive step in aiding sex trafficking victims.⁸⁹ While the bills were intended to make the internet a safer and more regulated space, they infringe on the longstanding ‘safe harbor’ rule in Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act.⁹⁰ Regarded as some of the most significant Internet legislation created thus far, it states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.”⁹¹ This rule has allowed the internet to thrive via user-generated content without holding the platforms and websites responsible for the content those users create and post.⁹² The FOSTA-SESTA bills create an exception to Section 230, holding website publishers responsible for third parties that post ads for any form of sex work, with the goal to police online prostitution and trafficking rings.⁹³ In reality, the bill has created confusion amongst internet sites as they have dealt with the repercussions of the unprecedented and sweeping legislation. Now, any site that accepts contributions from a broad public, including things as simple as a comment section, have no practical way of dealing with the risk associated with the user content that might be posted on their site.⁹⁴ More traditional websites and apps have ways of addressing copyright risk, which include selectively curating and insuring their posts so that they can continue to accept user generated content.⁹⁵ Without the safe harbors, many of the internet companies have been forced to reject user generated content, making the World Wide Web more regulated and less democratic as it begins to resemble other media like

cable television and traditional broadcasting or publishing.⁹⁶ Trump's bill is just one of the recent attacks on Section 230, a law that is vital to preserving the internet as we know it.⁹⁷

Although the bills have been touted by Congress as crucial tools in policing websites and stopping the victimization of sex workers, legal experts, internet freedom advocates, sex workers, sex trafficking survivors, and even the department of Justice have called into question the implications and efficacy of FOSTA-SESTA. While the bills were initially targeted at sites known for giving digital real estate to sex workers, by the time FOSTA reached the House floor, it had been influenced by SESTA's broader provisions, which targeted all websites. FOSTA-SESTA then, does little to actually target the facilitation of sex trafficking, but it does create broad-based censorship across the internet for the first time. Law professor Eric Goldman suggested that SESTA "would expose Internet entrepreneurs to additional unclear criminal risk, and that would chill socially beneficial entrepreneurship well outside the bill's target zone." Weakening Section 230 means immediate censorship and the deletion of content for the vast majority of the internet, which is made up of platforms that lack the resources to take on this liability. In response to the bills, sites like Craigslist and Reddit have all removed parts of their sites like the personal section or the subreddits. However, the bill does actually align with the interests of some—the corporate tech giants. While companies like Facebook and Amazon initially opposed the bill, they began to support SESTA in its final months as it became clear that its long-term effects would favor the control and monetization of the internet by corporate entities, making it harder for new companies to thrive, and paralleling the unfair competition and monopolization in capitalism.⁹⁸

Since the bills do not differentiate between consensual and nonconsensual sex work, online sex workers have been forced to find new ways to advertise, vet, and choose clients.

Studies and anecdotal evidence have found that moving sex work online keeps sex workers much safer, decreasing their likelihood of HIV/STI transmission and being victims of violence. Online platforms also serve as safe spaces for sex workers to form online communities, which have been identified as “essential for harm reduction information and support.” While these bills were meant to increase safety for sex workers, they have done little to target sex trafficking, and a lot to police the internet, significantly impacting those who choose to engage in sex work from the comfort and safety of their own homes. Webcammers have been directly affected by these policies, as they have lost the online spaces they had used to advertise their services on the Internet.⁹⁹

Dye’s presence as a cammer and artist goes beyond pornographic websites, to social media like Instagram and online streaming like YouTube, although her content is not allowed to exist there without resistance. She has over 21,000 followers on Instagram despite the censorship she has faced from the platform, something she has addressed in her posts. On November 12, 2019, she posted a list of tips on how to protect your profile from getting deleted by Instagram—among which included using a business account, acronyms, censoring words, and even editing gender. Some of her cake-sittings can be found on YouTube now, but Dye has received letters from YouTube stating that they “do not allow fetish content” and has had to defend her videos against censorship by arguing that they are documentation of art performances.¹⁰⁰ These issues around language and categorization are so pertinent, as Dye explains that she opts to tag her content as ‘performance art,’ instead of ‘fetish’ to reduce the chances of it getting deleted.¹⁰¹ Her anecdote highlights how, in the vastness of the Internet and media that we produce as a society, the categorization and censorship of media is often based in perception and language that can be detected instead of the actual image/content. Furthermore,

this implies that today, a small set of tech corporations are taking on the responsibility of deciding what is art and what is not, what we see and what we do not, something previously under the purview of the government. Like Dye, camming sites themselves deliberately use language outside of the sex industry—advertising cammers as the best performers and artists of our time—to stay hidden from authorities. Despite the fact that pornography and camming exist to make people feel good, they remain a shameful and illicit part of society, something that the industry has tried to overcome by appropriating the language of the art world in attempt to disguise and elevate the content itself—not unlike Dye’s performances.

These anecdotes highlight the fact that the commodification of female sexuality has proliferated in society, requiring regulation that the artist’s cultural capital can overcome. Pierre Bourdieu was a sociologist who built on Marx’s ideas, arguing that capital forms the foundation of one’s social life and position within the social order. Bourdieu’s investigations were significant because they went beyond Marx’s economic ideas into the arena of culture.¹⁰² He claimed that power and dominance not only originated in the ownership of material resources, but also the possession of social and cultural resources.¹⁰³ Writing in the second half of the twentieth century, Bourdieu overcame the Marxist dichotomy of capitalist—those who have ownership and control over the means of production—and laborer by commenting on the complex developments in the economy of his day, like the growth of public sector employment and high-salary occupations reserved exclusively for those with specialized technical or cultural knowledge.¹⁰⁴ According to Bourdieu, cultural capital comes in three forms—embodied, objectified, and institutionalized—which serve to construct social spaces and class divisions. He suggested that individuals that share similar positions in social space also experience similar

conditions of work and life that led to group formation, each with their own class dispositions—labelled by Bourdieu as class habitus.¹⁰⁵

The sex worker embodies the artist in performance to critique the elitism at the heart of the art world and the ways in which it is a constructed a social space that has served to commodify female sexuality and reinforce class divisions. By embodying the artist and performing prostitution in the art world, the sex worker claims ownership of institutionalized capital by appropriating a title that symbolizes cultural competence. The performers also confront their viewer with their embodied cultural capital—the commodification of their sexuality—while maintaining agency. In doing so, they illuminate the heavily constructed nature of social space and its relationship to class/identity, while deconstructing our ‘tastes’ for cultural objects. Bourdieu himself noted how heavily constructed our culturally ingrained habitus was, and how heavily it influenced aesthetic movements.¹⁰⁶ He observed that upper-class individuals had a taste for fine art because of their experience and education surrounding it early on, amassing cultural capital attaining to high art that working class individuals were not given access to.¹⁰⁷ In his work, he insisted that habitus is so ingrained in our ideology that people normalize it, citing natural ability instead of acknowledging the ways in which habitus is culturally developed through class.¹⁰⁸ By elevating the fetishization and commodification of their own bodies in the art realm, performers break open the divisions between high and low constructed space. Furthermore, they mark the art world as complicit in constructing and reinforcing an elitist discourse that reaffirms culturally constructed value through the objectification of the female body. Far from transcendent, they demonstrate that art has just become a commodity which reinforces the commodified viewing characteristic of our society.

Body art in the context of the sex worker serves as a double edged critique of modernist's fetishization of the art object and its relationship to the female nude's commodification. The medium deconstructs traditional viewing dynamics, shifting the art object to a person, and thus, putting the spectator in a new relationship with the 'art object,' which has traditionally been consumed by the viewer's gaze. This allows the artists to overtly critique the politics of viewing that have commodified their body, re-enacting their commodification in the art world. While some artists use this metaphor in the practice of art to educate their audiences about sex work, some employ the iconography of the prostitute to critic the commodity fetishism at the heart of formalist desire. The works emphasize their relationship with the audience, encouraging active participation to disallow passive viewing that might encourage voyeurism. They also highlight the performative nature of identity, subverting traditional gender assumptions of artist as masculine and the commodity as feminine, while they conflate the two to forge new meanings for the female body.

Together these works criticize the visual dynamics of bodies in circulation, drawing attention to the larger economic dynamics that both artists and sex workers face. This critique is carried out through the body itself, which is marked by the individual's identity. Oftentimes, the invocation of prostitution is associated with naivety or the desire for notoriety, criticized by the art world for walking the line of obscenity. The negative critical response due to the presence of sexual content seems to prevent critics from engaging with the larger themes these works address, such as sex, sexuality, capital, and the art commodity, to critique the art market. Their engagement with discourse, the audience, and the lineage of art history make their work effective critiques that ultimately humanize the individual. Although body art can provide an effective method of critique, it is risky, because it can be easily appropriated, collapsing back into the

thing it is meant to critique. These artists demonstrate that sex sells, even in the art world, by performing the prostitute. Their performances inherently engage with issues of regulation and censorship from larger institutions and corporations to highlight their role in maintaining the systemic oppression of the sex worker. Despite this, the women emphasize their agency and empowerment throughout the performances. Jones cautions that “while this new form of digital sex work creates an opportunity to develop resiliency, sexual empowerment, and sexual pleasure, we can also see how the neoliberal ideas adopted by models could thwart progressive political goals.”¹⁰⁹ She notes that the dangers of camming, like harassment, have not been addressed at all by larger institutions, so cam models are forced to address them on their own.¹¹⁰ She concludes that these actions are reflective of the larger neoliberal sociopolitical system, which has forced individuals to rely on self-help to unburden these social structures from their responsibility to justly and equally apply the law.¹¹¹ The next chapter addresses installations and interventions, as artists move beyond the individual to critique the larger system and its processes.

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- ¹⁰⁰ Leah Mandel, “On Making Art Through Subversion,” *The Creative Independent*, April 15, 2019.
- ¹⁰¹ Leah Mandel, “On Making Art Through Subversion,” *The Creative Independent*, April 15, 2019.
- ¹⁰² Michael Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts* (Durham: Acumen, 2012), 87.
- ¹⁰³ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 88.
- ¹⁰⁴ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 89.
- ¹⁰⁵ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 93.
- ¹⁰⁶ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 94.
- ¹⁰⁷ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 94.
- ¹⁰⁸ Grenfell, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 93.
- ¹⁰⁹ Angela Jones, “‘I Get Paid to Have Orgasms,’” 132.
- ¹¹⁰ Angela Jones, “‘I Get Paid to Have Orgasms,’” 132.
- ¹¹¹ Angela Jones, “‘I Get Paid to Have Orgasms,’” 132.

III. The Institutional Critique

In this chapter, I analyze three artworks that move beyond the formal art object and the individual female body in order to critique the larger, underlying sociopolitical system that has resulted in their commodification. Instead of presenting their audience with a fine art object or confronting them with the body, these works recreate the institutional perspective by going beyond the individual to deconstruct the sociopolitical power dynamics that have failed the sex worker. WochenKlausur's, *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, was a social intervention in which the group was invited by the Shedhalle, a museum in Zurich, to craft a social response relating to drug use. The group decided to create a shelter for women engaged in sex work, many of whom stayed in the industry to support their drug addictions, because they were unable to utilize traditional homeless shelters as they were closed during the day and open at night, when sex workers are often busiest.

The two installations in this chapter employ aspects of relational aesthetics to focus on the ephemeral interactions between the spectators and 'art' in the space, emphasizing that we have come to understand our identities in relation to others. In *Warte Mal! (Hey wait)*, Ann-Sofi Sidén created an installation that humanized the sex worker by telling the complex story of a border town in Europe known for its developed sex industry from a variety of individual perspectives within the town. Sidén's deliberate use of the documentary genre functions as an implicit critique of her own media and the formal principles associated with it by consciously revealing herself to her audience her presence as mediator. Her camera and written diary entries

capture multiple perspectives, which allow Sidén to paint a nuanced portrait of a town that can find hope despite the hardships they face. Santiago Sierra's *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, combines elements from performance, installation, and video. The work involved paying four sex workers the amount of a shot of heroin in exchange for them to have a line tattooed on their backs. Sierra's work further highlights people's subservience to an economic system, analyzing the larger framework that gives rise to sex work itself. The installations seek to present the processes of capitalism to their audience as unnatural, demonstrating the ways in which it has perpetuated commodified viewing dynamics.

Due to art's inherent engagement with the dominant ideologies and discourses of its time, it can be a powerful tool in movements that seek to address sociopolitical issues or challenge traditional hierarchies. Although it is difficult to pinpoint its exact origination, the beginning of the 20th century saw the blossoming of activist art, the majority of which was in response to a number of ongoing wars at that time. For example, the Dada movement protested the first world war, while Picasso's *Guernica* critiqued the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. In the 1960s and 1970s, Western artists not only used activist art to protest involvement in the Vietnam war, but also employed it to address the persistent and systemic inequalities they experienced regarding race, gender, and class. In the 1970s, the feminist art movement made strides in exploring and subverting women's position in "culture," leveraging Marx's idealist language of oppression, exploitation, and revolt to educate and empower women. Although artists raised awareness of the AIDS pandemic in the face of a shamefully slow governmental response in the 1980s, the more optimistic, activist art was generally pushed aside as the ideology of postmodernism took over. However, market-oriented production was disrupted again in the

nineties, as there was a renewed reflection on art's social responsibilities and the ways it ought to engage with its audience.

Emerging in the early 1990s, amidst Internet culture and rise in celebrity, critic/curator Nicolas Bourriaud coined his socially interested art term “relational aesthetics,” which he defined as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”¹ Influenced by the conceptual art and a new age of technological connectivity, Bourriaud believed that this new art form—which stressed art inspired by human relations in a given social context—was indicative of the network and circulation of objects, images, and ideas of the time. As the economy shifted from its basis in manufacturing and Fordist production to one heavily composed of the service industry and human encounters, relational aesthetics made a parallel shift from the interaction with the static formal art object to active participants in the making of art's meaning. In some ways, the shift from formal art object to interaction and audience participation is foreshadowed by performance art, and represents two of the main pillars of feminist body art. However, in his conceptions of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud denied artists the ability to draw inspiration from past aesthetic movements.²

Conceptualizing ‘the artist’ as a universal figure and envisioning relational aesthetics’ purpose in allowing artists to think about the system within which their work exists, Bourriaud left little room for the analysis of identity politics, abstraction, or objectivity. His theories inspired many artists throughout the 1990s, shifting their focus away from the creation of the art object in favor of the manipulation of audience and subject interactions in the gallery space to reveal larger social constructions of power. Relational aesthetics fundamentally illuminates the structural system which links us together as the audience forms constructions about themselves

through their relationship to others. By re-enacting the macro perspective of the institutional framework, the artwork—and the materialized power dynamics it reinforces—can easily be overpowered by commodified viewing itself, falling back into spectacle. Under this model, the artist-curator collects the cultural capital gained from the spectacle, thus reinforcing the artist-as-celebrity. Eventually this term began to refer to a wide range of artistic practices, from gallery-based installations to activist, site-reflexive projects which had little to do with his initial ideas.

All three of the works in this chapter insist on bringing the art world in dialogue with the real world in pursuit of the art object's demystification. The commercial art world has thrived on its distinction from the mundane, as the art world's key players are able to demand more money by reinforcing the fetishization of the art object. Juxtaposing the iconography of modernist formalism with the gritty nature of the sex industry—as Sidén and Sierra do—or completely refusing to acknowledge aesthetic form at all—in the case of *WochenKlausur*—these artists critique the elitism inherent in the construction of Greenberg's formalist ideology. While Sierra's piece was clearly inspired by relational aesthetics and *WochenKlausur* is overtly associated with activist art, Sidén's interpretation combines aspects of relational aesthetics, video, and activism to critique the larger capitalist structure while simultaneously humanizing the individual. With their roots in conceptual art and activism, these works engage with the real world and its sociopolitical structures to change the audience's perception of it. Displaying the real-life sex worker to their audiences, these artists force their spectator to question the assumption that capitalism is natural and in everyone's best interest by representing those it harms the most.

WochenKlausur, *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, 1994, halfway house

WochenKlausur is a Vienna-based art collective that was founded by Wolfgang Zingg in 1993. The group involves over fifty artists, eight of which make up its core and have worked on numerous projects. WochenKlausur has been inspired by other artistic movements such as conceptualism, the Situationists, and Viennese Actionism, all of which emphasize critiques of the capitalistic economy, and favor the movement away from the sacred art object in the artistic sphere into art that addresses ‘real life.’ However, much of conceptual art—initially born out of the movement against the commodification of the art object—has now been integrated into the art market in innovative ways. The group posits that art is a flexible concept that has evolved in two directions since postmodernism: One is an art concerned with the bottom-line and economic gain that lures the masses with its spectacle, and the other is an art of action that seeks to better “conditions of coexistence.”³ In setting up this dichotomy, the collective problematizes the privilege inherent in an art world solely concerned with price points and desire, contesting the traditional differentiation between ethics and aesthetics. Since its inception in 1993, the collective has staged more than thirty social interventions that seek to find and address local problems by coming up with innovative solutions.

At the invitation of art institutions, WochenKlausur develops and realizes small-scale proposals to address issues stemming from sociopolitical inequities, with the ultimate intent to produce a longer-lasting initiative meant to be sustained by community members, organizations, and the local government. The art institution provides the cultural capital and a framework to work within, plus the exhibition space which serves as the studio from which the project is conducted. The artists involved in an intervention usually have a limited time frame—anywhere from three to twelve weeks—to improvise an intervention designed to deal with an issue that is

identified by the group beforehand based on their research of the specific working context. This process is the basis of the group's name itself, as WochenKlausur translates to “weeks of enclosure.” Unencumbered by the bureaucratic politics of the larger institution, WochenKlausur spends their weeks together confined in the gallery space to design solutions—which often involved unorthodox approaches and even trickery—to accomplish their goals. For example, in 1996, WochenKlausur worked with the Salzburg Police Detention Center—one of the largest deportation detention facilities in Austria—to improve the living conditions for those in the facility. Research and interviews with guards substantiated claims that the inmates were enduring inhumane conditions, forced into extremely close quarters with one another. In response, WochenKlausur established a social service agency within the detention center so that each inmate was assigned a volunteer counselor that ensured basic social, legal, and hygienic services were available to them. This project did not unfold without protest, particularly from the police chief himself. Ingeniously, WochenKlausur constructed a tiny cottage in Salzburg's historic center, where they organized discussion groups with politicians, the media, leaders in the church, police authorities, and relief organizations. The plethora of media coverage attached to the cottage worked to attract attention to the deplorable living conditions experienced in the detention center, and the refugee service was active for thirteen years until the Austrian Ministry of the Interior required its termination.⁴

In *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*, 1994, the collective established a shelter for drug-addicted sex workers in Zurich (fig. 11). In this case, WochenKlausur was invited by the Shedhalle, a contemporary art museum with free entry that explores issues of politics, social roles, cultural phenomena, and alternative ways of life from the perspectives of artists, scientists, and activists. This institution itself speaks to the ways in which there has been a growing

demand for alternative spaces and new methods of viewing that promote more socially conscious art. The Shedhalle requested WochenKlausur use the project to address drugs in a way that would reinforce the institution's founding principles. Nine artists researched the political climate and Zurich's policies on drugs.⁵ Election campaigns were underway at the time, and relief organizations assisting drug addicts were being scandalized by right-wing parties who saw their actions as undermining narcotics enforcement.⁶ The city ultimately cut funding for social services. In their research, WochenKlausur noticed a group being affected disproportionately by these cutbacks—sex workers. Oftentimes, they would engage in the sex industry to support their drug habit. Given that homeless shelters were only open at night, and this is often the time when the sex worker is busiest, the women had no place to get undisturbed rest during the day. Therefore, WochenKlausur devised a plan to purchase an old hotel and convert it into a women-only shelter that would remain open during the day.⁷

To accomplish their intervention, the collective used unusual tactics and leveraged the media in the face of funding shortages. Due to their cultural position as artists, the collective has a platform, resources, and the ability to utilize media to educate the public on issues within their society. It is important to think about the politics of the artist speaking on behalf of sex workers, because of the ways in which democracy and capitalism fail to serve or even listen to those on the fringes of society. Given their platforms, artists in combination with broadcasting media present the possibility of public outrage, a significant threat to political figures who seek public approval to maintain their positions in office. Knowing this, WochenKlausur devised a plan in which they rented a boat for two weeks, inviting a select group of over sixty passengers in total, which included key politicians, journalists, medical and legal specialists. After explaining their project, WochenKlausur sent groups of individuals onto Lake Zurich to discuss the issues sex

workers were facing. These “Boat Colloquies” not only provided a neutral space away from public exposure for discussion, but they also generated media attention about the project and the issue it stemmed from. Some trickery was used to secure the involvement of two key figures—the Swiss Social Democratic Party’s National Secretary André Dauget and the Zurich mayor Josef Esterman. The collective told each man that the other had conferred with WochenKlausur, stating that they would only agree to participate if the other would as well. Flattered, both of the men accepted the invitation. By the end of the eight-week exhibition, despite some funding success from increased public awareness of the problem in the media, the group had not generated a long-term intervention that would sustain itself. A governmental source of funding was secured a few months later, although the city discontinued its contribution after seven years of the shelter’s successful operation.⁸

The Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women opened a new space in society that would service a marginalized identity that was otherwise overlooked by the government. WochenKlausur normalizes the act of sex work and drug uses, finding fault in the broader sociopolitical regime instead of at the individual level. These sociopolitical critiques parallel their critique of the art world’s fetishization and commodification of the art object, as WochenKlausur fails to present any object to its audience for purchase. Furthermore, their work demonstrates a growing dissatisfaction with capitalism and democracy’s abilities to help and address fringe populations. The group’s founder Wolfgang Zinggl was elected to Austrian parliament as a representative of the Green Party in 2001.⁹ The Green Party’s agenda, with its focus on ecology, autonomy, grass-roots democracy, feminism, and non-violence, often parallels the ethos that underpins many of WochenKlausur’s interventions.¹⁰ Ultimately, Zinggl’s position as a politician and a freelance

artist highlights the ways in which the group's work pushes the boundaries of what art can be and argues for what it should be—a way to improve the world around it.

WochenKlausur's art illuminates larger questions in the art world about activism and its relationship to art, almost inadvertently casting doubt on the legitimacy of the art world itself. Despite its critique of the art world, it is interesting that the group still relies on artistic institutions for funding and studio space. Their position as an art collective makes them qualified for funding from the art world that other non-profits and activist agencies would not have access to. Oftentimes, the money being given to the group derives from government subsidies, but the fact that the funds flow through the cultural institution instead of the government indicates WochenKlausur's complex relationship to art institutions. Others that have taken issue with WochenKlausur cite the ways in which these interventions provide a band-aid solution to issues without addressing the underlying problem, potentially subverting the opportunity to replace the structure of the system itself. Zinggl has responded to these critiques, emphasizing the shift that has taken place post-1970 away from attempting to completely change the world. He suggests that "activist art no longer overestimates its capabilities. But it does not underestimate them either. It makes modest contributions." Indeed, WochenKlausur is one of the few artists making tangible, material changes in their environments for the betterment of society. With the persistence of globalization and capitalism's strength, there is no question that our society—especially those marginalized within it—needs and benefits from WochenKlausur's interventions. In "Art, Activism, and Democracy," art historian Elizabeth Hawley suggests that WochenKlausur's interventions are in areas that have traditionally be within the purview of the government instead of an art collective. Hawley argues that "by placing the onus on the art institution to allocate funds for the arts toward projects that produce concrete social betterment is

problematic,” because these are interventions that the government should be addressing. However, she ultimately understands that it is precisely this issue which allows WochenKlausur’s work to critique sociopolitical structure by presenting creative alternatives to problems within the existing framework.¹¹

Although WochenKlausur’s interventions inevitably critique larger sociopolitical forces such as democracy, capitalism, and the art world, its actions are nevertheless tied to the framework and capital of those institutions. Some might argue that allowing them to call these social interventions ‘art’ poses a risk to the aesthetic realm, threatening its dissolution altogether. However, leveraging the media and their status as an art collective gives WochenKlausur the autonomy and resources to positively influence society, without being hindered by the bureaucratic decision-making characteristic of sociopolitical institutions. Throughout their oeuvre, the successes and failures of WochenKlausur’s interventions are indicative of the current state of the social and political environment, functioning as a critique of the government’s inability to aid marginalized groups, which is even more clear given that many of their projects are successful for a number of years before government funding is pulled, forcing the program to shut down. WochenKlausur pushes the boundaries of what it means for art to be political. Enacting long-term material change in various communities across the world, the collective provides a model for artists wishing to move outside of the parameters of the cultural institution to enact real change in the world. While WochenKlausur does not interact with an audience in the gallery space, their actions are broadcasted throughout the localities they engage with. Alternatively, the artists engaged in installation are based more heavily in the gallery space, focusing on the interactions spectators have with their work to make them uneasy within their larger surroundings.

Ann-Sofi Sidén, *Warte Mal! (Hey wait!)*, 1999, video installation

Ann-Sofi Sidén is a prolific, contemporary Swedish artist currently based in Berlin and New York City. Born in 1962, she has had major exhibitions of her work at various international galleries.¹² Her oeuvre spans a broad range of media and subject matter, resisting easy classification. Combining various tropes of journalism, scientific research, documentary, and feature film, it focuses on aspects of surveillance, identity, and voyeurism in a general analysis of the human condition and psychology in today's world. Although Sidén's anti-formal selection of media developed alongside her career in the 1980s, those choices clearly impacted her career in the following decades. Her work *Who Told the Chambermaid?* 1998, embodies many of these ideas, ultimately highlighting the ambiguity of fact and fiction. In the video installation, Sidén portrays the stories of various people in hotel rooms across a wall of television monitors.¹³ As the spectator encounters the wall of screens, it is as if they occupy the surveillance room with voyeuristic views into various rooms and the people who occupy them. The people in the hotel move across the screens as they move through the architecture of the building, revealing the hierarchy among the various characters such as the guests, kitchen occupants, and maid. Using tropes of security footage and documentary film, Sidén suggests that this hotel represents reality, and the viewer is left to question the origins and truth of this video footage, which was actually carefully shot and heavily edited by the artist.¹⁴ Throughout her body of work, Sidén resists telling stories from a singular perspective, often broadening the scope of her investigations to encompass the multitude of voices and identities over time within these larger systems. Utilizing various methods, her installations and spatially aware videos have the effect of revealing the presence of a system beyond one's control—whether that be social, political, and/or economic.

In *Warte Mal!* 1999, Sidén explores the world of roadside prostitution in the European border town of Dubí via extensive video installation that straddles the line between performance art and documentary (fig. 12). The E55 highway runs from Dresden to Prague, and as it crosses the German border into the Czech Republic it passes through Dubí, which since the velvet revolution of 1989, became notorious for its broad economy of sex work. The town is known for the sex workers that line its main street, shouting “Warte Mal!” which translates to “Hey, wait!” Ten years after the fall of the Eastern Bloc communist state and its transition to a democratic, capitalist one, Sidén’s work charts the changes in these people’s lives that have resulted from the massive structural readjustment. The project resulted from a year of continuous research on the town, as the artist made prolonged trips throughout 1999, staying at Motel Hubert in the town and befriending the people who played key roles in the sex industry there. Sidén documented her time there through video, photography, and a written diary. Her extensive video interviews with the people living there, which include not only the sex workers themselves but also their clients, the police, and motel owners who rent out their rooms to them, provide a broad range of narratives and contribute to her understanding of their lived experience in the town. Sidén’s extensive installation, which has been shown in numerous galleries with various arrangements, combines the cinematic and documentary video footage with sculptural elements and excerpts from her diary. The thirteen-channel installation is carefully arranged across video monitors contained in glass booths and projected in large format, moving the viewer through the gallery space as they uncover the geographic landscape of Dubí and the people within it. The representation of the constellation of individuals who have been impacted by the evasive political, economic, and social processes of restructuring deconstructs the capitalistic system as ‘natural’ and attempts to shine light on its constructed and destructive nature.

Sidén's choice to use the video medium—specifically in the style of documentary—and its associations with the portrayal of 'truth' was contentious in the art world. Identifying documentary as 'not art,' some critics such as Robert Fleck, have justified the work's place in the art world because of the artist's sculptural use of video installation.¹⁵ In "Warte Mal!": Construction and Consumption of Female Subjectivity After the Velvet Revolution," art historian Amy Charlesworth suggests that the work's engagement with the documentary tradition is vital in understanding it. She posits that the modernist obsession with formalism can be limiting to the video because it severs the medium's secular ties to broadcasting and the commercial.¹⁶ Appropriating a medium traditionally used by corporate institutions or the government for power and control, Sidén combines video with the sordid reality of the sex worker to implicitly critique capitalism.¹⁷ Furthermore, she questions the assumption that the camera 'uncovers truth' by making her subjectivity and mediation evident. Instead of suggesting an impartial presentation of the facts, it is clear in Sidén's diary entry and her formal cinematic choices that the story can only be told through her position as mediator.¹⁸ Charlesworth points to the cinematic shots that "insinuate that meaning already resides in the film, creating a passivity in the act of viewing, as opposed to highlighting that meaning is created in the dialogue between the viewer and the filmmaker."¹⁹ Sidén engages with the meanings the audience associates with documentary film, by using its tropes—such as grainy handheld footage—to convey a real phenomenon in a way that stresses the idea of truth as elusive, highlighting the inherently mediated nature of video in our lives.

Sidén's year-long engagement with her subjects in Dubí is indicative of her attempt to resist the dehumanizing them—via grouping or generalization—for the consumption of the museum goers, as she opted to live and engage with them over a year. Although the artist claims

that there is no moral message inherent in the piece, her choice of subject matter is inherently political. In her interview with Robert Fleck, she states that her emotional engagement in the piece is what kept her coming back to Dubí, later categorizing the trafficking of women as “a tragedy.”²⁰ If the story of these people is indeed mediated through Sidén, then one cannot help but see this as a political choice on her behalf. Ultimately, *Warte Mal!* counters the traditional representation of the prostitute established by generations of flâneurs, male social scientists, and artists that have labelled them as fallen women and marginalized other within the social hierarchy.

However, it is difficult to resist the portrayal of the “sex worker as victim,” which furthers the idea that they are either helpless or sexual deviants. Charlesworth explains that these stories of victimhood result “in a general tendency to feel we know stories before we are told them; the complexities of cultural, economic, social and historical circumstances are erased in many such narratives as one story seamlessly replaces another.”²¹ The ‘victim frame’ is commonly used as an effective tool to elicit an emotional response in the viewer, one that can be used to incite action and increase awareness.²² However, it is problematic because of the ways in which the focus on the individual victim outshines the cultural conditions that construct the identity. Sidén resists the victimization of her subjects in a number of ways. In “In the border zone: *Warte Mal!* – a video installation by Ann-Sofi Sidén,” British geographer Phil Hubbard suggests that by listening to and presenting the stories of sex workers, Sidén humanizes them for her audience, going beyond the statistics of human trafficking they might already be aware of.²³ By highlighting the moments of solidarity between the women and more playful shots of them that illuminate the more humorous sides of their lives and their loyalty to one another, Sidén demonstrates how hope can be found, even in Dubí. Hubbard explains that Sidén insisted on

showing scenes from a party on the final screen when the installation was in London, so as to leave the audience with a sense of the cooperation in the community.²⁴ Despite the spectator's freedom to move through the installation at various paces, Charlesworth argues that requiring the viewer to move through space to get a sense of the entire story acknowledges the role of the spectator thus countering the victimization and voyeurism of the sex worker.²⁵

Like Merry Alpern's photographic project *Dirty Windows*, Sidén's installation engages with the language of documentary and surveillance to address video's connection to security and regulation in the context of state power. In 1967, Guy Debord published his philosophical critique of commodity culture in *The Society of the Spectacle*, in which he traced the development of contemporary society as one of spectacle. Arguing that modern conditions of production result in life's degradation from being into having, ultimately coming to represent an accumulation of spectacles, Debord suggests that authentic social life has been replaced with its representation.²⁶ He redefines spectacle as "not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images," moving the term beyond its associations with television and film so that it comes to signify the systemic sociopolitical conditions that both organize and are organized by the world's visual translation.²⁷ Thus, Debord posits that the spectacle embodies the material translation and objectification of our new worldview, simultaneously indicative of and justification for the current system of production and consumption.²⁸ Debord's argument goes further as he suggests that the "specialization of power" is "the root of the spectacle," so that sociopolitical power dynamics come to be represented and organized through its mediation.²⁹ His book uncovers the commodification of visibility and its relationship to the politics of surveillance as its processes move out of the purview of institutions, and increasingly into the hands of the consumer. Although Debord's critique arose in the 1960s, it seems

increasingly relevant today in the larger landscape of the Internet and social media. *Society of the Spectacle* asks its contemporary reader to engage with the ways in which the dissemination of surveillance practices and technology have come into contact with consumer culture to promote practices of self-representation.

As our society has become increasingly saturated with digital screen media, the consumption of surveillance as a cultural form have become normalized to produce a civilization of spectatorship.³⁰ In her chapter, “Commodified Surveillance: First-Person Cameras, the Internet, and Compulsive Documentation,” professor of film Catherine Zimmer builds on Debord’s theory of the politics of surveillance and visibility in light of today’s technological context. Zimmer begins her investigation with the analysis of the first-person-camera perspective—characterized by the use of the video camera in the film narrative to convince the viewer that the entire film was shot through said camera—and the viewing dynamics it promotes.³¹ Zimmer uses *The Blair Witch Project*, a first-person-horror film that debuted the same year as *Warte Mal!* as a case study to explore the affordances of the first-person-camera. The first-person camera style is distinct in its presentation of the video camera footage as the only access to the film narrative, and is often accompanied by tropes that signify low-budget production and amateurism instead of a ‘transparent’ image.³² Zimmer argues that “the style of the first-person-camera film is intended to simulate the ubiquitous amateur video gaze provided by consumer electronics,” like webcams and mobile phones.³³

Extending Zimmer’s theories to *Warte Mal!* it is evident that Sidén engages in the tropes of the first-person-camera film to simulate the ubiquitous amateur gaze promoted by consumerist technologies and social media platforms, which now allow everyone to document, share, and sensationalize the world as they encounter it.³⁴ In line with Zimmer’s analysis, the shaky camera

shots and grainy footage signal the aesthetic of a hand-held camera so that the viewer understands themselves to be immersed in the experience of the protagonists, and ultimately sympathizing with their position.³⁵ In doing so, Sidén creates tension between the credibility of her video as ‘real’ by continuously insisting on the presence of her own subjectivity in the content’s documentation and presentation. The first-person-camera makes the audience adopt the perspective of the mediator—in this case, Sidén—so that cinematic portrayals and surveillance technology are unified in one form.³⁶ Zimmer argues that in these ways, “the realist and experiential claims of the films are themselves implicated in the structuring of subjectivity and surveillance as mutually defining.”³⁷ In *Warte Mal!* Sidén records her individualistic, first person experience in Dubí, and brings it into the realm of the gallery for the audience’s consumption. Sidén employs amateur techniques of surveillance to re-enact the commodification and consumption of the sex worker for her audience while simultaneously deconstructing the normalized consumption of cultural surveillance.

Sidén’s subjective, first-person documentary speaks to the larger consumer culture and commodification of surveillance, which she ultimately employs to subvert the capitalistic fetishization of the art object and female body. Although Sidén engages in the documentation of the sex worker for the audience’s consumption, her work seeks to humanize her subjects by telling their nuanced stories. She uses a variety of voices throughout her interviews in Dubí to emphasize that the individual is once again trapped in a system beyond their control. Leveraging Dubí’s economic regime transition from communism to capitalism at the border between East and West, her highly mediated video installation questions the veracity of the documentary form itself as she captures how sociopolitical regimes unfold on and impact real women’s bodies. This state in flux becomes demonstrative of the artificiality of capitalism—as the political process of

restructuring is so evident—and the ways in which the complex activities of those on the margins and borders of society are indicative of the larger societal structure.

Today, the town of Dubí is not what it once was. After the 2008 recession, many of the customers from Germany and Austria are no longer coming around. Additionally, the opening of a cross-border motorway has relocated much of the foreign traffic that once travelled along the E55 highway. Police and sex trade experts say that the majority of these women have moved further West towards Germany and Spain, particularly because many of them were Romanian or Bulgarian and now that their countries have joined the EU they are free to travel to more lucrative sex industries across Europe. Although some establishments are still running—with their women restricted to the interiors of the brothels—Dubí demonstrates how quickly and briefly the sex industry boomed before the changes in the political, economic, and urban landscape dictated its migration. Through the lens of *Warte Mal!* it is also indicative of how quickly these women could leave without a trace, soon to be forgotten by the landscape in which they were once so intertwined. Ultimately, it speaks to the resilience of ‘the world’s oldest profession,’ as the sex industry follows the money and tiptoes around legislation in an ever-evolving fashion.³⁸

Santiago Sierra, *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, 2000, performance, Madrid

Santiago Sierra is a Spanish artist born in Madrid in 1966, where he still lives and works today. He studied fine arts at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid and at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg from 1989 to 1991, as well as at the Academy of San Carlos in Mexico City from 1995 to 1997. Over the past two decades, Sierra’s work has engaged with the structures of power and class in capitalism, laying them bare to his audiences by enacting the role of the

capitalist and hiring underprivileged or marginalized people to perform menial and useless tasks. In *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*, 2000, Sierra set up an installation in Berlin in which various carton boxes were set up in the gallery space. Upon entry, the audience would be confronted with boxes that might have appeared to parody minimalist works, however their meaning changed dramatically when the viewers discovered what they contained. Inside were Chechen political exiles who were not allowed to work due to their migratory status. Sierra hired them to sit in the boxes silently for four hours a day over a period of six weeks, paying them an hourly minimum wage in secret so as to prevent their deportation. In so doing, Sierra highlighted these refugees' precarious position in society, paying them for unproductive labor that remained invisible throughout the show. Sierra's practice erases traces of himself, as he is often not present in the gallery itself, nor is his presence indicated by any art object or action within the gallery space. In these ways, it is evident that he was influenced formally by minimalism and conceptualism in his appropriations of minimalist forms and use of ephemeral interactions. Although his work often underlines worker's exploitation in capitalism, by embodying the capitalist, Sierra makes himself complicit in the system and makes no attempts to change it, a fact his critics eagerly assert.

Santiago Sierra's *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, Spain, 2000 engages with the exploitation of sex workers, ultimately revealing the economic foundations of prostitution (fig. 13). The work was documented on video in El Gallo Arte Contemporaneo, accompanied by the artist's text explaining that the four women pictured are prostitutes addicted to heroin that gave their consent to have lines tattooed on their backs in exchange for 67 dollars—the price of a shot of heroin. The resulting black and white video serves as a record of the event, displaying the topless women seated with their backs to the camera as they converse, laugh, and smoke while

the female tattoo artist inks the line across their back. Two men in dark clothes come and go from the frame, taking measurements and photographs of the process over time. In this piece, as in most others in the artist's practice, the 'work' done by Sierra is hidden from the audience and includes coming up with the conceptual idea of the piece, setting it up, and documenting it. This position reinforces the myth of the artist and stands in stark contrast to the waged labor of those on the screen, who are simultaneously the focus of the work but also extraneous to it. Their identities are not nearly as important as the singular genius who conceived of the artistic idea. Therefore, the resultant value of the work is not derived from the person directly hired to carry out the labor, but instead, from someone else, somewhere else, that becomes obscured in relation to commodity production under capitalism. While the wage justifies the women's engagement in demeaning and unproductive labor, Sierra ultimately attains the more serious economic gain due to his privileged position as the artist. In his working model, Sierra is clearly re-enacting the relationships characteristic of the larger capitalistic structure so as to deconstruct it for his viewers.

160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People directly remarks on the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism that explains capitalism's basis as a society of commodity exchange in which the commodity—the product of labor—comes to represent the value which sustains the autonomous capitalistic firms. This means that in the capitalistic market economy, the social relations between the people—who produces what and for whom—come to represent social relationships between objects. However, capitalism obscures these social dynamics of production by presenting each commodity to the consumer as undifferentiated and impersonalized, regardless of who produced them and in what conditions. Sierra makes visible these social dynamics of production in his art practice by embodying the capitalist and subjecting his workers to useless

labor for his benefit. Instead of producing a commodity of value, his work visually recreates and marks capitalism's exploitation onto the bodies of those it oppresses to reveal the underlying relationships of production. Sierra—the artist/capitalist—symbolically forces—via labor unfreedom—the tattoo onto these women's bodies, re-enacting the exploitation of the capitalist for his elitist art-world audience, so that he simultaneously critiques the system and acknowledges his existence within it. Sierra's critics have interpreted his work as dehumanizing to his subjects, as he puts them on display, making them carry out pointless labor that—in this case—leaves their bodies forever marked by capitalism. By demonstrating the exploitative politics of the commodity economy to his viewer, Sierra implicates them as one of the participants within the larger capitalistic regime.

The complex position that the audience occupies in relation to Sierra's art has been a topic of focus for scholars. Sierra's critics often identify his oeuvre as a non-critical re-enactment of power. However, those who have defended it often do so on the basis of the impact that these experiences may have on their audience. In her article "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," art historian Claire Bishop suggests that his work offers a more disruptive version of relational aesthetics, one that engages with real life more directly than others have.³⁹ Referring to *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*, Bishop suggests that Sierra does not attempt to provide a simplistic transcendent experience of human empathy, but instead creates an extremely uncomfortable relationship dynamic between the viewer and the viewed, so that the spectator undergoes "a pointed racial and economic nonidentification: 'this is not me.'"⁴⁰ While Bishop emphasizes the ways in which Sierra's work results in the recognition of difference, Rosero argues in "Radical (Dis)Identification Santiago Sierra's Double(D) Spectator," that Sierra's viewer is denied a stable subjective position because of their position

within capitalistic exchange, they are simultaneously “complicit witness and unwilling victim,” constantly shifting between the two opposing roles.⁴¹ Rosero suggests that because the spectator exists in a capitalistic society, they can identify with not only the subjects of labor—as they too have experience selling their time/effort/bodies for a wage—but also with Sierra’s position as employer, due to their involvement in an economic network that gives them the ability to command others’ actions through payment.⁴² His works then, repeatedly speak to the ways in which “subjects are not only victims of others’ subjugation, but are also actively responsible for the subjugation of others,” leaving no one innocent.⁴³ However, Sierra’s employment of relational aesthetics can serve to dehumanize his subjects, particularly because of the art form’s antipathy in regards to deconstructing stereotypical, feminized roles.

Sierra’s oeuvre seeks to deconstruct and refute the commodification of the art object while highlighting the ways capitalism has exploited workers and commodified bodies. Tattooing the sex worker with the modernist organizing line, Sierra remarks on the prevalence of labor unfreedom in the economy and the way it impacts particular identities. His installations confront his audience with their position in capitalism, allowing them to simultaneously identify and dis-identify with his subjects, as both victims of capitalism and perpetrators that allow it to continue functioning. Thus, Sierra undermines the disinterested modernist gaze and privilege of the voyeur by forcing the viewer to be uncomfortable in their observation of the real bodies presented to them. *160cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* demonstrates the broader economic system that sex workers operate in, highlighting labor unfreedom and addiction as factors that influence people’s decisions to engage in sex work. Although it is often argued that sex work is a voluntary choice, the vast majority of sex workers experience labor unfreedom.⁴⁴ In this profit-driven, capitalistic society many feminist Marxists argue that instead of further policing

trafficking, a bottom up strategy in which labor has increased power is necessary in order to move an increased percentage of the population towards labor freedom.⁴⁵ By confronting the spectator with these women's economic position in capitalism and the demeaning labor they will carry out in exchange for monetary compensation, he forces his audience to rethink the reasons that people engage in sex work, attributing them to the systemic structure of capitalism and its complex interaction with the lives, histories, and personal choices of the individuals involved. Despite Sierra's deconstruction of capitalistic exploitation and alienation of labor, his work demonstrates the underlying belief that art is fundamentally limited by the discourse that constructs it. Sierra does not attempt to change the system—he only reveals it to his audiences in an attempt to change their relationship to—which means his work can easily fall back into embodying the very exploitation it seeks to critique.

The artists in this chapter deconstruct the processes of capitalism and democracy while simultaneously refuting the commodification of the art object. Sierra and Sidén's installations emphasize the existence of an underlying social/political/economic system, revealing its influence on how we construct social space and identity. While Sierra's work often plays with motifs drawn from formal aesthetic movements like minimalism—by placing Chechen exiles in boxes or tattooing a straight line on a sex worker's body—he appropriates the iconography of modernist formalism to demonstrate that it is a social construction, like capitalism. This approach makes the contrast between the elite—those who have the opportunity to frequent the art world in their leisure time and have an understanding of the discourse on formal qualities—and the marginalized even more pronounced, marking the art viewer as complicit. Ann-Sofi Siden's *Warte Mal!* 1999, implicitly critiques the film and documentary genre, rejecting the idea

that a documentary can tell ‘the truth.’ Purposefully portraying capitalism as a constructed system—which is heightened by Dubí’s structural adjustment away from communism—through video, which has traditionally been linked to corporations and government broadcasting allows Sidén to dually deconstruct capitalism and its relationship to her chosen medium.⁴⁶ While Sierra participates in the exploitation and dehumanization of the sex worker, Sidén attempts to paint a more nuanced picture of each individual she encounters in order to avoid their group victimization. By responding to a marginalized group in a way the government should, WochenKlausur demonstrates the way in which artists can leverage their platform in society to intervene in secular inequality, while critiquing the inadequacy of present sociopolitical institutions. Together, the artists expose the power dynamics and production relationships that permeate capitalism, revealing how they have been obscured by fetishization of the commodity.

The artists deconstruct the underlying structural relationships within the capitalistic economy by re-enacting the position of power that the structural institution itself typically occupies. By replacing the art object with real, marginalized people, the artists cross the line from aesthetics into ethics, conveying the exploitative nature of the sociopolitical framework that has brought about the dual commodification of sex and the art object itself. By privileging the secular, they illuminate the relationship between the commodity and desire, demonstrating how this relationship has played out on the female body. In their installations and interventions, the artists lay bare the ways in which democracy simultaneously serves the needs of the hegemonic because it is ruled by ‘the people,’ while excluding marginal populations through their medicalization or criminalization. The larger sociopolitical critiques not only illuminate the exploitative nature of capitalism and democracy’s failure to benefit all, but they also demonstrate the hierarchy of whose voices are heard first. With their platforms and cultural capital, artists

speaking on behalf of the sex worker because the voices of the marginalized can be easily silenced in the global capitalistic economy.

Endnotes

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- ² Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 44.
- ³ WochenKlausur, "From the Object to the Concrete Intervention" (web page), WochenKlausur (website), accessed March 3, 2020, <http://www.wochenklausur.at/kunst.php?lang=en>.
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- ¹⁰ Hawley, "Art, Activism, and Democracy," 95.
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- ¹⁷ Charlesworth, "'Warte Mal!'" 623.
- ¹⁸ Charlesworth, "'Warte Mal!'" 626
- ¹⁹ Charlesworth, "'Warte Mal!'" 626
- ²⁰ Robert Fleck, "Ann-Sofi Sidén in conversation with Robert Fleck," *Moderna Museet*.
- ²¹ Charlesworth, "'Warte Mal!'" 629
- ²² Charlesworth, "'Warte Mal!'" 628
- ²³ Hubbard, "In the border-zone," 117.
- ²⁴ Hubbard, "In the border-zone," 117.
- ²⁵ Charlesworth, "'Warte Mal!'" 630.
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- ²⁷ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 2.
- ²⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 3.
- ²⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 7.
- ³⁰ Catherine Zimmer, "Commodified Surveillance: First-Person Cameras, the Internet, and Compulsive Documentation," in *Surveillance Cinema* by Catherine Zimmer (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 75.
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- ³⁴ Zimmer, "Commodified Surveillance," 77.
- ³⁵ Zimmer, "Commodified Surveillance," 82.
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⁴⁴ Katie Cruz, “Beyond Liberalism: Marxist Feminism, Migrant Sex Work, and Labor Unfreedom,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 26, no. 1 (April 2018): 88.

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Conclusion

This project has explored the iconography of the sex worker in Western contemporary art from 1973 to 2018 in order to analyze the affordances and limitations of various media in their portrayal, arguing that together, the artworks critique modernist formalism as a privileged ideological construction, which served to fetishize and commodify the female body and art object in tandem. Contemporary artists take up the contradiction of an abstract, formally concerned art that consistently framed the female body to examine the relationship between the commodification of female sexuality and art. While artists employ the iconography of the sex worker to draw attention to the art market and art's persistence as a luxury commodity good, sex workers themselves employ the institutionalized cultural capital of the artist to elevate their work within higher cultural realms to further legitimize it. Throughout, the works draw an analogy between the desire elicited from the culturally constructed fetishization of the art object and the female body to demonstrate that capitalism has commodified female sexuality and viewing in tandem. Due to the overt commodification of the sex worker's body in this system, artists employ its iconography as a double-edged critique to disrupt formalist viewing and get at the heart of modernist desire and the gendered nature of artistic production it reinforced. As artists undermined the voyeur's transcendental gaze, they addressed various aspects of the art market, highlighting how it has constructed a social space that reinforces class divisions and reproduces the commodified viewing within society—despite its claim that it exists above the secular and

mundane. They simultaneously question the efficacy of neoliberal politics, as it continuously fails the sex worker, instead prioritizing discrimination and the regulation of female sexuality.

The practice of art history has traditionally been concerned with the aesthetic value of artworks and art's larger function in society without addressing its role as a commodity or considering the economic value the market assigns each work. In 1982, T. J. Clark published an investigation into the mid-nineteenth century social context from which painter Gustave Courbet arose, calling for the discipline to shift its focus.¹ He rejected traditional art historical analysis that linked artworks and artists together in a historical narrative, because of its inherently faulty assumption that the artist's identity and perspective is automatically representative of the artistic community.² Rejecting Greenberg's formalist theory and its complete dismissal of content, Clark notes that illuminating the relationship between the content and form can move us beyond formal analysis "because they make their prejudices clear."³ He continues by asserting that "flirting with hidden analogies is worse than working openly with inelegant ones, precisely because the latter can be criticized directly."⁴ Clark interprets these overt analogies as both important and risky, because as they deconstruct discourse to open up the field of study, they can simultaneously 'deform' the field itself.⁵ The artists throughout this project make overt analogies between sex work and art to highlight the omnipresent capitalistic system, ultimately redefining what art should be concerned with. Clark suggests that a social history of art must take into account the larger ecosystem of artistic production and reception, despite the discipline's resistance to acknowledge capitalism as a structural force in art.⁶ Contending that the audience for art is a particular subset of the public at large, Clark argues that the study of this audience is essential to truly understand the larger shifts in artistic production in a given society. Titia Hulst further highlights the paradoxical nature of the art historian's relationship to the

market, given their role as specialists of authentication and provenance, which directly impact the value of works on the market.⁷

The artists in this project are representative of Clark's market-driven shift as they participate in the ongoing critique of the art history's ignorance to the economic, emphasizing formalism's role in obscuring the underlying artistic discourse that has privileged the male artist/gaze via the female body's commodification. They appropriate the rhetoric of various avant-garde movements—such as abstract expressionism, pop art, and minimalism—to deconstruct the role of cultural discourse in shaping our tastes and aesthetic values. Despite the controversial nature of the subject matter—particularly in the context of the polarized feminist perspectives on sex work—the artists use subversion to undermine the 'pure gaze' of the art viewer/voyeur by overtly re-enacting the commodification of female sexuality in the art world. These critiques bring up issues of gendered representation and the ways in which it serves to reinforce sexist power dynamics by regulating and censoring female sexuality to maximize efficiency and profit. Grouped together, these works parody the notion of a 'democratic' art form by making obvious the culturally constructed artistic discourse which maintains art's elite status and by extension its fetishization.

Given the political and economic nature of the sex worker, the artists' critique of the capitalistic underpinnings of the art world parallels their larger commentary on the inadequacy of neoliberal politics in addressing the reality of oppressed groups within unregulated, globalized capitalism. With the prosperous days of the postwar economic boom—initiated by governmental deficit spending and characterized by the shockingly successful assimilation of some ten million men back into the labor market and the subsequent burgeoning growth of the middle-class—long gone, Generation Z (those born mid-1990s through the late 2010s) has been confronted with the

unregulated capitalism characteristic of a neoliberal government, a growing income gap and shrinking middle-class.⁸⁹ In this competitive globalized economy, capital—economic and cultural—has become both increasingly concentrated and crucial for survival. By taking on responsibilities that have traditionally fallen under the purview of governmental institutions, the artists demonstrate the inadequacy of both capitalism and democracy by highlighting its exploitative economic forces and lack of institutional protection. Furthermore, the works emphasize the ways in which viewing has become commodified under the present sociopolitical system, a critique which has become increasingly pertinent in the age of the Internet and commodified surveillance. As technological connectivity has proliferated, so too has the amount and circulation of content that becomes increasingly difficult to regulate. However, this has not stopped political figures from policing and censoring female sexuality, oftentimes in ways that adversely impact the sex worker's ability to conduct their work safely.

Donald Trump's failure to enact positive or meaningful change for consensual sex workers in his FOSTA-SESTA bills has been mirrored in his—and other governments'—response to sex work in response to the emergence of COVID-19. As coronavirus has destroyed Trump's economy—and so he fears, his re-election—his lack of political leadership has been astounding to watch. With his singular focus on re-opening the economy, the President, along with other politicians, have refused to listen to credential sources, and Trump himself seems to enjoy spreading fake news. Since the markets crashed in March of 2020, Trump has passed a historic \$2 trillion dollar relief package designed to send money directly to Americans with the goal to significantly expand unemployment coverage.¹⁰ While Tokyo provided some economic relief to sex workers—although it was far from adequate—Trump has completely excluded the sex industry from receiving any form of governmental support in the wake of the pandemic, by

requiring small businesses to pass checklist requirements—one of which assures that their work is not of ‘prurient sexual nature.’¹¹ Although some sex workers have been able to move online and conduct work remotely, others cannot due to the upfront capital costs involved. Given their lack of benefits, many sex workers have been forced to continue working, putting their health—and by extension, the public’s—at risk. Trump’s response to sex work is indicative of the inherent structure of democracy—which privileges the needs and ideology of the hegemonic group over the marginalized, proving itself inadequate in the just application of the law—that the artists critique. The failure to structurally address consensual sex work as a legitimate industry with beneficial regulations has put real bodies at risk, shifting the onus from institutional moved the typical institutional responsibilities onto the individual and private-sector.

While the bills failed to successfully target human sex trafficking—and they came with significant ramifications for consensual sex workers—and the industry generating an estimate \$150 billion annually, the socially concerned within the private sector has offered a more effective alternative. In an NYU Law Forum conducted on February 26, 2020, four panelists presented on their various anti-trafficking work, highlighting the role of the financial sector in combatting forced sexual labor. Commissioner of the Liechtenstein Initiative for a Financial Sector Commission on Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking and panelist Barry Koch stressed that unlike other crimes—which might have emotional or political motives—human trafficking is exclusively driven by money, and thus leaves a “financial footprint” that can be traced. During Koch’s earlier tenure as general counsel for JPMorgan Chase’s anti-money laundering compliance program, he and his colleagues “developed a model overlaying the attributes of customers, accounts, and transactions in jurisdictions with high risks of trafficking. With the overlay, transactions that would normally seem unremarkable merged in ways that allowed

investigators to zero in on likely traffickers.” Analyzing travel in high-risk places along with foreign wire transfers and late night credit swipes, they used the method to track a ring transporting enslaved girls from South Florida to Massachusetts that was initially found through E-ZPass road tolls. In collaboration with law enforcement, the bank leveraged their sophisticated tools to surveil millions of transactions, providing information that led to further investigations, prosecutions and subsequent rescues.¹²

Koch stresses that those freed from the trafficking industry often experience financial hardship like poor credit or stolen identities. In response, the Liechtenstein initiative in conjunction with the Financial Sector Commission, has formed a consortium of banks throughout the US, Canada, the UK, and Central Europe that assists survivors with opening bank accounts and building credit so that they can re-enter the financial system. Panelist Krishna Patel—former federal prosecutor and presently managing partner at KnDO Advisors—noted that from a law enforcement perspective, financial analysis can serve to corroborate the victim’s story in front of the jury. It is of interest that the success of transaction analysis tools lies in their ability to manipulate and sift through massive amounts of data, a process that has implications for consumer data, surveillance, and privacy.¹³

The pandemic has brought about a particularly unique historical moment, especially pertaining to issues of data and surveillance, given that tracking the coronavirus has been key in combatting its spread. America’s response to the coronavirus has been lackluster to say the least, as an inadequate public healthcare system has been compounded by the ideological narrative that privileges self-interest and freedom above all else. On April 23, 2020, Vietnam offered a glimmer of hope in the fight against the virus, as it eased its national lockdown following a successful, comprehensive containment campaign that led the state to record relatively few cases

and zero deaths.¹⁴ Considering that Vietnam shares a border with China, these results are particularly stunning for this nation of 95 million.¹⁵ The communist country's aggressive containment campaign, which sealed the country's borders, quarantined groups of people, mobilized soldiers and police to track infections, and fined social media users participating in misinformation, was paramount to its successful response to the virus. While Vietnam's political apparatus is not easily recreated, Taiwan's aggressive digital surveillance and South Korea's widespread testing capacity both offered effective management strategies as well. Given that experts have stressed the quickest route to reopening the economy is via extensive testing, it is surprising that the President has not gotten involved in making the test more readily available. In the context of global crisis, unregulated neoliberal politics fail to coordinate a comprehensive response to the virus, and consequently, to protect its citizens, as the capitalist ideology materializes itself in gruesome statistics. As people strive to stay connected in this trying time, the virus has also impacted the role of consumer surveillance in our lives. Social media and communication platforms have thrived in light of quarantine related isolation, recording a global TikTok download boom and a never ending series of Instagram challenges that have promoted compulsive documentation from home, as we remain connected but separate for the time being.

The steady increase in consumer surveillance from 2008 to 2018 has mirrored the widening income gap—with the highest 20% of families earning 43% of US aggregate household income in 1968, which has steadily increased to 52% in 2018—and the rise in the prevalence of the celebrity cult phenomenon.¹⁶ Growing up alongside the Internet, Generation Z is particularly unique in its relationship to technology, so that today's youth “have become accustomed to interacting and communicating in a world that is connected at all times.”¹⁷ Exposed to a plethora of cultural perspectives early on in their lives, there are certainly benefits

accrued to the connectivity and information technology has allowed for. No other generation has been exposed to this volume of media, growing up with portable smartphones—and by extension, the world—in their hands.¹⁸ The sheer increase in screen time has had real impacts on how the generation views and consumes information, so that they have become addicted to this connectivity, subconsciously reaching for their iPhones to access social media and the immediate gratification or distraction it provides Gen Z's shrinking attention span.¹⁹ Its frequent and somewhat addictive technology use allows the group to avoid real life struggles through online escapism and fantasy that serves a somewhat double-edged function to promote feelings of alienation and even depression—which characterizes the generation as well.²⁰ Instagram and TikTok not only encourage the user to peruse a large amount of short form content, the platforms promote the consumer-based move to self-documentation interspersed with advertisements to create a commodified viewing experience. Instagram models and influencers sell their appearance and/or lifestyle to brands, essentially exchanging their following or cultural capital for tens of thousands of dollars.²¹ The growing economic inequality of capitalism parallels the increased concentration of cultural capital, which has manifested itself in the cult of celebrity.

In many ways, the worship of celebrity culture is demonstrative of the public shift away from religious figures to modern-day personas as larger symbols that inform how we think about the world around us. With the proliferation of accessible media platforms, it has never been so easy for anyone to attain a public following across the world.²² Celebrities are those special individuals celebrated for their exemplary successes or personality traits, a definition that imbues many of them with a god-like status.²³ While Instagram models can make good money, the billion dollar influencer market compensates celebrities particularly well, compensating them with hundreds of thousands or—in Kylie's case—one million dollars for a single post.²⁴ Kylie

Jenner is the youngest sibling in the Kardashian-Jenner empire, with an Instagram that is home to over 6000 posts and 171 million followers. She maintains her following with excessive amounts of content that give them the inside look into her life, as she often posts stories from her bed in her bra or by the pool in her multi-million dollar house with her friends. Her curated social media account narrates her life, as a young twenty-something year old living an unprecedented life of luxury. In 2018, Kylie Jenner became the world's youngest 'self-made' billionaire through the success of her entrepreneurial makeup line, which had more to do with her success marketing herself than her ability to manufacture a high quality product.

A cultural symbol akin to the royal family of today, the Kardashian matriarchy is alive and well, coming to symbolize a feminine, capitalist success story of consumerism and luxury epitomizing the apex of human desire. The production of the reality TV show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* has played a significant role in building the family's following and brand. Although Kim Kardashian initially gained media attention as a friend and stylist of Paris Hilton, she received a more notorious reputation after her sex tape was leaked in 2007, just months before the show's premier. Reality TV promises its audience 'unlimited' access to celebrity's lives, creating a privileged position for the spectator, who ultimately has the ability to judge the stars' decisions and actions. Voyeurism in reality TV functions then, as a powerful tool to justify the viewer's own judgement, particularly in the wake of the cultural shift away from religion. Christianity was once —and in some ways still is—deeply entangled with the ideology of secular governmental institutions, serving as crucial determinants in formulating societal opinions around morality which allowed for a smooth functioning society. In religion's wake, the individual must understand their existence in relation to those around them. By broadcasting their luxurious lives across TV and media platforms, the capitalist system creates a demand for

the lifestyle itself. Even if the typical viewer cannot buy a Rolls Royce on their birthday, they can get in on the action by purchasing parts of their lifestyle, like their makeup products or jeans. They not only embody the capitalist ideals of commodified viewing, but also those of feminine beauty, allowing them to maintain their vast influence in cultural taste making that has led them to become capitalism's most successful businesswomen.

To date, Kim has amassed massive amounts of economic and cultural capital, mobilizing her platform to sell various products so that her brand has vastly expanded as she has entered various industries. Recently, Kim has channeled her capital towards advocacy, embarking on a law apprenticeship that has allowed her to address systemic issues in America like mass incarceration and gun violence. She has collaborated with #cut50, a national bipartisan initiative for American prison reform.²⁵ With the goal to reduce incarceration and crime by 50% across the country, the initiative—and particularly Kim herself—was instrumental in convincing Trump to pass the First Step Act, a transformative policy shift that aims to reduce harsh drug-related penalties.²⁶ As a result of their work, more than 7,000 people have been released early from federal prisons.²⁷ While this significant step forward in legislation would have taken much longer to gain traction without the public attention that Kim's following attracts, it is clear how her cultural capital—like the artist's—can be leveraged for the public good. However, the exchange goes both ways, as Kim's participation in advocacy continues to build her brand approval and influence. While her activism has materialized real change, the Kardashian lifestyle reinforces capitalist principles that prioritize the sale of desire above the needs of others, so that regular people become a point in the vastness of consumer data. With the rise of the Kardashian empire, which symbolizes the success of the consumerist lifestyle today, it is no surprise that our media feeds might prioritize Kylie's cool new sunglasses or Kim's epic new

photoshop fail over more pressing social content. It is precisely these politics of commodified viewing that the artworks throughout this project critique, in many ways foreshadowing its inevitable proliferation in our lives.

As the cultural capital characteristic of the celebrity parallels that of the mythic artist, their activism forces tensions between our desire to mobilize change and the need to address the underlying issues with neoliberal politics. Like the artist, celebrity activism unloads institutional responsibilities onto the individual, leaving it to those with cultural capital to pick and choose causes. These dynamics have permeate other sectors as well, such as the private-sector advocacy or tech billionaires and their commitment to big philanthropy. Bill Gates, for one, has become a global leader in solving major problems in developing countries particularly. While his work is inspiring on many levels, the sheer amount of influence he has as a single person in global affairs is alarming. This pattern illuminates the larger issue of capitalist philanthropy, which has given certain individuals massive concentrations of wealth, technology, and influence, so that they feel the impulse to give back, ultimately shaping society with their obscene amounts of capital. While activism is important, it fails to address the root of the problem in the structure of the sociopolitical system, like more adequate taxation and infrastructural support. In the past twenty years, along with increased wealth accumulation and regressive tax policy, politicians have come to rely on big philanthropy now more than ever, looking to the billionaire class to solve the problems collective action and a strong public sector addressed before. This system greatly profits the rich, giving them the ability to choose how to allocate their money to charity as their brand benefits from the perception of social consciousness. As private charity continues to place band-aid solutions on capitalism's ills, billionaires reproduce the system itself as capital becomes

increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few, leaving it to the working class to truly enact change.

The artists in this project critique the increasingly commodified politics of viewing which not only changes how we view and consume information, but also impacts how we come to understand our place in the social ordering system. Foreshadowing the proliferation of commodified surveillance which has become inescapable at all cultural levels of consumption today, the artists comment on the cult of the female celebrity and its relationship to female sexuality. A product of the larger system, these artists and artworks fail to address intersectional issues of race, as Adrian Piper demonstrates was clearly linked to the scrutiny surrounding colored women artists' sexuality in particular. Nead furthers this comment, suggesting that the female nude is just as much a function of normalized exclusions as inclusions, which his simultaneously relentlessly displayed the female body while rendering certain bodies invisible.²⁸ The art throughout this project has acknowledged its position within the larger system, deconstructing the capitalistic discourse through re-enacting the sex worker's commodification in the art market, which is why the works have so easily fallen back into the very thing they critique—such as pornography, prostitution, or exploitation. Given art's role as a superstructure that reinforces class dynamics and hierarchical social spaces, Marx would suggest that these artistic critiques—like big philanthropy—fail to enact meaningful, long term change in the public interest. Instead, his idealistic theory suggests that activism makes the population complacent, engaging just enough capital to prevent a working-class revolution while reproducing the capitalist power dynamics that keep them oppressed. However, in the face of persistent institutional and legislative failures to address the marginalized, it is important now more than ever to make their stories heard. Artists and Kardashians have the capital to make that

happen, but they are also problematic in their very nature, as they reinforce power dynamics on real bodies in circulation.

Endnotes

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- ² TJ Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (United California: University of California Press, 1999), 10.
- ³ Clark, *Image of the People*, 11.
- ⁴ Clark, *Image of the People*, 11.
- ⁵ Clark, *Image of the People*, 11.
- ⁶ Clark, *Image of the People*, 11.
- ⁷ Hulst, *A History of the Western Art Market*, 2.
- ⁸ Anthony Turner, "Generation Z: Technology and Social Interest," *The Journal of Individual Psychology* 71, no. 2 (2015): 104.
- ⁹ George Mason University Mercatus Center, "Economic Recovery: Lessons from the Post-World War II Period" (web page), Mercatus (website), accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.mercatus.org/publications/economic-history/economic-recovery-lessons-post-world-war-ii-period>.
- ¹⁰ "SCREWED OVER: Porn stars and sex workers are denied coronavirus stimulus aid from Trump \$2 Trillion bailout," *The U.S. Sun*, April 4, 2020.
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- ¹⁴ "Without a single COVID-19 death, Vietnam starts easing its coronavirus lockdown," *Los Angeles Times*, April 23, 2020.
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- ¹⁸ Turner, "Generation Z," 106.
- ¹⁹ Turner, "Generation Z," 109.
- ²⁰ Turner, "Generation Z," 108.
- ²¹ "The rise of the celebrity cult phenomenon," *City Press* (Auckland Park, South Africa), November 3, 2019.
- ²² "The rise of the celebrity cult phenomenon," *City Press* (Auckland Park, South Africa), November 3, 2019.
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- ²⁴ "Kylie Jenner reportedly makes \$1 million per paid Instagram post - here's how much other top influencers get," *CNBC*, July 31, 2018.
- ²⁵ "What Is #cut50? Meet the Attorneys Helping Kim Kardashian West With Her Career In Criminal Justice Reform," *Oxygen*, April 5, 2020.
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- ²⁸ Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 60.

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