

Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s

What Is Art? Prostitution

In 1974, artist Carlos Ginzburg wandered around the port of Antwerp, Belgium, looking for a prostitute. He wanted to hire a woman for the afternoon—not for a sexual encounter, but as a prop for a performance. The artist negotiated with a local pimp who, when he learned that Ginzburg was from Argentina, offered up a recent transplant from Buenos Aires. The woman was paid somewhat less than her usual fee for an afternoon’s work, work that consisted of sitting in a gallery holding a sign emblazoned with a quote from Charles Baudelaire: “Qu’est ce l’Art? Prostitution~” (see fig. 1). In the photographic documentation of this piece, titled *Latin American Prostitute* and part of a group exhibition on Latin American systems art organized by curator Jorge Glusberg at Antwerp’s International Cultural Center, the young woman’s eyes stare out at the viewer from beneath arched, penciled eyebrows as the camera’s flash casts a shadow behind her head.¹ The long white sign is perched in her lap, emphasized by two pale triangles of flesh that point toward the letters—one formed by the skin revealed by the V-shaped neckline of her dark dress,

Figure 1
Carlos Ginzburg,
*Latin American
Prostitute*, 1974,
performance, Inter-
national Cultural
Center, Antwerp.

Photograph courtesy
of the artist.



and the other created where the skirt parts to show her crossed legs. Here we see a peek of knee, shin, and the strap of a shoe fastened to her heel.

As Ginzburg recounts, “Of course it was a pure fiction; prostitutes are not working in museums with Baudelaire’s quotation. But also it was not a fiction, and she was practicing prostitution. This total indeterminacy of the situation was very disturbing for everybody because there was the intuition and feeling she was doing real prostitution.” (It was rumored that she and a few male gallery-goers exchanged phone numbers and made dates for later.) What were the stakes of such indeterminacy given the potent, even “disturbing” conjunction of sex, commerce, and art within the context of international cultural exchange? Ginzburg’s title emphasized the woman’s place of origin, intimating that Latin America prostitutes itself to European nations. Was the prostitute’s presence merely meant to signal the blurred line between selling art and selling out—the taint of market economies that threatens to corrupt both sexual relations and artistic value? Or was there something else involved as Baudelaire’s open-ended, elliptical metaphor received fleshy embodiment in the form of a live female, displaced from her portside brothel to an art exhibit? What sorts of solicitations were on offer here?

In Ginzburg’s 1974 performance, sex acts performed for money are associated with artistic exchange. Note that the prostitute is gendered female as a default, while the client is assumed to be male, reflecting the pervasive heterosexualization of scenes of prostitution within the cultural imagination regardless of the self-identified sexual preference of the woman.² I will return to the complexities of Baudelaire’s passage—which is far from straightforward—but in its simplest gloss, *Latin American Prostitute* crystallizes how the long-held associations between the circulation of art, artistic personalities, and commerce are persistently gendered, as well as consistently yoked to the idea of prostitution, with women peddling and men purchasing. It is worth asking what might be at stake for feminism in this formulation, especially as contemporary artists continue to mine the conjunction between selling sex and trafficking in art. In what follows, I look at artistic engagements with prostitution in a range of critical and artistic contexts since the 1970s to consider how they might be seen as a response to anxieties about gender, labor, and artistic value.

To begin, I detail several performances from the mid-1970s such as Ginzburg’s that directly confront prostitution, in order to place them within a broader historical context, one marked by a contemporaneous reorganization of labor. This reorganization had profound consequences

for both art-making and sex work, not least because of the changing roles of intimacy, affect, and emotional work within a fast-consolidating service economy. Concluding with contemporary work from the 1990s and 2000s, I assert that the ongoing connections between art and prostitution, when understood as practices that visibly register shifts in labor, help us rethink the complex affective efforts involved in producing critical feminist work within a late capitalist market economy. How can we make sense of both the literal relations between art and prostitution and the charged metaphor that the female artist or critic is a “whore,” a metaphor whose continued ubiquity is a testament to its peculiar power? Rather than moralize about these links, it might prove more strategic to put feminist pressure on what Ginzburg called “indetermination.” In doing so, we can begin to theorize about a broader politics of gendered exchanges within art and its attendant discursive apparatus. As a feminist art historian concerned with questions of labor, I attempt in this essay to think through what happens when art, work, and sex are mutually redefined to produce new relations.

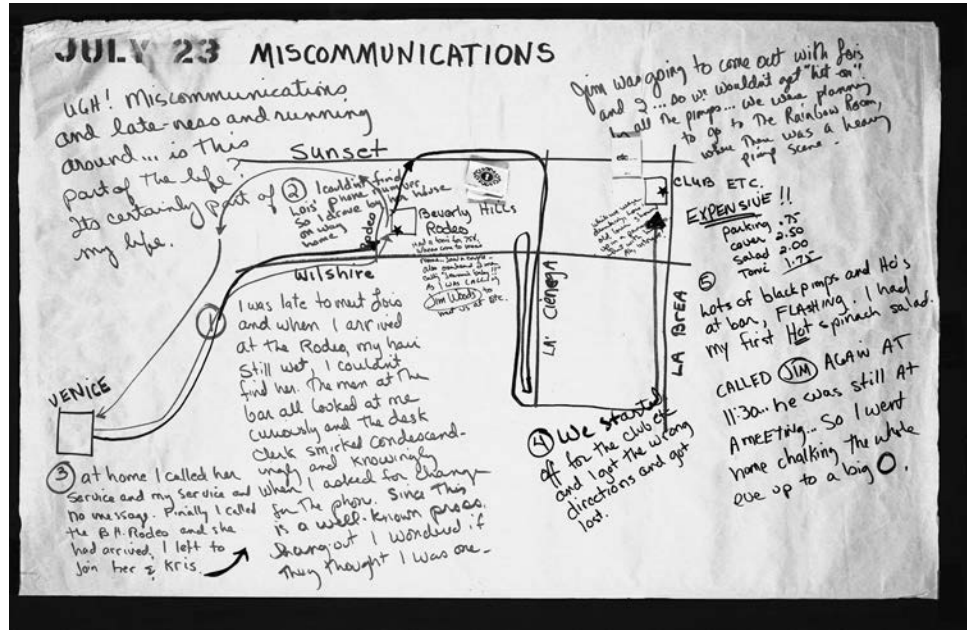
I Wondered If They Thought I Was One

At the same time that Ginzburg was negotiating with a pimp in Antwerp, in California, feminist artist Suzanne Lacy was commencing her own exploration of the possible relationship between art and prostitution. In her art piece *Prostitution Notes*, also from 1974, Lacy undertook an extended research project by tracking down and spending time with female prostitutes in Los Angeles. The resulting work includes a series of ten hand-drawn, informal maps and notes written on paper that transcribe Lacy’s thought process about sex work, including, as she started to notice its prevalence, how the geography of the city itself was transformed when she surveyed it through the lens of prostitution. Her research reflected her commitment to interrogating structures of class and gender exploitation, and “how power inequalities circumscribe the movement of women” (Lacy, conversation). Given the logistical difficulties in reaching these women (some of whom used aliases, had unlisted numbers, and had transient, ever-changing work locations), many of her attempts to arrange coffee dates and interviews were thwarted by missed connections.

In one brown paper drawing, dated July 23 and labeled “Miscommunications,” scribbles and schematic lines track Lacy’s peripatetic explorations from Wilshire Boulevard to a club on La Brea, annotated with her jottings, observations, and souvenir matchbooks from several of her

Figure 2
Suzanne Lacy, "July
23—Miscommuni-
cations," from the
series *Prostitution
Notes*, diagrams on
brown craft paper,
1974.

Courtesy of the
artist.



destinations (see fig. 2). She narrates asking for change at a hotel known for prostitution and being “smirked” at by men at the bar and the desk clerk “condescendingly and knowingly [. . .]. I wondered if they thought I was one.” This is not a paranoid fantasy, but rather an assessment of how context shapes identities, as women are socially and economically positioned—that is, hailed along gendered, class lines—within specific architectures, sites, and spaces.

As Lacy has written, “I didn’t want to put myself inside their shoes, walk the streets as an art performance, or dress up like a prostitute in order to flirt with their reality. [. . .] Rather, I thought to locate the work in my own experience, to record the process of my entry into an understanding of ‘The Life,’ as I looked for the echo of their situation inside my own” (“Prostitution” 5). Lacy’s work remaps Los Angeles with the frame of sexual commerce but also redraws her own internal landscape as she finds parallels between the lives of the prostitutes she meets and her own situation (one that was at times economically uncertain and occasionally uncomfortably dependent on men, including a trip she took to Mexico paid for by her male lover). She asks: “What is my identification with hookers?” (“Prostitution” 7). Interestingly, though this question motors Lacy’s process, it is never answered or resolved but instead gestures to how many women, including artists, are undervalued, underpaid, and unsupported.

“Women artists are left to drift upon the open market, eking out a precarious living,” writes Griselda Pollock in language that indicates the often financially compromised practice of art production for women (85). In part because of her vexed identification with prostitutes, Lacy made a deliberate decision not to salaciously depict or represent the women she contacted (as Ginzburg did), but instead used her internal musings and performance-based research to formulate a social art project that later evolved into workshops for sex workers she held at a drug rehabilitation center in nearby Venice. Lacy’s art project, based on conversation rather than on display, points to the stark differences between her feminist approach and Ginzburg’s take on prostitution.

Many female artists in the 1970s dove into sex work as a way to explore questions of identity, culpability, and publicity; unlike Lacy, who had no interest in playacting or momentary *déclassement*—which she felt would only showcase her own educated privilege (Lacy, conversation)—some women artists sought to blur the lines between performance and prostitution. In her 1975 performance piece *Role Exchange*, artist Marina Abramović changed places with a professional prostitute in Amsterdam for four hours (the duration of her art opening at the De Appel Gallery) (see fig. 3). To emphasize what she felt to be a potential equivalency in their situations, Abramović chose a woman who had been working in the red-light district for the same amount of time she herself had worked as an artist—ten years. Both were prepared to accept full responsibility for whatever might happen during that time period; while the prostitute went to Abramović’s art opening in her stead, the artist “saw” clients; they split the \$500 stipend given by the gallery (see Novakov).

Photographs of the performance show a man walking through the doorway next to the large street-level brothel window; Abramović’s face, fully visible, looks out onto the sidewalk, while the man’s profile is obscured by the door frame. Despite this image, which hints at a transaction on the verge of consummation, the artist “never got any clients” (Watson 54). One man who came by did not want to pay her price—the prostitute insisted that Abramović not fall below the usual rate—and one regular who dropped in was not interested in having the artist as a substitute. Abramović’s use of her own body implicates her in a circuit of exchange, one in which the “live show” of an artist’s performance runs parallel to the “live show” of sex work. Indeed, as performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider has theorized in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance*, women’s performance art, especially that which places the

Figure 3
Marina Abramović,
Role Exchange, per-
formance, Amster-
dam, 1975. © 2012
Marina Abramović.

Courtesy Sean Kelly
Gallery/Artists
Rights Society (ARS),
New York.



female body on display in front of an audience, is often viewed as bound up with the selling of sex.

One year after *Role Exchange*, British art-punk collective COUM Transmissions held their 1976 show *Prostitution* at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) (see fig. 4). This show featured photo spreads from porn magazines depicting collective member Cosey Fanni Tutti, who, in a strategy somewhat similar to Abramović's, attempted brief immersion into the sex trade, working as a stripper and a porn model, and who advocated for radical openness about sexual practices (see Stiles). The press release

Figure 4
COUM Transmissions, press release for exhibit *Prostitution*, featuring a photo of Tutti from *Curious* magazine. Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 1976.

Courtesy of Cosey Fanni Tutti.

October 19th-26th 1976



SEXUAL TRANSGRESSIONS NO. 5

PROSTITUTION

COUM Transmissions:- Founded 1969. Members (active) Oct 76 - P. Christopherson, Cosey Fanni Tutti, Genesis P-Orridge. Studio in London. Had a kind of manifesto in July/August Studio International 1976. Performed their works in Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels; Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris; Galleria Borgogna, Milan; A.I.R. Gallery, London; and took part in Arte Inglese Oggi, Milan survey of British Art in 1976. November/December 1976 they perform in Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art; Deson Gallery, Chicago; N.A.M.E. Gallery, Chicago and in Canada. This exhibition was prompted as a comment on survival in Britain, and themselves.

2 years have passed since the above photo of Cosey in a magazine inspired this exhibition. Cosey has appeared in 40 magazines now as a deliberate policy. All of these framed form the core of this exhibition. Different ways of seeing and using Cosey with her consent, produced by people unaware of her reasons, as a woman and an artist, for participating. In that sense, pure views. In line with this all the photo documentation shown was taken, unbidden by COUM by people who decided on their own to photograph our actions. How other people saw and recorded us as information. Then there are xeroxes of our press cuttings, media write ups. COUM as raw material. All of them, who are they about and for? The only things here made by COUM are our objects. Things used in actions, intimate (previously private) assemblages made just for us. Everything in the show is for sale at a price, even the people. For us the party on the opening night is the key to our stance, the most important performance. We shall also do a few actions as counterpoint later in the week.

PERFORMANCES: Wed 20th 1pm - Fri 22nd 7pm

Sat 23rd 1pm - Sun 24th 7pm

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS LIMITED
NASH HOUSE THE MALL LONDON S.W.1. BOX OFFICE Telephone 01-930-6393

for their opening features a photograph of Tutti lounging on a couch with nothing on but a loosely laced corset, sunglasses, and stockings. As the text underneath it states: “Cosey has appeared in 40 magazines now as a deliberate policy. All of these framed form the core of this exhibition. [. . .] Everything in the show is for sale at a price, even the people.” Despite the title, which equates Tutti’s forays into sexually explicit posing with the wider art market subversions/deviances of COUM Transmissions, pornography (as a field of textual or visual representation) and prostitution (as an encounter that requires physical presence) imply different subject/viewer relations with respect to distance and proximity.⁵ At the ICA, live performances that had been planned for the *Prostitution* exhibition were canceled due to a public outcry, and the porn materials were placed in a separate area for viewing by request only. Art historian John A. Walker comments that the ICA show “presumably [makes] the Marxist point that most of us have to ‘prostitute’ ourselves to some degree by selling our mental or bodily labour powers” (89).

The examples above—all from the years 1974 to 1976—demonstrate different ideological and aesthetic approaches that artists took toward prostitution at this time, from using a hooker to make an interruption within the art institution (Ginzburg) to affinity-building self-reflection and research (Lacy) to the personal, bodily transposition of art and sex work (Abramović or Tutti). This sheer variety serves as a corrective for those who think of 1970s feminism as monolithic with regard to sexual morals; while Robin Morgan was pronouncing in 1974 that “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice” (139), self-declared feminist Tutti was posing in porn magazines. With their explicit use of the magazine page, Tutti and COUM Transmissions mean to expose the art world’s prurient interest in “coverage” and promotion, yet there is some debate about the political nature of such work: Lisa Tickner comments that a “quasi-sexist” gesture such as Tutti’s, which aims to co-opt, mime, and reflect the language of misogynistic representation, “grows potentially more powerful as it approaches actual exploitation but then, within an ace of it, collapses into ambiguity and confusion” (273). For Tickner, such a strategy oscillates between incisive parody and base titillation, and its ambiguity ultimately risks serving an antifeminist, regressive agenda.

In fact, the issue of ambiguity has long attended critical writings on artistic depictions of prostitution; one influential text in this regard is T. J. Clark’s reading of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, a painting first exhibited in 1865. Clark discusses how the white woman in the painting (there

is also a black female attendant), though widely understood as a prostitute, was at the same time uncertainly classed—*prostitute* can register along the class spectrum, from expensive kept woman to impoverished streetwalker. This indecipherability ramifies to her sexuality and the incoherence of the nude body itself. “The signs of social identity are as unstable as all the rest” (39), he writes. Clark refuses to categorize this instability, however, as simple confusion, instead insisting that the painting more drastically fails to stabilize around meaning. Manet’s self-possessed prostitute “erodes the *terms* in which the normal recognitions are enacted, but it leaves the structure itself intact. The prostitute is still double, abject and dominant, equivocal, unfixed” (Clark 39). Tickner argues that Tutti’s performance, produced over a century after *Olympia*, likewise contributes to the restabilization of ideological structures, in which the spectacularized blurring of categories (artist/sex worker) results in the further policing of their differences.

As Hollis Clayson has written in her important book *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, representations of prostitutes are central to nineteenth-century artistic practices, in part because they embody anxieties about class mobility and social ambiguity. In some senses, that anxiety has mutated and accelerated in the intervening century. There are clear differences between Edgar Degas’s brothel prints, to cite a canonical example, with their frenzy to capture and make visible the female body for sale, and late twentieth-century feminist work such as Lacy’s *Prostitution Notes*, in which a woman artist sought to investigate this subject without directly imaging it. The density of artistic activity in the mid-1970s, particularly but not exclusively that utilized performance (where the consumerist display of bodies is overtly problematized), suggests that in that decade, sex work was registering in a new way within shifting modes of artistic making, as well as in changing economies, visual and otherwise. Artists thus turned to prostitution as a subject in the 1970s in part because it made legible a number of then-emergent conditions: the growth of the feminist movement, the professionalization of the art market, the intensifying instability of class formations, and an increased emphasis on affective labor.

Legal theorists and historians alike have remarked upon the upsurge of discourse regarding prostitution in the 1970s. As D. Kelly Weisberg notes, “A number of factors coalesced in the 1970s to contribute to increasing scholarly and public attention on prostitution. These factors included the rise of the women’s movement, the growing importance

of the civil rights movement, expanding notions of the law of privacy, a new concern about victimless crimes, and frank public discussion about social mores” (189). Feminist and theoretical responses to prostitution at this time were all over the map ideologically. For example, Kate Millett’s important text *The Prostitution Papers*, published in 1973, galvanized many feminists around questions of economic and psychological exploitation. Coming from a wildly different perspective, Jean-François Lyotard published his *Économie libidinale (Libidinal Economy)* in 1974, a text in which the (universalized) tropes of pimp, client, and prostitute figure heavily in his account of exchange within political economy. Lyotard’s text partakes in the widespread mystification of prostitution within critical theory, in which prostitutes recur as vehicles for a dizzying array of metaphorical uses.⁴

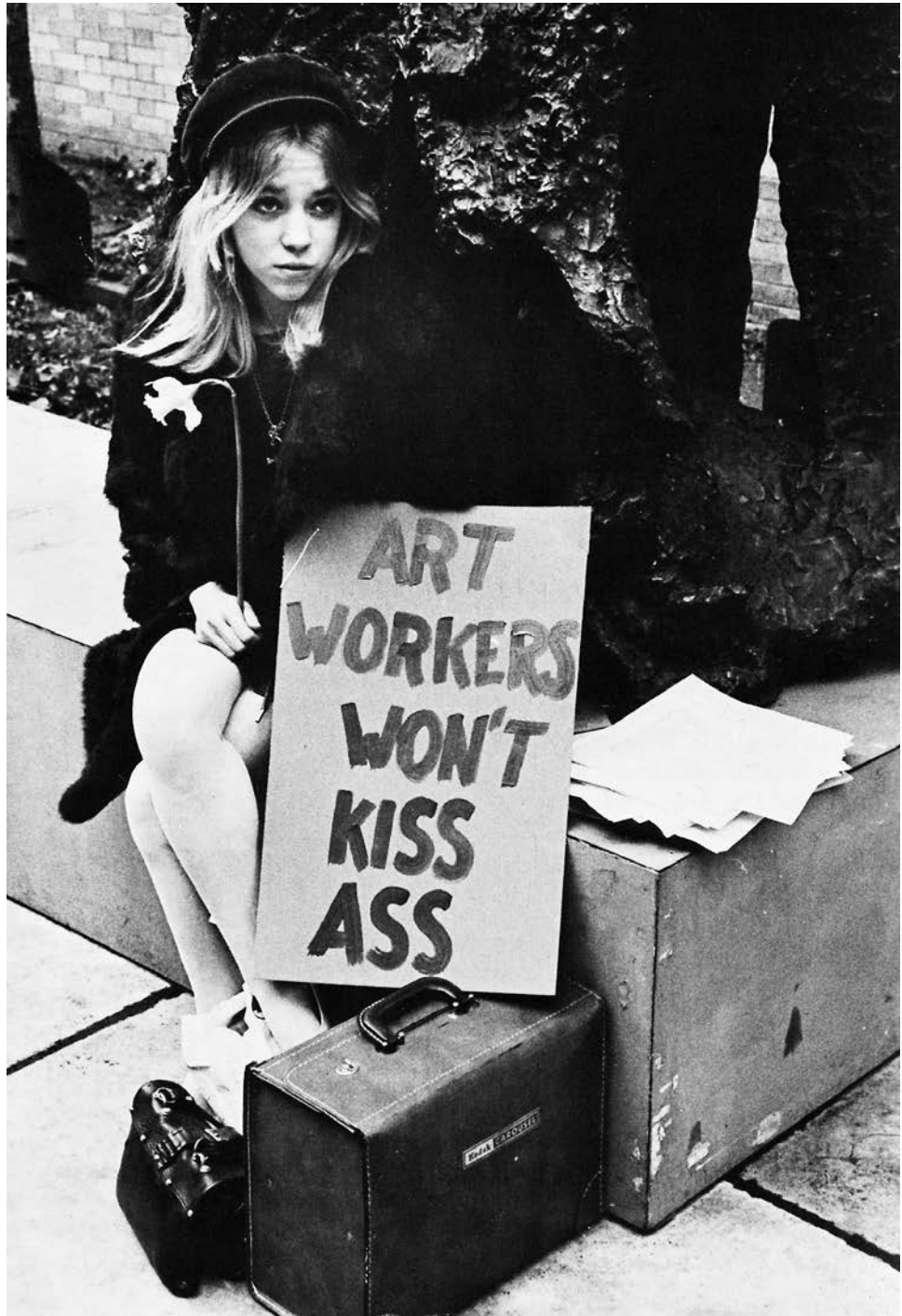
Clayson’s art historical study, one of the first of its kind, began as a dissertation at UCLA (under the advisement of Clark) just at this moment, in 1975. The 1970s marked a time of drastic policy shifts and fierce debates about prostitution at the state, municipal, and national levels within the United States: in 1971, Nevada moved to decriminalize prostitution and formally regulate its brothels; New York’s Mayor John Lindsay unsuccessfully pushed for legalization in 1972; the ACLU argued throughout the 1970s that prostitution was a “victimless crime” (Jenness; Ringdal). Within this constellation of changes, in which sex workers were separating themselves from outlaws and perverts, feminist artists found new terms to redescribe the terrain of the sex industry, and feminist art historians like Clayson began to think critically about the gendering of modernism as it relates to sexual exchange.

Art Workers Won’t Kiss Ass

Ginzburg’s photograph of a light-haired young woman holding up a sign recalls another that also dates from the 1970s. In this image, a woman is seated outside with a sheaf of leaflets, her bags at her feet and a flower in one hand. Her hand-lettered protest poster reads: “Art Workers Won’t Kiss Ass” (see fig. 5). Though the woman depicted in this image has not been identified, the approximate time and place of its taking are clear; it is New York sometime around 1970. Against Ginzburg’s staged performance in which a woman serves as a living illustration for another’s scripted question, here a woman holds a declarative statement presumably of her own making, one that places obsequiousness on a continuum with

Figure 5
Primary Information, poster based on archival photo of unidentified art activist (c. 1970), New York City, 2008.

Courtesy Primary Information.



sexual licentiousness. The statement asserts that she will not bend to the viewer's (or the institution's, or the art world's) bidding, and she will not shape her will to any external desire; in this, she refuses Ginzburg's parallel between art and prostitution. While Ginzburg's performance piece and the "art worker" photo differ in tone and kind, the two images are instructive to place in relation to each other, for both underscore another crucial factor in the conjunction between prostitution and art making in the 1970s: the explicit reframing of these activities as labor.

It is important to note, then, that the late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by an international mobilization of artists seeking to validate their efforts *as work*; that is, as effortful, productive, and managed by economic constraints imposed by subjugating ruling-class interests. In countries such as England and Argentina, artists asserted that their practices were governed by the power differentials (and exploitation) inherent to the rules of wage labor within the capitalist West.⁵ This redefinition of art as work was made most clear in the U.S. context with the 1969 formation of the Art Workers' Coalition, a group that organized in New York to agitate for artists' rights and to protest the Vietnam War, among other leftist concerns. Its members were artists and critics, including many conceptual artists who did not make traditionally salable objects, aiming to publicly redefine themselves as workers—even, some would insist, proletarians.

This was always an unstable position, one fraught with ambivalence about the classed nature of artistic identity in the context of a broader New Left move away from a focus on solidarity with blue-collar workers.⁶ Still, as the woman with the poster illustrates, the Art Workers' Coalition managed in its brief existence (it faded in 1971) to bring into focus the *art worker* as an identity to rally around within the art industry. The term gave collective voice to artists seeking to validate their forms of production within a shifting economy and lent momentum to their organizational efforts within the era's social upheavals. A shared sense of financial uncertainty, and an urge to assert that what they did was politically relevant, motivated many artists to redefine their often nonremunerative work as a form of honest labor.

Emerging from a similar impetus to organize a previously underrecognized sector of labor and agitate for collective recognition as workers, Margo St. James, a feminist sex activist based in San Francisco, formed COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) in 1973. This rights group aimed at decriminalizing and destigmatizing prostitution. According to

one historian, “Since the 1970s prostitutes have been organizing in the United States, Britain, and Australia [. . .]. In short, prostitutes are endeavouring to be acknowledged as workers in an occupation that lacks trade union safeguards or protection” (Spector 62). Throughout the 1970s, trade unions for sex workers began to take hold throughout Europe and the struggles of prostitutes became part of a wider feminist agenda regarding unpaid labor (see Federici). Drafting off this momentum, in 1978 activist Carole Leigh popularized the term “sex worker” to describe the full range of those who engaged in sex (broadly conceived) for money: burlesque performers, escorts, exotic dancers, and so on. Perhaps there is some irony in sex workers’ arguing that their activities are a form of labor when for Marx precisely what was wrong with work within capitalism was that it was akin to prostitution—prostitution being the “specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer” (Marx, “Economic” 108). Still, under the name “sex worker,” these disparate activities would no longer be individually performed, often shrouded by secrecy or shame, but instead would function as a newly formed, vocal class of laborers who might collectively bargain for protections and rights (see McClintock).⁷

Though these two seemingly divergent populations—artists and sex workers—both sought to validate themselves as laborers in this decade, they likely had no direct influence on each other; St. James, for one, does not remember having any awareness of the New York Art Workers’ Coalition in the early 1970s.⁸ Instead, the emergence of these two identifications in this decade is indicative of shifting values about what constitutes “work.” The 1970s saw the widespread global economic upheavals that have come to be known as *postindustrialism*, a term that signals a move away from a manufacturing, goods-producing economy to one of service-based, immaterial labor, and thus the multiplication, fragmentation, or even disintegration of the category of “the worker” in its conventional meaning. The corralling of these incongruent identities under the sign of work signals the unhinging of previous class positions. It might be that, as the coherence of *worker* fractured, the category became more available for downward appropriation by the likes of artists (who, due to cultural capital and educational privilege, sit above the working class) as well as aspirational renaming by the (generally understood to be lumpen) prostitute.

Elizabeth Bernstein, in her sociological study of sexual commerce *Temporarily Yours*, postulates that the 1970s economic restructuring also signaled a larger shift in attitudes toward intimacy, given the

ever-eroding lines between public and private, home and workplace. Bernstein discusses how the political frame of sex work as work that developed in the 1970s resulted in sex workers' placing their labor within "a conceptual template which explicitly situates prostitution in terms of the likely array of other available working-class jobs" (48). What is more, prostitution began to overlap with the kind of service work historically understood to be part of affective labor, in particular, as it was increasingly geared toward providing intimacy. Affective labor such as kin work, care, and nursing is not new, of course, and has long been feminized, but as Michael Hardt has noted, since the early 1970s it has "become generalized through wider sectors of the economy" (97). Within this model, clients are offering not just rote sexual release but a complete "girlfriend experience" that includes the production of a perceived genuine affective connection. This is what has been referred to as the "emotional labor" of prostitution (Chapkis 69–82).

The prostitute, like the performance artist who generates no salable object, is a figure of ambiguous exchange who encapsulates the instability of the commodity object and the uncertainty of forms of worthwhile labor, ones that have been converted (or evaporated) into pure exchange value. One might speculate that in the 1970s, women artists—particularly those who were making artwork with their bodies—identified with prostitutes because performance and sex work are analogously affective and precarious practices. This dynamic has the potential to cross the gender divide, for though artists conventionally make highly valued objects, many art workers (male and female alike) of the early 1970s vigilantly attempted to decommodify their work via conceptual and performance art. Along with the production of affect and the commercialization of intimacy, then, art workers and sex workers of the 1970s had in common their lack of reproductive labor.⁹ In other words, in this decade traditional artistic objects were undergoing a transition to dematerialized practices, changing the very nature of the salable commodity; inevitably, this mutating of commodities—their reorganization or dissolution—had gendered consequences.

It could be argued, as Clayson does in her work on art in the nineteenth century, that the prostitute embodies the fugitive nature of modernity. This observation could be extended forward in time, as current sex workers (some of whom conduct their transactions on the phone or the Internet) reflect the ruptures inherent to contemporary labor, including pervasive digital communication, technological content-providing, and

Figure 6
Robert Morris, *Site*,
performance, with
Carolee Schneem-
mann, 1964. © Rob-
ert Morris/Artists
Rights Society, New
York. Photograph by
Hans Namuth.

Courtesy Center for
Creative Photogra-
phy, University of
Arizona ©1991 Hans
Namuth Estate



affective service work accompanied by infrequent payments, devalued skill sets, and a lack of benefits. Today, the part-time call girl and the artist with overwhelming debt are both members of the ever-widening and insecure labor force. Clark comments on the “special instability of the term ‘prostitute’ in the 1860s [. . .] whereby the prostitute was made out to have vacated her place at the edge of society, and be engaged in building a new city, in which everything was edges and no single demarcation was safe” (24). One wonders if the prostitute becomes a more prominent thematic in art during times of economic upheaval, as she not only symbolizes potential destabilizations vis-à-vis gender and class but equally shores up their borders.

For Clayson, the nineteenth-century obsession with depicting prostitutes was decidedly part of “a male sexual politics” (153). So, too, were some self-identifications of the 1960s/1970s artist-as-worker, which at times veered toward macho posturing. On a few occasions, these two figures (art worker and sex worker) came together in close proximity on the same stage, as in 1964, when minimal artist Robert Morris created his performance *Site*. In this piece, the artist dismantled a large wooden

cube to reveal a naked, reclined female—the artist Carolee Schneemann, posing as art history’s most famous sex worker, Manet’s Olympia (see fig. 6). Wearing workman’s gloves and a transparent mask of his own face as a sound track of construction noises played, Morris took apart a minimalist box made of plywood sheets until Schneemann was exposed. This display of female flesh alongside Morris’s heavy lifting does a number of things. First, it puts into dialogue sex work and artistic process, in particular the process of minimalist fabrication, a form of making that mimed the procedures of construction work. Morris wore work clothes as a kind of costume in *Site*, but some art workers adopted such proletarian getups for their everyday wear, including minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, famous for his daily uniform of worker’s overalls.

The emphasis on the spectacularization of Morris’s *effort* rather than on a finished product also attempts to defetishize the artistic object, even as the presence of Schneemann’s powder-white body simultaneously reveals that dream’s impossibility. The prostitute presents, in one figure, Laura Mulvey’s understanding of the conjunction between the sexual (Freudian) and the economic (Marxist) fetish, as well as the condensation of commodity and spectacle (79). Schneemann’s body suggests that all making, even that which ostensibly results in no purchasable artifact, as in Morris’s ephemeral performance, is haunted by the anxiety of fetishism—a fetishism that is always ambivalent, as it summons the terror of female sex while also keeping it at bay. (It matters, too, that as such performances enter history, documentation like photographs become hardened into property.)

Walter Benjamin writes that the prostitute is the perfect emblem of modernity: as commodity and seller in one, she both confounds and confirms the ruthless logic of capital (171). In fact, as COYOTE and the sex worker trade unions of the 1970s insisted, the prostitute is not only a commodity and seller, she is also a worker, making visible the means of production with her solicitations. Susan Buck-Morss, building on Benjamin, extrapolates: “The prostitute is the ur-form of the wage laborer, selling herself in order to survive. Prostitution is indeed an objective emblem of capitalism [. . .]. Whereas every trace of the wage laborer who produced the commodity is extinguished when it is torn out of context by its exhibition on display, in the prostitute, both moments remain visible” (184–85). What *Site* does, then, is propose both its artists (Morris and Schneemann) as laborers, even as Schneemann’s only work is to appear as an object. These conjunctions were brought into sharp relief a few years later with

the organization of the Art Workers' Coalition (Morris was involved in some related activist efforts).

Marx considers the process of commodification a system of equivalences whereby the laborer is valued, but abstractly, paid based on hours worked rather than the use value of the product created (*Capital* 133). By performing the role of the construction worker in *Site* (as if in rehearsal or preparation for his later inhabitation of the identity of the art worker), Morris resists this leveling of labors and values by revealing a prostitute at the heart of a seemingly hollow object, that is, by presenting an even more desecrated form of labor underneath or inside his own working-class masquerade. By revealing Schneemann inside his minimal structure, Morris asserts that *something* lies at the heart of artistic making—but what? Prostitution, as Baudelaire (by way of Ginzburg) would have it? Or is it something rather more unmoored—desire, maybe? Women? Sex? Nudity? Painting? Modernist art historical legacies? The nineteenth century? The metaphors slip and slide; in *Site*, Olympia, no less than in her own day, remains indeterminate, difficult to grasp.

I Called Myself an Art-Historical Whore

As the commercialization of sex expanded and multiplied in the 1970s, so too did the commercialization of art, reflected by the vast uptick in promotional writing about art that appeared in magazines around the world. Artists' avowed working-class affiliation as “art workers” in the late 1960s and early 1970s was meant in part to counteract what was in fact an increasing professionalization of art, one that coincided with the explosion of the Masters of Fine Arts degree, which granted a new kind of educational and institutional authority to many artists, and the 1965 founding of the National Endowment for the Arts, which encouraged artists to market themselves along the lines of entrepreneurial business models (see Singerman; Wallis). In fact, this was a time of great expansion of the art market and corporate patronage, an expansion indicated most vividly in the explosion of glossy art magazines (see Crow). The rise in advertising pages within the art press illustrated the increased spiraling together of art and promotion, as well as how artistic success was implicated in the business of “selling oneself.”

Art criticism was understood in the 1970s as a kind of gendered and sexualized labor, one that, as I will show, was accused of flirting with prostitution. Within the United States, art criticism as a remunerative

job received a noticeable boost after the 1967 move of *Artforum* from Los Angeles to New York City, a leap that was accompanied by an increased advertising budget that allowed the magazine to commission and pay writers. To quote Amy Newman's verdict: "The institutionalization in America of what has come to be known as 'the art world'—an entity encompassing production, distribution, promotion, display, and consumption of art as well as its intellectual, topical, legal and social dimensions—took place in the 1960s and early 1970s" (7).¹⁰ One result of this burgeoning art industry was that, by the early 1970s, many more writers were able to scrape together a living writing art criticism, as opposed to it being a profession viable only to a rarefied few. Importantly, art criticism was a field in which women were making a noticeable impact.

In retrospect it is striking how many of the major critics writing for art magazines at this time were women, among them Rosalind Krauss, Lucy Lippard, Annette Michelson, Barbara Reise, and Barbara Rose. The prominence of women art critics in this fledgling field is likely related to the sexism that made it difficult for them either to succeed as artists—several of them, including Krauss and Rose, identify as "failed artists"—or to secure steady jobs teaching. Writers such as Lippard eschewed the academy, preferring instead to piece together large amounts of freelance art-critical writing in order to support themselves; this too could be seen as a response to sexism.¹¹

The institutionalization of art criticism—and the fact that it was newly accompanied by real (if paltry) material benefits—raised questions about its relationship to the market. During an era of what Thomas Crow has called "the emerging global service economy" of art (86), the conjunction between art criticism and money proved especially volatile when the writers were women. Female art critics were frequently viewed with suspicion, given that the influence they wielded was tempered by an overlay of misogynistic attitudes prevalent in the art world. Krauss cites Clement Greenberg's acid assessment: "Spare me smart Jewish girls with their typewriters" (309).¹² And as Rose recalls, "women were just sex objects, they were nothing else" (qtd. in Newman 58).

Within an environment often dismissive of their intellectual contributions, what type of "service" were these women seen as performing? Notably, female critics were compared to prostitutes—and *compared themselves* to prostitutes—as if by selling their ideas, they were also selling their bodies. This epithet adhered especially to those few women who were able to make a living wage writing about art, those "career

critics” whose public voices were often uncomfortably (and unfairly) tied to their private lives as the friends, neighbors, and wives of artists. In the 1970s, recalls Lippard, “I called myself an art-historical whore, because I’d research anything anybody asked me to” (“Freelancing” 16). Lippard here simultaneously makes light of the mercenary aspects of art criticism and indicates how compromised it felt to be a woman marketing *herself*—“hustling” to get jobs—within the still-emerging phenomenon of females as professional art critics. For Lippard, this intellectual “whoring” applied in particular to art criticism, which she saw as distinctly female labor. As she wrote in 1971, “It is far easier to be successful as a woman critic, curator, or historian than as a woman artist, since these are secondary, or housekeeping activities, considered far more natural for women than the primary activity of making art” (“Prefaces” 42). Criticism for Lippard becomes domestic—housework—a service job, inherently feminized; as such, it is a form of upkeep, or what artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her 1969 manifesto termed “maintenance.” At a time when feminist activists and intellectuals such as Shulamith Firestone were reevaluating models of women’s labor as primarily based on two mutually constitutive economies—one domestic and one sexual—Lippard’s striking redefinition of criticism *as women’s work* (both prostitution and housekeeping) also works to unsettle a conception of housework as “naturally” women’s lot, and an unpaid one at that. Lippard’s association of criticism with housework occurred against the backdrop of feminist organizing for a wage-labor system of domestic work, as in the 1972 formation of the International Coalition for Wages for Housework.

Lippard’s somewhat mocking description of herself as an “art-historical whore,” like most self-deprecating jokes, uses a derogatory term preemptively so as to take the sting out of it. In fact, such criticisms were actually leveled at her, and in vituperative language meant to denigrate. Take this anonymous letter sent to Lippard in the early 1970s, after an Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Committee (an offshoot of the Art Workers’ Coalition, in which Lippard was a central figure) demonstration against the Museum of Modern Art in New York:

There she is, our Lucy, making speeches at meetings, handing out leaflets on the barricades at West 53rd Street [. . .]. She explains to her boy: “It’s so UNFAIR, darling. If only the Museum of Modern Art had given as much space to a show of your daddy’s work as they’re giving to Bill de Kooning’s, [. . .] WE might

have made it in the big time. Then Mommy wouldn't have had to work so hard, turning out all those potboilers. [. . .] That's why, darling, your mommy became an intellectual prostitute."
(Anonymous)¹⁵

The letter accuses Lippard of participating in feminist activism not due to her sense of social injustice but stemming from a personal grudge, and it aligns her criticism with turning tricks, alleging that her writings—her “potboilers”—are degraded and cheap. By mimicking a conversation between mother and son, the letter invokes her marriage to artist Robert Ryman and casts her as a crude status seeker. Its scathing tone speaks volumes about the resistance Lippard faced as she moved among her roles as critic, activist, mother, and feminist. In addition, it declares that Lippard’s writing is a transactional, bodily activity, performed for money and easy gratification. Equating a female critic with a “whore” in the 1960s and 1970s was a way to dismiss her writing, but it also draws attention to criticism and sex work as affective service economies.

Such accusations came at a time when the public/private divide was being interrogated and politicized by the women’s movement. The well-known feminist slogan “the personal is political” cuts both ways: within the hothouse of the New York art world, women were scrutinized for their intimate or social connections in ways men were not. The prostitute became the uneasy female counterpart to the male proletarian as the artists and critics of the Art Workers’ Coalition sought to metaphorize—or give language to—their special, and not always immediately visible, forms of labor. If women art workers looked to the designation of prostitute rather than claimed for themselves the status of the proletarian, as many male art workers did, it is no wonder. French feminist Christine Delphy wrote in 1977 that the word *proletariat* was overwhelmingly represented as male; for a woman to call herself proletarian was to “think of yourself as a man, and furthermore, to think of yourself a man of the most *glorious* category. It is to raise yourself to the rank of the cultural heroes. But this, in its double claim, is psychologically impossible and unthinkable for the majority of women” (132).

In the 1970s, the specter of “intellectual prostitution” cast its shadow over a wide range of females participating in social discourse—thus recalling the gendering of affective and intimate labor, labor that in this era was increasingly implicated in intellectual, service, and sex work alike. This is, however satirically, encapsulated by Woody Allen’s 1974 short

story “The Whore of Mensa,” in which a man confesses that he pays brainy Vassar and Brandeis graduates not for sex, but to *talk about ideas*. As one client of this rarified form of hooking confesses, “For a price, she’ll come over and discuss any subject—Proust, Yeats, anthropology. [. . .] See, I need a woman who’s mentally stimulating [. . .]. And I’m willing to pay for it. I don’t want an involvement—I want a quick intellectual experience, then I want the girl to leave” (37). Prefiguring the “girlfriend experience” that Bernstein discusses, the fulcrum of Allen’s humor is the sharp distinction between the intellectual satisfaction provided by a college coed and the sexual satisfaction that a prostitute can offer.

Allen’s—and Lippard’s—casual deployment of the metaphor of whoring stands in sharp contrast to fellow critic Krauss’s reaction against the infamous 1974 Lynda Benglis two-page advertisement in the pages of *Artforum* magazine. In this ad, a shiny, naked Benglis in rock-star sunglasses holds a double-headed dildo between her legs in a gesture of campy self-promotion (see fig. 7). Krauss, who was on the *Artforum* editorial board, recalled in an interview several decades later that this ad, which was paid for by Benglis after it was rejected as editorial content, “was tantamount to saying that we were all hookers together, the writers, as well as the artists. That we were all for sale. [. . .] I suppose as a woman writer, I identified with this—somehow I felt that this was *accusing* me, as a woman writer, of soliciting for artists in some way” (qtd. in Newman 415). Later, Krauss reiterated: “We thought the position represented by that ad was so degraded. We read it as saying that art writers are whores” (qtd. in Malcolm 233). Note the transition from artist as pornographer to art writer as whore: the “degradation” of Benglis’s gesture leaks out beyond the bounds of its two-page spread to contaminate the magazine’s editorial masthead.

Art historian Richard Meyer has discussed how this incident laid bare “the intimate proximity of commerce and criticism within the pages of *Artforum*” (249). Meyer expounds, “The ad was degrading not—or not only—because it presented the artist as a sexual commodity, but because it implied that the art writer herself was for sale on the open market” (74). Certainly, Krauss’s statements on the subject ratchet this proximity up to the level of the indecent, as she states that the Benglis ad hailed art writers, especially female art writers, as not only whores but possibly pimps as well, “soliciting for artists.” This intertwines three commodifications—of art, of ideas, and of women’s bodies. Krauss displays more than a deep uneasiness with the economics of reviewing contemporary

Figure 7
Lynda Benglis, two-
page advertisement,
Artforum magazine,
November 1974. Art
© Lynda Benglis/
Licensed by VAGA,
New York, NY



art and the art magazine's dependence on ad revenue; her anxiety turns on gendered questions of labor—the “oldest profession” is recruited as the most negative example of being paid to perform a service. In the Benglis ad debate, prostitution becomes a charged metaphor for the relation between criticism and promotion, although it is unclear who here is the prostitute. Is it Benglis, with her outlandish come-on, her offered-up body, and her provocative solicitation? Or is it the magazine writer who hawks her words?

This uncertainty was at the root of the objections stated by Krauss, Lawrence Alloway, and three others from the magazine's stable in a joint statement regarding the controversial ad, printed in the December 1974 issue of *Artforum*: “We are aware of the economic interdependencies which govern the entire chain of artistic production and distribution. Nonetheless, the credibility of our work demands that we always be on guard against such complicity, implied by the publication of this advertisement. To our great regret, we find ourselves compromised in this manner and that we owe our readers an acknowledgement of that compromise” (Alloway et al.). This compromised position implicates the magazine as intertwined with the economies of selling and buying; that the image is of a naked female body emphasized the uncomfortable association with the pimping of female flesh. Claiming that it dirtied the reputation of the magazine by objectifying women, the letter to *Artforum* also couched its protest against Benglis's ad in terms of feminism. But how much or how certainly this photograph objectifies is up for debate: it puts her body on display, to be sure, but as she provides her own phallus, that body is not necessarily easily available to the male viewer. More interestingly,

Benglis's posture queers her, for she holds a double-headed dildo at her crotch and thus conjures a phantom lesbian female partner (or penetrable male partner) who might utilize the other end; this queer aspect, which follows on the heels of the post-Stonewall gay rights movement in the United States, surely added another dimension to her transgression.¹⁴

As Jennifer Doyle has written, "The autonomy of art (the idea that aesthetic value is independent of economics, of politics, of the body) emerges against the negative example of prostitution" (51). In fact, Krauss's dismay about the declining autonomy of criticism seems to be the primary issue here, and it was a dismay widespread in the 1960s and 1970s, as the two engines of the market and the art press increasingly powered each other. For instance, abstract painter Ad Reinhardt complained that Greenberg had become more "an agent and a dealer" than a critic, with any pretense of objectivity eroded by surrounding mechanisms of publicity and celebrity (qtd. in Fuller 38). Krauss's revulsion at the apparently crass commercialism of *Artforum* led her to defect from its pages to found the journal *October*—notably devoid of any potentially sully advertising or lurid photographs of self-promoting artists. According to its founding editors in the initial issue, *October* would be "plain of aspect," with austere pages that include illustrations only as "determined by considerations of textual clarity" (Gilbert-Rolfe, Krauss, and Michelson 3).¹⁵ Unlike *Artforum*, *October* neither generates revenue by selling considerable ad space from galleries nor dedicates its pages to publishing reviews of contemporary exhibitions, but is instead run through an academic press. The self-conscious, professed disinterest toward the art market performed by the clean black-and-white images of *October* was meant to counter what Krauss believed to be the veritable pornography of ads and images in *Artforum*.

In her article "Minimalism and Biography," Anna C. Chave suggests that the interpersonal entanglements of the New York 1960s art world were central to the consolidation of the art world at that moment, as critics actively promoted their friends and lovers (149–63). It has been suggested that there might have been a further possible reason for Krauss's recoil: the triangle between her, Benglis, and Morris (they were friends, friendly rivals, and possible intimates). When revealed, such entanglements between artists and critics were usually to the detriment of women rather than men. (Critic Dore Ashton was reportedly dismissed from her post at *Art News* because she was married to a painter [Burnham 112].) A gossip account of the art world published in 1973 hinted at other "sordid

insinuations” regarding the “ties and relationships so sweet” and “liaisons” between artists and critics, both sexual and otherwise (Burnham 136).

Since the professionalization of art criticism took place within a small world of interconnecting social networks, one’s “personal” life sometimes did overlap with one’s “professional” life. Lippard, for one, has been forthright about the fact that she began her critical life writing about her friends in the 1960s and that such connections and collaborations were central to her feminist criticism in the 1970s. Speaking of her work with the feminist collective journal *Heresies*, she recalls, “I was writing *as part of* a familiar and sympathetic fabric rather than being an isolated individual or dissident voice” (“Prefatory” 88). In other words, she admits to the community ties, affinities, and affective connections that motor her criticism. Lippard’s allegiances are striking and only unique in that they are actively propelled by feminism. Previous, dominantly male circles of overlapping influence within art history, such as the Surrealists, were not castigated for cultivating unseemly, incestuous, or corrupt community ties by “prostituting” as Lippard was.

Ultimately, the connection of art and criticism to sex work in the 1970s could be understood as the result of several factors. First, for feminists, a vibrant women’s liberation movement freshly illuminated the power differentials generated by gender discrimination. Second, the redefinition of artistic labor made artists and critics alike newly aware of the materiality of their own intellectual worth. As artists moved away from making objects or products and started writing and performing, much art became akin to criticism, an act of translation or interpretation, part of what artist Andrea Fraser has called “artistic services” (“How to”). In the context of an art market grappling with its dependencies upon capital, such services were sometimes cast as suspect or debauched. The problem of patronage has long been gendered and was most famously metaphorized by Greenberg as an “umbilical cord of gold” that binds artists to their financial supporters (8). This image, like that of the prostitute, mobilizes a female body, implying a maternal connection between avant-garde artists and the upper class that nurtures them. Consider again the two positions assigned to Lippard: either mommy/wife or whore.

Art Paid Better

Has the shame of the moniker *prostitute* lessened since the 1970s? Benglis’s 1974 *Artforum* advertisement might not raise an eyebrow

in today's climate of casual female self-exposure of the "Girls Gone Wild" variety. In 1998, the artist Heilman-C presented professional sex workers giving live sex shows on demand for her one-person exhibition "Sex Acts" at New York's Jack Tilton Gallery, a gambit that "fail[ed] to garner the serious attention of the art press" (Auerbach). The *who cares* shrug that accompanied Heilman-C's exhibit is as much a sign of the relaxation of moralizing in the past decades as it is a symptom of general fatigue with overly simplistic equivalences between art and sex work.

Given the amounts of money that continue to change hands in the art market—a culture of seductive commerce that flies in the face of the current worldwide recession, described in broadly sexual terms as "overheated," "frenzied," or "near a climax"—art is widely recognized as libidinal, desirous, and transactional. Fashion photographer and filmmaker David LaChapelle titled his 2006 limited-edition monograph featuring editorials for *Vogue* and portraits of actors *Artists and Prostitutes*. As he has stated, he chose this title because "sometimes to be an artist is to be a prostitute, and vice versa" (qtd. in Elbies). Published by Taschen as an oversized, hard-copy, full-color volume, *Artists and Prostitutes* retails for upwards of \$2,000 and is itself a premiere example of expensive artworks-cum-fashion commodity fetish objects. LaChapelle takes prostitution as a catchall phrase for the escalating obsession with marketing personalities and celebrity. The book title suggests that all of us, men and women alike, are metaphorically "whores" in some sense (fame whores, style whores, publicity whores, etc.), selling ourselves in multiple marketplaces through the circulation of desires, contrivances, and tastes.

Beyond the realm of the metaphoric, people increasingly actually cross between these self-descriptors: they are, literally, artists *and* prostitutes, as evidenced by the popular annual exhibition of art (from photographs to performance to paintings) made by sex workers, the Sex Workers' Art Show Tour, which travels to colleges and art spaces around the United States, and the recently formed International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture, and Education. More and more, the categories of artist and sex worker are not mutually exclusive; performance artist and former prostitute/porn model Annie Sprinkle is only the most visible and well-known example. Many struggling young artists faced with the bleak financial realities of meager incomes and rising living costs choose to work in the sex industry to augment their small incomes. Seeking financial independence, they prefer the relatively flexible hours of working for

phone sex lines or in peep-show booths to feeling trapped by traditional nine-to-five jobs. But the vector running from scantily remunerated art-making to the comparatively ample compensation of sex work sometimes reverses. Sprinkle, for instance, moved in the other direction, from sex work to art, because, as she put it, “art paid better” (qtd. in McDonald).

Making the connection between these vocations explicit, Sprinkle has stated, “[A]lmost all the top women performance artists have told me (because I’ve met all my favorites) that they were in the sex industry as streetwalkers, go-go dancers, etc. I think the sex industry is a much bigger funder of the arts than the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts]” (qtd. in Juno and Vale 39). But Sprinkle’s enthusiasm is by no means universal; some have seen performance art using the naked female body as being on a murky or intentionally deceitful continuum with sex work. “It is perhaps not surprising,” writes Sheila Jeffreys in *The Idea of Prostitution*, “that some women performance artists learnt their skills in prostitution. They are, after all, simply providing similar performances, though to larger audiences who see themselves as intellectuals and art lovers rather than johns, and in theaters rather than in peep shows. Somebody is being had” (85). For Jeffreys, women on display—whether in brothels or art galleries—participate in sexual exploitation, women’s oppression, and objectification, regardless of self-identification, financial obligation, or institutional context.

In contrast to Jeffreys, art as sex work has been seen by some feminist artists not as a distillation of waged capitalism, but as importantly removed from the exchange economy, more “gifting” than “whoring” (Sprinkle, “Some” 68–70). Sprinkle claims that even if her actions as an artist might be identical to her actions as a sex worker, the two forms of labor remain separate. For her, art (even that which looks like sex work) has the potential to be transformative or personally fulfilling, whereas some of her sex work (embedded within a punitive market that she views as much more compromised by money, not to mention misogyny) has been at times damaging.¹⁶ In particular, Sprinkle finds relief within the context of performing for mixed-gender or majority-female art audiences. For her, the possible commodification of performance art (long fretted about by art historians) is by no means equivalent to the objectification of her body within the more explicitly transactional nature of prostitution. Likewise, Schneemann has said of her use of nakedness in her own performance pieces, “[I]n some sense I made a gift of my body to other women: *giving our bodies back to ourselves*” (194). It is unlikely she would have said this

about her participation in Morris's performance *Site*, which she reportedly found quite objectifying as another example of her use as the "Cunt Mascot on the men's art team" (196).

For many contemporary artists working in the last two decades, the sex industry remains a signature issue, but it has shifted away from the 1970s politics of empowerment illustrated by such projects as Tutti's. Recent artistic explorations of sex work do not, by and large, see it as a platform from which to launch an oppositional or liberated erotics but instead view it as just one occupation among others. To name a few examples: Christine Hill, a conceptual artist who has long explored the connections between commerce and art, briefly stripped as part of a performance project on menial labor. Hill, after relocating from the United States to Germany, worked a number of jobs that she considered art performances, including shoe shining, concessions selling, and erotic dancing, the last being another instance of badly paid employment while she explored the standard clichés of bohemian existence.

Nikki S. Lee, in her multiyear performance project on posing and passing, worked at a strip club for her *Exotic Dancers Project* (2000) as one of many different identities (regional, stylistic, age-based, etc.) she has inhabited, identities that sometimes, but not always, align with vocations. In a photograph documenting her immersion into sex work, Lee, wearing platform heels and a string bikini, bends over in front of a long mirror to survey her backside and adjust the scarf tied around her waist. This semiprivate moment unfolds in a space clearly demarcated for self-preparation. Dollar bills folded into the garter around her thigh signal the financial nature of this outfit, a work uniform that lays bare its mercantile operations (see fig. 8). Both Hill and Lee are part of a wider trend of what I have termed *occupational realism*, in which waged work is performed as an artistic strategy.¹⁷

I can only gesture to the many contemporary artists who plumb the sex industry across a range of media. For instance, photographers Nan Goldin, Reagan Louie, and Merry Alpern have extensively documented sex workers and clients, sometimes inhabiting the traditionally masculine role of the voyeur, as is the case with Alpern's *Dirty Windows* series (1993–94). Other artists confront the human rights issues raised by international sex trafficking, or approach sex work as a site of activist organizing. In a quasi-journalistic vein, Swedish artist Ann-Sofi Sidén's 1999 video installation "*Warte Mal! [Hey Wait!]*" features interviews with prostitutes, pimps, and police officers in a remote Czech Republic border town known for its sex

Figure 8
 Nikki S. Lee, *The Exotic Dancers Project (4)*, 2000.
 Chromogenic print.
 © Nikki S. Lee.

Courtesy of Sik-kema Jenkins & Co., New York



trade. As Claire Bishop commented about this piece, “Abduction, beatings, drugs and soul-destroyingly low-paid work are recurrent themes.” Moving more concretely into outreach, along the lines of the work Lacy pioneered in the 1970s, Austrian collective WochenKlausur has generated dialogues around problems of addiction among sex workers in Switzerland (*Intervention to Aid Drug-Addicted Women*, 1994–95). This artistic project resulted in the creation of a halfway house for prostitutes that was in operation for six years. Such an intervention pushes beyond the symbolic into strategic action.

Fraser’s 2003 *Untitled* has been arguably the most controversial recent investigation of the permeable border between art work and sex work.¹⁸ For this piece, Fraser had sex with an art collector at Manhattan’s Royalton Hotel for somewhere near the amount of \$20,000; their sixty-minute encounter was taped by a single stationary video camera, resulting in a video whose silence and grainy texture take on overtones of surveillance. This transaction was brokered in advance by her dealer and involved numerous contractual stipulations, including a provision that the collector, who was assured anonymity, had to be male, unmarried, and heterosexual. With these precise stipulations, she inhabited and thus commented on the expected female selling/male buying formula. But it is possible that by foreclosing any possibility of a queer encounter

(however unlikely) had a woman taken up her offer, Fraser guaranteed the heterosexualization of her piece, thus recapitulating the polarizing gender dynamic that prostitution cements.

When Fraser's video was shown at New York's Friedrich Petzel Gallery, the response from the art press spanned the gamut from indifferent to scandalized. "Andrea Fraser is a whore," was the opening sentence of a 2007 review of her work by *Village Voice* art critic Jerry Saltz. Saltz is quoting an unnamed fellow critic and goes on to defend Fraser's work; nonetheless, the insulting, shaming tone set by that initial statement shadows the rest of the article. In fact, the artist herself has disavowed this reading and was quoted in a *New York Times* article by Guy Trebay as saying that *Untitled* is "not a literalization of what is, in fact, a very old metaphor, that selling art is prostitution" (20).

Maybe it is more accurate to say that *Untitled* is *not only* a literalization; in this work, Fraser also comments on social relations and the charged exchanges between dealer, artist, collector, and audience. The potency of the art-as-prostitution metaphor stems from a widening uncertainty about what, exactly, the nature of artistic commodification is with regard to the market, given the persistent fetish of the author function. As Fraser has said, "All of my work is about what we want from art, what collectors want, what artists want from collectors, what museum audiences want. By that, I mean what we want not only economically, but in more personal, psychological and affective terms" (qtd. in Trebay 20). The category of artist as service provider has expanded in the past few decades with the uptick in artistic practices that are akin to critical curatorial or interpretive work, so that what is marketable is less an art object than the auratic presence of the artist. To cite a conversation (which included Fraser) that was transcribed in the pages of the journal *Grey Room*, "the artist is a currency" (Anastas, Bordowitz, Fraser, Koether, and Ligon). Bernstein has compellingly argued that much of what is for sale in sex work has become a traffic in intimacy. Fraser's project pushes us to think further about such intimacies—often disavowed—within the marketing imperatives of art exchange. Selling a piece of art, an object that is connected by some special quality back to the touch of the artist, involves the negotiation, purchase, and management of social affect in an economy marked by the consumption of bodies, goods, and emotions.

But given Fraser's interest in feminism and in art as an affective service, one might expect her to embrace the obvious—for some, all too obvious—relationship between *Untitled* and sex work. *Untitled* seems to

conflate selling sex and selling art, while Fraser's defensive renunciation serves to distance the work from, and even moralize about, "real" prostitution by eliding vital differences between the two, such as criminalization. Fraser's work is subtended and made possible by her privileges as a white, educated woman in the United States, whose occupation as an artist grants her a specially valued status. Disregarding the exacting punishments and policing of sex, even under the rubric of art, misses the real danger that artists trading sex for money continues to present in some contexts. In 2011, a Chinese artist named Cheng Li performed a piece at Beijing's Contemporary Art Exhibition Hall titled "Art Whore," in which he and a consensual female partner had sex before a small, invited audience. As a result, the artist was arrested and sentenced to a year of "re-education through labor" at a prison camp ("Performance").

One difficulty with art that uses prostitution as a broad metaphor for economic relationships or for gendered dynamics is the instability and porousness of the metaphor itself. It cannot be contained, it cannot be reined in, it cannot help but quickly skip down the chain of associations, back to the body and into the realm of the lived. And so: 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. However many parallels might be drawn, they cannot and should not be conflated. They have wildly different relationships to criminalization, regulation, disenfranchisement, violence, and physical threat; further, they are impacted unequally by injustices inflected by class, education, privilege, race, age, region, addiction, health, poverty, and sexuality. Sex work might be a choice, but it is one often made out of desperation, particularly within the lower registers of economic mobility. To imply that art work and sex work are mirror economies of each other is to ignore the real struggles, exploitations, and hardships of sex work and to diminish the real privileges, access, cultural value, and capital that accompany artistic work. It might be challenging to make a living as an artist—it is not easy money—but art making is generally viewed as a societal good rather than a corrupting vice. Different geopolitical realities make sex work in one context an employment choice, while in another, it is forced labor that is heavily scrutinized by the law and profoundly stigmatized by the public. By contrast, art making, no matter how compromised or underpaid, is not coerced, nor is it, except in very extreme cases of censorship, harshly punished by the state. In other words, to conflate art and sex work is to fundamentally elide the question of power.

Figure 9
 Carlos Ginzburg,
 “What Is Art? Prostitution,” Slought
 Foundation, Philadelphia, PA, 2006.

Courtesy of the
 artist.



Welcome to Our Dirty Commerce

The Baudelaire quotation “What is art? Prostitution” is certainly the pithiest, and arguably the most famous, assertion of a sexualized convergence between art and the market. Despite threatening to collapse into cliché, it continues to circulate visibly in a series of reenactments of Ginzburg’s 1974 piece (most recently in 2010, in New York, Paris, and Buenos Aires). A 2006 version of this performance at Philadelphia’s Slought Foundation featured a number of departures from Ginzburg’s initial piece: an actress rather than a prostitute held the sign; she was completely naked but for her thigh-high fishnet stockings; and the stenciled Baudelaire quote was translated into English for a U.S. audience (see fig. 9). In addition, the undertone of international friction from the initial performance has evaporated, as the woman hired in Philadelphia was a local. According to the curatorial statement by Osvaldo Romberg, the restaging of Ginzburg’s work asks questions about the “excessive commercial sex appeal” of current art exhibition strategies; it was also meant to comment on “the sadness and humiliation of *Women in the world in relation to Men, the Art World, and the figure of the nineteenth century intellectual [Baudelaire].*” But this reading of *sadness* and *humiliation* rests on a misunderstanding and decontextualization of Baudelaire’s words, one that has trailed Ginzburg’s piece from the outset.

Returning to Baudelaire’s original text, it is by no means clear that he equates prostitution with only feminized degradation; in fact, the quote reads in full, “Love is the taste for prostitution. There is, indeed, no noble pleasure that cannot be related to prostitution, at a show [*spectacle*], at a dancehall, everyone enjoys possessing everyone. What is Art? Prostitution. The pleasure of being in crowds is a mysterious expression of the

sensuous bliss in the multiplication of numbers” (649, my translation). According to an article about Ginzburg’s work by Marecla Iacob, the artist was keenly interested in this self-expanding aspect of Baudelaire, in particular the notion that “the prostitute, like the artist, pleasures the public, and pleasures no one in particular” (60). Further, Baudelaire expounds, “What is love? The need to go outside the self. Man is an adoring animal. To adore is to sacrifice and prostitute oneself. Thus all love is prostitution” (692, my translation). In other words, prostitution for Baudelaire—no less than poetry—is a kind of intense openness to the world, a vulnerable and sensuous decentering of the self, a renunciation of unitary subjectivity that leads to an intoxicating influx of sensations of the many.

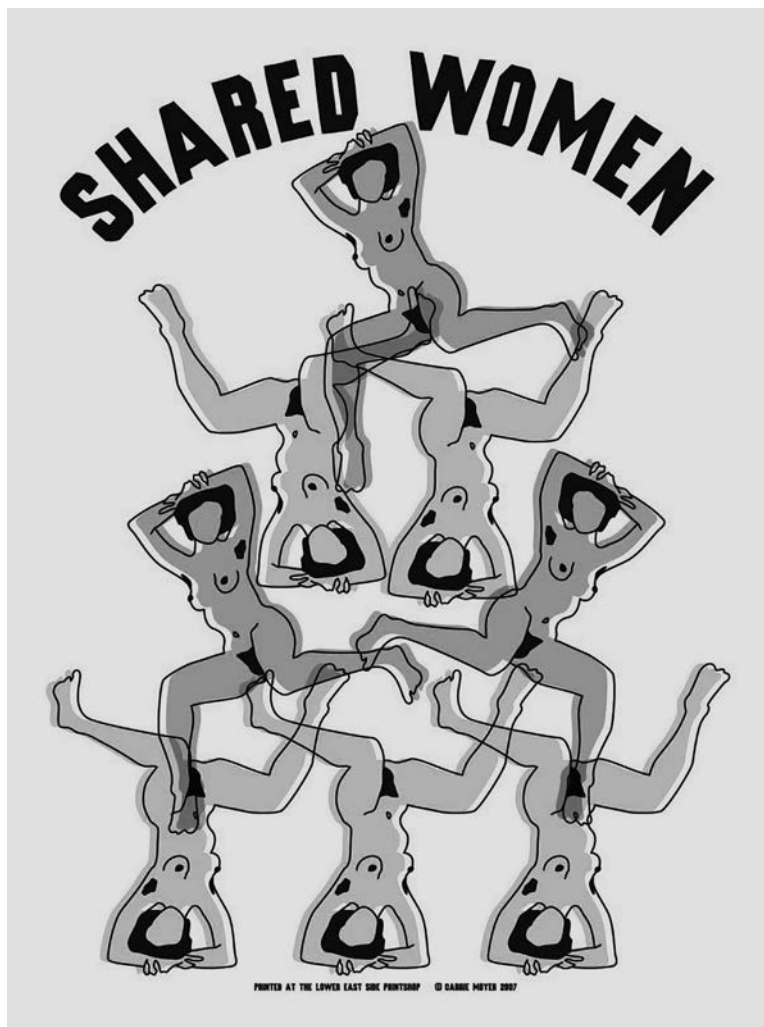
Literary critics such as Leo Bersani and Maria Scott have offered readings of this enigmatic text. Bersani, in *Baudelaire and Freud*, notes that Baudelaire’s “feelings about the prostitution of self inherent in love and art vary wildly” (9). It is even at times holy, as “the being most prostituted of all is the being of all beings, that is, God, since for every individual God is the supreme friend, since God is the common, inexhaustible reservoir of love” (Baudelaire 692, my translation). Baudelaire, that is, equates prostitution with the infinite capacity for destabilizing empathic pleasure across or beyond gender, a far cry from the Marxist and feminist questions regarding dispossession, waged work, or feminized labor. As Scott comments, across Baudelaire’s oeuvre, “The role of penury in a woman’s decision to become a prostitute is strangely occluded” (74). The unanchored loss of self implicit in the prostitute is both orgiastic and terrifying, as it pivots, finally, on a kind of openness to shared sensations, that is to say, affective intimacies that cannot be confined to a purely mechanistic understanding of the market.

For many artists since the 1970s, art-as-prostitution offers an opportunity to reflect on the gendered commodification of social relations, the consumability of critique, and the anxiety of autonomy. However, expanding on the original Baudelaire metaphor presents quite a different picture of the art work/sex work equivalence, for it alludes neither to the taint of art by capitalism nor to a shock to bourgeois moralism, but to an unruly libidinal aesthetic exchange that is not necessarily financial or physical. Released from normal constraints of gender and sexuality, it even becomes a bit queer—that is, it does not imply a heterosexual frame or possession in the sense of property.

This kind of Baudelarian perspective was taken up by a group of queer women artists in the 2007 exhibit *Shared Women*, curated by Eve

Figure 10
 Carrie Moyer,
Shared Women,
 exhibition poster,
 Los Angeles Con-
 temporary Exhibi-
 tions, 2007.

Courtesy of the
 artist.



Fowler, Emily Roysdon, and A. L. Steiner at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) (see fig. 10). Rather than shy from the accusations of tarnished favoritism faced by the likes of Lippard, *Shared Women* embraced the affective connections forged between artists, critics, and curators. The curatorial statement explains: “*Shared Women* is an exhibition that is dependent on cronyism, feminism and nepotism. [. . .] This is a gay feminist show that picks up the tools of our mothers and refashions them to seduce and influence each other. [. . .] Welcome to our dirty commerce” (Fowler, Roysdon, and Steiner). *Shared Women* took up the sexualized language elsewhere shunned and turned it into something to be celebrated, particularly vis-à-vis queer community formation. In

the exhibit's promotional image, designed by dyke artist Carrie Moyer, schematized nude female bodies intertwine, their limbs exuberantly and suggestively overlapping as they form a triangular pattern. Each identical, faceless woman holds her hands behind her head and has her legs spread—typically passive postures. But rather than have them lie prone, Moyer has oriented them upright and upside down around a vertical axis, with feet playfully plunging into crotches, harking back to Baudelaire's "sensuous bliss in the multiplication of numbers." Contrary to art-world murmurings that take a disapproving, even conspiratorial tone toward interpersonal connections, the curators of *Shared Women* argued that they can be generative and sustaining.

Contemporary art history—itself a contested field that bleeds into contemporary art criticism in an ever consolidating network of distribution and publicity—often stems from or results in writers and living artists having active dialogues and is hence inescapably intertwined with relationality and intimacy. Though these dialogues obviously occur within an overarching context of the market, they can also forge spaces of interest and delight—even passion—in discursive exchanges not totally confined or dictated by such economic relations. If art criticism, and even scholarship more widely, is an outgrowth of affect, of profound if sublimated desire, then we all need to admit the erotics of our critical investments, the libidinal interests that drive our academic pursuits, particularly when, as in the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary art history and criticism might be said to be metaphorically "in bed" with their subjects. That is to say, critics sometimes get to know artists personally as well as professionally; we often use their words as our archive; we might even be friends with them. The exhibit *Shared Women* proposes that the bonds forged by engaging with someone's work can be intellectually gratifying and that those bonds foster vibrant artistic and critical communities.

In the end, artistic approaches to sex work since the 1970s cannot be generalized; the sometimes incommensurable positions taken about prostitution relate to its own internal contradictions. "The prostitute" is stretched thin across the threshold of the literal and the metaphoric, put to work as almost no other figure is. Some artists cast out provocations aimed at disrupting conventions, some expand on sex work as an allegory for affective labor. Other projects, including those by Lacy and WochenKlausur, probe the punitive political economies of feminized labor and move into advocacy. These community-based artistic strategies exist on a continuum with activist practices. As they call for the projection of

different political possibilities, it could be said that both art and activism require an imaginative leap of faith that transgresses the boundaries between the lived and the metaphoric. Daring to propose alternatives to patriarchal economies is one of the riskiest and most invigorating aspects of feminism as a social and artistic movement.

With this in mind, we might venture to envision what it would look like if sex workers and artists organized together for a more just economy.¹⁹ If this vision of solidarity across disparate class positions and variously valued forms of feminized labor seems remote, perhaps the art-as-sex work comparison, with all its ambivalence, offers us a new way to think about the limits and promises of cross-class identifications as it beckons us to reconceive the way categories of affective labor are organized and policed. Imagining such solidarity requires destigmatizing sex work as well as recognizing that the intimacies and affective economies inherent in scholarship, art, and criticism can connect with the intimacies of social movements. It also leads us to interrogate models of pleasure and exchange beyond prostitution in feminist art and feminist art criticism, models that address the art market's relentless circulations of dollars, ideas, and bodies as they continue to be framed by gender, affect, and power.

I tested out some initial ideas on this subject at the 2006 College Art Association annual conference as part of a panel chaired by Matthew Jesse Jackson and Andrew Perchuk. I thank them for that opportunity and for their comments. In the years since then, I have benefited from the gracious assistance and insightful feedback provided by the differences editors, Johanna Burton, Denise Davis, Carrie Lambert-Beatty, Celeste Langan, Lilith Mahmud, Jaleh Mansoor, Richard Meyer, Ann Pellegrini, and, most of all, Mel Y. Chen.

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Notes

- 1 The catalog for this show does not include documentation of Ginzburg's piece, which the artist arranged just prior to the opening of the exhibit (Glusberg). In this 1974 version, rather than translate Baudelaire into Dutch (or his native Spanish), Ginzburg maintained the original French text.
- 2 This presumed feminization and heterosexualization of prostitution does not take into account the large population of transgender sex workers; nor does it include men who exchange sex for money, primarily called escorts, hustlers, and gigolos or specifically designated "male prostitutes." Furthermore, the straight/queer divide does not always structure male prostitution, as in "trade" and those

- who are “gay-for-pay.” While much could be said about male homosexual prostitution in art, it falls outside the scope of my discussion. Doyle helpfully theorizes this subject and provides a substantial look at Andy Warhol through the “rhetoric of prostitution.”
- 3 The word *pornography* comes from a Greek term that means “writing about prostitutes.” Linda Williams provides an excellent analysis of the will to see in pornography and the complicated relationship between the visual and haptic.
 - 4 See, for instance, the fascination with prostitution in the writings of Slavoj Žižek, esp. *Metastases*.
 - 5 Some members of the British Artists Union, founded in 1972, demanded wages and governmental benefits for all artists. And as Andrea Giunta chronicles, Argentine artists in the 1970s actively sought connections with workers and activists as they attempted to move from artistic object making to political agitation.
 - 6 Artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s identified with the working class in lurching and unsystematic ways. As such, the term *art workers* was persistently riven with tensions and contradictions (Bryan-Wilson, *Art*).
 - 7 Viewing sex work through the lens of labor allows for questions of gendered production, class, commodification, the market, and value, though it cannot always account for the specific issues of regulation and moralization that attend to prostitution. To sensitively contend with such registers in their local circumstances, Prabha Kotiswaran calls for a “postcolonialist materialist feminist theory of sex work” (51).
 - 8 Though she was not in touch with the New York art workers, St. James met with artist Lacy as part of Lacy’s prostitution project (Lacy, “Prostitution” 6) and later had contact with the Los Angeles-based Feminist Art Workers, a group that formed in 1976.
 - 9 Aspects of nonreproductive labor, including housework and prostitution, have been understood within feminist terms (see Federici; and Fortunati).
 - 10 This is further discussed in Foster.
 - 11 Lippard is quite frank about the extensive economic instabilities that accompanied her life as a freelance critic (“Freelancing”).
 - 12 Greenberg’s quote emphasizes that many (although not all) of these female critics were Jewish; the conjunctions between Jewish cultural identity and radical politics in the 1960s, including feminism, have been explored by Schultz.
 - 13 The letter is undated, but its unmistakable references to specific actions locate it sometime around 1970–71. I explore this letter further in *Art Workers*.
 - 14 Benglis was at this time also exploring same-sex sexuality in works like her video *Female Sensibility* (1973), which features a close-up of the artist kissing another woman.
 - 15 *October* as a forum for scholarly art criticism was forged in conscious contrast to the advertising-oriented *Artforum* (Crow).
 - 16 Sprinkle’s performance *Post-Porn Modernist* (1989–95) included a segment called “100 Blow Jobs,” in which Sprinkle attempted to exorcise the bad experiences she had had performing fellatio for

- money (the 100 represent a small minority of what she estimates to be about 3,500).
- 17 This strand of artistic practice, in which art becomes a job (or a job becomes the art), continues across a spectrum of class positions (Bryan-Wilson, “Occupational”).
- 18 Responses to this work have been voluminous and varied within both popular and scholarly contexts (see Anastas; Cahan).
- 19 During the 2000 strike of the union for Museum of Modern Art staff, the Professional and Affiliated Staff Association (PASTA MOMA), one of the small handful of artists who refused to cross the picket line was Julia Query, the maker of *Live Nude Girls Unite!*, a documentary film about the unionization of strippers at San Francisco’s Lusty Lady strip club.
- Query had been invited to screen her movie as part of MOMA’s film series, but in solidarity with the strikers, she honored the picket line and declined the museum’s invitation. Instead, she held a screening at New York University as a benefit for Local 3882–AFT, NYU’s clerical worker’s union. The evening included reports from United Students Against Sweatshops, the NYU graduate student union, and the PASTA MOMA campaign. With this gesture, Query’s status as a worker trumped her status as sex worker and as artist. More recently, fall 2011 witnessed a moment—unfolding as I complete this text—of potentially interesting cross-class alliances, given the Occupy movement’s emphasis on the 99 percent that enables new kinds of affiliations between workers of all types, nonworkers, students, and others.

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