

Essential Workers

Curated by Claire Klima



Leah Schrage, Still from *Quarantine & Chill* (2020)

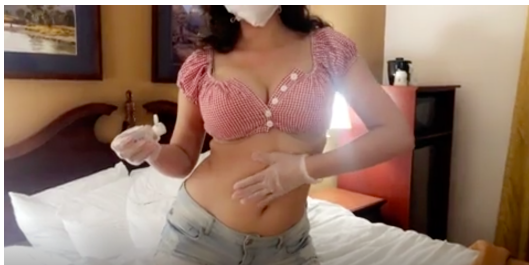
Dr. Paula Burleigh
ART 250: Contemporary Strategies in Art
May 18, 2021

Abstract

This exhibition examines the tactic of reclaiming sexual expression as a subversion of the male gaze. Agency is threatened by the gaze, and contemporary artists Leah Schrager, Juniper Fleming, Kate Peters, and Candice Breitz challenge this threat through visual representations of sex workers. Consumption of digital pornography skyrocketed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, prompting resurgence in discourse around the rights of sex workers which are already neglected but have become even more difficult to define as that work branches into digital platforms. Due to the prevalence of patriarchal frameworks, sex workers who fall victim to sex crimes are rarely able to seek protection, and are often policed unfairly in other respects. Andrea Fraser's film considers overlaps between difficulties establishing agency for women in the high art world. Scarlot Harlot coined the term "sex work," and her film debuted just before the World Wide Web was accessible to the public, as part of a demonstration calling for sex worker rights. Annie Sprinkle was also grappling with this subject matter under postmodern frameworks. This discursive exhibition assesses tactics of subverting the ever-expanding gaze and regaining agency over sexual expression. *Essential Workers* invites visitors to consider their reactions to individuals electing to exercise their bodily autonomy in this manner both in the digital realm and in the physical.

Exhibition Checklist

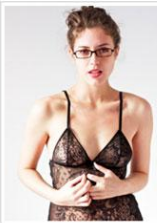
- Leah Schrager/"Ona," [Quarantine & Chill](#), 2020



- Leah Schrager/"Sarah White," [Naked Therapy](#), 2010-2015

Sarah White Therapy
The Original Naked Therapy Practice

WELCOME **NAKED THERAPY** ABOUT PHOTOS FAQs ETC. ▾



Naked Therapy (N.T.) is an experience that combines therapy and creative play therapy, with the added honest and unique insights through the experience with a comfortable, accepting, even fun environment awareness of their feelings that is freeing, and a their full potential. Just as dreams unlock the unphysical, and/or intellectual.

A Naked Therapy session takes place via webcam course of the session, yet the process of undress session the therapist and client talk about what the client and therapist also engage in arousal on the client and the client/therapist relationship.

Naked Therapy is different for every client because. And different clients seek Naked Therapy for different someone significant. Some are married and the relationship problems and want help working their practice and improve in that area. Some have u

- Kate Peters, [Cam Girls](#), 2015-present



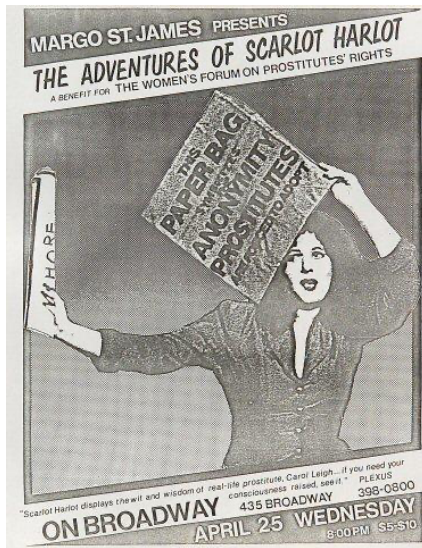
- Juniper Fleming, [Predatory Prostitute](#), 2017



- Candice Breitz, [TLDR](#), 2017



- Scarlot Harlot, *The Adventures of Scarlot Harlot*, 1980



- Scarlot Harlot, *Sex Workers Take Back the Night*, 1990



- Andrea Fraser, *Untitled*, 2004



- Annie Sprinkle, *Post-Porn Modernist*, 1989



- Stills from COUM Transmissions, *Prostitution*, 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: Musée d'Art Moderne. Paris: Galleria Borzogna.

Label Texts

Kate Peters, *Cam Girls*, 2015-present

Cam Girls consists of portraits taken remotely of workers who make a living selling their digital time and attention. Kate Peters interacts with each model through her webcam and poses them in positions which echo art historical precedents. Remote photoshoots are employed by massive magazines and other editorials since COVID-19 restrictions begged innovation, but Peters began this practice before the pandemic. Documenting digital sex workers through a digital medium allows the models to retain autonomy over their respective practice - Peters does not ask them to meet with her in person in order to be photographed in a legitimate way. Some of the models remain anonymous by leaving their face out of their images. Peters exercises emotional labor with her models by communicating extensively to establish clear boundaries and expectations, contrasting behavior digital prostitutes sometimes endure in their work. *Cam Girls* presents new-age sex workers and extends the coded visual language of female figure photography to them in order to reinforce their power in their representation.

Juniper Fleming, *Predatory Prostitute*, 2017

Juniper Fleming considers the language around sex workers when they are victims of violent crimes. The term “predatory prostitute” was coined in a press conference discussing Aileen Wuornos, a so-called serial killer whose death penalty sentence was highly politicized. Wuornos maintained until she died that she killed those two men in self-defense. Fleming considers the systems which situate prostitutes as acceptable victims. The first clip in the video shows the attorney general’s vilification of Wuornos, and Fleming contrasts this with another clip later from a true crime series about a serial killer who targets sex workers (and successfully murdered more than ninety people). *Predatory Prostitute* weaves scenes from cinemas between journalistic clips to demonstrate the widespread nature of the constructed perception of sex work. Juniper Fleming calls audiences to consider the intentional weaponization of prostitutes’ sexuality and how it hinders progress towards protecting sex workers.

Exhibition Essay

Sex work and visual art have a complicated interwoven history. Female figures are historically employed in the Western canon to serve as an allegorical representation of virtue, or lack thereof, and it wasn't until the turn of the twentieth century that women could be depicted as human beings. Even then, it was at the hand of male painters. Titian's *Venus of Urbino* informed a visual language that only continued to grow. Impressionists radicalized the medium by interpolating viewers into scenes with the female subjects. Eduard Manet's *Olympia* toused feathers at its reveal due to the scene depicting solicitation of services from a prostitute. The girl's shoes are still on and her hand is covering her crotch. Her handmaiden is bringing her flowers which implies her interlocher, the viewer, brought them for her, customary for this service at the time. Edgar Degas created many famous works of ballet dancers. Art historians have long considered the power dynamics present within his paintings, which he intentionally retained. He often depicted the dancers being watched by old men who were the dancers' sponsors. Being a dancer was a scandalous profession, and in order to engage in the practice, many young women had to endure sexual advancements from men who would support their endeavors.

Modernism left little room for female presenting creators. The role of "woman" in art was to be an object of bemusement, not create the objects. However, embracing sexuality is seen as a manipulation of that bemusement, or a trick. Postmodernism gave way to Laura Mulvey's coining of the "male gaze," and first and second wave feminist movements explored ways to subvert the gaze. Guerrilla Girls posters were plastered around New York City in the early 1980's counting how many female nudes were owned by museums versus how many female artists they collected from (the numbers were disproportionate, of course). However, sex workers were left out of much early feminist discourse. Profiting off of the male gaze was not seen as empowering - that is a more recent rhetoric.

Sex work is the oldest occupation. The term "sex work" was coined by Scarlet Harlot, a transwoman who dedicated much of her activism to establishing footing for prostitutes in the feminist movement. Two of her films, *The Adventures of Scarlet Harlot* (1980) and *Sex Workers Take Back the Night* (1990), are included in the exhibition to demonstrate the parallels in conversations then to those happening now. Videos from Annie Sprinkle and COUM Transmissions are included as well to demonstrate other contributions to the dialogue Harlot was pioneering. Prostitution has taken on many forms and adapts with each visual medium. Painted portraits were used for pornographic imagery, and the camera and film allowed new room for mass production of such media. However, protections for the subjects of pornography are few and far between. Artists included in this exhibition pose the argument that reasons for the lack of protections intersect with feminist discourse around oppression. Legislating protections has been made even more complicated by the advent of digital media.

When the process by which sexuality can be represented is not extended to the subject of said representation, the resulting messaging can be perverse. Laura Mulvey argues that the male gaze stems from the castration complex. While this argument is fraught with gender binaries, the premise is that when men represent women, they tend to do so in a way that only considers how they differ from men. Mulvey argues this representation, specifically in film, is

commonly that of an object of desire.¹ Sex workers had this rhetoric weaponized against them. Annie Sprinkle and Scarlot Harlot alike were subject to criticism from first- and second-wave feminists who viewed their practices as catering to the male gaze rather than subverting it. The argument posed by Scarlot Harlot and Annie Sprinkle is this: why does sexual representation only belong to men? If men are consuming me as an object of their desire, why can I not have a say in how I am consumed?

Politics of representation only grow more complex as access to cameras, internet, and other sources of production and consumption of media becomes more widespread. “Deep fakes” threatened the careers of many digital sexworkers.² On the one hand, the internet promises a more democratized distribution of content, but at the advent of digital sex work, the industry was initially dominated by men. The anonymous nature of the medium meant an initial surge in porn consumption, but also that men could pose as any “object” they saw fit. As a result, digital sex work has become more “masculinized.”³

Contemporary visual artists are exploring more tactics of subverting the gaze as the extension of that gaze grows wider and more omnipresent.⁴ Previously employed subversion techniques, like reappropriating the art historical canon with images of sex workers, continue to be exercised as in Kate Peters’s *Cam Girls*. Video artists like Juniper Fleming and Candice Breitz contribute to the traditions established by Annie Sprinkle and Scarlot Harlot through performance and activism while also calling attention to further intersections of oppression for sex workers of color or in poverty. The videos included all outline the means by which prostitutes have been vilified through various forms of media representation. Leah Schragger’s practice involves being a sex worker, another precedent established by Harlot and Sprinkle. Many of these contemporary artists were included in *Sex Workers’ Pop-Up* (2020), an exhibition that was cut short by three days due to COVID-19.⁵ Andrea Fraser arguably also takes on the role of sex worker, but her performance demonstrated the overlaps in consumption of sex and artwork. *Untitled* further argues the nature by which the art world informs and is informed by the same patriarchal structures that affect prostitution. It also shows a disparity in how white women belonging to a certain echelon of creators are portrayed when partaking in the same acts other women are vilified for.

Essential Workers seeks to stimulate dialogue around politics of representation, specifically the representation of sex workers. Conversations around consumption and distribution of porn have been brought to the forefront, and can be connected to greater conversations around how labor is valued. As the United States continues to struggle its way out of crisis, it is imperative to consider ways to better protect citizens who perform necessary

¹ Laura Mulvey (Autumn 1975). “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. *Screen*. 16 (3): 6–18. doi:10.1093/screen/16.3.6.

² Samantha Cole, “Deepfakes Were Created As a Way to Own Women’s Bodies-We Can’t Forget That,” *VICE* (VICE Magazine, June 18, 2018), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nekqmd/deepfake-porn-origins-sexism-reddit-v25n2>.

³ Jeff Nagy. “Pink Chat: Networked Sex Work before the Internet.” *Technology and Culture* 62, no. 1 (2021): 57-81. doi:10.1353/tech.2021.0002.

⁴ Ana Finel Honigman, “Divisions Between Art and Sex Work Grow Blurrier During Coronavirus Pandemic,” *ARTnews.com* (ARTnews.com, May 4, 2020), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/artists-sex-workers-coronavirus-pandemic-1202685830/>.

⁵ “Sex Workers’ Pop-Up,” *Sex Workers’ Pop-Up* (Open Society Foundations, 2020), <https://www.sexworkerspopup.org/>.

jobs. Whether sex work is an “essential” position may be controversial, but the same goes for all undervalued laborers, from food service to healthcare. Hang-ups around valuing labor are still intrinsically tied to the classist, sexist, and racist systems in which the labor is exercised.

Essential Workers calls visitors to consider these intersections and assess their own contributions to said systems.

Bibliography

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