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SEX WORKERS AS “CONCRETE OTHERS”:
POSSIBILITIES AND PERILS

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SEX WORKERS AS “CONCRETE OTHERS”: POSSIBILITIES AND PERILS

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Abstract

Sex workers have long served as muses for some of the world's best-known artists. Though we see these women, exposed in various states of undress, on the walls of many of the world's most famous museums, they remain relatively anonymous. Visitors who stop to read the panels accompanying these works are rarely encouraged to reflect on questions about how exploitation empowerment might be observed through an intersectional lens, the role of sex work in society today, and what the defiant or vulnerable expressions on these women's faces might tell us about their relationships to the artists wielding paintbrushes and a different kind of power. This article outlines a recent pedagogical experiment at the Art Gallery of Ontario in which a small group of former and current sex workers engaged in a feminist hack of the institution's European Modern galleries. Drawing on Hamington's (2004) feminist ethics of care, a key component of which is to highlight the experiences of “concrete others” so that they are “no longer known only as abstract agents who are interchangeable with any others” (Hamington, 2004, p. 43), the participants in this study critiqued the labels accompanying two works of art depicting sex workers, and imagined what could be written instead if those with real-life experience in the profession were to interpret these canvasses for the general public. While Hamington's assessment that “knowledge creates the potential for care” (p. 43) may be correct, we argue that special considerations must be taken when it comes to applying a feminist ethics of care to sex-worker populations.

Résumé

Depuis longtemps, les travailleuses du sexe jouent le rôle de muse pour bon nombre d'artistes de renommée mondiale. Même si ces femmes se retrouvent, à divers degrés de nudité, sur les murs de plusieurs des musées les plus connus au monde, elles demeurent plutôt anonymes. Les personnes qui s'arrêtent pour lire les panneaux

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qui accompagnent ces œuvres sont rarement encouragées à réfléchir aux questions comme la possibilité d'examiner l'autonomisation de l'exploitation à partir d'une perspective intersectionnelle, le rôle du travail du sexe dans le société d'aujourd'hui ou ce que les expressions effrontées ou vulnérables de ces femmes pourraient nous dire sur leur relation aux artistes armés de pinceaux et d'un autre type de pouvoir. Cet article décrit une récente expérience pédagogique menée par l'Art Gallery of Ontario avec un petit groupe de travailleuses du sexe actuelles et anciennes impliquées dans une action féministe ciblant les galeries d'art moderne européen de l'institution. S'inspirant de l'éthique féministe des soins de Hamington (2004), dont une composante clé est de souligner les expériences des « autres concrets » (« concrete others ») pour qu'ils « ne soient plus connus uniquement comme agents abstraits qui sont interchangeable avec n'importe qui d'autre » (traduction libre) (Hamington, 2004, p. 43), les personnes ayant participé à l'étude ont critiqué les étiquettes associées à deux œuvres dans lesquelles figurent des travailleuses du sexe et ont imaginé ce qui pourrait être écrit à leur place si des personnes avec une expérience réelle de cette profession avaient à interpréter ces tableaux pour le grand public. Bien que l'observation de Hamington selon laquelle « les connaissances créent le potentiel de soins » (traduction libre) (p. 43) puisse être correcte, nous soutenons qu'il faut faire preuve de grande prudence en appliquant une éthique féministe des soins aux populations des travailleuses du sexe.

We meet at the front doors of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) early one summer morning. Though Alice went to bed early in preparation for our morning meet-up, Lauren was up every hour breastfeeding her infant daughter (who is tagging along for the tour, and whose coos and "I'm tired of being trapped in this stroller" protests ring loud and clear on the recording of our conversation). Andrea was up late performing at the Bed Post Sex and Sexuality Variety Show, reading an excerpt from her book *Modern Whore: A Memoir*, about the two years she spent working as an escort in Toronto. Our fifth participant, let's call her "Hallie," requested we change her name and that we not disclose any information about her personal life. While she was keen on being part of the tour and discussion and gave permission to use her contributions in this article, she opted not to take part as a co-author for reasons that will be explored in the coming pages. Three of the five of us are past or present sex workers. Alice mostly works as an escort based in Toronto. Andrea worked as an escort and, after a brief hiatus, recently returned to the industry as a stripper. Hallie has worked as a stripper across Canada and abroad. Lauren is an educator at the AGO and has been leading tours for adult groups in the museum for more than a decade. Her little daughter is only a few months old and focuses on the post-impressionist brushstrokes and chewing her mama's finger while we adults launch into a conversation about critical feminist education in museum settings.

We have all met at the AGO to perform a bit of a feminist museum "hack" related to sex-worker representation within the institution. As a focal point for our discussion, Lauren has selected two paintings for which our group will later write alternative labels. Clover (2017) defined the museum "hack" as a

participatory visual method...that enables educators to use the museum exhibitions to deconstruct accepted social, political, and cultural norms

that are both visible and invisible in museum narratives. The aim is to illuminate the limitations or bias of decisions made around images and stories as well as our own complicity in simply accepting those as told/shown... (p. 86)

As we approach the first work of art, hanging in the European Modern galleries, we reflect on the many different ways learning takes place in a museum setting.

Clover, Sanford, Johnson, and Bell (2016) reminded us that “although preservation and conservation seem their most important mandates,” institutions like the AGO are, “by their own admission, first and foremost, pedagogical institutions” (p. 113). Hooper-Greenhill (1992) echoed this sentiment when she said, “Knowledge is now well understood as the commodity that museums offer” (p. 2). Learning takes on many forms in this building. Curators wield a certain amount of power to select exhibition themes and determine how the “conversation” between works on display frame the story being told. The label panels accompanying certain pieces have the potential to scaffold visitors’ viewing experience with other knowledge that curators and interpretive planners deem important.¹ Educators themselves may employ pedagogy that either reaffirms the status quo or encourages those taking part in tours to make personal connections, think critically about what’s before them, and consider why certain artworks and artists are collected and exhibited (Spring, Smith, & DaSilva, 2018). Though art galleries and museums may appear to be objective, unbiased, and “detached from real world politics,” politics is front and centre within these institutions and actually impacts nearly all aspects of what the public is seeing and how it is presented (Phillips, 2011, p. 17).

Our first stop on the tour serves as a case in point. We find ourselves in a small gallery in the Modern European collection that is devoted to the representation of women. The vast majority of works on display in this gallery show women in domestic settings—a mother holding a baby next to a bed, older women wearing heavy dresses and gossiping among patterned wallpaper; Hammershoi’s always faceless wife is there too, quietly turned away from the viewer and toward the dinnerware. Across the room, staring them down, is the sex-worker subject in *The Purple Garter*, painted in 1910 by Kees Van Dongen. This is the first piece we stop to consider in depth on our tour. The panel accompanying this work says:

Turn-of the Century Paris had a reputation as a sin city. Prostitution (which was legalized) was front and centre in novels, the press, scientific journals and even popular songs. Debates raged about morality, class, family life and especially health, due to outbreaks of syphilis. Many artists like Edgar Degas and Pablo Picasso turned to this quintessentially urban and modern subject. Here, Van Dongen’s prostitute, identifiable by her telltale stockings, holds us in her seductive gaze.”

This first piece and its accompanying description spark a lively conversation almost immediately. The weightiest themes discussed include the political implications of using the term “prostitute” instead of “sex worker”; the age-old subject/object debate when it comes to women being represented in art; and the colours and composition of the work itself and how these things relate to the model’s psychological state and possible intentions.

1 Of course, the AGO also adheres to museological standards when writing labels (see, for example, Serrell, 2015; Wetterlund, 2013).

Lauren records (and later transcribes) our full conversation. We then collaborate for several weeks (mostly via email), deliberating how we might rewrite the label panels for artworks we encountered from a sex-worker perspective.

We eventually agree on this alternative label copy for Van Dongen's painting:

Van Dongen has titled this work of art *The Purple Garter*, but the garter itself is barely noticeable; the main focus is clearly this woman's naked body. Her breasts, torso, and thighs are shown in the brightest light. Her face, tinted with green, is somewhat obscured. Perhaps her "swamp monster" or snake-like shadowy appearance is related to the fact that there had been a recent outbreak of syphilis in Paris and sex workers were often (and still are) the target of much moral panic and outrage. Or perhaps her somewhat occluded gaze is more a reference to her state of mind. She looks as if she knows she's on display—hustling. Perhaps she's just started a long shift; she's tilting her head and tipping her hat, and smiling just enough to give the men the entertainment they've come for, but she's also holding back, conserving her energy for the long night ahead. She even has one hand behind her back. Perhaps she's not showing all her cards until her client pays up? Or maybe she's reluctant to give too much of herself, her real character, away to the men (Van Dongen included) who show up to ogle at her constructed persona. Van Dongen subtitled this painting "a study in red light," but it's likely he (and countless other male artists of his era) were interested in more than just the lighting when they visited Paris brothels. How might you compare this woman to the others depicted in this gallery? Who among them is most liberated/oppressed? There are age-old debates about whether sex work is empowering or exploitative, whether women like the one depicted here are predators or prey. Surely, in the early 20th century, sex work was one of the only ways for women to achieve economic independence. Furthermore, most people in society today likely wouldn't consider their jobs "empowering." Why do we hold sex work to a higher moral standard? Why can't it be seen as a job like any other? Why are sex workers often considered to be exploited for "selling" their bodies while men working in more male-dominated professions that rely equally as heavily on physical labour (movers, for example, or construction workers) aren't accused of doing the same? Can making money in and of itself be empowering?

Our goal in rewriting imagined label panels is twofold. On the one hand, we feel it is necessary to call attention to museums' and art galleries' history of sexual discrimination and exploitation that persists to this day. We believe critical feminist educators informed by the sex-worker rights movement can help uncover patriarchal assumptions and what Pollock (1988) referred to as "phallogentric thought" that inform contemporary exhibitions and adult education in general (p. xx). Secondly, we want to provide readers with an example of what an alternative might look like if "women's various and differing experiences, needs, and knowledges" were incorporated into the design of exhibitions (Clover, 2015). We

believe that the perspective offered by sex workers themselves is important in an art gallery setting—particularly one that is themed around representation of those in the profession. Countless world-famous male artists have made a name for themselves (and very decent livings) by depicting sex workers, while sex workers have existed on the margins of both society and feminism since time immemorial. In spite of major feminist advances over the past several decades, sex work has remained controversial, and many feminists (without lived experience in the trade) argue that it exploits, objectifies, and dehumanizes women—arguments that undermine the agency of those who choose to work in and may even enjoy the profession (Brooks, 1999; Capous-Desyllas, 2013). Furthermore, the choice versus coercion narrative is tired. Sex workers deserve basic rights and protection under the law whether or not they enjoy the work they do or have other livable options to choose from. It is also important to note here that while we consider the term “sex worker” preferable to “prostitute,” both are problematic. “Prostitute” is, essentially, a legal term that has for too long been used to criminalize women. While the term “sex worker” may be beneficial for those who want their labour recognized as real work and argue that they should have all the protections of other chosen forms of labour, it fails to capture the nuances of forced labour in a capitalist culture with a faulty social welfare net. That is to say, we all have to work to survive, and not all of us are empowered by our jobs, regardless of the industry, and some of us are more vulnerable to state abuse and violent clients than others. Sex—and our moral discomfort with its exchange for money outside the institution of marriage, for instance—tends to add an element of further degradation to the injustice of having to work to live. The term “survival sex worker” does well to encompass these complexities for those it applies to. We also find phrases such as “people in the sex trade/people who trade in sex/the sex trade” less problematic.

In considering a “feminist ethics” of care, Hamington (2004) borrowed Benhabib’s (1992) notion of the “concrete other,” arguing that in order to truly care about an individual, one’s knowledge of them must not be “vague” or “abstract” (p. 42). Thus, an epistemological shift “that requires increasing knowledge of an individual [so that they are] no longer known only as abstract agents who are interchangeable with any others” is imperative. They then “become persons with names, faces, bodies and other aspects to which sympathetic identification gives us connection” (p. 42). As a walk through any European Modern art collection will prove, sex-worker identities are almost always “vague” and/or “abstracted.” We don’t know the names of Degas’s young dancers or laundresses or how/if he obtained consent to paint them while they stretched backstage or were ironing crisp white shirts, and we aren’t privy to how Picasso’s *Demaiselles d’Avignon* felt about having their faces distorted and made to resemble African masks in this now world-famous work (Greer, 2009). In spite of the demeaning title of Van Dongen’s painting, his subject is much more than the “purple garter” she sports. Hence, when rewriting these label panels, we are attempting to help “concretize” the “other” (sex workers in this case) so that members of the public might have access to their perspectives in ways that go beyond salacious characterizations or metaphors for the lowest rung in society. That said, there are very real challenges in doing this. Our conversation about the second work of art on the tour highlights some of these difficulties.

We next find ourselves standing in front of Gerhard Richter’s *Helga Matura* (1966). It’s a blurry image of a young woman. The label panel beside the work reads:

Helga Matura was a sex worker who was murdered in her apartment in Frankfurt in 1966. German newspapers published numerous sensational stories about her death and the search for her killer. Interested in the relevance of painting in an era of mass-media bombardment, Richter reproduced in paint a snapshot of Matura, softening the image to distance it from its original tabloid context. By doing so, he challenges us to think about how we perceive and understand the ceaseless flow of images we encounter daily. Is it all just a generalized blur, or are we actually able to feel the pain and suffering of others when they are presented to us as distraction and entertainment?

This piece immediately provokes an intricate conversation about true threats to sex workers (i.e., abusive clients are rare; laws and societal bias tend to be much more dangerous) and privilege among sex workers (those who can pass as white versus those who haven't been through the formal education system and/or are racialized/exoticized). It also leads us into a discussion about the risks of disclosing one's line of work.

We again collaborate to write an alternative panel:

The image of this woman is blurred, as if she's a foggy reflection of the onlooker in a mirror or body of water. Perhaps she is asking the viewer: "Can you see yourself in me?" Gerhard Richter borrowed this image from a tabloid article that outlined how this young woman, Helga Matura, who was working as a sex worker at the time, was found stabbed to death by one of her clients in 1966. The tendency of the press to sensationalize such stories persists to this day and overlooks the fact that, though abuse by predators disguised as clients does occur, far more threatening to sex-worker safety is police abusing their power for easy targets, rejection by family members, and the slow and consistent dehumanization by stigma throughout society. For example, in Canada, it is still illegal to purchase sex and so sex workers are often forced to work underground. They then have little recourse to report assault without fearing incrimination by police or even deportation if they aren't official residents of the country. This painting begs several different questions: How did Matura's family react when the tabloids published this horrific story and disclosed her profession? Richter is among the highest-paid European artists working today—does he have a right to profit (even indirectly) off of this tragedy, or claim ownership over her story and identity as he has done here? How might police in Canada respond to Matura's killing today? Would their response be different if she was "street-involved," Indigenous, or a trans woman? Are we all actually equal before the law?

Issues of legality and disclosure hit close to home for our group. Andrea was once raped by a regular client and recounted the story in her book. Part of the reason she decided to write and publish *Modern Whore* was to help humanize sex work by offering a perspective we rarely have access to, to present herself, essentially, as a "concrete other" (Hamington, 2004, p. 42). She stresses that she felt a sort of obligation as a privileged, white, university-educated, cis-gendered woman to use her platform to draw attention to these important

issues. Many others who might want to disclose their line of work hesitate to do so for fear of the consequences that may arise (not being allowed to cross the US border, rejection by family members or cultural communities, difficulty finding jobs outside of the sex industry, to name but a few). This is the reason Hallie opted not to be identified as a participant in this project. Now working outside the sex industry, she fears her current employers might react badly if they discovered the job she left off her resumé. Perhaps this is part of the reason that, more often than not, sex workers' needs are defined by non-sex workers in academic research, in policy discussions, and in art and literature (Capous-Desyllas, 2013). One compelling exception to this is work being done by Elene Lam and Butterfly (Asian and Migrant Sex Workers Support Network). In 2016, Lam and co-creator Alex Tigchelaar devised a performance art piece entitled *The Viminal Space*. The title of the piece references how migrant and racialized sex workers are often framed as being both victims and criminals at the same time—though these individuals are technically engaging in illegal activities, there is also the (misguided and racist) assumption that they are victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Lam, through art and activism, points out that the voices of migrant sex workers are often missing from sex-worker rights movements.

Much has been written about the male gaze in art and the anonymity and abuse of muses (Greer, 2009; Hunter, 2019). The issue of parity when it comes to gender representation within art galleries has long been at the forefront of feminist politics. Many activist-artist groups (the Combahee River Collective or Women Artists in Revolution, for example) have made great strides and placed meaningful demands on institutions. Pollock (1988) argued that vital contemporary debates and foci in museum studies (including sexuality, post-colonialism, and internationalism) are now possible

precisely because of what we have learnt by the historic feminist interruption: that knowledge is shaped in relations of power and invested with interests, political, ideological and psychological...The core narratives that encode Western phallogentrism's political unconscious serve not merely to structure the study of the histories of art, but to establish a story of art as *The Story of Art*. (p. xix)

Sex workers, in all of their beauty, power, seduction, and complexities, have inspired many a famous artist and played a key role in the creation of modern art itself. To date, however, their perspectives are largely absent within the very institutions that seem so keen to display their nude forms. Their contributions to "The Story of Art" are lacking due to both institutional and public bias.

The three co-authors of this piece agree with Janes (2003) that "museums have a broader role to play in society than is conventionally assumed" and that these institutions have something to say about "identity, community, and the future of civil life" (p. 2). Hooper-Greenhill (2001) argued that if museums are to remain relevant, they ought to "tell counter-narratives and counter histories that disrupt both public, and their own institutional, imaginaries" (p. 123). It is for this reason that we've come together to create label panels that reflect sex-worker perspectives, contain provocative questions, and skew the frame through which visitors view, critically and creatively engage with, and seek to understand certain works of art. Our participatory "hack" within the institution seeks to disrupt hegemonic social and political (and curatorial) narratives and to demonstrate that educational activities within the museum setting need not start from a place of accepting the stories that are

being told, but can instead creatively address biases that persist. Though our imagined label panels will not actually adorn the walls of the AGO anytime soon, the institution is making great strides when it comes to community-based projects and educational activities (Smith, 2015, 2018; Spring et al., 2018).

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