

Mensenkennis

Merel Carlein van Altena

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Self-Stigma in Frame:
A Participatory Photo-Elicitation Study

Merel Carlein van Altena

This work is part of a Master's thesis at the Faculty
of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Leiden University,
within the programme of Cultural Anthropology and
Development Sociology,
specialisation in *Visual Ethnography*.



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who directly or indirectly contributed to the completion of this thesis.

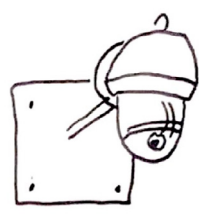
My heartfelt thanks go to Tika, Maryo, and CJ for their openness and for trusting me enough to let me into their lives. This work could not have existed without them.

I am grateful to Maria Scali for her involvement and support during the research, as well as to my other colleagues at SHOP.

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Finally, I thank my parents for their unconditional support, both in this project and beyond.



~~ik ben nu uit~~
"ik ben nu uitgesekt."
ex-sekswerker

"I'm all sexed out."
ex sex worker

Foreword

Throughout the process of conducting this research, I often found myself being silent. Not because I had nothing to say, but because I became increasingly aware of just how much is already being said. About sex work, about (self-)stigma, about who gets to speak and who is heard. Finding words about sex work isn't hard. Listening, it turns out, is much more difficult.

During fieldwork, I noticed how quickly people read one another. In a single second, or even before someone enters a room, an assessment is already made: who you are, what you're here for, what you might be thinking or judging. I felt it in the way eyes lingered just a moment on my oversized green glasses, or on my slightly-too-bold shoulder bag. Signals that may have suggested I didn't quite belong, or perhaps that I did. It wasn't a conscious calculation, but something intuitive. Sex work is *mensenkennis* (people skills). It is a constant exercise in sensing, gauging, and responding to what often remains unspoken, yet deeply felt.

I found myself in a dual position: as a researcher, but also as a staff member at SHOP, the knowledge and expertise centre on sex work and human trafficking in The Hague. I was not only seen as an outsider with a notebook, but also as someone familiar with the field. Someone recognised, at times approached based on previous contact. My role was constantly shifting and demanded alertness, self-reflection, and a conscious navigation of closeness and distance.

This thesis is the result of a visual anthropological study on self-stigma among sex workers in the Netherlands. At its heart lies photo-elicitation as a participatory method, where participants used their own visual material to reflect on their experiences, identities, and the influence of stigma in their everyday lives.

Alongside these dialogues, this work also includes my own field notes, drawings, and personal reflections. It brings together both analog and digital photos from participants, as well as audio fragments that together paint a richer picture of the moments we shared. What you read, see, and hear here is a personal account of what I encountered in the various spaces my research took me.

This is not a neutral report. It is a study shaped by encounters, by images, silences, and spoken boundaries. By the choices of the participants and by my own choices as a researcher. It is a search for meaning within collaboration, within closeness, and in recognising what is not always immediately visible.

How to Use This Book

This book is made not only of paper, but also of image, sound, and movement. What you're holding in your hands is one version of the research. The other version lives online, in the form of an interactive PDF. To experience the work in full, scan the QR code or enter the link below. On that page, you'll find a short guide to help you get started.



www.mcva.art/mensenkennis

The digital, interactive version includes an added layer: sound. Audio fragments are marked with this icon:



By clicking it, you'll hear stories and parts of conversations recorded during the photo-elicitation interviews with each person. What you hear are voices reflecting on images, sharing memories, and engaging in dialogue with me about what was captured.

Some photos are framed in white: these are clickable. Behind these images, you'll find audio fragments that extend the meaning of the visual.



There is no set path through this book. You choose where to begin, what to open, and what to leave untouched. Consider it an invitation to look, to listen, to return to what lingers, and to pause where silence deserves space.

“Whorearchy”
(as I understand the concept from [name redacted])

“High class” “High class escort”

Escort,
independent, agency-based escort

Online sex work

Home-based sex work?

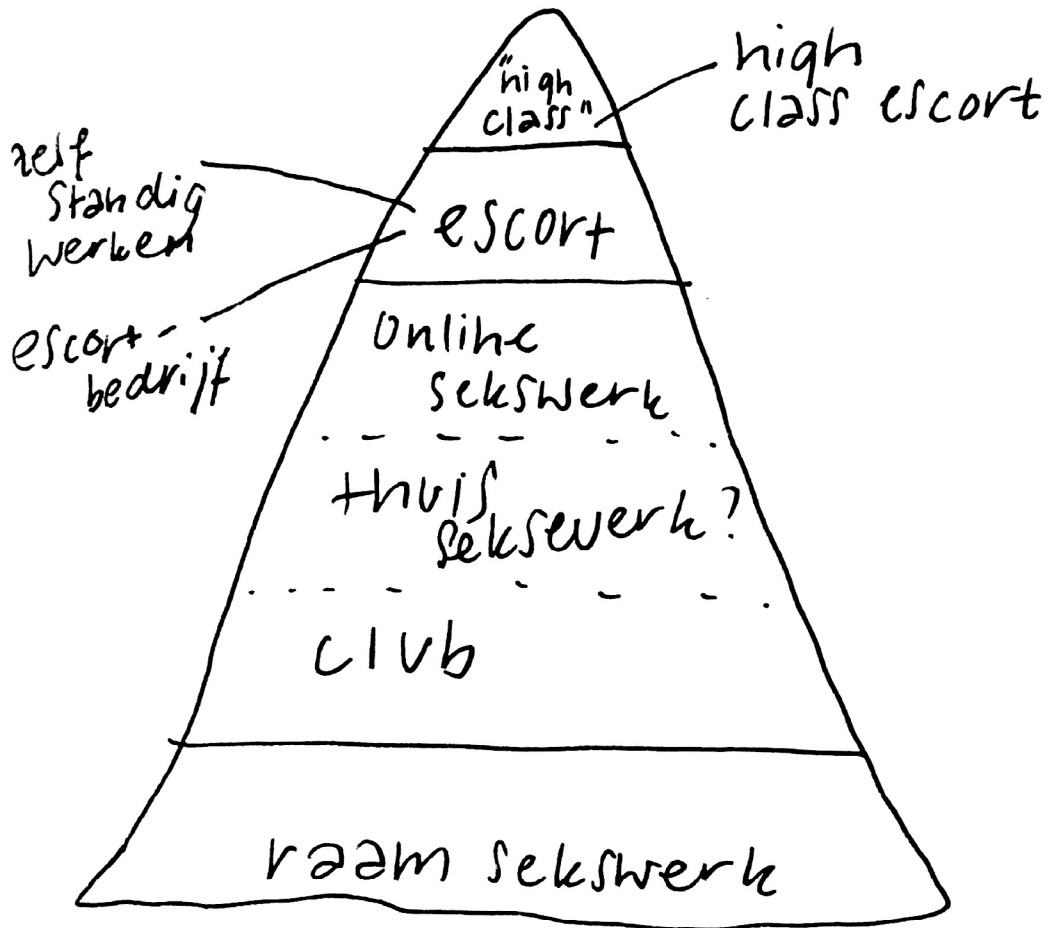
Club

Window sex work

“High class” vs. “full service”

“Girlfriend experience”

"Hoerarchie"
(zoals ik het begrip van ~~escort~~)



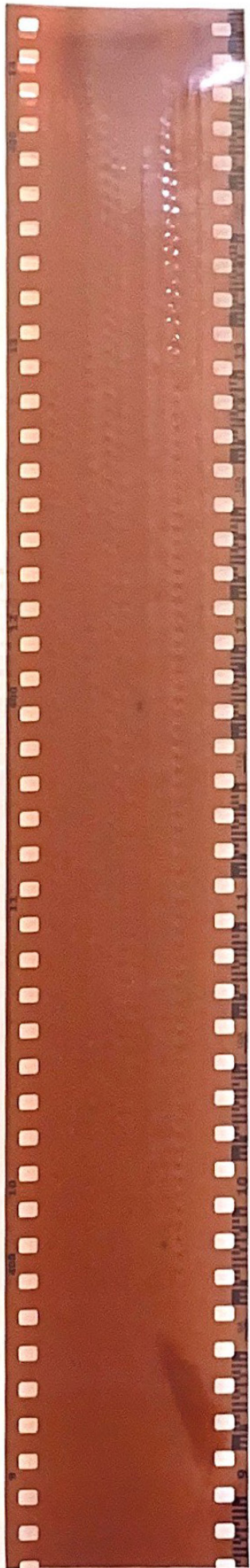
"high class" vs "full-service"

"girl friend experience"

Maryo

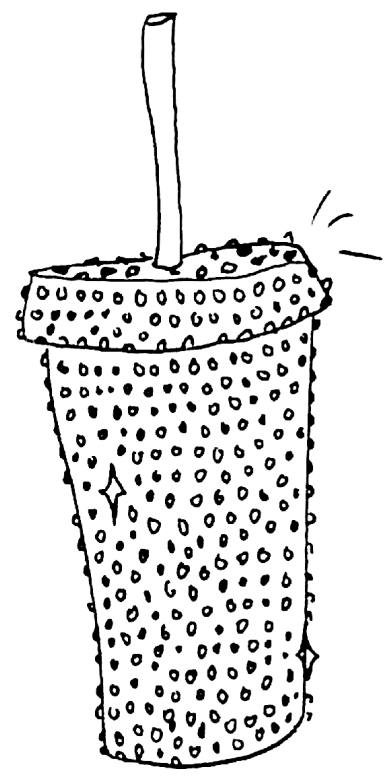
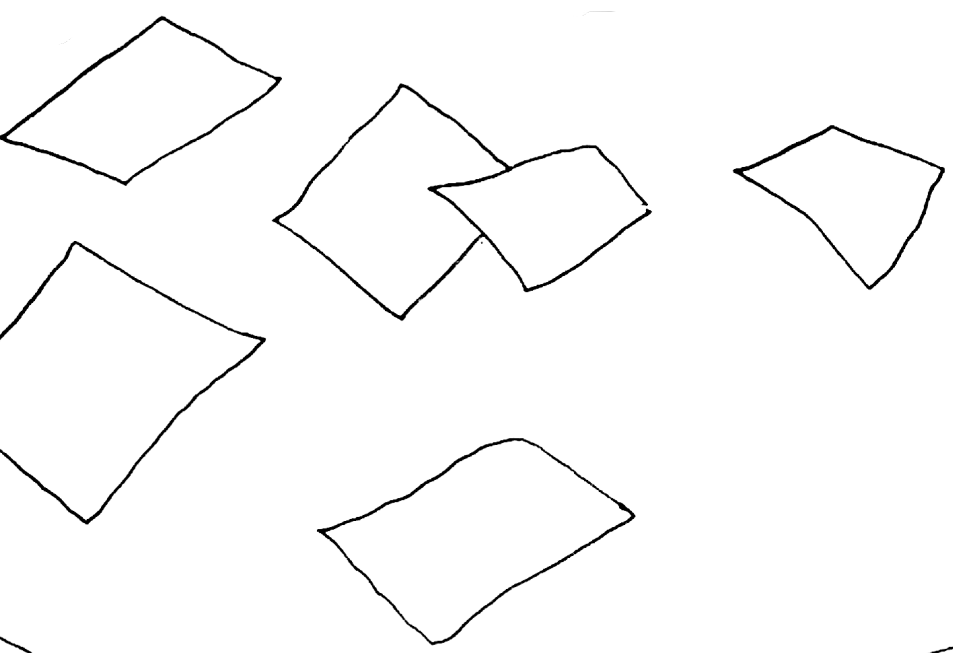
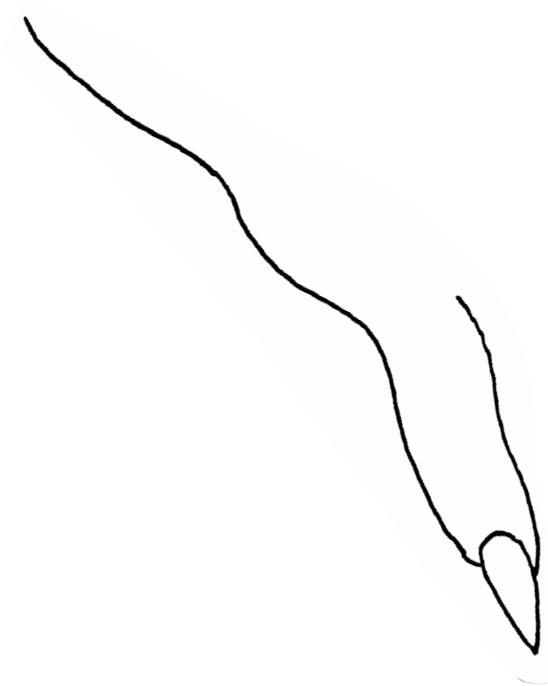
EX-SEKSWERKER
RETIRED
STRIPPER

Ex sex worker
Retired stripper





I am Maryo.









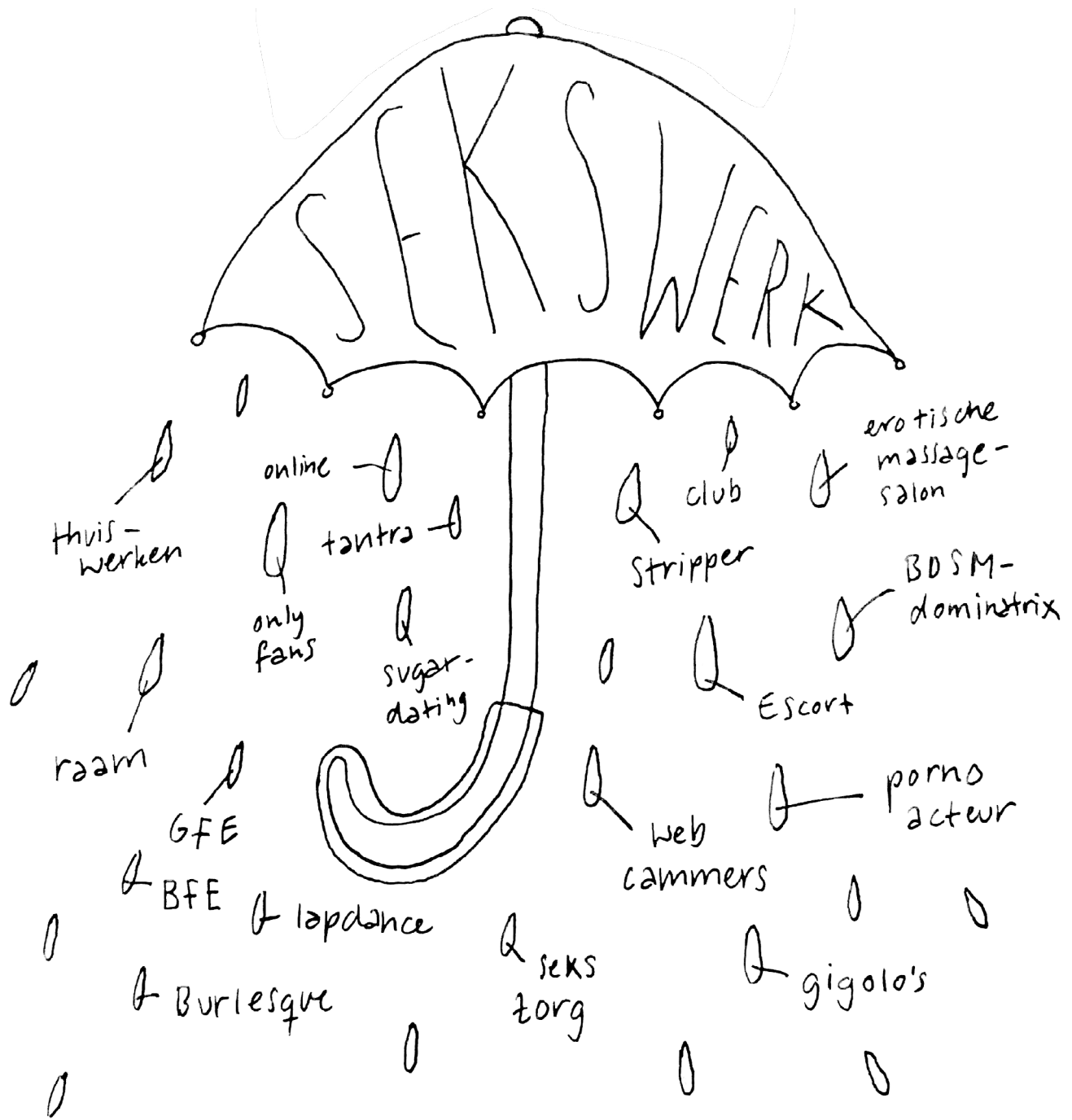








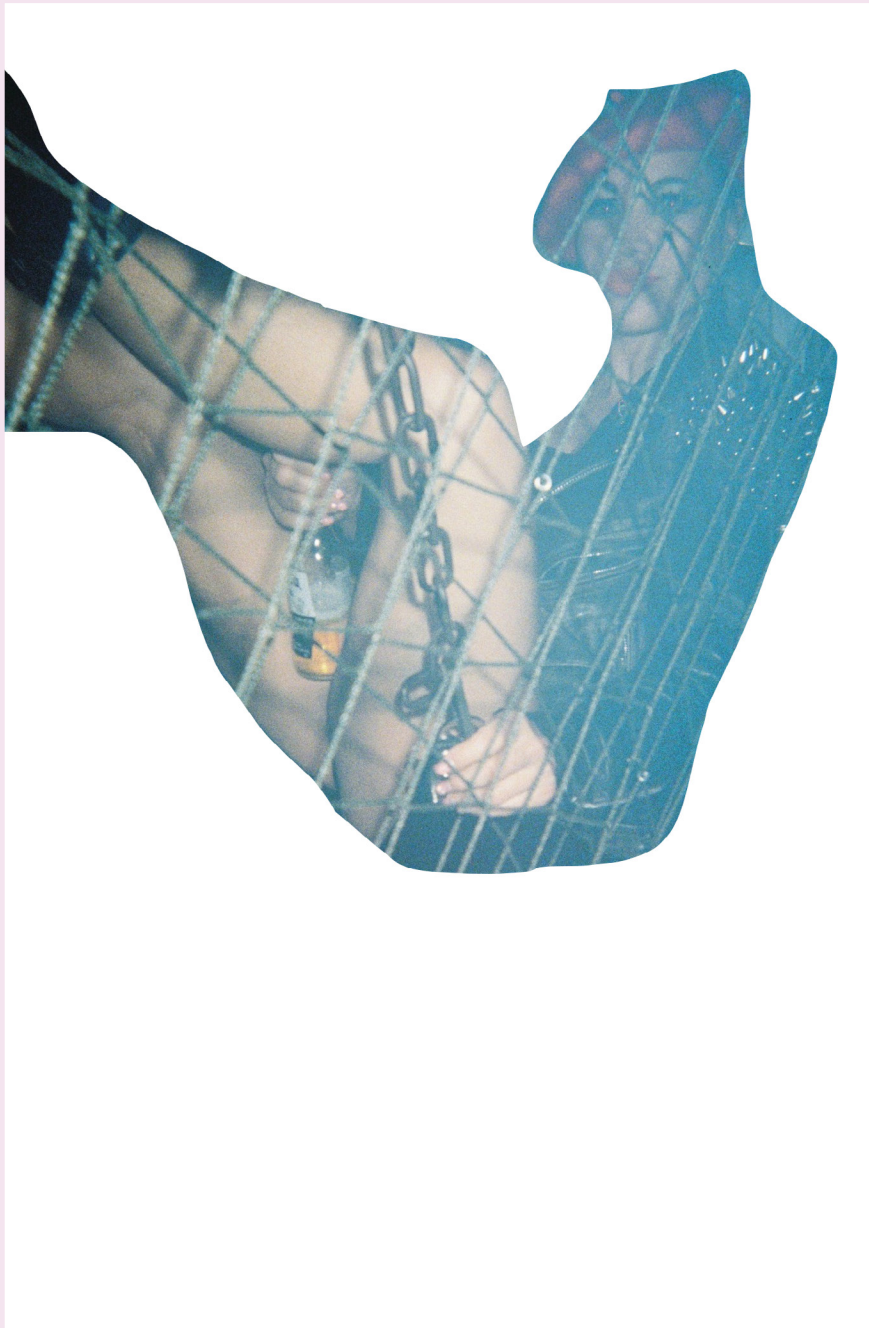




Sex work is an umbrella term.



Room for creativity.







hoer

Vrouw van zeden

Vrouw/dame van plezier
meisje van plezier

sekswerker

Stripper

prostitutée

danser

whore
woman of sins
lady of pleasure
girl of pleasure
sex worker
prostitute
stripper
dancer

Some words land hard. Others slip by almost unnoticed, yet still linger somewhere. They are not just terms. They are labels, frames, ways of placing something or someone or of keeping them at a distance. In conversations, I listened to how people described themselves, how they spoke about others. How words were sometimes chosen out of convenience, sometimes out of shame. Sometimes to break free from the stigma that clung to earlier names. Words can describe a profession, but also pass judgment. They can exclude, sexualise, romanticise, soften, or harden.

I began collecting names. Words people use for themselves, for others, for the work, for the body. Some sex workers didn't find it very important. "I don't care, I respond to anything." Others chose their words carefully. "I do sex work," but they were not sex workers. The difference lay sometimes in tone, sometimes in timing, but always in experience.

The shift from 'prostitute' to 'sex worker' is not just a change in terminology, but a political act. A conscious move to break away from a loaded history, to make space for dignity, for work, for agency. Carol Leigh introduced the term "sex work" in the 1970s as a way to frame it as legitimate labor, and as a response to moralising debates that sought mainly to condemn or victimize the work. That shift in language is not a minor detail. It reflects a shift in perspective.

For some male and trans sex workers, no term felt fitting. Not the word, not the description, not the categories they were repeatedly placed into. The language available often didn't align with their experience. So they chose their own words, shaped outside the view of formal structures. A vocabulary that did more justice to who they were, and what the work meant to them. On platforms and in their WhatsApp Status, a parallel language emerged: emojis, abbreviations, symbols, strategically chosen words to be visible to those who needed to see them, and invisible to the rest. M\$M, payboy, gigolo, t-girl, \$hemale. A digital grammar of suggestion, signaling, and negotiation.

Still, other terms don't disappear. They continue to exist, side by side, overlapping. In everyday speech, in policy, on street corners, in online profiles. And what someone chooses, or refuses to choose, says something about positioning. Sometimes, no language was used at all. No 'sex worker', no 'whore', no 'escort'. No political statement, no identification, no desire to define. Not necessarily out of shame, but perhaps out of a refusal to contain it within something it was not.

For some, the work had nothing to do with identity, choice, or conviction. There was no talk of stigma, no talk of rights, no talk of labor. What remained was the act, the place, the moment. What connected them to the work was not the language around it, but simply their presence in a particular location. A room. A website. A street.

The absence of words did not feel empty. On the contrary, it said a lot. About avoidance, perhaps. But also about boundaries. About what does not need explaining when it does not need to mean anything to you. Not everyone wanted to be part of a story, a struggle, a category.

I thought words were clear. But they turned out to be murky, ambiguous, and temporary. Sometimes they worked as a shield. Sometimes as a burden. Sometimes as an opening to a conversation. And sometimes they just went quiet. Or were used simply to name a price.



The boundary between the work and yourself.



Tika Stardust

SEKSWERKER
VOOR MENSEN
MET EEN
BEPERKING

MAATSCHAPPELIJK
WERKER

Sex worker for people
living with a disability

Social worker





An encounter with Tika.

21/2



+winkelstraat+







"ik zou dat nooit
kunnen! ik zou
nooit kunnen
doen wat jij
doet!"

"I could never do that! I could never do what you do!"

15/2 . WELKOM BIJ CAFÉ B (Bibliotheek Den Haag)



During my research, I increasingly realised I was living in a bubble. A bubble I had created myself and carefully protected. A bubble shaped by my background, my political beliefs, my experiences, and my work. To me, sex work was something ordinary, not something incomprehensible or something you only saw on TV, bathed in red light.

I had never questioned the idea that sex work is work. It felt self-evident to me, something I understood intuitively without needing to reflect on it for long. Still, new layers began to reveal themselves, layers I had not fully felt before.

In conversations with and about Tika, I kept hearing the same kind of response. There was a sense of distance in people's words. Sometimes a form of admiration, more often a kind of awkward incomprehension. I recognised the tone, as if her work existed outside the realm of what was imaginable. Something heroic, perhaps, or disturbing. But certainly not ordinary.

Tika's response stayed with me.

No. You could do it. You just choose not to. It is a choice.

The simplicity of her answer struck me. There was no judgment in her words, no defensive tone. In those words, something often overlooked became visible: that "I can't" often really means "I don't want to." And that choice does not imply a moral hierarchy, but simply reflects a personal boundary or preference. It is not about courage or ability, but about conscious decision-making. In recognising that choice, there is respect. Not through romanticisation or stigmatisation, but through clarity.

Gradually, I began to listen differently. Less from an instinct to correct others, and more from a curiosity about what lies beneath the phrase "I could never do that." Was it fear? An inability to view sex work as work? Shame? I learned from Tika to make space. To allow discomfort to exist, rather than pushing it aside.

Stigma often operates most effectively where it is not spoken out loud. It settles in glances that linger just a bit too long, in questions that are swallowed, in compliments that mask unease. Not necessarily out of ill intent, more often out of discomfort. Even those who loudly proclaim "sex work is work" may still hold on to ideas about prostitution, victimhood, or moral failure.

Stigma does not only exist in rejection. It also lives in glorification, in othering, in framing sex work as something extraordinary. Whether positive or negative, it remains a way of setting it apart. In the presence of sex workers, I became increasingly sensitive to those subtle nuances, to the invisible lines that are still drawn. The boundaries between acceptance and rejection, between understanding and judgment, were constantly shifting.

31/1

"je schaamt je
er niet voor?"

"In schaamte
kan ik me niet
vinden. Ik heb
wel aan mezelf
getwijfeld"

"You're not ashamed of it?"

"I can't find myself in shame. I have doubted myself, though."



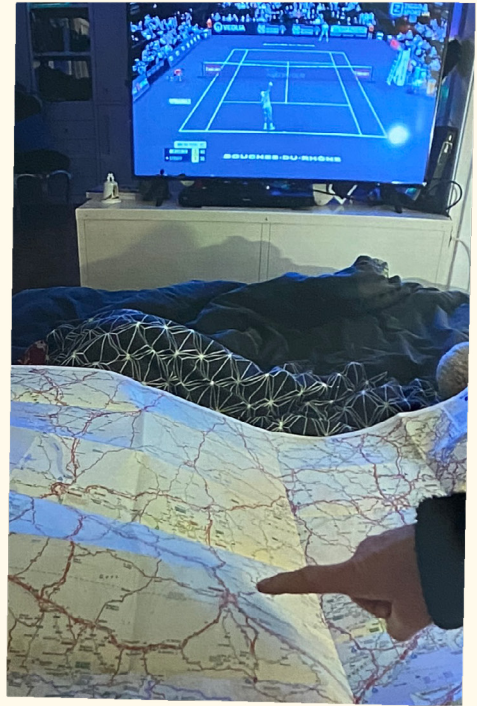




Image and reality.

Gaarne niet storen.







Simply touching someone.



Rainbow Support

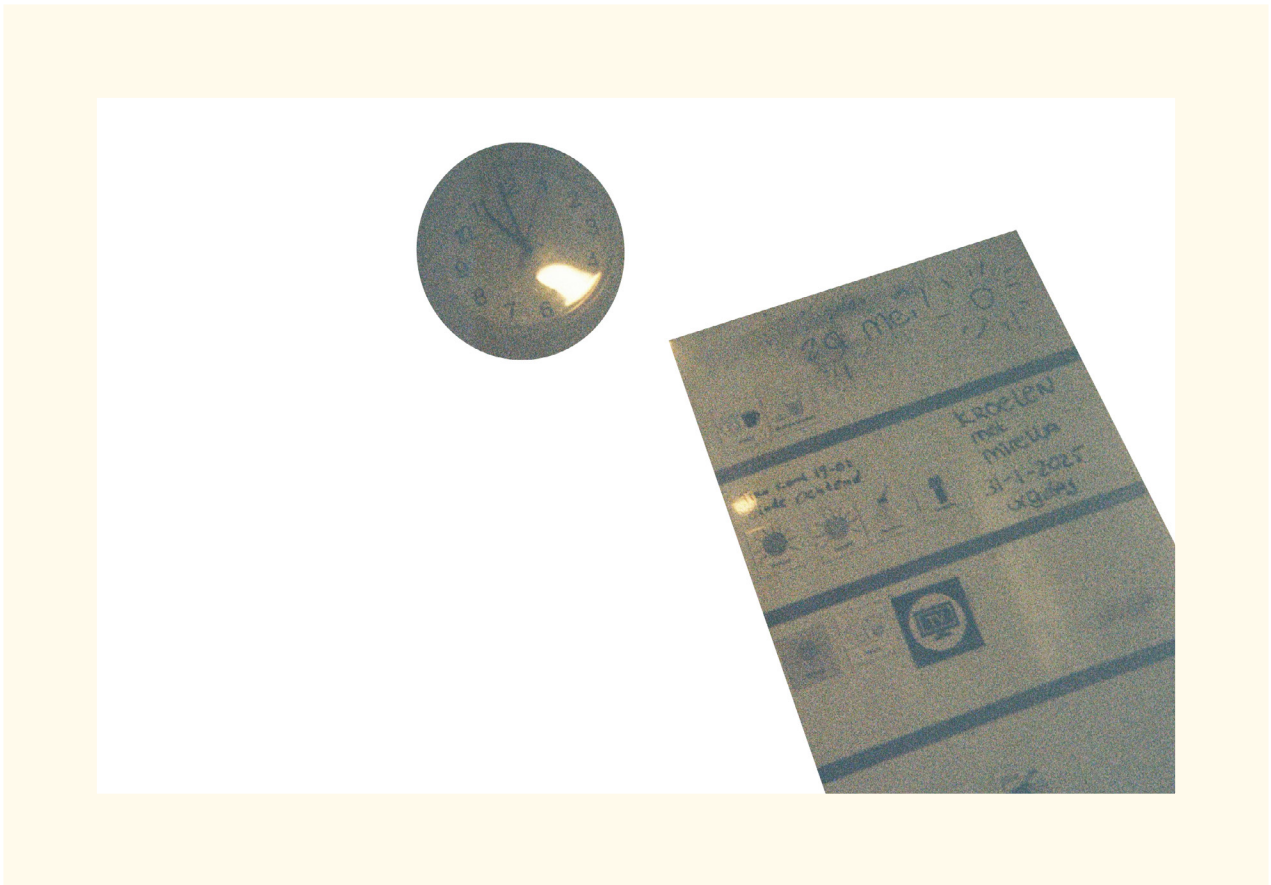
Dinsdag 18:30 - 19:30

Ben je graag voor iedereen die
vragen heeft? Of heb je zelf
vragen? Kom dan met je
vragen, problemen, maar ook
succes verhalen, naar ons
bijeen. Het is een leuke manier om
elkaar te ontmoeten en
elkaar te helpen.

contact

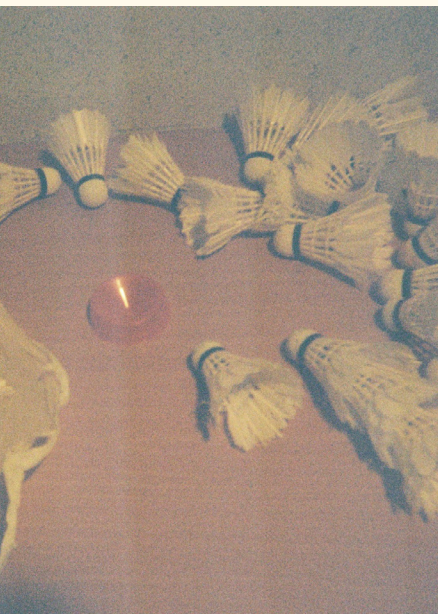
wij zijn ooxo!





*Tika is coming 19-02
in the morning*







To initiate a contact.

klantjes

contacten

klant

Clients, contacts, customers





2013







When sex becomes care, but isn't allowed to be work.

SOCIAAL EROTISCHE
DIENST VERLENING
VOOR MENSEN MET
EEN BEPERKING

Social-erotic services for people living with disabilities

" ik zou wel
elke dag
willen, maar
dat is niet
normaal. "

"I'd want it every day, but that's not normal."



CJ

drag carnaval
(ex)sekswerker

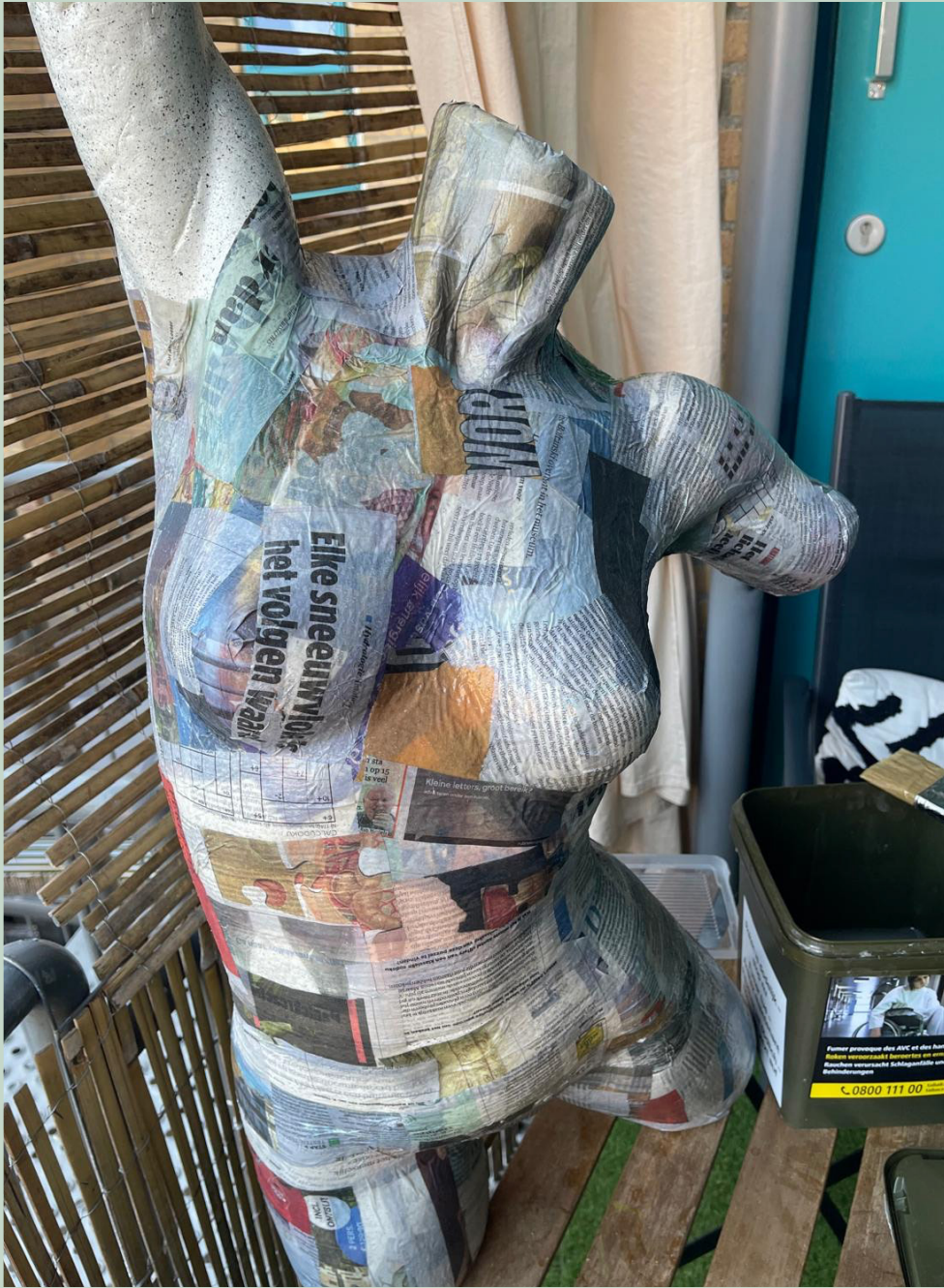
drag
carnival
ex sex worker





Carnival in Curaçao.





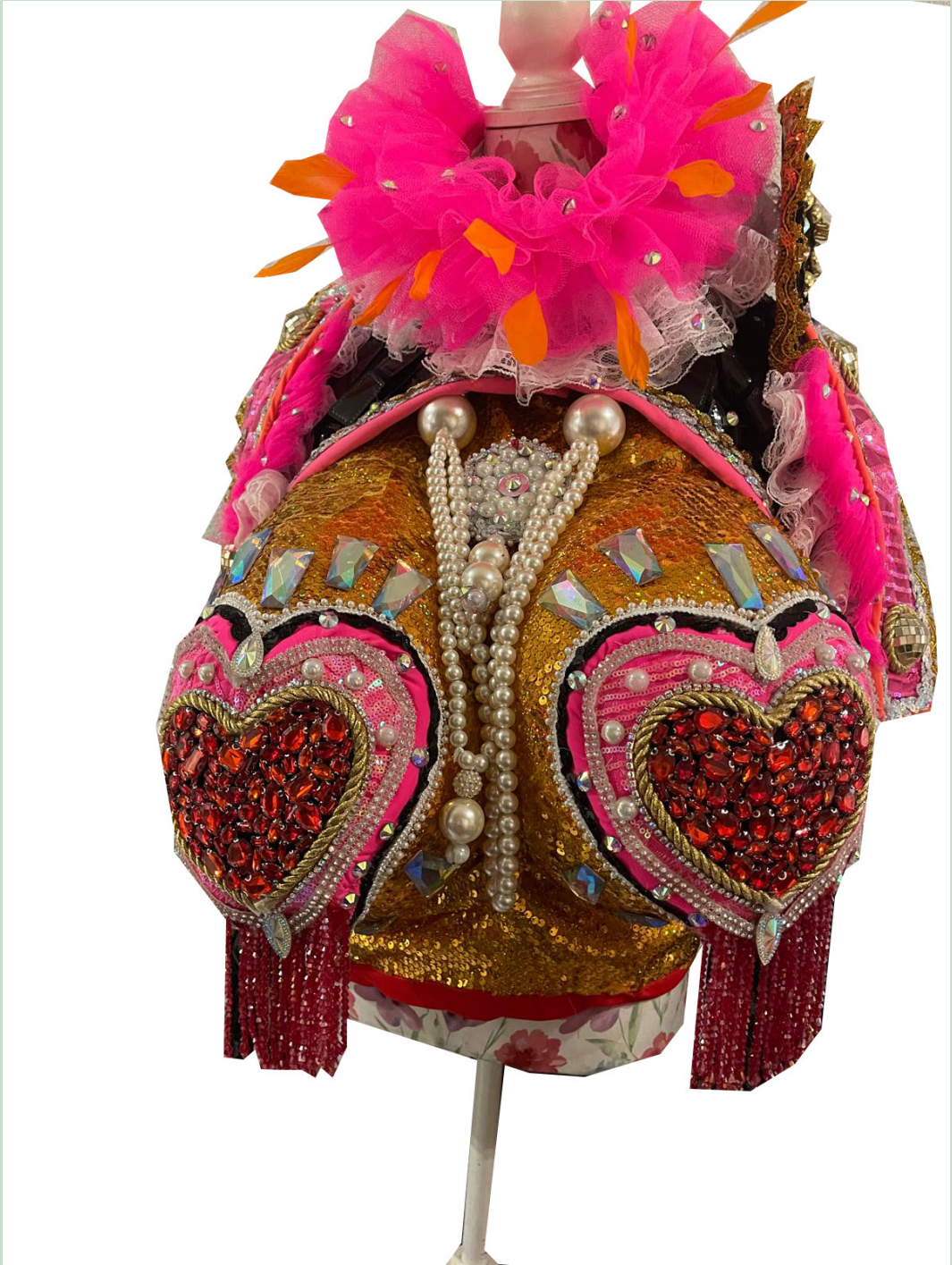


The first reaction.

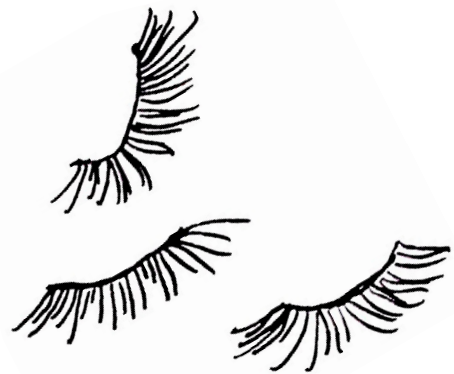
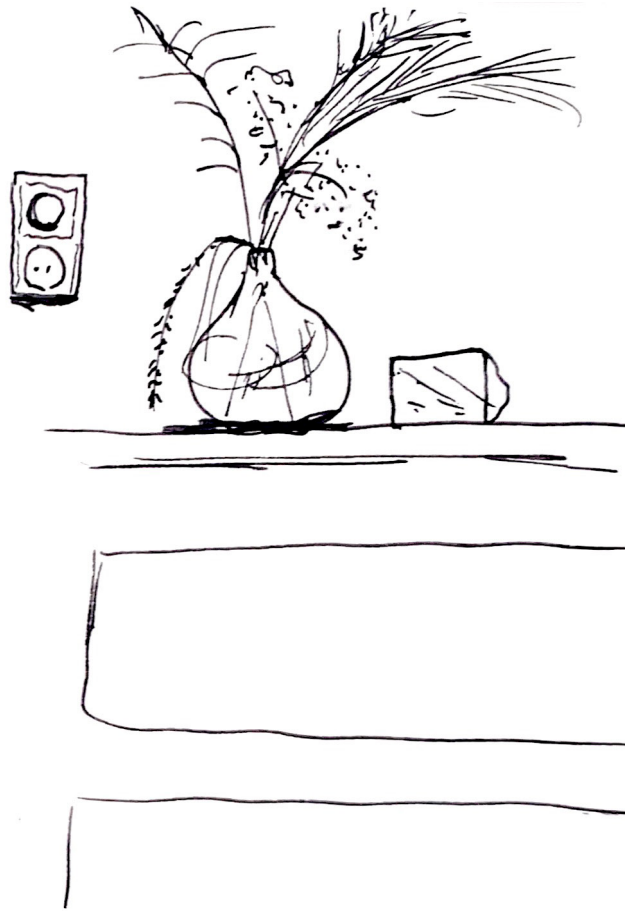
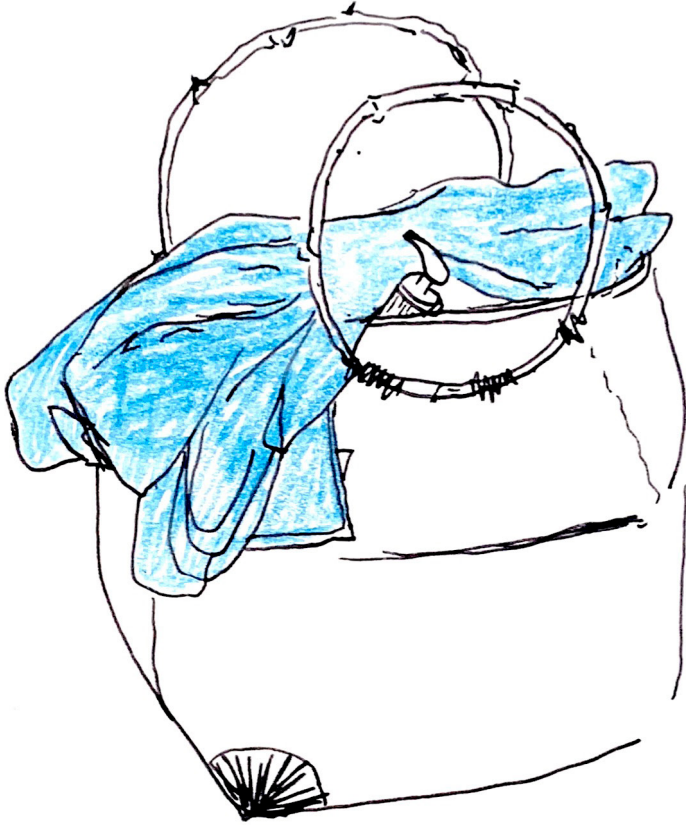


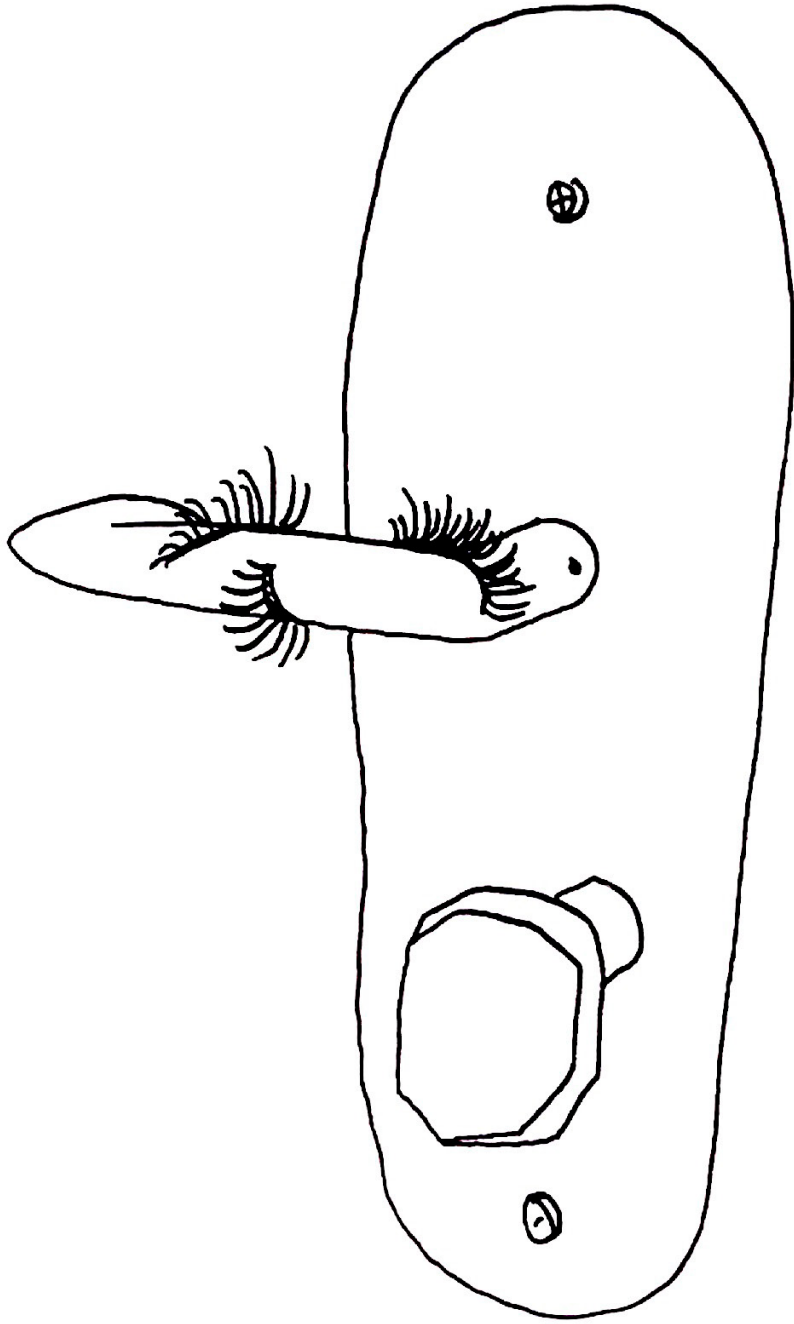






31/1





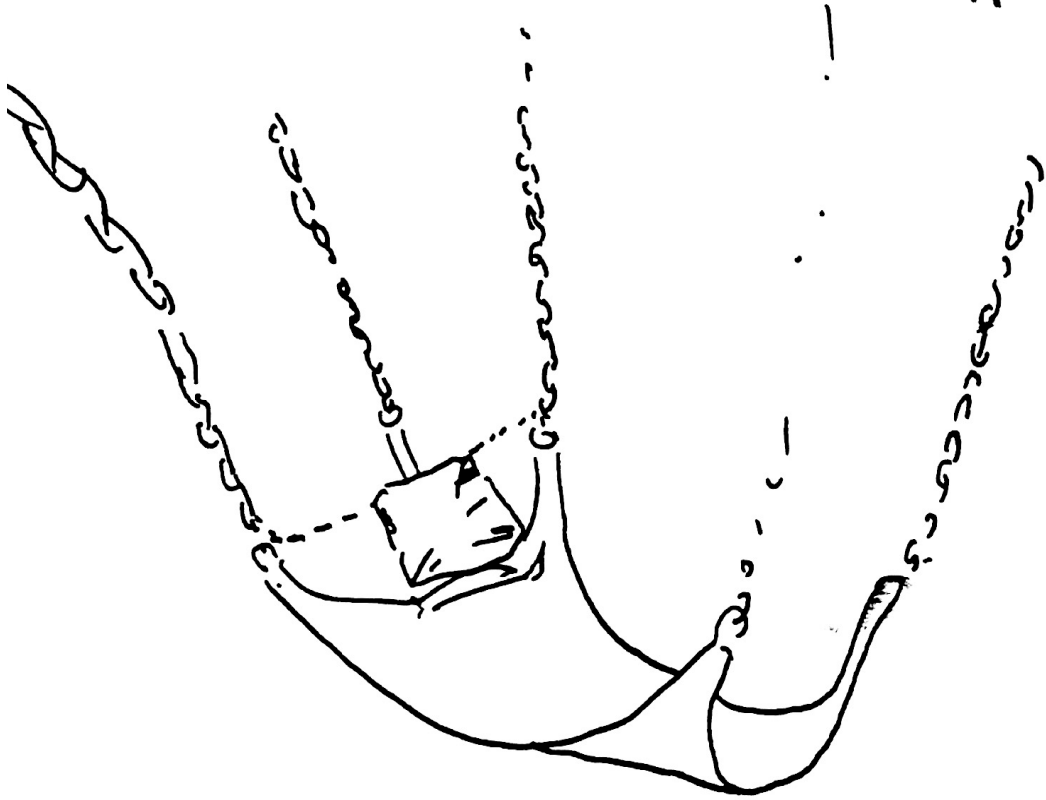
Ardell Wispies false lashes on the door handle of
a massage parlor.



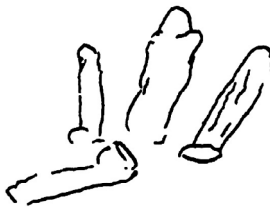
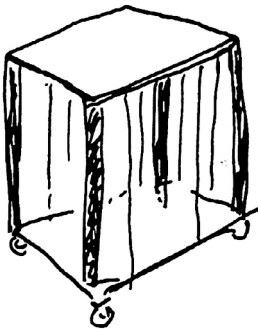


I dare to stand there.

1912

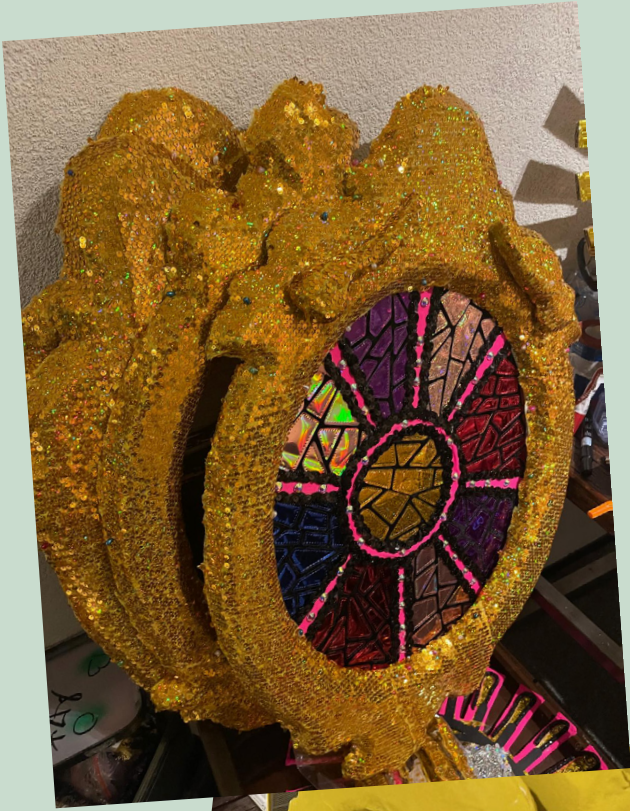


Mistres Jessica









gewoon
hoer

just whore

The light poured generously through the large front windows. It was a Wednesday afternoon, during the walk-in consultation hours at Spot46. A place where (former) sex workers can go with questions about their work in the erotic industry, or for an STI consultation with the public health service, which is present there on set days. In the corner stood a wide, soft couch that served as a waiting area. There was a sliding door separating the kitchen from the Spot46 space, but it was often left half open. Everything blended together: people, conversations, with no fixed desks marking who worked there and who came for help. In the background, the radio played a 2000s pop playlist just a bit too loud, as if that was part of it.

That afternoon, I was there as a researcher, but I mostly felt like a colleague. I did the small things: setting down a cup of green tea for someone in the waiting area, placing a form on the correct stack, straightening flyers with bold titles promoting “safe work.” I moved in the background. If someone felt uncomfortable with me being there, I would leave without explanation. I made that clear from the beginning.

I was allowed to stay. Even during the STI consultation. I sat quietly on a stool that creaked softly, off to the side in the corner of the small, screened-off room. I was grateful for moments like that. Not because of the information, but because of the trust they carried.

After the consultation, something small happened. The woman who had just sat across from the nurse as a sex worker turned to me. She asked a question about my studies. Casually, almost offhandedly, as if we had already been in conversation. Her body turned slightly toward me. For a moment, we were just two students talking.

She told me she was studying too, with a matter-of-factness that felt familiar. She seemed about my age. That in itself was not unusual, I often spoke with sex workers who were the same age or younger than I was. What stayed with me was the natural way in which our roles briefly disappeared. We met there, very briefly.

Sometimes I think that is what it’s all about. How dynamics shift, almost without notice, and something new becomes visible in the contact. Not something big, but something small that feels real. The roles fall away for a moment, and what remains is an exchange between two people who truly see each other.

There were more moments like that during my fieldwork. Small shifts, barely noticeable, but deeply felt. From researcher with big glasses, a notebook and a fountain pen, to someone with a vintage Prada bag sharing her best fashion tips. From outsider to familiar face. From listener to someone who also offered something in return. That shifting made the fieldwork richer. It opened doors, sparked conversations that suddenly felt familiar. But in that movement between roles, there was also vulnerability. Because as you get closer, it becomes easier to cross boundaries. And

that is exactly why it called for softness, for alertness, for knowing when to hear something but not write it down.

Because it is in those very moments that something else also emerges. Perhaps a shift in power. I sensed it immediately: I received something, something the other person gave, consciously or unconsciously. And I also knew that I would walk away with it. With words, impressions, interpretations. While for the other person, it might be nothing more than a passing conversation. There is always a boundary, no matter how close it feels. And I am responsible for what I take with me, and for how I let it return or choose not to.

Mensenkennis

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