



"Annie Oakley" performance at the 5th Annual Sex Workers' Art Show, Capitol Theatre, Olympia, Washington.



FIFTH ANNUAL SEX WORKERS' ART SHOW. Capitol Theatre, Olympia, Washington. 19 January 2002.

Billed as "an evening of visual and performance art created by people who work in the sex industry to dispel the myth that we are anything short of artists, innovators, and geniuses," Olympia, Washington's Annual Sex Workers' Art Show began in 1998 as a grassroots event to showcase the cultural production of sex workers (defined as "girls, boys, and transpeople" who work or have worked as prostitutes, dancers, peep show performers, phone sex operators, dominatrixes, etc.). Its reputation and popularity have steadily grown. The fifth annual event on 19 January 2002 played to a standing room-only crowd at Olympia's downtown 800-seat Capitol Theatre.

The show's organizer "Annie Oakley" describes it as "a space for sex workers to be taken seriously as artists and as people. It's a place for us to share our insights about life inside and outside the industry, and for us to meet each other and be inspired by how badass we all are. It's also about giving the public an opportunity to witness and learn from these amazing, intelligent, creative people." Through word of mouth, reputation, newspaper ads, and targeted solicitation—including notices at sex-work venues, homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters, and women's clinics—anyone formerly or currently employed in the sex industry was invited to submit work; no submission was denied a place in the program. Over two dozen performers presented original music, performance art, videos, poetry, and visual art that asserted their experiences as sex workers. The Capitol's mezzanine level served as a gallery for photos, drawings, paintings, collages, and sculptures.

Oakley explicitly aligns the Art Show with other grassroots activist organizations for demonized members of society by offering it as a benefit fundraiser. The box office receipts (from the \$10 admission) and money raised from a queer date auction that opened the second act were given to Books to Prisoners and the Transgender Medical

Fund, which are regional organizations, in addition to *Danzine*, a magazine by and for women sex workers. While the show regularly draws a few "big name" performers (previous shows featured Annie Sprinkle, Penny Arcade, Margot St. James, and Carol Leigh), the event predominantly showcases performances by women, men, trans, and intersex sex workers whose performance resumes are more likely to be accorded the status of sin or crime than of art. Performers came from all over the United States, with the majority from the Pacific Northwest and Southern California.

Among the individual acts that stood out as original, moving, and complicated were the blues stylings of Candye Kane, performed before a huge video projection of one of her 1980s solo porn videos; Oakley's monologue about her experiences with the bureaucratic state licensing system that efficiently and facelessly polices her identity, body, and soul; Ariel Lightningchild's autobiographical video about histories of abuse, mental illness, and addiction, "Deconstructing Crack-Ho"; Jayson Marston's anecdotes about Hollywood's closeted johns, juxtaposed with his own struggles with HIV; the Infernal Noise Brigade's carnivalesque, percussive disharmony that filled the house as they performed in the aisles; and Carol Queen's extremely funny and generous monologue about her regular peep-show client and the intimacy forged between them as she helped him express his specific fetish.

But the real force of the evening was less from any one performance than from the accumulation and multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and bodies that constituted the program. The Sex Workers' Art Show was not simply a display of those in the sex industry or a space for individual expression, but an active force in articulating, shaping, and contesting the meaning of the identity "sex worker" in the public sphere. The proliferation of academic studies and popular memoirs of the lives of sex workers notwithstanding, the dominant discourse of sex work reduces to univocal narratives the multiple voices of those in the industry and their understandings of sex, labor, intimacy, commerce, violence, and love. The number of performances in

quick succession worked to establish a notion of identity that was comfortable in both its dissonances and resonances. Even the less interesting acts were a part of this larger polyphony of competing and complementary enunciations of what a "sex worker" is.

The following day performers and spectators were invited to attend a conference organized by Oakley that further explored the political and social issues raised by the art show. Some of the panel

discussions and workshops were offered exclusively to current and former sex workers, while others were open to the public. One workshop led by representatives of *Danzine* and *Hook Online* (an internet journal for men in the sex industry) shared information and strategies for establishing and maintaining independent sex-worker focused publications. In another session, writer, filmmaker, and educator Carol Queen led a discussion on "sex positivity" that explored the tension between sex work as a potentially transformative and empowering experience and the hostility and contempt many sex workers feel toward their clients. The conference should be understood as intimately connected to the project of the performances staged the previous evening, providing a different sphere for dialogue, debate, and the exchange of knowledge.

Olympia's Annual Sex Workers' Art Show continues to be a significant event in the cultural production of sex workers and the fight for sex workers' rights. The ability of performance and art to enunciate the multiplicity of experience and identity is being mined in Olympia to generate new meanings of what a sex worker is, does, and feels.

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