



## Yet Another Artist With A Project

by Katja Aglert

### 17.09.2000

The Red Light District in Amsterdam is 700 years old and at a distance looks rather charming, with all the red lamps, cobblestones and picturesque bridges. Unaccustomed as I am to the area, I study the surroundings and watch how others act and move. Several people window-shop. I just go straight on, feeling a bit tense and excited and I find it hard to go by the shop windows where the women stand. I need to find a way to be in this context that I can justify to myself.

The further I get into the area the greater the activity and I am approached in all sorts of ways - for example, asked about a variety of sexual services. People are everywhere, on the corners and along the walls and seem engaged in different kinds of commerce. I pass the old church, Oude Kirk, and spy on the other side a cul-de-sac so narrow that one cannot avoid touching other people when going in and out. The whole cul-de-sac is lit by red lamps like a joyful Christmas, but in fact they signal the presence of prostitutes. The cul-de-sac is densely trafficked – doubtless many tourists want to see this place - one of many attractions to visit during their holiday - but there are also punters – customers of the prostitutes - and others related to the business. On a sign a little further away near the church it says Prostitution Information Centre. I have seen it before but not yet gone in. I continue up to Warmoesstraat, which is just now being dug up. My shoes squelch in the wet sand and I feel a little more relaxed. On this street there are mostly bars, sex shops, gay dives and a few galleries.

### 09.10.2000

When I finally dare to go into the Prostitution Information Centre (PIC), I buy all the literature I can find. My strategy is that by having already “read everything”, I won’t only be referred to the books on sale, but instead actually be able to start up a conversation. When I pay I take the opportunity to present myself to the woman behind the counter: “Hello, my name is A and I am an art student currently in Amsterdam to do a project related to prostitution”. She welcomes me and smiles. She is called “E”.

### 16.10.2000

A friend from Sweden has come to visit and we walk through the Red Light District. She says that we shouldn’t be more upset about seeing women in show windows selling sex than, for example, about certain kinds of advertising based on the same mechanisms. The codes that are communicated to an observer in both cases encompass the same gaze and are grounded in a patriarchal system and point of view.

### 24.10.2000

I read somewhere about a punter who said that he was aggrieved about the Dutch state wanting to get rid of trafficking.<sup>1</sup> His reason for thinking that trafficking should exist in Dutch society was that it encouraged diversity amongst the prostitutes. He also thought that Dutch prostitutes are much too greedy and too eager to get the right amount of pay, whereas prostitutes illegally living in the country often ask for less money and are not all that fastidious with condoms. He thought that was good.

### 29.10.2000

E is working at PIC today and I ask her if it’s OK to talk a little. We sit down and she tells me that her goal with PIC is to educate society through giving information on prostitutes and prostitution. She says: “The reason for working as a prostitute is money. It’s not about sex or lust, and that’s what a prostitute knows, which is hard for an “outsider” to understand. A prostitute develops a routine for giving the men who are prepared to pay for sex what they want as quickly as possible. Those who prostitute themselves share a common denominator – for various reasons being cynical about love and sex and therefore distinguishing



between sex for money and sex for love. Many of us are brought up to think that love and sex are sort of holy and not to be abused, that to be prostituted means to be or have become able to break the taboos around having sex for money. There are those who have “one night stands” after having been offered a few drinks and who look down on prostitutes! We usually call them “coca cola girls”. It’s hard for us to understand how one can have paid sex and not be paid.”

E is an ex-prostitute. Having first hand experience of prostitution is one of the criteria for working at PIC. She shows me reproductions of classic drawings that illustrate how people have viewed prostitution throughout history. The pictures show women seducing and perverting men or women in collusion with the devil. I wonder how E thinks society views prostitution today? She says that it doesn’t matter how society looks at prostitution since prostitution is a fact. What one can do in the current situation is to work to create good conditions for anyone wanting to be a prostitute. While we sit and talk, the telephone never ceases and all sorts of people come and go, shop, look, question, look askance, giggle, etc.

#### **02.11.2000**

E relates an incident involving one of the girls in the shop window next door. A punter hadn’t ejaculated and demanded his money back from the girl, who was forced to call the police. E thinks it’s idiotic and compares it to going back to the bakery and asking for a refund because one hadn’t eaten up the bread one had bought. She thinks many men who go to prostitutes are stupid and don’t understand that they are actually seeking love and not a fuck, and if they think it’s only lust they’re just dumb. A few times a year, for various reasons, she gets so furious with the men coming into PIC that she throws them out on their ear. “Men just make me livid sometimes!” she says.

#### **05.11.2000**

E worked as a prostitute for a year 15 years ago. I ask if she thinks that it takes courage to work as a prostitute and she answers that courage is needed when one begins and when one stops. The reason why she stopped was that she contracted several different venereal diseases simultaneously and AIDS was around. She needed a fortnight’s rest and decided then to quit. After awhile she admits that the real reason was that she couldn’t face living a double life any more. No one around her knew what she had for a job. I asked E if she would describe the situation she was in when she was working as a prostitute. She replied: “Dutch, no drugs, no addiction, good working situations, was paid, required condoms and worked legally. She belonged to the group of so-called professional prostitutes, who often live double lives – have house, family, dog – in “ordinary” or “normal” society, but who have chosen to work as prostitutes. E says that this group is larger than one thinks. That the “professionals” work openly in the Red Light District is unique. According to E the media are not usually interested in writing about this group of women since they don’t have anything “spectacular” to tell – e.g. about a childhood with sexual violence, etc. Neither are these prostitutes interested in having anything to do with the media since people in their immediate surroundings most often don’t know what they are working with.

My interest in the professional prostitutes has become stronger and I want to focus on them. When I tell this to E she thinks it’s interesting since in her view what’s always highlighted are the stereotypes - the “over-sexed” or the “victim”.

Before I leave for the day I ask her what she thinks about my having had so many conversations with her and getting masses of information without giving anything back. She says she has no problem with this since her job at PIC is to do just that. I understand her wanting to draw a clear boundary; I shouldn’t imagine that we sit and talk for any other reason than it is her job. At the same time she tells me things that are personal and I nevertheless feel she has shown some sort of confidence in me on another level than that of the purely professional. But perhaps that is merely a misunderstanding. Her work is, of course, is based on her personal story. As she herself says, “one is never free from having worked as a prostitute; one will never be able to marry the prince of Holland.”



**06.11.2000**

I ask E if I can interview her and record it at the same time. She wants me to ask questions; she prefers it that way since she doesn't want to repeat phrases from her work at PIC out of habit. "You must get me to think!", she says.

### **A (artist) interviews E (ex-prostitute)**

A: OK, E, what do you have to say about prostitution?

E: I'd like to relate an anecdote. Here at the Prostitution Information Centre (PIC) we have lectures as a way of financing the Centre since we have no state support. A few months every year we get students from, for instance, Belgium and Germany. Last summer we got a group of Swedish students and they were one of the toughest groups I have ever had.

A: Why?

E: These Swedish girls and boys who were going to be social workers were strongly against prostitution and their questions to an ex prostitute like me were based on their opinion that prostitution was morally wrong and bad for women. There was a girl who tried to convince me that it was a low, a terrible thing to do to oneself. She asked: "What's in your mind after you've just had sex with a customer?" I answered that if I'd just had sex with a customer, I'd be thinking "yes, 100 guilders more – I want more of that so I can go shopping!" The girl continued: "But what do you really think deep down after you've had sex with an ugly fat man?" I told her that I think: "well, there's another 100 guilders!" She tried to convince me that I should feel exploited and dirty, but I can't help not feeling like that. When you have had a customer, you think about more cash – give me money, give me money – and think of all the things you can buy. This is something people have difficulties understanding. Of course, you have to have sex otherwise you won't get the money, but it's a trick and it's almost shocking how quickly you get used to it. I think it can be compared with what a nurse goes through. The first time she washes a patient it can be truly shocking, the next time, still rather shocking, and the third time, well, then she's a nurse and glad to be able to help. When you're a prostitute it's the money that makes you happy, that's how it functions and it seems hard for an "outsider" to comprehend.

A: Where does the "subject" go when one works as a prostitute?

E: There is a routine with customers. You check his genitals, wash them, put on a condom and try to satisfy him as quickly as possible. It's more about a trick. It's not so difficult, it doesn't make you feel bad. There's also a kick when men look at you and wow! Want you so much that they'll pay money for it. You don't like the sex part but you get a kick out of being a woman that men want. Many women are uncertain about their looks and it's good for self-confidence; it makes you feel powerful and strong and attractive. Doesn't make you randy, that's something else. But sure, you get to know a lot about men that you'd rather not know.

A: Like?

E: How obsessed they are by sex. I've had many customers who have fantasies about their secretaries. As a prostitute it's fun with these crazy men and their crazy fantasies.

A: Do they tell about their fantasies?

E: Yes, because they want you to act as if you were their secretary. I think it's OK since it's fun, and then they leave the secretaries in peace. But there's another side to it: if like me for example, you've lived a double life and then decide to quit prostitution and seek a job in an office, then you think – yuk! when you see these men. They all have the same thing in mind; it's alright as a prostitute but as an ordinary woman on the street one really doesn't want to know or to think about how sexually preoccupied they are.

A: What about the "professional" prostitute?

E: People often think that a prostitute is a toothless, drug-addicted girl on the street. A "professional" prostitute works because it's a job not because she's forced to in order to get money for the next fix. But the term is a little off since drug addicts try to support themselves in the same way. But it's a distinction prostitutes make. There are many Christian organisations here in the district that take care of the addicts on the street. One of the women came in here once and said that there was a clear difference between the girls, between the drug addicted women who began first with prostitution and then with drugs and those who were already addicts when they began with prostitution. She said those who began to do drugs after



becoming prostitutes have a kind of pride in their work. They take better care of themselves and have fewer problems than the others, who often hate what they do and feel bad about it. It seems that if you're not happy about what you do, you also take more risks with your health and with nasty customers. Those who choose prostitution as an occupation have a more positive view of themselves and handle it better. They refuse nasty customers, take care of their health and I'm sure they use condoms.

The group of "professionals" work discreetly since they actually have something to lose. Here in the Red Light everyone is interested in prostitution; the prostitutes are accosted by journalists, social workers, artists with projects, students and the church. Imagine, that you come from a very asocial family, your mother's an addict and you dad has beaten you since childhood, you're a victim of incest and dependent on drugs on the street. What have you got to lose saying you're a prostitute? But if you're married, have children and live in a house in the suburbs, then you won't want to talk about it for you've so much to lose if it comes out. We're very tolerant in Holland, but in a hypocritical way. The Dutch say: "If it's the woman's free choice, if she keeps the money herself and doesn't have a pimp taking it all, if she's happy with what she does, why not?" No problem. But there's a big difference if it's your daughter or your neighbour. At PIC we heard a story from a woman with a two year-old daughter who was stupid enough to tell a TV station that she was a prostitute. Her neighbour reported her to a child protection agency since the woman had various people taking care of her daughter when she worked. They thought she was a bad, unsuitable and irresponsible mother. But the way she organised her child-care was the same as any working mother would do – the child was at nursery two days a week, one day one grandmother took care of her, and one day the other granny. Every working mother gets help from a nursery and the grandparents if she's lucky. There's no justice in society so most prostitutes are forced to live a double life.

A: Can you talk about your own situation with a double life?

E: I come from a pleasant ordinary middle class family. Becoming a prostitute was for me a rebellious act. I had a sort of complex about being a well-brought up girl, I was upset about it - I wanted to be a bit crazy. I had some sort of dream of being an artist, but thought I was too dumb and had no talent. I was a very angry and rebellious teenager who wanted to be a criminal but was too honest to steal, so I chose to be a prostitute. We are the no-future generation, coming after the people who in the 50s and 60s thought everything was possible, but all we got were doors that were suddenly shut in our faces. So I wanted to be a prostitute – but I didn't hate my parents so much that I wanted them to know about it. They are pleasant Christian people and they would be hurt. I amused myself for awhile and earned as much as I could, ate elegant dinners, took taxis to the grocery and other mad foolish things. In the beginning you think you're really smart not to pay tax, but after awhile you begin to understand that you can't do anything with your money if you don't pay your taxes. All that money was illegal you can't put it in the bank, buy insurance – all the smart things you would have wanted to do with the money when you started you can't do. You cannot place it in a bank deposit box for a few years and then be able to study at university or buy a house. If you buy a house people will wonder where you got the money from.

A: You worked illegally then?

E: To work as a prostitute and go to a prostitute were tolerated even then<sup>2</sup>, but the tax laws are different from criminal laws. Everyone in Holland with an income must pay income tax, even if you rob some lady, you must pay income tax. It's a crazy law but it's useful when they catch heavy-duty criminals. Then the tax man takes all the money and says: "OK, officially you live on the social, but then how can you afford two Jaguars, three Mercedes, a house in Holland and a house in Spain?" And so they take it all. That's how the law is applied in practice. I didn't have a habit so I spent all the money in shops. It's amazing how people treat you in shops if they see you have a lot of money to spend. They treat you like the Queen of Sheba, and it's just great. I had fun, but I was also forced to be careful. Only my best friend knew I was a prostitute; everyone else thought I worked in a shop. You must also be careful about how you spend your money; for instance, you have to put off buying a video because you bought a colour TV the week before. So then you spend everything on taxis and things like that, but after a year or so it was no longer very satisfying to earn money only to spend it. Not to do anything with it. Then I really felt like a prostitute. I never again want a job where I only work for the money. I'd not feel good if money's the only object. Only working for money and not being satisfied, not finding pleasure in it, that's against my morals. Here you have an ex prostitute with morals! A baker bakes bread, he makes something. People who do creative things and make money on it, or take care of others and earn money from that...I think that for money you should do something meaningful or create something.



A: In order to stand yourself?

E: Yes. I made many men happy, but I didn't give a damn about them, so it didn't give me any particular satisfaction. I decided to quit.

A: During the period when you were living a double life, you were officially working in a shop. What hours of the day or night did you actually work?

E: I worked during the day. I always worked during the day because I lived in an occupied house, had no drug habit, and didn't need all that much money. I could earn more money at night but then I would have had to deal with men who were on drugs, drunk or crazy. During the day you had to do with men who come for a lunchtime quickie. One earns less but it's easier. I was a lazy prostitute who wanted easy money rather than a lot of it.

A: What group of prostitutes is referred to when you talk about prostitution in general here at PIC?

E: The professionals. We have a problem here at PIC: for instance, we don't get any help from the arrogant Amsterdam City Council because they think prostitution already gets so much support. But if you read research reports on prostitution, all the help and all the research is devoted to the drug addicted street prostitutes and to the women involved in trafficking. But, for instance, if you work as a prostitute, aren't on drugs but suffer from depression and go to a psychologist at one of the ordinary health centres, they'll say: "that's your problem". They'll see prostitution as the problem, but if you're an artist or a secretary, they'll say: "Now let's work with your depression". In addition, a prostitute won't trust such people because they also think it's about sex and want to know how it is to have sex with somebody who could be your grandfather, but that's not what's interesting. It is for these women I speak, for myself, for the women who go against all preconceived opinions about what a prostitute is.

A: What do you think of society's view of prostitution and prostitutes?

E: Society has a preconceived idea of prostitutes. In Holland there's a slang expression for prostitutes that means the "fun girls", a romantic view from before, from the 50s with all the blond prostitutes who had a great time. There aren't many people who would guess that I've been a prostitute since they have such a clichéd picture of what a prostitute is. I've nothing against that since it makes it easier to live a double life. If you're an ordinary girl, they'll never believe it about you.

A: Earlier you said that it doesn't matter how society looks upon it since prostitution is a fact, no matter what.

E: Yes, I'm really ambivalent here. I think society should see prostitution for what it is – a way to earn money. But I also understand that it isn't like an ordinary job, it'll never be an ordinary profession; the tax authorities shouldn't treat it as an ordinary profession because it isn't. When I say I don't care what society thinks, it's a personal view. Society should see prostitution as a reality and respect and accept the girls, understand that it's about money and not about sex. But at the same time I think that they can think as they do because then it's easier to live a double life.

A: Is this double life the reason that you haven't begun to work as a prostitute again?

E: Yes, and because it was so tough to keep myself from going into prostitution. As soon as I have problems with money or with men I want to be a prostitute again. It's been really hard to keep myself away from it.

A: Why do you think of going into prostitution when you have problems with men?

E: Because then I think all men are devils and they should pay for it. I always have problems with men because they want it their own way so much, and that's something I'll never accept. I don't think I've ever had a relationship where there's real equality. It may begin like that but it always ends with the man: it's his girlfriend, his car, his house - the man...and then the woman. I don't go for that, and I think they should pay for it!

A: So it's also about revenge?

E: Yes, a bit, I think. I think that that can be a good reason for being a prostitute for a while – to get revenge.

A: What do think of Sweden's criminalizing the punters, the people who buy sex?

E: On the one hand it's sympathetic that the customers are criminalized, but on the other, it's unrealistic.

A: What's sympathetic about it?

E: That they don't criminalize the women but the men. But it's terribly unrealistic to criminalize anyone – I don't believe in it. I completely agree with the right-wing orthodox Christians who think that one should have sex only within marriage. I wish that every young man or woman would meet their life-long love when they're around 18 and live happily together for the rest of their lives; that they hold hands and kiss each other in the old people's home - but that's not what it looks like. We must get to a point where we see reality.



If you are from the middle class, well educated, have a job that's satisfying, are married to a nice man or woman and have several wonderful kids – then it's simple to judge. But not everyone's in that situation. If you're gay, for example, you've also got the right to be happy in your way. It must be understood that prostitution is a reality, homosexuality is a reality, people who take drugs are a reality. As a prostitute, you see lots of men who would never otherwise have the possibility to be with a girl.

A: Do you mean the men you talked about earlier, who actually are looking for love?

E: That's another discussion. I mean that there are many customers – in addition to those who are old men or married – who are handicapped, physically or mentally. There are men who can't get a girlfriend because women turn up their noses at them. The only place where they are welcome is at a prostitute's. The other is that I think men go to prostitutes for the wrong reasons – men are a little funny, I think. It's said that it's easy for men to distinguish between sex for love or sex for money; it's said they want sex just because they're horny and are hunters....But as a prostitute I've another experience of men: that they're rather pathetic because they think they're looking for sex but actually they're looking for love - but they don't know it. That's what I don't understand with men: they sit in the pub drinking beer, talking with their mates, feel raunchy, go home to their wives and say "Darling, I want sex!" And the wife answers: "You sleep on the sofa tonight!" A woman wants intimacy before sex, perhaps a glass of wine, good music and a good talk. Get into the mood. So then you think that if men only want sex, they might as well go to a prostitute! So they go to a prostitute and then they suddenly want a glass of wine and get into the mood with a talk. It's a big problem for prostitutes – all their customers want a personal relationship with them. You get so tired and down. They will want to know why you're a prostitute, they want intimacy. But that is something you will never ever sell – intimacy can't be bought. They all want to know about your private life, so you make up stories. There's two kinds of stories told to punters: one is "I have a university degree, but I'm so randy that I've made my hobby my profession"; the other is the "sad story".

A: What happens if you say that you won't tell anything?

E: Then they stop coming on a regular basis, or they start to complain. You must give them that, but it's a pain in the ass. One funny thing that happened once when I was working at PIC was that a man came in really upset and shouted: "those goddam girls, they only do it for the money!"

A: And what did you say?

E: I laughed and said: "So you've finally understood that they don't want you without your money!" I have to inform so many men who come in here that the women are prostitutes. That's why I think men are a little pathetic. I would even dare to say that it seems simpler for women to distinguish between sex for love and sex for money. I read The Shere HYTE Report on Men's Sexuality. Shere HYTE is an American woman who made a comprehensive survey of sexuality; she wrote about men's sexuality and about women's sexuality. She's interesting, but according to current research, she's a little old fashioned. One of her conclusions was that women want to experience intimacy before they have sex and men while they have sex. She asked men what they feel for women and she got the usual replies about boobs, bums, whores etc. But then she asked how they felt just when they put their penises in a vagina and then they suddenly came out with a whole load of romantic shit like "I feel so warm; I feel so accepted". That's amazing. These men, they're seeking something and come to a place like PIC and complain about the prostitutes. What's wrong with them? I want to know, and that's part of the attraction.

#### 07.11.2000

There was a huge amount of people coming into PIC today. For example, a couple where the woman had been a prostitute in Paris but now wants to start working in Holland. She wants to know about what do to practically and where she should go to find help with what she needed. What punters have most money – those at the clubs or the ones that visit prostitutes who are self-employed? Could she get a permit to start her own business? What's the best way to rent a window? How much money do you get working from a window/a club/ your own business? Etc. I never found out who the man was, what his relationship to her was – brother, friend, boyfriend...? I discovered myself looking at the woman with a whole load of preconceived opinions: 'a very small compact woman, like an angel, for me a completely unlikely prostitute'. During the couple's conversation I came to find out most of what a person needs to know to find her place in the prostitution jungle. It seems complicated to behave bureaucratically correct if one wants to work as



a prostitute. Those who work “professionally” really exert themselves to acquire what it takes to be able to work in peace and quiet under all possible circumstances.

Every Saturday tourist groups who have bought “The Red Light Tour” arrive at PIC to hear E give her talk. Or, as she says, “give her standard speech”, which she gets very tired of, while the tourists drink a glass of wine. Afterwards, she, the ‘ex-prostitute’, answers questions. She’s very tired of that part of the work at PIC. “I don’t want to be the ex-prostitute for the rest of my life,” she says, “it was, after all, 15 years ago”.

### **E’s standard speech for tourists who have bought “The Red Light Tour”.**

My name is E and I’ll begin by explaining what the Prostitution Information Centre is. As far as I know, it is the only place of its kind in existence. We are exactly what we say we are – a place where one can get information about prostitution. We don’t exist only for the prostitutes – it isn’t our main goal to help them – but since we ourselves are ex prostitutes, we cannot refuse to help them. But we are here for everybody – for journalists, tourists, students and customers. We answer all sorts of questions, everything from where the Red Light District is located to heavier questions. But don’t rely too much on us, we’re neither doctors nor psychiatrists; we are merely a couple of ex prostitutes and our knowledge comes from our own experience. The hottest subject just now is taxes; the most common questions we get from prostitutes are about taxes. Since the women are self-employed they have to pay taxes like an employer and that’s nothing one learns in 10 minutes. So we help with showing them how to fill in the various forms. PIC came into being because of our own initiatives and we get no financial support from the Dutch state. Unfortunately we can’t pay the rent through giving information and that’s why it looks like a tourist trap in here. Some of the souvenirs are very nice, however and just now you are the ones that pay the rent through taking advantage of the tourist items here. You have paid well for your drinks, and if you think you’ve not gotten everything you expected out of your Red Light Tour, you can at least feel pleased to have contributed to the Centre. Thank you very much. Around the corner here is a reconstruction of what a window room looks like inside, and after this presentation you can go and look yourselves. If you want to work as a prostitute, you need two things: money for the rent and a passport showing you are over 18 and are in Holland legally. Women in the windows are not allowed to work topless and the same rules apply for them as for everyone else: one cannot show oneself naked in a public place in Holland. The women themselves can decide their own prices; the most common is 50 guilders for an ordinary lay or a 10 minute fellatio – after 10 minutes the price goes up. Another thing you can see in the room is the red button – that’s an alarm signal and when that is set off the woman gets immediate assistance either from the owner of the room, other prostitutes or the police. The police are most often on the girls’ side, in 9 cases out of 10, the alarm is due to a customer getting feisty about the price because he’s not had an ejaculation within the allotted 10 minutes. Well, I haven’t any more to say right now. You are welcome to look at the room and take photos if you like. If you have questions, please ask them now.

**“The Most Frequently Asked Questions about Amsterdam’s Red Light District”** is a pocket-size folder put together by and available at the Prostitution Information Centre. With the permission of the Stichting Prostitution Information Centre, here are some of the questions from the folder published in 2000<sup>3</sup>:

”How long does this neighbourhood exist?

- The Amsterdam Red Light District already has existed since the year 1200. Only then they didn’t call it that. This region is one of the oldest parts of Amsterdam. Likewise, the Warmoesstraat is the oldest street in Amsterdam. It is one of the first streets that most tourists will encounter as they enter the Red Light District from the Central Station side, with an imposing billboard for “Chickita’s Sex Paradise”, greeting them as they do...it is also a centre for the Gay leather scene!

You can find one of the oldest houses in the city at the beginning of the Zeedijk. Prostitution has always been here. In the Middle Ages prostitution was allowed in certain places in the city. For example the brothels



in Damstraat used to be run by the sheriff and his men! Amsterdam has always had a lot of travellers and seafarers passing through its port. In the 16th century prostitution underwent prohibition, although it continued to grow just the same. In the 17th century is when window prostitution appeared for the first time in this area, and this phenomenon actually arose from prostitutes parading their wares from behind the door or window of their own house.

Is it safe to walk here?

- Yes in the Red Light District you can walk on the streets, without any worries, but nowadays as you have to watch out wherever you are, the same rules applies for the Red Light District. Keep an eye on yourself and your personal possessions, and preferably don't walk alone in any of the narrow little dark alleys after 4 o'clock in the morning, and of course never display your money too openly. This naturally applies to anywhere you go, common sense really!

Is it legal, all those women behind the windows?

- Yes it's legal. Working as a prostitute has been completely legal in the whole of the Netherlands since 1911. Window prostitution is tolerated in a total of 9 places, including Amsterdam. The total number of windows however has to remain constant by law.

It seems as if anything is possible in Amsterdam!?

- Fortunately a whole lot is possible, but that doesn't mean that there aren't rules. People can be themselves here but are asked to take others into consideration and not be anti-social. In general the same rules of social conduct apply as in every other country or state in the civilized world. As far sex and soft drugs go it's more open and easy to speak about than in other countries; mutual respect is in fact always the most important thing.

Can you take photos in the Red Light District?

- It's not forbidden to take photos in the Red Light District, but it is an unwritten law in the neighbourhood that you don't. For many years tourists have taken photographs of prostitutes without their permission, and this has led to a lot of irritation and even fights! In any case it's very impolite to take a photo of someone unasked, especially in this area; better to leave your camera at home or in the hotel, or only take photos of the windows from a good distance away. Don't ignore this because some people can react strongly! You often see stickers in the windows that say "no pictures".

Can prostitutes refuse clients?

- Of course they may! Generally speaking prostitutes work independently and the same applies for them as for you: Nobody has the right to touch you or in any way invade your private space if you don't want them to.

As a woman, can you also take a look at the prostitutes as you walk down the street?

- Of course you can. Most prostitutes are well aware of the fact that they serve as a tourist attraction. The important thing is that you show them respect and you project that to them. Please don't stand with your nose up against the windows, stare or make fun of them in any way. Also be careful you don't stand directly in front of a window with a group of people while you look at something else, as you will be obstructing them in their work. (Don't forget they have to be visible to potential clients).

How do I make contact with a prostitute?

- If you see someone who you want to make contact with, just walk up to the window. If the prostitute wants to, she will open the door and you can ask her what you want, and she will probably tell you. If for some reason she doesn't want to open the door that's her right and you can just walk on.

What is the average price for a visit to a prostitute?

- Most of the prostitutes who work behind the window have a flat rate fee of 50 guilders. Because a lot of prostitutes pay taxes, these days the prices they charge are finally going up, and more and more of them are going to raise their minimum price to 75 guilders; for anything more than a "straight fuck and suck", one has to pay more. For 50 guilders you get about 15 minutes. Prostitutes are self-employed and determine their own rates and working methods!



Are condoms safe?

- If you use a tested and approved condom, for example the brand DUREX, and you use it the right way, then of course the condom is safe. Only use a water or silicon lubricants (never use oil-based lubricants), and take good care if you have long nails. There should also not be any air in the reservoir in the front.

What kind of men are the clients they have?

- In 99.9% of all the cases the client of the average prostitute is a man, and men come in all shapes and sizes so you can't generalize them so easily, except perhaps that most of them have a regular partner. The nationalities of the clients in this neighbourhood are of course very diverse. In the summer there are a lot of tourists but also a lot of Dutch, a survey is in fact being done at this very moment.

How much can you earn as a prostitute behind the windows?

- It varies a lot and it's of course not something that people want to shout about from the rooftops! It depends on the number of hours worked, the manner of working and presenting oneself and a bit on your looks. The earnings vary from 50 up to 1500 guilders in a day.

Do prostitutes pay tax?

- In the Netherlands everyone who earns money has to pay tax. Unfortunately for the Treasury not everyone participates. Prostitutes are not left off the hook; for a few years now the Tax Office has been noticing where they've been missing out and is now trying to do something about it, although they have not been very successful in this respect.

Are there also men who stand behind the windows?

- No, it was once attempted in 1995, but the project was not able to be repeated. Male prostitution takes place in clubs and on a small scale on the streets. This sector forms about 10% of the market. For female clients, apart from a few escort services, there is little on the market.

Can you bargain with a prostitute about the price?

- Don't you think the price is already low enough?"

### **After her speech to the tourists E and I talk far into the night at the PIC.**

A: I thought I asked different kinds of questions from those of the tourists since I have been working with the subject for awhile.

E: Mmmm....

A: I thought I had more experience, so to speak....it was really useful for me to experience those groups of tourists.

E: You understand that the so-called dumb tourists ask the same questions as you do. Artists, journalists with different projects often come in here thinking they have better questions than the tourists. At first when you came in I thought, "oh boy, one more of those!"

A: Yes... maybe I'm repeating myself now because I feel quite dizzy...but I don't think I can ask you any more about prostitution, I've reached a kind of limit, if you know what I mean. It feels as though I've been out after sensational truths about prostitution...

E: Yes, yes...

A: Then if I see that I'm not a bit different from the tourists, then the question is how come I ever thought I was different? Do you see what I mean? So, for the time being I can't make myself ask any more about prostitution. On the other hand, there's nothing more to know – I mean how deep can you go to try to "understand" without making yourself a prostitute?

E: It's the only way – to get your own experience, but then I'd think you'd gone too far....but from a prostitute's perspective you're just an outsider, just like any other outsider.

A: Yes...

E: You're an outsider just like all the tourists, like all the social workers who want to work with



rehabilitating and channelling prostitutes into society. You're bloody outsiders, all of you. But you must be that, in some way – I mean, it's enough to want to be open and at least try to understand.

A: Yes, but what I mean is, that as an outsider, one can only understand so much and after that there's nothing more to understand. What I've understood about prostitution is not more advanced than what the tourists understand during one of your lectures. What you tell me, you tell the tourists - there's no difference. Before, I believed that if I came into contact with someone with personal experience, I'd acquire some sort of truth, which would give me more knowledge about prostitution. Instead, what I've come to now is that there's nothing more to know, it's not more than this, than what it is. There's no depth – rather there's insights, which are very much about oneself and one's attitudes and notions.

#### **12.11.2000**

Every Wednesday and Saturday E receives 2–3 groups of tourists – part of the “circus”, she says. There's obviously been so much “circus” in the Red Light District that prostitutes don't want to work there any more. E's suggested that actresses play the prostitutes in the Red Light District; they can be photographed and they can answer questions, while the punters go to some other district where the prostitutes can work.

I asked E how important she thought it was that she tells the tourists who book guides to the Red Light District that she's an ex prostitute. She thinks it's crucial - no one would be interested if it wasn't about (the sensational) seeing and listening to a real ex-prostitute. The smuttier the better, lots of chuckles amongst the tourists during E's talk when she relates the most bizarre stories. To hear these things from her made me break out in a cold sweat – I felt stung in some way. If I would be able to feel trust for myself and for E, I would at this point not allow the fact that she is an ex prostitute be exposed in my project; it should function as a basis for my investigation. Otherwise, despite the fact that she has been a “professional” prostitute, I will be creating just another clichéd picture. This I want to avoid since I am interested in going beyond the picture of prostitution that is ordinarily presented (in the media, for example). When I told E that I might be going to exclude that part of her story as a prostitute, she threw out her arms happily and said, “so your investigation will be about me!” Her understanding of an investigation “about her” is that it leaves out the part about prostitution.

There's a lot that's different from what I thought. For example, only to think of women as the reified victim (which has been my unconscious point of departure) has become more complicated after asking E at some point what she thought about objectification. She answered as if it was self-evident that my question concerned prostitutes' objectifying men!

#### **15.11 2000**

“Why do I talk to you so much?” asked E when we were on our way home from PIC on Wednesday. I couldn't answer that question. I told her I wanted to continue to record our conversations, regardless of what we talked about. That was OK with her, but she asked if I ever didn't work. She's going to come to my place for dinner on Thursday – the first time we've met outside of PIC.

#### **22.11 2002**

E was here yesterday and was pleasantly surprised at the place where we live in Jordaan; she didn't think such old flats (draining straight into the canal) existed any longer in Amsterdam. During the evening she said that I was the first person during her time at PIC who had been given her private telephone number, and that made me happy. She thinks I'm brave because I want to know more than her standard stories from her standard role performance. When she says I'm brave I feel proud and strong. That's how I felt during the first interview when I thought she confided things to me that I later realized she told to whole hordes of tourists. “I give them the show they want”, says E when she talks about the tourists. She did that too when she worked as a prostitute and, for instance, satisfied men's fantasies by playing a secretary. To play a role can be a survival strategy. During the time when E worked delivering food to patients in a hospital in



Amsterdam she adopted the role of being the positive “crazy”, happy girl who always made the patients’ last days a little easier while their families wept over the impending loss of their nearest and dearest. Yesterday she told me that she didn’t like the “natural look” that was so prevalent for a while 15 years ago. It was harder to play a role without any makeup, but it was when she went entirely natural - unmade-up - that she attracted the most punters. She likes role-play and she says that’s probably why she’s so good at what she does at PIC.

I asked her if she also gives me what she thinks I want. Could it be that I think we have a relationship of trust while she gives me what she has up to a certain limit - viz the point where her role ends? She replied that in the beginning she thought “phu, yet another artist with a project” and tried to send me to another place with information on prostitution. However, when I persisted in coming back and asking and asking, she tried to give me what I wanted. But now something else has grown between us based on interest in seeing each other and enjoying each other’s company.

**02.12.2000**

I was visiting E yesterday, having coffee and photographing her cats, among other things. I think she got a little rattled and uncertain of me and my intentions with wanting to meet her. When I said that my project had become a combination of work and socialising, she wondered if I was at her house in the capacity of work. I said, not only, but in the beginning I met with her only because of work since we hadn’t developed any other sort of relationship then.

**07.12.2000**

I wonder if E feels used by me. The last time I met her I didn’t take the video camera with me in order to show that I can meet her without talking project or recording anything.

**09.01.2001**

We have discussed the limits or boundaries of the project. E wonders when we’re meeting for friendship purposes and when in relation to the project. I have tried to explain that the boundaries seem fluid to me. I’m considering asking her if she’d do an interview with me and in that way get an opportunity to ask questions that she might not ask otherwise.

**21.01.2001**

Today when I asked E about interviewing me, she burst out “Ah! You want us to be equals!”

**E (ex-prostitute) interviews A (artist)**

E: A, why did you come to the information centre (PIC)?

A: I came to Amsterdam because of its Red Light District. I’d been in Amsterdam several times before, gone through the district and felt very nervous and uncomfortable about the whole scenario. I was moved, curious and personally engaged in the subject of prostitution. I went by the Centre (PIC) and thought, that’s the place to begin. I went around the quarter, circled the centre for weeks before I dared go in. I was so scared that I’d be thrown out or something because I didn’t know if it was OK to go in there and say, “hi, I’d like to talk about prostitution”.

E: Was it so bad?

A: Yes, I was uncomfortable, very much because I’d not defined for myself exactly what I wanted – my idea was to try to be open. It was a pretty awkward entrance, I guess. But, to answer the question why I went into PIC, it was because I decided to start there and see what happened.

E: You’re an art student and you want to do a project on prostitution. What motivated you?



A: I began my project when they criminalized the punters - the people buying sex - in Sweden and that led to my being curious about the Red Light District as a kind of antithesis to the debate in Sweden. I wanted to continue my investigation in Amsterdam since it was the most tolerant place as regards prostitution I could think of.

E: Yes, I think people usually visit the Red Light District because it's where they can see prostitution so openly.

A: But for me it was also a way to continue working with my project. In the Red Light District I thought I could conduct my investigation more freely than I could in Sweden.

E: How do you mean?

A: I struck a certain amount of "local" resistance in Sweden, so I felt inhibited in some way, but it anyway felt important to go on. Many people I talked to about going to the Red Light District were a bit provoked and said things like "you going to go down to that den of iniquity, that cesspool?!"

E: Ha, ha...

A: "That male chauvinist den of iniquity!"

E: What! Is that true? Has your opinion of prostitution changed since you've seen it in Holland?

A: Since I've talked to you a lot about it, my opinion's changed to the degree that I don't have one opinion but am rather more ambivalent.

E: Did you have a clear opinion about prostitution before you came to Amsterdam?

A: I was into questioning the criminalisation of it. Now it feels more complex since I've understood that legalizing it is at least as problematic as criminalizing it. How you find a way or approach for dealing with possible problems depends on who it involves, what type of society is involved, what "kind" of prostitution and what situation...

E: Was there a lot of discussion in Sweden when the law was introduced?

A: Yes, there was a big debate.

E: Both in the media and amongst the population, like in bars, for instance?

A: Yes.

E: What was the most common opinion? How did people react?

A: It seemed that many thought criminalizing the punters was good, that that was a step forward – at least to criminalize the buyers of sex. But the discussion was also about a potential situation where both parties would be criminalized, which, for example, the social workers working with prostitutes think would be problematic. They think such criminalizing would make their work more difficult if it means that the prostitutes would have to go underground.

E: Have you a Red Light District in Stockholm?

A: No. When buying sex was criminalized, the idea was that there would be no commerce on the street officially. Instead, prostitution on the Internet has increased enormously. I checked the number of pages I could find on the Net during the period before and after the criminalization and the difference was huge – I remember reading about it as well in some Net magazine. If one wants, it's simple to contact a prostitute and set up a meeting – even the prices of the various services are published on the websites. At one point I thought of trying to get information through contacting a prostitute on the Net. But the idea of "meeting someone in some car in the forest" made me choose other ways. On the other hand, I think one reason why I came to Amsterdam was because I wanted a climate of discussion that contrasted with Sweden's. I wanted to test my thoughts and opinions. In Sweden I felt that I always had to be on the defensive and that wasn't very fruitful. I didn't feel free to ponder and analyse. I can give an example. I was involved in a group show at an art gallery in northern Sweden. The theme of the exhibition was "The Ugly", and in relation to that I thought it would be exciting to investigate prostitution, especially since the law on buying sex was about to be passed. My piece for the exhibition contained two parts: a text<sup>4</sup> where I took up, for instance, possible effects of criminalization on the prostitutes; and a cd where one could find authentic examples of homepages for prostitution. Without either me or the project leader knowing anything about it, my work was removed from the exhibition the day before the vernissage.

E: Why?

A: Because the piece was considered "aesthetically and morally" wrong. The gallery management thought it could be bad for children and other visitors to see the Internet prostitution pages – the pages showed half naked women. They were worried that people would be encouraged to go home to their own computers and check out the prostitutes!



E: In Sweden, of all countries, you couldn't show a picture of a naked woman?

A: The art gallery was a municipal gallery and a public place and they couldn't handle or be responsible for the reactions. The municipality had a crisis meeting about it and decided that on moral grounds they couldn't allow my piece to be in the exhibition.

E: Do you think that it helped to go to Amsterdam, do you think that it's really so open here?

A: From what you've told me, it's not as open in Holland as I first thought.

E: (the cat meows). Ah, Puf, you want some attention! We've a little black cat here that's behaving funny because he's really interested in A but also really wary. He likes you but was disappointed when you took advantage of that and filmed him – he thought that was extremely rude! I think Puf has feelings that I should have since you and I are friends, but I'm also a victim, a subject for your art project. Your project is about prostitution, but it also involves a personal story.

A: What? What did you say?

E: Your project goes on, and I'm in a very peculiar situation, being a subject for your project and also your friend. I know that you struggle with that problem. But I remember once feeling disappointed after one of our meetings. I thought we met because of friendship, but then suddenly you wanted to record something, and then I thought: "what's this for a situation – does she just want information? Are we friends or am I only a subject?" In the beginning I was quite flattered that I was interesting enough for someone to involve me in a project, but I've not told any of my friends about it. I'm still surprised that this art student and I became friends - I am, in fact, not interested in being in the centre of any art project.

Translated to English by Jan Teeland

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Trafficking is the general term to denote various forms of illegal commerce over national borders: eg human trafficking, sex slave trade or organised drug smuggling. Source: Swedish National Encyclopedia.

<sup>2</sup> The Dutch law contains a unique concept, *gedogen* (regulated tolerance). *Gedogen* is applied when the prosecutor and the police were in agreement that the maintenance of a law cost society more socially and economically than allowing scrupulously regulated infringement.

<sup>3</sup> The whole folder can be ordered from [www.pic-amsterdam.com](http://www.pic-amsterdam.com)

<sup>4</sup> The text also included the following quote by Don Kulick, Assistant Professor in Social Anthropology, found on the Net: I ask myself instead what, exactly what, those passing laws against prostitution are actually against. Are they against the fact that certain prostitutes take drugs? In that case we should help them get rid of their drug dependency. Are they against the fact that certain prostitutes cannot get any other work? In that case, we should employ them. Do they think that whores are a symbol of the oppression of women? If so, then the women shouldn't be punished by taking their work away from them but instead, we should ensure that women get higher wages and that companies have more female managers or executives. Do they have moral problems with some men buying sex? Then we're into an entirely different discussion which is solely about morality.

Related reading:

"danzine – created by and for ladies in the biz" #16 (1999), # 17 (2000)

"Global Sex Workers – Rights, Resistance, and Redefinition", Kamala Kempadoo & Jo Doezema (1998)

"Dutch Policy on Prostitution, Questions and Answers", Foreign Information Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2000)

"Closed Curtain – Lives of de Wallen", Bruce Harris & Michelle Bird (2000)

"Prostitution & Feminism – Towards a Politics of Feeling", Maggie O'Neil (2001)

"I never thought this would happen to me – Prostitution and traffic in Latin American women in the Netherlands", Fanny Polanía Molina & Marie-Louise Janssen