



Contemporary Sex Worker Cultural Practice in Australia: Sex Workers' Use of Sex Industry Skills in Public Protest and Performance

Elena Jeffreys

The organised public presence of sex worker communities in recent times in Australia is a reflection of contemporary Australian sex work practices. These practices include exacting control and caution over the disclosure of one's identity, the use of pseudonyms, alteration of appearance, workplace skills (including the ability to interact with a diverse range of people), use of verbal and non-verbal communication, complex understanding of fantasy, use of iconic archetype when interacting with clients and consciously performing gender roles, all within the limited time frames of sex industry 'bookings'.¹ This article explores recent examples of public events organised by Australian sex workers and argues that the skills used to organise these events are closely linked to the skills and particular practices utilised in sex work. Sex worker organising is a positive reflection of the strength and resilience of sex workers in Australia today, and is an expression of community cultural development.

I have had ten years involvement in sex work: as a worker, peer educator, political activist, cultural archivist, elected representative and performer. Sex workers have complex and sophisticated understandings of public space and performativity, I hope that my contribution and analysis will add to the sea of diverse sex workers' voices that are correcting myths by documenting sex worker skills, strengths and complexities.

Individual sex workers in Australia have an incentive to stay out of the public eye. Sex workers who are known for their choice of profession may experience discrimination and vilification.² Sex work is viewed by courts in Australia as a reason to declare mothers unfit, by banks as a reason to refuse loans, by landlords as a reason to evict tenants, and by visa officials as a reason to deny visas to certain countries. Sex workers who also have positions in the public service are told that they are not 'upholding public standards,' and in some states of Australia it is still against the law to serve alcohol to a 'known prostitute'.³

Dominant social mores demand that sex workers are invisible.⁴ Discussion, disclosure, recognition and visibility of the sex industry is perceived as evidence of a 'slight' on society, at best impolite and, at worst, to deserve micro-management on the visual landscape with criminal penalty for non-compliance.⁵ The stigma and discrimination sex workers experience when their sex work status is known, is a punishment for their 'indiscretion,' however it is hard to know if it is the act of sex work that is challenging to mainstream society, or the *first-person telling* of such acts, by sex workers in particular. Both the act of sex work itself and the disclosure of it attract a level of sex-panic.

Sex workers work in the public sphere; economically active as independent operators from their own home, rented apartment or hotel room, from brothels or escort agencies, and from the street. The ability to be public without being 'seen' is an incredibly important sex worker skill. Accessible to clients while also avoiding police and other social regulators, sex workers move in a sphere of commerce, sometimes without disclosure even to those closest to them (friends, family and partners).⁶ Many brothel workers go to great lengths to alter their appearance for work, becoming unrecognisable even to those who might know them outside of work. Escort workers blend into public spaces in order to travel to escort jobs (either to hotels or suburban homes). Private sex workers work from residential areas without drawing the attention of their neighbours.⁷ Street based sex workers will move and change their practises in order to avoid the police.⁸ Most sex workers use a pseudonym.

Sex workers are highly skilled at interpersonal communication.⁹ The daily work routine includes negotiating intimate sexual encounters with (often new) clients, communicating about 'taboo' issues relating to condom use, sexual behaviour and setting sexual boundaries.¹⁰ The role of the sex worker is to guide the client to experience the mutual sexual encounter without transgression of the limits the worker has set. The sex worker skilfully mediates the gap between client expectation and reality, by invoking desire, imagination and fantasy.¹¹ An average 30 minute booking includes massage, oral sex, sex and two showers, making time management an important part of sex workers' skills set.¹² Furthermore, sex workers consciously use gender performativity in their workplace.¹³ For female sex workers, including transgender, this is comparable to techniques used by drag performers. The exaggeration of aspects of femininity to communicate desirability, sensuality, sexual availability and prowess, are used to express archetypal characters to increase income.¹⁴ Thus verbal and non-verbal skills, including presentation, dress and appearance, are part of the Australian sex workers' repertoire.¹⁵

Sex workers exact an extreme amount of control over their work environments, as evidenced in research with 95 private sex workers and 125 brothel workers by Roberta Perkins. Many of the interviewees had also worked in a street based environment:

They have created an environment in which violent problems are minimised. My research shows that sex work is not as dangerous as people think, and this may be due to the environment the workers create, or perhaps the men are not as violent as we think they are, whatever reason, the creation of that environment makes the worker feel safe and confident; and is a significant factor in worker satisfaction ... a sex worker is not going to stay working in an environment where they don't feel safe.¹⁶

Theories that maintain sex work is inherently unsafe are not evidence based. Perkins found that during a sex workers' working life, less than 10% of sex workers she interviewed had ever experienced rape by a client, less than 5% have experienced being bashed at work, and less than 3% have ever experienced violent crimes such as stabbing. Anti-sex work theorists have difficulty acknowledging the relative safety of individual sex work workplaces.¹⁷ All positive aspects of sex work are alien to the framework of anti-sex work theorists, as Danielle Egan

argues: 'women's sexual pleasure in the sex industry is ontologically impossible in radical feminist discourses.'¹⁸ Sex workers are silenced and their experiences ignored in anti-sex work theory.¹⁹ In opposition, I present the complex, public and extremely skilled examples of sex worker public protest and performance in Australia.

Sex Worker Action Group (SWAG) Christmas Eve Demonstration outside Northbridge Police Station, 2002

On Christmas Eve 2002, sex workers in Western Australia (WA) used the familial purity of Christmas spirit to challenge stereotypes while spreading the very serious message about increased police powers granted to WA Police by the then Police Minister Michelle Roberts. One year earlier, when Michelle Roberts was in opposition, her party had referred to the same police powers over sex workers as 'everything the police ever wanted for Christmas'.²⁰ Sex workers planned to exploit the hypocrisy of her actions by dressing up as Christmas Elves, delivering presents (the laws) from Michelle Roberts to the Western Australian Police Force.

Dressed in red and green, and wearing identity concealing fluffy white beards and face masks, the sex workers approached the Northbridge Police Station as a group on the 24 December 2002, carrying armfuls of large boxes wrapped in glossy Christmas paper and marked with large labels. The TV crews, previously alerted to the demonstration by the Sex Worker Action Group, started the cameras rolling the moment the sex workers approached, and filmed the angelic tableau beneath the white and blue checked 'Police Station' sign on Beaufort Street, Northbridge. A song had been penned by the sex workers, titled 'Silent Whores' and sung to the tune of Silent Night, telling of police corruption and sex worker objections. The new laws were outlined in bold letters on the gifts reading: 'Strip Search Without Charge', 'Enter Premises Without Warrant', 'Move On Notice', and 'Restraining Order', framed by the message, 'To the Police, Love from Michelle Roberts xx'. Intrigued passers by and amused media requested the song be sung again, but the Sex Worker Action Group had decided before the action to limit its length and thus limit the possibility of unplanned breaches of individual disclosure. The group withdrew from the Police Station to allow sex workers who were most concerned for their identity to leave the action.

Seven sex workers were involved in the action, which had been planned for two weeks. The action itself went for just under twenty minutes. The time length of the action is comparable to the average sex industry interaction in Australia—a 'half hour' booking includes two showers and about twenty minutes with the sex worker. Moreover, the controlled use of time, sex workers' disguises and careful management of geographical space—all essential sex industry skills—made the demonstration a success.

Sex Workers Protest in Russel Square, February 2003

Michelle Roberts's attack on the rights of sex workers in Western Australia continued in the form of the Prostitution Control Bill. With proposed criminal licensing, mandatory testing and registration laws, it was tabled for public comment in late November 2002.²¹ A twelve week 'consultation' period

Parading Ourselves

culminated on the 7 February 2003 and sex workers planned a public action on that day to express their distaste for the proposals. A formal media conference, with high profile supporters and nominated sex workers spokespeople, was held at 9am that morning on Roe Street. At the same time sex workers gathered in Russel Square, Northbridge, to prepare for their own sex worker specific public protest.

Russel Square is culturally significant to Perth sex workers. It has been the centre of their street based working area in Northbridge. A raised gazebo in the centre of the park allows safety, anonymity and protection from the elements for sex workers to scope the clients driving around the perimeter of the park. Clients know they are being watched from the centre but cannot identify sex workers in the gazebo from the distance and road level of their cars. It is up to the sex workers, if and when, to disclose their presence and come down from the gazebo to approach clients.

So on the day of the protest, sex workers met and planned their action inside the gazebo, and could see the media coming into the park. Nominated spokespeople were sent from the sex worker contingent in the gazebo to meet the approaching media and brief them on the morning's activity. The media were instructed to set up their cameras on the grass, were forbidden to enter the gazebo or come up the stairs, and were to film the group as a whole. They were not to single out any individual's face for filming, and would be permitted interviews with the nominated spokespeople at the conclusion of the action.

When confident that all expected participants had arrived, the sex worker contingent moved down the stairs in one group, wearing sunglasses and mouth gags to disguise their identity, carrying large banners, and flanked on either side by flag-bearing Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMWU) officials. The group then staged a 'speak out' at the base of the steps, followed by individual media interviews.

In the same way as in their workplace, the sex workers used geographical space and simple alteration of appearance (in this case mouth gags and sunglasses) as a way of dealing with identity disclosure. Dawn Whyte, from SWAG explains the meaning of the mouth gag:

We were actually being gagged to say that sex workers had no voice. We acted as a group, to strengthen our voices, to say that we wanted this legislation thrown in the bin, that we, as a group, recognised that it would cause more harm to the industry.²²

Twenty sex workers were involved in the Russel Square protest, and the same number of allies had been supportive by attending the earlier public media conference.

Lamington Ladies Stall at Dumas House, 20 June 2003

The campaign organised by the West Australian sex worker groups was successful in convincing the majority of upper house members of the Western Australian Parliament to vote against the licensing legislation that Roberts had been trying to push through. However, at the same time, and perhaps in retaliation, the Government withdrew funds from Phoenix, the local sex worker organisation. To

justify the funding cut, the Health Minister spread unverified (and later discredited) information that Phoenix had been misusing funds and producing inappropriate/pornographic material.²³ The West Australian sex worker community fought back by adopting what is recognised in Australia as a modern archetype of wholesome family goodness, a character you can trust with your money and what you put into your mouth—the Lamington Lady. Dressing as Lamington ladies challenged the over-sexualisation of the issue in the West Australian media and refocussed on the issue of community services.

Janelle Fawkes, a protest participant, explains:

We went to his [Bob Kuceras's] electoral office on the edge of a small set of suburban shops, newsagent, pharmacy and small supermarket on a main arterial road, Wanneroo Road in Joondanna. We were dressed up in aprons and cutesy café shift dresses and unpacked fold up card tables, flowery table cloths and doilies, at 8.30am in time for a media photo shoot and interviews. Some of us got changed into our Lamington Lady costumes from the boots of our cars parked outside the office.²⁴

Pastel pink and blue tunics made the basis of the transformation, with cream and white stockings, sensible shoes, frilly aprons and catering caps. Standing behind lace topped card tables with plates of lamingtons, the activists smiled for the cameras and explained that they had lost all of their health and advocacy services because of the actions of Bob Kucera. Janelle Fawkes remembers that the protest drew verbal banter: 'a staff member of the pharmacy next door yelled at us, "You girls can afford to pay for your own clinic." We yelled back, "We've already sold one lamington, there's only 279,000 to go!"'

That a member of the public felt informed enough to give uninvited 'advice' to the activists demonstrates the strength of the stereotype of sex workers as financially frivolous, unaccountable, and ultimately undeserving of publicly funded health services. Jade Spade, another SWAG activist, was reflective on the morning of the protest, saying, 'This is what we have been reduced to. This is how far the Government's attack on our rights has pushed us. We are dressed as Lamington Ladies in the carpark of a Yokine shopping centre with fluffy caps on our head'.²⁵

After the brief event the convoy packed into cars and moved on to the main protest site for the day—outside the Ministerial offices at Dumas House in West Perth. The canteen ladies were welcomed by the waiting plethora of sex worker activists, advocates, LHMWU members, and queer, gay and lesbian identifying members of the broader sex worker community. Alternative lesbian media journalist Ruth Wykes covered the story: 'Phoenix supporters protested outside Dumas House last month showed that at least they haven't lost their sense of irony. Dressed as canteen workers, protesters staged a mock lamington drive to highlight the unlikelihood of funding from the ALP.'²⁶

The demonstration had an 'outlaw' atmosphere to it because the demonstrators were people who had nothing further to lose: already marginalised, criminalised, censored and closed down. Sex worker activists and supporters stood proudly around their lamington table and staunchly behind a seven metre 'We're Angry' banner. Sex workers in scarves and dark glasses stood apart from the tableau, unable to be photographed, but present to witness the last demonstration of the

long fought and difficult campaign. After the LHMWU spoke in support of the political representative role Phoenix had played, a SWAG spokesperson vowed to maintain opposition to the Prostitution Control Bill. Later that day, activists learned from media sources that Michelle Roberts had finally publicly ceded defeat on the licensing legislation. Bob Kucera was sacked as Health Minister three days later due to a raft of issues, but the huge number of complaint letters about the Phoenix defunding in all of the local newspapers would have contributed somewhat to his unpopularity in cabinet. However, it was a bittersweet victory for sex workers who had lost their organisation.

Who was the public protest for? The decision to withdraw funding had already been made, the detractors stayed away and it was not expected that the demonstration would alter any material outcome. I agree with Janelle Fawkes, who concluded by saying:

We're frustrated with what was clearly an attack on us for fighting against their bill. As health organisations, we would have been letting down sex workers if we hadn't raised awareness of how bad these laws were. The demonstration was about saying to the public 'These accusations against us are false,' and about saying to sex workers, our own communities, that it [the funding cut] doesn't matter, we did the right thing.²⁷

Forty sex workers and supporters attended the protest to express their opposition to the Bill and to the closure of Phoenix. The group used performance and protest to reinforce positive aspects of the West Australian sex worker community, to display solidarity, to express loss and sadness at the funding cut, and to promote ongoing resistance to the proposed oppressive laws. The sex worker community was practising vital community development for their own benefit.

Australian Sex Worker Parties: Whoretown, Hookers & Strippers Ball, International Whores Day

Australian sex worker communities traditionally hold semi-private cultural gatherings for sex workers, partners and friends in a party atmosphere, with different degrees of publicity and accessibility to the non-sex working community. Contemporary examples of this include International Whores Day (annual event, Adelaide, 2002–2005), Whoretown (one-off event, Perth, 2002) and the Hookers and Strippers Ball (former annual event, Sydney).²⁸ Common characteristics of these events include sex worker control over who can attend, sex worker control over photos and other documentation, and sex worker control over cultural representations at the events (in the form of performance and art).

The annual International Whores Day, celebrated at the beginning of June, marks the occasion in 1975 when sex workers in Lyon, France, occupied a church to protest treatment by the police and authorities.²⁹ The Adelaide event marking International Whores Day is open to sex workers as well as supporters and has included touring sex worker artists (Norrie mAy-welby, 2003) and combined performance and exhibition (Debby Doesn't Do It For Free, 2004). Jenni Gamble, Manager of South Australia Sex Industry Network (SIN) and organiser of International Whores Day events in Adelaide, told me:

It was started in 2002 at the Lion Arts Centre. [In] 2003 [we had] Norrie mAy-welby, [in] 2004 [we had The] Debbys. 2005 was different, a bit low key. A bar in the city was booked out and we had a party. It was well attended. Now bi-annually we will probably do a bigger show, and put in a bit more energy. The IWD hasn't got a long history but we do have our own history of cultural organising.

We've had it open to other people in the sector, friends, family and supporters. However it is not advertised publicly it is not completely closed either. By trying to limit who knows about it we get mostly supporters. Sometimes some wanker types might show up but we haven't been gate crashed in a major way yet. It has kept it intimate and that way it has protected sex workers who want to come along. We don't want to invite the rest of the world, it's our own kind of cultural event. I don't know if the rest of the world really gets it to any degree.³⁰

In Perth in 2002, Sex Workers held 'Whoretown', a cultural event that included art workshops organised by the Street-based Sex Workers' Outreach Project of Western Australia (SWOPWA), a drop-in and outreach peer project for street-based sex workers.³¹ The event ended with a party was held at an inner city theatre/bar space for sex workers and friends, with films and sex worker poets and performers, organised by Sex Worker Action Group, the Street-based Sex Workers' Outreach Project of Western Australia and Phoenix. The event was broadly advertised, but, in order to buy tickets, people had to come into one of the sex worker organisations. Some clients did show up but were not let in. The sex workers did not hire security for the event since they were confident that they could handle any issues arising from the 'no clients' door policy.

In Sydney, New South Wales, the Hookers and Strippers ball, held by the Sex Workers' Outreach Project, has been running in different guises since 1998. Kate De Maere, Resource Production Officer, Sex Workers Outreach Project, New South Wales, explains that the 'ball is for sex workers and friends (no clients) ... We have never really had a problem with this ... it is for most part an honour system'.³²

The ball is used as a vehicle by sex workers to communicate issues of the moment and reflect on the year that has been. The annual 'Joy' awards, sponsored by Glyde Health, are presented to sex workers who are voted from among their peers to have made an outstanding contribution to the New South Wales sex worker community. In 2002, following the death in Villawood Detention Centre of detained Thai woman Puotong Simpalee, the Thai sex worker community held a special memorial event on the stage at the Hookers and Strippers Ball. Jum Chimkit, Multicultural Outreach Educator and memorial event organiser, explains:

We felt upset ... some organisation made [up] her story, that it [is] trafficking, but they never know if it is true or not. They continue to make that story for any other girl who comes here, that it is trafficking, and I wonder why [they make that story].

I didn't talk about that on stage [at the Hookers and Strippers Ball]. When I walk on stage, Jeffrey was just there to subtitle for me, and hold the candle. I speak in Thai, Jeffrey speak in English. We say sorry to her and give her the farewell—the way she wanted to go—for her spirit.³³

Simpalee was respected with the lighting of candles and a moments' silence. The cultural practice of the sex worker community at this time was to create a

respectful space without second hand descriptions, exaggerated stories or the projected victimisation of Simpalee.

As with other contemporary sex worker cultural events, the Hookers and Strippers Ball has included visual arts. In 2004, SWOP organised multi-media workshops for sex workers to create their own artwork, mostly using digital photography, and the works were exhibited during the week of the Ball at the Pine Street Art Gallery in Chippendale.³⁴ There was no censorship, the entire event was controlled by sex workers, and the outcomes were artworks that unashamedly discussed and promoted sex work. Sex workers placed themselves in the centre of the artworks. There was bold use of sexual euphemism and recognition by the artists of sex work as a positive personal experience.

Sex worker only space is found in sex work workplaces in Australia. However, these examples of cultural gatherings also illustrate a culture of sex workers controlling and attending sex worker social spaces, and creating sex worker representation through performance and visual arts outside of the workplace. Given the disclosure and privacy risks that exist when sex workers choose to interact publicly with other sex workers, it is a testament to the benefits of community development that these events occur at all. The positive outcomes for individual sex workers' participation clearly outweigh the risk. Sex workers exact control over workplaces to make them safe and comfortable environments, and express the same concern and skills when organising cultural spaces. Entry, documentation, and representation of sex worker communities within these spaces is mediated by the sex workers who organise them, and made strong by support of the communities who attend.

Touching Base Mardi Gras Float 2002

Recently, sex workers and their disabled clients have formed their own organisation, Touching Base,³⁵ and through collaboration have learnt much from each other. Sex workers traverse public space with the aim of being unseen. In contrast, many people with disabilities experience high levels of visibility due to their disability. The combination of these experiences meant that Touching Base had a rich and refined understanding of working with public space when they were planning their 2002 Mardi Gras float. This proved to be vital, especially given the relative inexperience of the carers who accompanied the people with disability on the float.³⁶ Saul Isbister of Touching Base explained:

When [the] Sex Workers Outreach Project of NSW invited participation by people with disability in the 2002 float various issues arose ... including the reluctance of personal care assistants to be identified as gay or lesbian if they participated. Where as people with disability were happy to attend and be visible regardless of their sexual preference and be seen to celebrate with sex workers, we respected the desires of carers to maintain anonymity by encouraging them to wear masks or otherwise disguise themselves, much in the same way many sex workers would prepare for work ...

For people with a disability on the float, their sexuality was validated through the actions of sex workers who were proud to be associated with them, both as commercial sex partners and as colleagues combating discrimination and

misunderstanding. For the sex workers, their role as compassionate, caring and sensitive human beings was reinforced and publicly validated by the presence of their clients with disability. The action of being seen proudly together challenged stereotypes; both about sexuality (for people with disability), and visibility (for sex workers). Thanks to the sex worker skills of using simple mechanisms to obscure identity, carers were able to participate with confidence as well. For every person with a disability who was part of the float, another four were unable to attend, due to lack of carers. In total there were approximately twenty people with a disability, twenty carers, twenty-five sex workers and ten or fifteen other supporters who paraded on the float that year.

Sex workers parade annually in Mardi Gras, and have also had floats in PRIDE in Perth and in the FEAST festival in Adelaide. Dawn Whyte, sex worker float organiser in Perth for three years (2001–03), spoke to me about her involvement.

I was actually one of the main organisers of the floats three years in a row. I found it an excellent opportunity to involve my family and friends in a community project and actually change community perceptions and attitudes about sex work, letting the public know that there is also families who support us, its not just a job or an occupation that has to be kept hidden and underground from families, there are also families who want to get involved and support current workers in the industry. There was even three generations of certain families involved, including grandparents, and one of the nieces was pregnant, ready to have the fourth generation, and they all supported each other as a family. I think it is great to be involved as a group as a small sector of the community who are able to come out ... and to be able to have a safe environment to do that, not to be judged, to be able to be proud.³⁷

On the 2002 sex worker float in PRIDE, over fifty sex workers and family members rode on the float (other years have been similar, with thirty-five participants in 2003 and forty in 2004). Willingness to collaborate and be public in queer community events shows the positive relationship the sex worker community has with other marginalised communities, and an understanding of the similarities that both communities face when venturing into public spaces.

Debby Doesn't Do It For Free³⁸—Whore Performance Art Group

As Shannon Bell articulates in *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, 'Performance is one of the most effective means for those who have been constructed by others as objects of desire and undesirable objects to enter into discourse and create an immediate subject position from which to address the social'.³⁹ Performance is a good medium for sex workers who wish to foray into public spaces and discuss sex work issues. In Australia, a whore performance art group, Debby Doesn't Do It For Free, uses performance and installation to demystify and challenge preconceived ideas about sex work.⁴⁰ Since 2002, the group has performed regularly at festivals and sex worker gatherings, always conscious of the connection between sex work and performance. Gender performativity and the use of archetypes, characters, dress, make-up and body language to communicate complex messages are important sex worker skills that are utilised by Debby Doesn't Do It For Free in their performance and art. Whore

artist and Debby Doesn't Do It For Free performer, Serena Mawulisa, aka Debby Diamante Dildo Harness, explained to me that sex work and stage performance has a historic link:

Notion of disguise/masks are familiar for sex workers; wigs, covering tattoos, [a] working name, complex counterfeiting of entire identity sometimes (with clients, including fake interests, university degrees, etc) is all part of the work. Strippers working names were actually called 'stage names' like actresses of old. Sex workers have traditionally occupied the 'shadowy spaces' of our culture—often social spaces shared with queers, actors, circus folk and other performers. For a long time the term actress was another term for sex worker—in post-Shakespearean times, when women started performing, a large number of actresses supplemented their income with hooking—especially due to the stigma of 'exposing oneself' on stage, often—particularly in Victorian England meant you weren't any longer acceptable marriage material. So during this time, actresses either got themselves a patron (kept woman), or did regular sex work.⁴¹

During their first public event for ARTRAGE in Perth 2002, Debby Doesn't Do It For Free artists decided to use Debby pseudonyms. As in sex work, the use of pseudonyms protects the identity of the sex workers involved. Their media release explains:

The Debby's address the myths and explore the contradictions of working in the sex industry. In the best traditions of whoring, each artist has a 'Debby' name. Developed and produced by sex worker artists, the Debby Doesn't Do It For Free mixed media installation and performance is the first of its kind in Australia.

'This is a glimpse into the unseen reality of sex workers lives and jobs,' Debby Debutante said today. 'We are bringing Whore Pride to Mardi Gras and the world—Debby style.'

The artists will be exhibiting a collection of short film, video projection, soundscape, 3D sculpture, woodwork and textiles. The performance evening includes comedy, music, performance art and spoken word.⁴²

By 2006, over thirty Australian sex workers had participated in *Debby Doesn't Do It For Free* by either exhibiting, performing or helping behind the scenes. In February 2004 they performed their first full length cabaret show, complete with mock national anthem: 'Advance Australia Fear' (Norrie May-Welby) and 'Olympic Whore', which involved performing feats of gymnastic capability while demonstrating sex on a massage table (Decriminalise Debby). Other aspects of the performance included Mr Big Pants, a politician who claims to be 'helping' sex workers while trampling their rights (Discredited Debby) and live vaginal fisting on stage whilst reading poetry (Debby Diamante Dildo Harness). These performances use archetypal characters to convey little-heard messages about sex work and its complexities, from a purely sex worker perspective.

In May 2005, the Debby's collaborated with Empower⁴³ of Chiang Mai, Thailand, and Scarlot Harlot⁴⁴ (aka Carole Leigh), of San Francisco, to develop a cross-cultural interpretation of anti-trafficking measures. The piece was performed at the public opening of the International Sex Worker Conference in Montreal. At this performance Mr Big Pants set the scene by giving a characteristically uneducated speech about the environmental benefits of curtailing car traffic, only to be interrupted by Sandra Saviour, a trafficking

'expert', who enlightened Mr Big Pants and the audience to the benefits of criminalising the poor and allowing sex workers to eat jail food. They exited stage right singing in unison;

Sex and money make an evil brew,
mix them together for a lurid stew,
there can be no other point of view,
and if you disagree with us we'll crucify you!

In the next act, a Thai sex worker seduced male members of the audience to pay for sex with her. She was enthusiastically 'rescued' by three Aryan superheroes with matching tights, long blonde hair and thick framed reading glasses. They packed the unwilling sex worker into a hessian sack with 'evidence' written across the front. While the superheroes were being interviewed and congratulated by media on stage left, the recognisable silhouette of long graceful Thai fingernails could be seen emerging from the sack, and the sex worker used her strong cultural identity (symbolised by the fingernails) to escape the sack and its evidentiary label. As the superheroes lamented the loss of their evidence, a commotion was heard off stage, and a diverse group of sex workers in a variety of national dress stormed the stage. They acted out a sex worker rights rally, chanting, 'Sex Worker Rights are Human Rights,' and held placards in different languages.

The chant quickly spread to the audience, where hundreds of sex workers stood in their chairs joining in, 'Sex Worker Rights are Human Rights'. Beyond language, beyond ethnic background and beyond nationality, sex worker attendees had much in common, and it was actively summed up in that loud demanding phrase. Here, at an International Sex Worker conference, the words were not chanted as slogans of protest. The chant reverberated around the hall, from the mouths of hundreds of sex workers of diverse backgrounds and languages, from all over the globe, some were personal friends, others just meeting for the first time. Unplanned and unstoppable once it had begun, the strength of the words was for the ears of each other—a reinforcement of the commonality and solidarity this diverse sex worker group felt that night. The feeling was one of support and joy—and also of giving. The chant that night was a gift for all activists to take home with them into their own protest spaces—usually heard at combative protests characterised by conflict, it had a very different sound on that occasion.

Conclusion

The Australian sex worker rights movement has built widespread support amongst Australians for a labour and rights framework that situates sex workers as highly skilled persons capable of representing their own issues.⁴⁵ More recently arguments against the workers' rights framework have been proposed by small groups of anti-sex work lobbyists who have attempted to re-victimise sex workers as exploited individuals without agency or choice.⁴⁶ Another inappropriate narrative views sex workers through a lens of 'deviancy'—proposing that sex workers are 'damaged,' 'sick' and the 'vectors of disease'.⁴⁷ The latter approach proposes that sex workers need to be controlled in order to protect the general public, and (ironically) to protect the client (and his wife).⁴⁸ Thus, even though the

sex worker rights movement has fundamentally changed the way sexual commerce is viewed in the Australian context, public display by sex workers as united, vocal, political and celebratory is still confronting for the non-sex working public. At one extreme, high profile cultural icons of the international sex worker community (Carol Queen, Annie Sprinkle) are publicly attacked by anti-sex work theorists as 'women hating' and promoting the exploitation of women.⁴⁹ Politicians decry sex worker cultural mapping as 'maps for sex and drugs'.⁵⁰ The use of performance in sex worker peer education is misunderstood and portrayed as sleazy and without benefit.⁵¹ And even though public opinion accepts sex work per se, progressive supporters still expect that it should stay out of the public eye.⁵² For example in 2004, a leader of the gay community still shuddered at the thought of sex workers in public and preferred to repeat the mantra that sex worker rights 'shouldn't be fought on the front page'.⁵³ A volunteer academic on placement at a sex worker organisation expressed similar views: 'public protest, with "out" and identified whores is the wrong way to go ... too ostentatious ... undignified.'⁵⁴ Sex workers who take up public space are inevitably accompanied by sex-panic and moral outcry, even from their natural allies. Despite these barriers and the stigma associated with being 'out', sex workers in Australia have a diverse public presence.

I have argued that contemporary Australian sex worker public organising is informed and shaped by existing sex worker skills and workplace culture. Public activity also works as a cultural exchange that informs an individuals' behaviour, reflected in their confidence when carrying out physical acts.⁵⁵ In the case of the contemporary Australian sex worker community, challenging discrimination and stereotypes about sex work not only raises the profile of sex worker voices in the public sphere, it also challenges fear and discrimination that may be internalised. As the examples in this article demonstrate, the sex worker community understands and is successful in the use of community cultural development for this purpose. The SWOP banners at the 2002 Mardi Gras float—Safety, Unity, Dignity and Respect—were designed to change mainstream understandings of sex work, but they were also a message to the sex worker community itself. Contemporary sex worker public organising has a two-fold purpose: to strengthen the sex worker community and to campaign for a more respected standing within society. Skills in organising, community cultural development and in the workplace tell a story of strength and creativity that bodes well for the future of sex worker communities in Australia.

Parading Ourselves

- 37 At the time, the force was endeavouring to transform itself into a more disciplined and professional organisation. Parker used the phrase as a way of envisaging a more military-like organisation which could be clearly contrasted with current disruptive citizenry.
- 38 K E Paasonen, 'Building the Beast: Media Construction of Protests and Protesters and the Assignment of Responsibility for Violence', MA thesis, University of Queensland, 1995, p 92.
- 39 *ibid.*, pp 2, 20–3.
- 40 *ibid.*, p 61.
- 41 T Bennett et al. (ed.), *Celebrating the Nation. A Critical Study of Australia's Bicentenary*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards NSW, 1992, pp xvi–iii.
- 42 S Kleinert and M Neale, *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p 706.
- 43 A Young, 'Veterans of black struggle take to Sydney streets', *Age*, 27 Jan 1988.
- 44 A Dewdney, *Racism, Representation and Photography*, Sydney Inner City Education Centre, Sydney, 1994, p 154.
- 45 Kleinert and Neale, *op. cit.*, p 286.
- 46 This can be seen in the film *Australia Daze*.
- 47 Kleinert and Neale, *op. cit.*, p 706.
- 48 The march was captured in the 'Freedom, Justice and Hope' photographic mural, initiated by photographer Huw Davies and developed by Sue Read, Tanya Ellis and Troy Russell (Dewdney, pp 51–8). The mural was displayed at the Eora Centre for Visual and Performing Arts, the Koori Campus of the Sydney Institute of Technology. It was thirty-three metres long and consisted of twenty-five prints.
- 49 M Maynard, in Kleinert and Neale, *op. cit.*, p 388.
- 50 L Watson, 'The Commonwealth Games in Brisbane 1982: analysis of Aboriginal protests', *Social Alternatives*, vol 7, no 1, 1988, p 40.
- 51 Kleinert and Neale, *op. cit.*, illustration p 46.
- 52 Burgmann 2003, *op. cit.*, p 249.
- 53 B Szerszynski, 'Performing politics', in L Ray and A Sayer (eds), *Culture and Economy: After the Cultural Turn*, Sage, London, 1999, p 212.
- 54 T McFarlane, 'The battle for Seattle: discourse, the Australian and framing representations of the Seattle World Trade Organisation protests', *GEOView*, <www.ssn.flinders.edu.au/geog/geos/mcfarlane2.htm>, 2001, p 10.
- 55 See <www.takver.com/history/s11.htm> and <http://www.ozshots.com/20000912_WEF/index_eng.html>.
- 56 This distinguishing feature was adopted by police in Glasgow in 1932 and named after the Chief Constable, Sir Percy Sillitoe. After South Australia's Chief Brigadier John McKinna visited Glasgow in 1960, he introduced it to police uniform in South Australia. It was first used by the Queensland police in the 1970s.
<<http://www.afp.gov.au/afp/raw/Publications/Platypus/Mar00/know.htm>>.

Contemporary Sex Worker Cultural Practice in Australia: Sex Workers' Use of Sex Industry Skills in Public Protest and Performance Elena Jeffreys

- 1 A booking is the term used to describe the period of time a sex worker spends with a client as part of the paid service.
- 2 Linda Banach and Sue Metzenrath, *Unjust and Counterproductive: The Failure of Governments to Protect Sex Workers from Discrimination*, Scarlet Alliance and AFAO, 1999.
- 3 *ibid.*, p 2, 20; 'Public servants should uphold public standards,' Editorial, *Courier Mail*, 7 November 2005, <http://www.thecouriermail.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5936,17157672%255E13360,00.html>, accessed 5 December 2005; Rayner, Miere, Ogilvie, Syrota, Thomson et al., *Discussion Paper on Police Act Offences* (1892), WA Law Reform Commission, (85), 1992, <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/disp.pl/au/other/85/P85%2dDP.html?query=%5e+alcohol+known+prostitute#disp0>>, accessed 5 December 2005.
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- 5 Newspaper advertisements and the shape, size and content of signage on brothels and other sex industry sites is highly regulated in Queensland (by the Prostitution Licensing Authority); it is

- argued that the general public should not be confronted by public indicators of sex industry operations. For example, sex workers may describe themselves but not what they do in their advertisements, for a description of acts is considered to be undesirable to the public.
- 6 Alison Arnot, 'Legalisation of the Sex Industry in the State of Victoria, Australia: The impact of prostitution law reform on the working and private lives of women in the legal Victorian sex industry', MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 2002, p 96.
 - 7 Eva Cox, Students Research on Home Occupations, University of Technology Sydney, November 2003 (unpublished).
 - 8 Margaret Knight in Ruth Callaghan, 'The body hawker', *West Australian*, 29 July 2000, p 9.
 - 9 Annie Sprinkle, 'The forty reasons why whores are my heroes', *Social Alternatives*, vol 18, no 3, July 1999, p 8; *Street Smarts*, SWOPWA (Street Based Sex Workers' Outreach Project of Western Australia), January 2003.
 - 10 Wendy Chapkis, 'The emotional labour of sex', *Live Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labour*, Routledge, New York, 1997, p 76–8.
 - 11 Maria McMahon, *Whorigami*, Skills Building Workshop, XV International HIV/AIDS Conference, Bangkok, July 2004; Corina McKay, 'Is Sex Work Queer?', *Social Alternatives*, vol 18, no 3, July 1999, p 52.
 - 12 Maria McMahon, 'Migratory sex workers: observations on anti-trafficking measures and public health outcomes on the trans-national superhighway', International Feminisms Conference, University of Sydney Womens' College, December 2004, published in an abridged form in *Social Alternatives*, vol 24, no 2, 2005; Janelle Fawkes, *Whorigami*, Skills Building Workshop, XV International HIV/AIDS Conference, Bangkok, July 2004.
 - 13 Elena Jeffreys, 'Why sex work is a queer issue', *Querelle*, 2003, p 40; McKay, op. cit., p 52.
 - 14 McKay, op. cit., p 52; Roberta Perkins, 'The working lives of prostitutes', *Working Girls: Prostitutes, their Life and Social Control*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1991, p 233.
 - 15 Fawkes, op. cit.
 - 16 Roberta Perkins, in an interview with the author, commenting on her new book, *Call Girls: Private Sex Workers In Australia*, University of Western Australia Press, in press 2006.
 - 17 For an example, see Mary Sullivan, *Making Sex Work: The Victorian Experience of Legalised Prostitution*, Spinifex Press, in press 2006.
 - 18 R Danielle Egan, *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love*, Palgrave MacMillen, 2006, p 91.
 - 19 J Fawkes, 'Sex working feminists and the politics of exclusion', *Social Alternatives*, vol 24, no 2, 2005, pp 22–3.
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 - 21 Minister for Police and Emergency Services, Government of Western Australia 'Prostitution Control Bill 2002 Call for Public Comment', *West Australian*, 30 November 2002.
 - 22 Dawn Whyte, former Phoenix outreach worker and SWAG delegate to Scarlet Alliance 2004 and 2005, personal communication with author, December 2005.
 - 23 Ben Harvey 'Phoenix cut before audit', *West Australian*, 11 June 2003, p 7.
 - 24 Janelle Fawkes, former Phoenix Peer Services Coordinator, SWAG member and current Manager of Scarlet Alliance, the Australian Sex Worker Association, personal communication with author, December 2005.
 - 25 Sex worker activist Jade Spade on the morning of the protest, personal communication to the author, 20 June 2003.
 - 26 Ruth Wykes, "'Phoenix rising and Phoenix falling,' Women out west', *Outspoken Publications*, 46, July 2003, p 4.
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 - 30 Jenni Gamble, personal communication with the author, August 2005.
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Parading Ourselves

- cultural mapping and self documentation. For media references, see Ben Harvey, 'State picks up tab for sleazy sex map', *West Australian*, 22 May 2003 p 3; Mark Fletcher, 'Sex map stirs Hyde', *Voice News*, 24–31 May 2003, p 1.
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 - 35 <www.touchingbase.org>.
 - 36 Saul Isbister, Touching Base member, Personal communication with author, July 2005.
 - 37 Dawn Whyte, former Phoenix outreach worker and SWAG delegate to Scarlet Alliance 2004 and 2005, in personal communication with the author, November 2005.
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 - 39 Shannon Bell, *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, Indiana University Press, 1994, p 138.
 - 40 Decriminalise Debby and Debby Diamante Dildo Harness, *The Deep End*, ABC Radio National, 24 February 2004, 8.45 pm.
 - 41 Serena Mawulisa aka Debby Diamante Dildo Harness, personal communication with author, November 2005.
 - 42 Debby Doesn't Do It For Free media release, February 2004.
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 - 44 <www.unrepentantwhore.com>.
 - 45 Roberta Perkins, 'Prostitution: a work-based occupation', *Working Girls; Prostitutes, their Life and Social Control*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 1991, p 7–18; Penelope Saunders, forthcoming.
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 - 53 Adrian Lovney, then President of the AIDS Council of NSW, contributing to a Scarlet Alliance Workshop, AFAO (Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations) AGM, Ridges Hotel, Camperdown, May 2004.
 - 54 Jenni Gamble, discribing a statement from a Phd student volunteering with a sex worker organisation in South Australia, personal communication with author, August 2005
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