

Sex work and Perforations of the Self in Liberal times

“I was very young at the time and didn’t really understand that I could suddenly be regarded as both a woman and a sex object. I felt so exposed to it that I thought to myself, I might as well accept money for it, since I was already being looked at in this way.” Susane, 26

In downtown Karlsruhe there is a street with several brothels. From the Federal Court in the “Schlossbezirk” 3, where the law for the legalisation of prostitution was enacted in 2002, you walk 1,4km, roughly 15 minutes on foot, to a street surrounded by sight proof shrubbery and fencing. Here, there are seven official establishments. Brothel 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

I met Dina for the first time in Brothel 3, now she lives in House no. 5. It is midday on a Tuesday. Behind the office door a halogen lamp lights up blue laminate floorboards on top of which stand a high desk and an office chair that appears too tall. Aside from this, only a floral oil painting replica hangs on the coarsely fibred wallpaper.

Everytime I go to visit Dina, her colleagues tell me that I can only spend a short time in her room. I climb the warm staircase and continue along the corridors. Having sex once costs 30 Euro. It used to be 40, but since so many new girls have arrived, the price is difficult to sustain. Room 304. She smiles, there is a vague absence in her features, which take a little while to register. She is listening to a Europopsong in which a woman’s voice sings that she is strong. A timed, automatic perfume dispenser sprays a cherry scent that does not smell of cherries. The room was already furnished before she came. All rooms are freshly painted, sometimes red, sometimes dark purple, with a variety of wall tattoos that you can find in the decoration department of a hardware store. Dina puts on a grey tracksuit. On the white chest of drawers, next to the CD player there is folder for the tax office in which Dina is supposed to register income and rent expenses. On the weekends the 12sq metre room costs 120 Euro per day. Dina writes down 100 Euro per weekday, as requested by the landlord. She then takes the folder to the office, where she presents the used condoms to be counted every night.

Dina doesn’t want to come out to the cafe. She says it would take too long. She says she really wants more clients. And she absolutely wants to eat less. Her pupils are huge. Around her nose tendril-like little veins climb up into her eyes. I think to myself, sex four times a day must mean therefore that the day’s rent is covered. I convince her and she joins me in the Cafe Skandal across from the house. I order her a Baileys, she enjoys this.

She says:

I need more customers

I need more customers

I need more customers

I need more customers

She wants to stay away from Reni, her neighbour. In fact, she doesn't want a lot to do with any of the women. Reni is crazy, and everyone says so. She often does it for 20, which makes the other women angry. Reni always wants it all. She is 19, Bulgarian and beautiful. She has absurd Barbie-like proportions, her hair is blackish blue. She stole Dina's cuddly toy. One of the policemen is completely infatuated by Reni. He's a regular. Reni does not have a passport, neither does Dina. The passport is with the pimp. Or with the owner of the house. She doesn't want to talk to me about it. She lights a cigarette or changes the subject. She doesn't believe in talking to people. She doesn't seem to consider it important. Ever since I greeted her she repeatedly tells me how nice it is to see me, that she missed me during the period she was not available by phone. That was three months.

We go in again. A long-haired student with a blank face and backpack is leaving the entrance. Several men are rapidly walking up and down the stairs. Doors are shutting, we join Barbara on her bed. A man with a grey turtleneck, cashmere jumper and chewing gum smile opens the door and asks if he may come in. His features are going haywire with excitement.

Dani asks me to hold the folder while I stand in the corridor. There are many days on which she owes her landlord something. Sometimes the income table only reads 80 Euro, sometimes only 50. Once, she was allowed to go on holiday, to visit her parents. She has not had another day off; the brothel is always open. The cleaning fee of 20 Euro is not noted. It is paid in the office next to the entrance, staffed by German women with a Southern accent, who never exchange an excess word with the sex workers. I say goodbye to Dani as she comes out again. I go out onto the street, and round the corner to the train station, where the students also get on to go home.

It is the 8th of March. Women's Day. I go to Brunnenstreet to bring the women chocolate and flowers. The bouncer says "We have Women's Day here every day", and tells me to hurry up. In House 5, many men are wondering around the staircases and corridors and holding onto the iron railings. They study critically and make comments. Several men ask me cheerfully why I have brought the flowers. Then they laugh, as if I had said something incomprehensible. They speak to the women like robots, or broken machines. A little too loudly, and sometimes with bad grammar. Many of the men call their chosen sex worker ugly or insufficient. The women then feel an urgent need to change. It seems there is a great need on the part of the clients to combine intercourse with verbal abuse.

The right of direction that comes with the law of prostitution means that the owners of brothels establish their own service standards. What clothes the sex workers are to wear, what hours are to be worked, how much money is to be accepted for what service. On some of the brothel websites the "fresh meat" of the week is announced and rated according to her qualities that are divided into categories like 'performance' and 'dedication'. The lack of true authenticity and lust on the side of the sex workers means many clients ask for a greater effort, better 'performance'.

Pro-activists and prostitutes themselves in the media have recently been drawing attention to the therapeutic aspect of their work. Sex work is for needs that are not able to be fulfilled without the exchange of money. In several components, such as their service providing abilities, sex work thus crosses over with care work. The sectors of sex work, care and domestic work are growing work sectors, which the European market is focusing on since the transition from an industrial to service providing society.

Through the growth of such industries, a statistically justified 'feminisation' of the job market is demonstrated. This however, contrary to progressive beliefs, is also linked to the phenomenon of the 'feminising of poverty'.

For clients that make use of sexual services, it is the pushing of limits, the experimenting with the broken machines that have to do as they're told, that makes for a thrilling plus. Paying for sex is an arrangement, and is permanently negotiated. The sex workers' right to self-determination is lawfully negotiated on the grounds that the earning of money with the selling of one's body means a growth in independence and liberalism.

The clientele wants a human, not a plastic doll, avatar or simple voice. It is meant to be a real woman they are paying for. But it is this inorganic tendency in the relationship between the client and service provider that creates a certain fascination. A play with live dolls on which one can test out human movement and emotion. With both horniness and a shaking of heads the men watch as the women offer themselves even more emphatically, smearing just a little extra glitter onto their skin. The bikinis are silver and reflect the light in the darkness in which the face disappears - they want to become artifice. No more name, just a code, absent presence with a synthetic smell. No more body. To look cool, mighty even; to have complete control over their own bodies, so that he does what I want, what they want, that which gives me freedom. Converting body to money, that is freedom.

Dina's service providing body was sold two years ago from Romania to Germany, during the extension of the EU around Romania and Bulgaria. Here, our politics believes that the body is to be treated as a flexible unit, able to be separated from the self. In the case of willing prostitution, "manual parts of the body are fixed with wages", according to pro-sexwork activist Pike Biermann. According to the VERDI, Germany's revenue reaped from the 3000 to 3500 red light businesses lies at 14,5 billion Euros. Following the legalisation of prostitution, every brothel became a trade. The responsible Trade Licensing Offices thus also let go of the obligation of disclosure and examinations of authority. The business of opening a brothel in Germany is thus tied up with less bureaucracy than the setting up of a deli.

Dina also has a social security number. She pays the tax accountant of the house, whom she has never met in person, a yearly rate of 150 Euro, on top of the monthly 30 euros in 'administration fees' that are paid to the owner of the brothel. When she wanted to leave the brothel with help of an association, he handed her the papers from the tax office, where it states that she has earned around 3600 Euros a month, whilst the expenses she paid to the owners of the brothel were 3200 Euro a month. Her monthly wage was therefore 400 Euro.