Embodying Human Rights by Curating with Care: The Challenges of Archiving and Curating Sex Work

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Introduction

In June 1975, more than a hundred sex workers took a stand for their rights by occupying the Saint-Nizier Church in Lyon, France. Their demands were clear: free ten sex workers recently jailed for solicitation, end police harassment and abuse, abolish punitive fines, and challenge the deep-rooted stigma attached to sex work. For eight days, beginning on June 2nd, they held the church as a symbol of resistance, until they were forcefully extracted by police. However, their removal did not silence them. Instead, it sparked strikes throughout France and marked a turning point. Formal organising of sex workers across Europe can be traced back to this collective action.[1]

Following the occupation in 1975, the 2nd of June has come to be known as International Whores' Day, which celebrates and commemorates sex workers worldwide and sheds light on the frequently exploitative working conditions, struggles of oppression and violations of human rights.[2] Sex work remains a controversial and thus rare topic within heritage institutions, be it within their displays or archives. Museums like the Schwules Museum (SMU) in Berlin, which focus on queer history and culture, are among the few institutions actively engaged in documenting and representing the history and culture of sex work. With the exhibition "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" from 2024, the SMU goes a step further in realising its mandate by providing the opportunity for a sex worker-led curatorial team to represent their own history, thus giving back agency to the marginalised community.

This thesis aims to examine how curating with care can enable museums to become agents of social change regarding archiving and curating sex work within the broader scope of curating queer history. It will do so by investigating the case study of the exhibition "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" through the lens of curating with care. The methodology combines interviews with members of the curatorial team, a site visit, examination of objects made for the exhibition and the exhibition catalogue, as well as engagement with existing scholarship to offer a new perspective on how curatorial care might extend beyond LGBTQ+ history to more fully include sex work history and culture.

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[1] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 107.

[2] Ibid.

Firstly, the concept of curating with care must be explored as an emerging curatorial methodology that reshapes the responsibilities of the curator. This will involve a theoretical discussion of the etymological and political roots of care in curatorial practice, as well as an examination of how systemic structures, such as funding cuts, institutional hierarchies, and precarious labour conditions, influence the curator's ability to enact care within heritage institutions. Research by scholars such as Helena Reckitt and Elke Krasny will be central to this discussion, as their frameworks address the entanglements of care, politics, and labour in contemporary curatorial practice.

What objects are displayed, what narratives are created and whose stories are told are based on the materials available and the choices of the curators involved. As places of knowledge production, heritage institutions decide over preserving and showcasing the history and culture of marginalised groups, such as sex workers, therefore actively shaping our understanding of those communities, their history, culture, social movements, and human rights struggles.[3] Systemic discrimination influences the decisions made during the archiving and curation processes, which in turn reinforce it. The capacity of museums and archives to serve as agents of social change as argued by Richard Sandell hinges on their willingness to move beyond surface-level gestures and towards meaningful, structural engagement with marginalised groups informed by care.[4] These developments have collectively revealed the power the museum and its staff hold and what challenges curators face when trying to embrace more inclusive and reflexive curatorial practices.

Community archives and museums, which arose out of grassroots initiatives, like queer museums such as the SMU, demonstrate how marginalised groups have taken back agency over their representation and preservation. The curatorial choices made throughout the exhibition process for "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" will be assessed in terms of curating with care.

Because of the continued stigma surrounding the topic of sex work, its history and culture have remained under- and misrepresented within heritage institutions. While there is a growing body of historical research on prostitution, very few studies explore the curatorial representation of sex work specifically.[5] When sex work does appear in the context of

[3] Sandell, R. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 7.

[4] Ibid.

[5] For further reading, see, Adams, Simon and Raelene Frances. "Lifting the Veil: The Sex Industry, Museums and Galleries." *Labour History*, No. 85 (November 2003): 47-64. Gilfoyle, Timothy J. "Prostitutes in History:

museums, it is often through adjacent debates about sexuality and display, or the contested boundary between art and pornography.[6] The limited number of museum-based projects that do address sex work history tend to focus on legal histories or antique artefacts, often presented without input from or relevance to contemporary sex worker communities. These publications typically reflect on the priorities of the institution rather than the people whose histories are being exhibited. A handful of community-led curatorial projects do exist, but they remain rare, under-funded, and under-documented within academic literature.[7]

Crucially, the existing scholarship on curatorial activism, representation and care has yet to meaningfully intersect with research on sex work and its culture. While theoretical and methodological frameworks have been developed for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ histories focusing on issues of access, terminology and systemic erasure, these have not been applied to the archiving or curating of sex work. By bringing together the fields of curatorial care, queer archiving and sex work representation, this research aims to fill this gap.

From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity." *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 104, No. 1 (Feb., 1999): 117-141.

[6] For further reading, see, Frost, Stuart. "Secret Museums - Hidden Histories of Sex and Sexuality." In *Museums & Social Issues*, Vol 3, Number 1 (Spring 2008): 29-40. Boyd, Anne Louise. *Art, Sex, and Institutions: Defining, Collecting, and Displaying Shunga.* Glasgow: College of Arts, University of Glasgow, 2016. http://theses.gla.ac.uk/7546/ Florêncio, João and Ben Miller. "Sexing the Archive: Gay Porn and Subcultural Histories." *Radical History Review,* Issue 142 (January 2022): 133-141. Tyburczy, Jennifer. *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display, Chicago, London:* University of Chicago Press, 2016.

[7] For further reading, see Chen, Lena. "Objects of Desire: Curating Sex Worker Art in the 21st Century." In *Curating as Feminist Organizing*, 253-264. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023.

1. Curating with Care

The work of the curator can be etymologically linked to the practice of care. The term curation stems from the Latin word "curare", which encompasses a diverse array of actions, including to take care of something, to provide or to manage, to take an interest in something, to take something to heart, to worry or to affect.[8]

This definition overlaps with the actions of care according to Berenice Fisher, a civil rights activist, union organiser and co-founder of the Congress of Racial Equality in 1942 in Chicago, Illinois, and Joan Tronto, professor of political science at the University of Minnesota. Together they created the following definition of care: "an activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment."[9] In the context of the museum, preserving, repairing and restoring objects and artworks maintains and prolongs the life of the items in the museum's care. Ensuring the best material conditions were provided, performing or facilitating any repairs or restorations and conducting academic research to provide more context for the items within the collection are all examples of such caretaking.[10]

In the English language, the term "curator" can be traced back to the 14th century, at the time defining the job of "superintendent of minors or lunatics."[11] In the context of the museum, the role of the curator was to manage the museum collection and take care of its objects, functioning as a "curator-as-carer".[12] This translated to working behind the scenes and involved predominantly invisible labour. However, during the 20th century, the "curator-as-carer" stepped out into the public realm. By doing so, the job of the curator changed to the "curator-as-author" who is actively writing the narratives that dictate how and what we remember.[13] When the focus turned from the collection towards the public, the curator's societal responsibility increased. The curator now not only needed to care for the objects, but also for the communities they belonged to.

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[8] Krasny, E. "Caring Activism. Assembly, Collection, and the Museum.", 2.

[9] Ibid., 4.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Krasny, E., and L. Perry. *Curating with Care*, 4.

[12] Krasny, E. "Caring Activism. Assembly, Collection, and the Museum.", 3.

[13] Ibid.

Originally, this was the scope of the curator's responsibilities before the shift towards the public. In my opinion, this transition did not eliminate caretaking from the curator's job description but expanded their sphere of influence. Curators are responsible for the stories and narratives about marginalised communities they author. Facing systems of oppression as an individual can be daunting. However, if the continuation of old patterns is what sustains the exclusion of marginalised groups, the use of new methodologies by the curator can lead to different, more inclusive choices being made and tip the scales in favour of the marginalised group.[14] An emerging methodology that aims to provide an alternative is broadly called curating with care.[15] During the process of creating an exhibition, every choice can be made through the lens of care. This impacts how care is transmitted and accepted by the individuals involved, from artists, archivists and curators to security guards and cleaning staff working at the museum. Using the new lens of care during the curation process uncovers the fundamental importance of mutual dependence, relationality, and shared responsibility, recognising that individuals are both vulnerable to and accountable for one another.[16] Marginalised groups are reliant on and directly affected by the curators' choices and narrative. This highlights the newfound responsibility of archivists and curators for the cultures under their care.

The curator and professor for Art and Education at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Elke Krasny together with researcher of feminist museology Larry Perry, argue that asserting that curating can be an act of care, demands a transformation of traditional curatorial practices, which are increasingly recognised as shaped by the interconnected histories of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. It also calls for new approaches to restitution and reparation in response to the harm caused by museum practices. By curating with care, the curator's work becomes more nuanced and thus more difficult.[17] Acknowledging the power dynamics at play not only outside but also inside the museum means curators have to educate themselves on the complexities of identity and intersectionality, build relationships with the communities they are showcasing and make sure not to repeat the choices that lead to the entrenched patterns of exclusion and oppression.

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[14] For further reading, see Eid, Haitham and Melissa Forstrom. *Museum Innovation: Building More Equitable, Relevant and Impactful Museums*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021.

[15] Krasny, E., and L. Perry. *Curating with Care*, 4.

[16] Ibid., 8.

[17] Ibid.

Curating with care seeks to address the exclusion of marginalised communities from heritage institutions. Krasny and Perry contend that the methodology of curating with care reveals what the curator cares about, how that is reflected in their work and for whom or what their work cares for. She argues that the concept of care can be used to challenge the historical violence of curatorial authority, which established sexist and racist systems through imperial and colonial collecting practices which moulded modern museums.[18]

To arrive at this assessment, Krasny and Perry observed on the one hand a crisis of social and ecological care, which is up for debate in politics globally, and on the other hand, a crisis of care due to the sexist and racist structures of caregiving still in place.[19] As a response to these developments, two new curatorial approaches have emerged based on the impulse to curate with care. The first approach is the practice of "curating caring" which urges curators to focus on the topic of care and those who provide care within society more frequently in their exhibitions. The second curatorial practice, coined "caring curating" prioritises caretaking during all parts of the curatorial process, informed by political and social analysis.[20]

Regardless of the focus of an exhibition, "caring curating" is a theoretical framework and curatorial practice applicable to any topic.[21] It can affect not only the narratives created, stories of marginalised groups added, but also the use of budget, human resources and reactions towards discrimination within the institution. Proceeding with "caring curating" means remembering the conflicts contained in and enacted through care, whilst at the same time respecting and furthering human rights.[22] At its core, it is a commitment to actively involving communities in shaping the design, interpretation, and presentation within exhibitions. This participatory approach fosters narratives that are co-created rather than imposed, ensuring they remain both respectful and relevant to those represented.[23]

Equally important is culturally sensitive collection management based on the understanding that objects housed within museums and archives are not merely material

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[18] Ibid., 4.

[19] Ibid., 1.

[20] Ibid., 7.

[21] For examples, see, Krasny, Elke, Sophie Lingg, and Lena Fritsch, Birgit Bosold, Vera Hofman. *Radicalizing care: Feminist and queer activism in curating*. Berlin, Vienna: Sternberg Press; Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien, 2021.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 8.

holdings, but often carry deep cultural, spiritual, and emotional importance. “Caring curating” requires acting inclusively, supporting multiple interpretations even when these may conflict. It includes a commitment to creating spaces that are accessible, inclusive, and socially supportive. These practices of “caring curating” are upheld through a reflexive approach that critically examines the effects of curatorial decisions on both communities and institutional structures. Heritage institutions could serve not only as sites of collection and display, but as platforms for social gathering, collaboration, and care. Ultimately, “caring curating” is not a static model, but a practice of continual adaptation and responsiveness, shaped by the needs and knowledge of the communities it seeks to serve.[24]

Caretaking necessitates time to gain someone’s trust and build relationships. Only with trust can marginalised groups feel safe to share their perspectives because they are persecuted. Trust has a direct correlation with an individual’s well-being and quality of life, since it is fundamental to human relations such as friendship or caretaking. It is the foundation of human relationships by functioning as “the social, economic and political glue that underlies and coheres social capital.”[25] This social capital is fostered in museums as they have the power to create knowledge and reinforce societal norms that our interactions within society are based upon.[26] Heritage institutions still retain their public image of impartiality and trustworthiness, despite the misogyny, racism, ableism, imperialism, and homophobia built into their structures. Hence, marginalised groups cannot and do not put their trust in heritage institutions to represent their history and human rights struggles. Instead, marginalised groups are forced to create their own grassroots community archives and museums in order to have agency over their representation and documentation.

All forms of government have instrumentalised the access to and quality of care to control, oppress and exploit humans, animals and land.[27] The satiation of the human need for care is crucial for survival. Withholding care or exploiting caring labour are forms of violence. Krasny maintains that the absence of care in curatorial practices continues to cause harm and inflict damage on both people and the environment. Curating through the lens of care could counteract these forms of structural oppression and erasure. Krasny and Perry propose that fostering creativity, building connections, and sharing beliefs and knowledge

[24] Krasny, E., and L. Perry. *Curating with Care*, 7.
[25] Janes, R. R., and R. Sandell. *Museum Activism*, 5.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Krasny, E., and L. Perry. *Curating with Care*, 5.

should be approached as an ongoing artistic process rooted in social responsibility and aimed at enabling meaningful interaction within communities.[28]

Additionally, the call for care responds to exploitative labour conditions in the cultural sector.[29] The popularity of biennales, art fairs and temporary exhibitions increased, which led to a rise in cultural tourism as well as more options for higher education in the arts.[30] Throughout Western nations, public arts organisations have been forced by public funding cuts to turn to sources of private funding, while the un(der)paid work of staff and volunteers has compensated for the loss of the institutions' financial stability.[31] Amid public disinvestment in the arts, institutions often cut costs behind the scenes, such as staff wages, while outwardly maintaining business as usual. This enhances reliance on precarious labour and adds pressure on remaining workers to preserve the institution's public image.[32] Consequently, job security in the arts and culture sector is declining. Cultural workers such as curators have tried to adapt to the unattainability of clear and secure career paths by embracing freelance, short-term or part-time work that involves international travel or relocation. The insecurity of the curator's job is also revealed in the common practice of regularly working beyond their contracted hours, using personal time to build relationships with possible donors or patrons, and delivering projects under unrealistic time pressure and with insufficient resources.[33]

According to Reckitt, it is a vital curatorial skill to make and maintain connections with artists, fellow curators and other cultural workers.[34] Cultivating a plethora of relationships with possible future employers or collaborators is a way curators can reclaim a feeling of agency over their insecure career path.[35] Cultural workers prioritise collaboration over criticism or conflict as their value is determined by their network and social currency. The curator's affinity for networking and collaboration needed to proceed with "caring curating", can function as a form of activism.[36] However, it follows that if curators point out

[28] Petrešin-Bachelez, N. "Caretaking as (Is) Curating.", 59.
[29] Krasny, E. "Caring Activism. Assembly, Collection, and the Museum.", 5.
[30] Reckitt, H. "From Coping to Curious", 169.
[31] Reckitt, H. "From Coping to Curious", 169.
[32] Reckitt, H. "Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction.", 23.
[33] Reckitt, H. "From Coping to Curious", 169.
[34] Reckitt, H. "Support Acts: Curating, Caring and Social Reproduction.", 8.
[35] Reckitt, H. "From Coping to Curious", 171.
[36] Krasny, E. "Caring Activism. Assembly, Collection, and the Museum.", 3.

discrimination within the institution or advocate for the inclusion of marginalised groups, they could be risking their livelihood. If museums and archives fail to dismantle the power structures they uphold and reproduce, even the most thoughtful and care-driven curatorial approaches such as "caring curating", will remain unsustainable. Cultural workers will continue to burn out under the current conditions or be replaced by others willing to endure the same precarity.[37]

Instead of investing in long-term collaborations and structural change, heritage institutions have developed a concerning alternative, the practice of "care washing". This term describes the highlighting of care as a means to improve a heritage institution's standing and meet the demands of its audiences for inclusive representation.[38] These initiatives, often in the form of temporary exhibitions, however, can be perceived by marginalised communities, such as the queer or sex worker community, as a performative action rather than systemic change within the institution.[39] Through those exhibits, the impression is created that, instead of committing to long-term improvements through engagement with the communities, museums are using temporary exhibitions to their advantage.[40] Hosting a temporary exhibition does not affect the museum's collections or curatorial practices in the long run. For the most part, permanent displays remain untouched, and the gaps in the institution's collections are rarely filled by new objects that featured in or were commissioned for the temporary exhibition. There are exceptions to the rule, depending on the mission and resources of the heritage institution, such as grassroots community museums and archives, which are initiated and maintained by the marginalised groups themselves.

On the other hand, short-term exhibits and pop-up displays on queer topics make it possible for museums to tentatively explore showcasing marginalised communities, whilst minimising the risk to the museum. Possible negative consequences of engaging with marginalised groups, such as the queer or sex worker community, include loss of funding, criticism by and loss of visitors, negative press, damage to the institution's reputation, and legal actions. As archive and museum researcher Tuan Nguyen points out, the flexibility of temporary exhibitions "enables museums to work around dominant political forces and to

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[37] Reckitt, H. "From Coping to Curious", 171.
[38] Krasny, E., and L. Perry. *Curating with Care*, 3.
[39] Levin, A. K. "Introduction: Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism.", 16.
[40] Ibid., 12.

engage democratically with an ever-changing community."[41] Smaller independent museums commonly have more freedom and flexibility to exhibit what and how they want, however, at the expense of financial stability due to a lack of resources. For meaningful, lasting change to occur, heritage institutions as a whole must be re-examined, because an institution that reproduces harm cannot claim to care for its staff, its audiences, or the communities it represents.[42]

LGBTQ+ programming in mainstream heritage institutions is often treated as a low-priority add-on, typically handled by volunteers or underpaid education teams. Catherine O'Donnell, a museum and gallery practitioner, provides a clear example of how museums rely on the expertise and unpaid labour of members of marginalised groups in exchange for showcasing their history and culture. In 2017, the People's History Museum (PHM) in Manchester, UK, took the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales as an occasion to create a project, consisting of multiple exhibitions and events, entitled *Never Going Underground: The Fight for LGBT+ Rights (NGU).* The highly collaborative and popular project resulted in nearly 52.000 visitors to the main exhibitions and over 11,600 program participants.[43] Volunteers were appointed as "Community Curators" due to their activism, community ties, and lived experiences as part of the LGBTQ+ community. As explained previously, the marginalised community's trust in heritage institutions needs to be earned. The Community Curators built that trust with the lenders on behalf of the museum. which often led to the donation of personal objects. O'Donnell points out that, by cultivating relationships with lenders and receiving donations to their collection, the gaps in representation of queer culture were being addressed. The museum was thus providing the donors and their community the opportunity to have their voices heard.[44] Although they had final say over exhibition content, the Community Curator's influence remained limited by the institutional framework designed by PHM. O'Donnell admits that equitable division of power would have meant including LGBTQ+ communities in all aspects of the projects, including defining the project's goals, contributing to the

[41] Ibid., 16.
[42] Reckitt, H. "From Coping to Curious", 175.
[43] O'Donnell, C. "*Never Going Underground*", 219.
[44] Ibid., 227.

development of the funding proposal, and participating in the ongoing evaluation of its outcomes.[45]

As project manager of *NGU*, O'Donnell provides an uncommon insight into the procurement and division of funding. While Community Curators performed highly skilled and essential work, they were unpaid because securing funding through the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) requires providing opportunities for volunteer participation, which are included in the project budget as non-cash contributions. To illustrate the extent of this unpaid labour, the Community Curators collectively contributed 334 days of work, valued at £551,000—six times the total cash expenditure of the NGU project. Despite this enormous contribution, the museum justified the lack of compensation by framing the role as a development opportunity, similar to an internship, since no prior work experience was required.[46] However, the value these individuals brought to the museum extended far beyond training: they enhanced the institution's reputation, increased visitor numbers, and provided access to communities the museum could otherwise not have reached. This reliance on unpaid, marginalised individuals to achieve institutional goals reflects a troubling financial exploitation, where essential labour is undervalued and systemic power imbalances are left unaddressed, whilst the museum reaps the long-term benefits.[47]

According to O'Donnell, the project marked a shift in the museum's approach, reflecting its first significant move toward more inclusive, collaborative, and community-oriented programming.[48] While every attempt of the museum to venture outside of itself and to remedy its lack of inclusion is progress, this does not mean that the institutions should be immune to criticism. The *NGU* thereby remains an example of the exploitation of marginalized communities. It should not fall on marginalised groups to shoulder the additional burden of ensuring and advocating for their own inclusion within institutions that, by definition, are intended to represent all members of society.[49] Caring curating requires fair compensation for everyone involved, especially members of marginalised groups. The NGU project shows the difficult position museums often face with limited funding, they must choose between two flawed options. They can either highlight marginalised voices without

[45] Ibid., 228.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., 229
[48] Ibid., 219.
[49] International Council of Museums. "ICOM approves a new museum definition"

paying them fairly, thus repeating the harm they aim to undo. Or avoid the project altogether because they cannot afford to do it ethically.

2. The Museum as an Agent of Social Change

Museums are recognised as one of the cornerstones of modernity due to their instrumental role in forming national identity and implementing the concepts of citizenship and the nation-state.[50] The racialised and sexualised notion of citizenship is built into the foundation of heritage institutions, refuting the proclaimed commitment to function as an inclusive and representative institution for the general public.[51] Museums contain objects and archival material that the dominant part of society deems worth preserving. Therefore, collections are shaped by the archivists' and curators' choices, which are rooted in the ideologies and political standpoints of the time.[52] It follows that through the decisions made, archives and collections are a reflection of colonial, imperial, and patriarchal structures.[53] This reveals the agency of the individual archivist or curator and opens up the possibility to make different choices, which means these structures can be dismantled, one object at a time.

Museums are a prime example of how society shapes cultural institutions, whilst in return, such institutions can influence the narratives society is informed by. Based on the idea that the social and cultural are interconnected, Richard Sandell, Professor in Museum Studies at Leicester University, argues that cultural and heritage institutions such as museums "have the potential to act as agents of social change, to impact positively upon the lives of individuals and communities."[54]

The first step is to recognise the museum's capacity to create meaning and the possibility of using it to further human rights. However, heritage institutions need to acknowledge that they have the power to change their curatorial and archival practices and that they can act responsibly to align with contemporary society's ideals, to enable cultural and social change.[55] What form this social responsibility will take is unique to the type of heritage institution. It depends on the museum and its collection's history, its sources of funding, the requirements of the communities, the human resources available, and the

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[50] Krasny, E. "Caring Activism. Assembly, Collection, and the Museum.", 7.
[51] Ibid., 8.

[52] Smith, M. "Remolding the Museum: In Residence at the V&A.", 75.

[53] Krasny, E. "Caring Activism. Assembly, Collection, and the Museum.", 8.
[54] Sandell, R. *Museums, Society, Inequality*, xvii.
[55] Ibid., 18.

stakeholders' political interests.[56] Sandell identified that no matter the type of heritage institution, it is "part of the political and moral apparatus through which human rights claims and entitlements are continually sought and fought for, realized and refused."[57]

The selection, display and descriptions of objects within museums and archives infuse them with meaning informed by political ideology. How and through which interpretive framework the exhibit is curated can either facilitate or hinder the inclusion and representation of marginalised groups.[58] To further inclusion of marginalised groups, museums will require their curators to interrogate their interpretive lens, which is commonly based on the cisgender, heterosexual, white man.[59] The output of the research necessary for an exhibition, be it in the shape of an exhibition catalogue, labels and descriptions all "serve as lenses for audiences, reproducing and magnifying mainstream attitudes toward non-binary gender and sexuality, policing and disciplining unruly bodies."[60] By adding the lens of care as a new option, the curator can choose to enact caring curating, facilitating the inclusion of marginalised groups.

Culture is capable of legitimising the experience of individuals. In the case of the queer community, culture provides individuals with an enhanced sexual and personal identity.[61] It does so by demonstrating the continued existence of queer individuals throughout history. The public display of queer history, be it in person or online, validates the queer individuals' existence.[62] The same is true for sex workers: Gathering and conserving their experiences is essential since doing so strengthens ties within the community, preserves and protects their history, culture, and human rights.

On the other hand, a museum's power to produce knowledge and create narratives can cause harm to marginalised groups through exclusion and silencing of the communities and perpetuating stereotypes.[63] According to Sandell, museums are "undeniably implicated in the dynamics of (in)equality and the power of relations between different groups through their

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[56] Ibid., xvii.
[57] Sandell, R. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 12.
[58] Sandell, R. *Museums, Society, Inequality*, 8.
[59] Smith, M. "Remolding the Museum: In Residence at the V&A.", 77.
[60] Levin, A. K. "Introduction: Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism.", 9.
[61] Oram, A. "Telling Stories about the Ladies of Llangollen.", 44.
[62] Clayton, Z., and D. Hoskin. "Activists on the Inside", 59.
[63] Sandell, R. *Museums, Society, Inequality*, 8.

role in constructing and disseminating dominant social narratives."[64] The resulting narratives have a direct influence on societies' understanding of marginalised groups, which in turn determines political rhetoric and law-making directly affecting the marginalised groups in question.[65]

As the anthropologist and Africanist Corinne Kratz established, the concepts and narratives presented in exhibitions are not limited to their location or duration but can spread through interactions between visitors, conversations outside of the museum, press coverage, and inspiration for new exhibitions.[66] Museums have the same power of creation and dissemination of ideas as other forms of mass media.[67] Both journalists and curators can influence public opinion, but neither can rely on their work to communicate their intended meaning to everyone.[68] Even if the curator aims to elicit respect, connection and empathy, this is not guaranteed and could have the opposite effect. Strongly ingrained beliefs are hardly swayed by one museum visit, but attitudes formed from a lack of or misinformation are susceptible to change.[69] Therefore, museums have agency to shape the visitors' understanding of concepts, narratives, and moral perspectives they encounter in the heritage institution which in turn informs their own beliefs and viewpoints, thereby contributing to more informed and reflective conversations about human rights. [70] This power can be harnessed to advocate for marginalised groups.

A museum consists of many individuals, living on various intersections, with differing political and moral compasses. Their biases and opinions colour every choice within the institution, consciously or unconsciously. Museums need to let go of the expectation of neutrality held by themselves and the general public. Instead, it is their responsibility to stand with all groups of society against any form of discrimination, most predominantly sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and racism inside and out of the museum walls. It is unrealistic and inappropriate for museums to keep striving for impartiality.[71]

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[64] Ibid., 8.
[65] Sandell, R. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 7.
[66] Kratz, C. *The Ones That Are Wanted,* 96.
[67] Sandell, R. *Museums, Society, Inequality*, 17.
[68] Hooper-Greenhill, E. *Museums, Media, Message*, 4.
[69] Sandell, R. *Museums, Society, Inequality*, 15.
[70] Sandell, R. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 108.
[71] Ibid., 7.

Using the resources and platform of the museum to present the experiences of marginalised groups to encourage positive change within society can be considered activism.[72] The idea of activism emphasises that the ways in which museums take on moral positions across different issues and demographics are fundamentally shaped by political discourse.[73] Museum staff can function as activists from the inside by using the approach of caring curating. They can do so openly, by suggesting exhibition topics, making choices during the curatorial process such as the selection and display of objects, use of funds and through press releases and visitor engagement. If open activism within the museum is not possible because it puts the staff at risk, there is also the option to do so covertly. It is not necessary for the curator or archivist to out themselves or reveal their personal connections to the marginalised groups to initiate or support the acquisition of objects and artworks connected to the community in question.[74]

The V&A LGBTQ Working Group at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) in London is a key example of how staff within large heritage institutions organise from within to drive change. Founded in 2006 as the V&A LGBTQ Network by a small group of colleagues, it now includes staff from across the museum, from such areas as curatorial, loans, retail, visitor services and learning staff, and the group welcomes both queer people and allies. Meeting bi-monthly, the group originally aimed to gain formal recognition within the institution to align its goals with official priorities and secure essential funding. Despite ongoing efforts and some internal support, it remains informally positioned, lacking a stable departmental home or financial backing, which limits its sustainability and ability to collaborate with external partners due to the group's commitment to fair compensation.

Nevertheless, over nearly two decades, the group has been instrumental in improving the visibility and accessibility of LGBTQ+ narratives at the V&A through research, public programming, internal collaboration, and engagement with external communities. Its presence has made staff more confident in addressing LGBTQ+ topics, contributing to exhibitions, training, and policy.[75] However, participation remains voluntary and inconsistent, with no institutional strategy or support to ensure continuity, leaving inclusion efforts dependent on individual commitment. Investment in the inclusion of marginalised

[72] Ibid., 8.
[73] Ibid., 9.
[74] Clayton, Z., and D. Hoskin. "Activists on the Inside", 65.
[75] Ibid., 59.

communities remains precarious, due to high staff turnover and institutions' reliance on individual initiative. As Oliver Winchester, co-founder of the V&A's LGBTQ Working Group, observes, public programmes are often "only as good as the next curator".[76] Without embedding care for all parts of society into the structural policy of the heritage institution, such efforts risk remaining temporary and easily dismantled. This lack of formal integration reflects a broader institutional indifference to the long-term inclusion of marginalised communities within collections and archives.

Despite the perceived anonymity of heritage institutions, they can function as agents of social change through the actions of the staff within. Curators are becoming increasingly aware that their work carries social and political weight. This awareness, together with a rising commitment to use the museum's influence in support of human rights causes, has produced new curatorial practices shaped by activism, such as caring curating.[77] In 1994, art historian Carol Duncan described this power of museums over societal discourses as follows:

> "To control the museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest most authoritative truths […] What we see and do not see in our most prestigious art museums – on what terms and whose authority we do or don't see it – involves the much larger question of who constitutes the community and who shall exercise the power to define its authority."[78]

As they are commonly excluded from heritage institutions, marginalised groups such as queer or sex worker communities, created their own archives and museums where they have control over all aspects of the archival and curatorial process. When marginalised communities are given the rare opportunity to express their viewpoints and lived experiences through exhibitions in heritage institutions, the existing power structures start to give way.[79]

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[76] Winchester, O. "A Book With its Pages Always Open?", 144.

[77] Sandell, R. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 10.

[78] Duncan, C. "Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship.", 286.

[79] Levin, A. K. "Introduction: Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism.", 9.

3. (In)Accessibility of Institutional Archives

Researching the history of marginalised groups is challenging because traditional research methods are less effective, since oppressed groups were not afforded the same systems of documentation and commemoration. Etymology presents a further barrier for researchers when accessing and searching for documentation of queer culture within archives. The lack of agreed-upon and standardised search terms to describe the queer community and sex workers makes finding the sources that do exist within institutional archives problematic.

As Australian archivist and researcher Elliot Freeman discovered, within institutional archives, queer records, and by extension records about sex workers, are difficult to detect or access within the current archival systems.[80] Her study was based on qualitative interviews about accessing archival material about the queer community in archives and collections in Australia. Her findings are thus not only applicable internationally but also to sex work history. When consulting institutional archives, the wide range of tags and search terms used to describe the queer community makes finding sources challenging. Institutional archives usually house documents and items that pertain to specific queer people and their encounters with the law and media. Historical documentation is sparse when it comes to sex work. The documentation primarily includes police records and court transcripts created by regulatory bodies, these same bodies also documented the queer community.

The varying search terms for items are understandable when considering that language and terminology used within and outside communities constantly evolve. Using contemporary ideas and terms that are subject to change is contested in the context of archives and collections. Arguably, the queer reading of archival material could falsify historical records. I agree with Sandell, who argues that it is vital to use a queer lens and speak what we consider to be the truth at this point in time, even though our current terminology was not used by the queer individuals in question, as it did not exist yet.[81]

Context also influences the choice of terminology throughout history and cultures. The terminology used in many records is frequently imprecise, indirect, or derogatory, and its meaning fluctuates depending on the context. As a result, interpreting these records typically demands specialised knowledge.[82] Certain terms that were once used by communities could

[80] Freeman, E. “Defying Description”, 464.
[81] Levin, A. K. “Introduction: Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism.”, 10.
[82] Freeman, E. “Defying Description”, 464.

now be regarded as derogatory or offensive. Terminology reflects the evolving language of communities. Contemporary expressions can seem mismatched or inappropriate when placed within archival settings, because archives strive for neutrality and longevity.[83] This dissonance makes it harder to trace and categorise the limited artefacts in collections and archives pertaining to the queer community. Queer archives, usually created by and for the community, actively engage with this complicated issue of terminology. In response to it, the curators of the SMU decided "to develop an attuned gaze, going beyond the hits of keyword searches to generate new theoretical insights where the heteronormative eye would not see the connections."[84]

What artifacts have been collected is a reflection of the society and what is deemed valuable at different points in time to said society. As societies evolve, so do the criteria for selecting objects as well as the categorisations being used. By using this rather subjective process, gaps emerge in the collection. The scope of what institutions choose to preserve directly affects which narratives can be shared. When marginalised communities are not adequately represented in collections, their stories risk being overlooked or unintentionally erased.[85] Some institutional archives can be considered a time capsule of archival practices in and of themselves. For the queer and sex worker community, it means derogatory or oppressive language is woven into the archives. The terminology used to categorise items has cultural meanings attached to it, and can be tainted by racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism and sexism, regardless of whether it is explicit or implicit.

Saidiya Hartman, professor in African-American Studies, argues that interacting with this derogatory tagging exposes the researcher to a "second order of violence".[86] This violence should not be underestimated in its severity or reach. Having to choose to be exposed to hate speech, especially if it pertains to your own identity or lived experience, to access archival material, is reprehensible. It is concerning that researchers need to resort to using slurs and derogatory language as search terms to discover pertinent historical records.

It is challenging for groups such as sex workers, who are harder to visually identify, to find themselves represented in archives, collections and museums.[87] This means

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[83] Rawson, K. J. "The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description", 333.
[84] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 24.
[85] Smith, M. "Remolding the Museum: In Residence at the V&A.", 76.
[86] Hartman, S. "Venus in Two Acts.", 5.
[87] Smith, M. "Remolding the Museum: In Residence at the V&A.", 75.

researchers need to resort to using inaccurate and problematic stereotypes. By clearly tagging and describing archival material indicating its queer connection and possible queer reading by using contemporary and inclusive language, archives can increase visibility and accessibility of their items.[88] The mandate of public archives is to represent the general public, including marginalised communities. Those communities especially need access to their own heritage to be guaranteed.

Based on Freeman's study, suggestions of queer readings of archival material can be viewed as an insult by archivists. Several participants recounted persistent forms of exclusion and spoke of a widespread, deeply rooted opposition to interpreting records through a queer perspective.[89] Participants reported being told that queer readings were insulting to individuals who were no longer able to defend themselves from these allegations. It is relevant to point out that queer individuals in question might want to posthumously come out of the closet.[90] Heritage institutions associated with or funded by the government, thus the oppressive body, were unsurprisingly not supportive of queer readings of their collections.[91] The same resistance applies to allegations of sex work, due to the criminalisation and discrimination enforced by governments.

The difference between equality and equity becomes clear through the representation of marginalised groups within archives. Additional mechanisms need to be put in place to secure access to documents pertaining to their history and culture, and the accurate and respectful representation of the group. This is an integral part of the approach of "caring curating". Community archives, such as queer archives, provide good examples of not only how clear and explicit language in tagging and descriptions can lead to better navigation of collections, but more importantly, how the inclusion of multiple and evolving perspectives can be captured.

Many museums and archives are working on digitising their collections to provide better access to them. This requires resources such as labour, funding, technical expertise, as well as a long-term strategy to maintain the digital content and access to it. All of this is difficult to come by, especially for smaller community archives. Digitisation is undoubtedly a beneficial way to increase access to archives, especially internationally; however, it does not

[88] Freeman, E. "Defying Description", 465.
[89] Ibid., 462.
[90] Levin, A. K. "Introduction: Museums, Sexuality, and Gender Activism.", 11.
[91] Freeman, E. "Defying Description", 463.

address the underlying problem: the misrepresentation of the marginalized group within those collections. To locate queer documents in institutional collections, extensive, explicit, and precise information is desperately needed. If the archival descriptions and tagging are not updated during the digitisation process, the discriminatory language is simply reproduced in the digital collection, reinforcing the problem.

A positive example of how to update a collection catalogue to make objects pertaining to queer history more visible and accessible is the V&A Museum in London. As described by Curator of Prints at the Victoria & Albert Museum, Zorian Clayton, and Consultant Curator with the National Trust and a member of their LGBTQ Steering Group, Dawn Hoskin, the work started on identifying relevant items already in the collection in 2015. The intention was to "create focused, catalogue records, featuring supportive research, contextual explanation, and interpretation to increase awareness of and access to objects and histories."[92] Till then, only a handful of objects were tagged in a way that hinted at their connection to queer history. The three search terms in use were neither sufficient nor functional. Meanwhile, there are 29 search terms pertaining to queer history available in the V&A database, containing more than 2 million objects. Some did not only receive new tags, but also a paragraph explaining the connection to queer history when it is not immediately clear. For example, many artists do not thematise their queer identity or their connection to the community in their art, so adding tags and additional explanations combats its erasure and encourages new research. To ensure this newfound knowledge withstands the test of time, the V&A's collection Management System was updated with the LGBTQ+ terminology as well. The new guidelines clearly outline meanings and usage, providing context and addressing sensitive issues.[93] By making the new terminology as accessible as possible, staff feel more comfortable and confident using it, not only in the context of cataloguing.[94]

Access restrictions imposed by collections and archives present further challenges to researchers and curators. Heritage institutions have the power to limit access to archival material through an embargo on controversial items or, in some cases, destroy items from their archives. According to participants in Freeman's study, the embargo periods would be substantially longer, by years or decades, for queer archival material compared to items about

[92] Clayton, Z., and D. Hoskin. "Activists on the Inside", 59.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.

heteronormative lived experiences. Freeman's participants reported that no explanation was provided, which led them to suspect that the queer content of the records was the reason behind it.[95] One such embargo was described by Barry Reay, New Zealand professor specialising in the history of gender and sexuality, in regards to the "David Louis Bowie Diaries from 1978 to 1993" housed in the Manuscripts and Archives Division in the Humanities and Social Sciences Library of the New York Public Library. These diaries include descriptions and drawings of Bowie's sex life and details of the queer community of New York City in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. It could function as a source of sexual history, including the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the US. Reay was granted special access to these diaries, which are officially embargoed until 2068.[96]

Other possible restrictive methods include partial or complete redactions of documents. Names and locations are subject to censorship even though, in some cases, these details are already widely known. The documents would merely confirm existing public knowledge. Participants in Freeman's study stated that "they would only be given access to a small percentage of a larger document, file, or collection—often for unclear reasons."[97]

However, encountering these barriers presupposes that the researcher knows of the existence and possible content of the archival material. Getting to this stage is challenging in itself.[98] Consulting collections without a specific item in mind makes it easier for the archive to simply deny the existence of connected archival material. This could be down to the archivists' lack of knowledge of the collection or done intentionally to limit access or queer readings of items. Freeman's participants also reported archivists voicing their opinions and expressing judgments to the researchers: "One participant compared the moral *"policing"* of queer materials in archives to that of pornographic materials, which are often kept off public display, and under heavy access restrictions."[99] To be able to find and access objects and archival documents about a marginalised group is the foundation for curatorial efforts to display them. Therefore, reforming all aspects of the management of archives, which, as discussed, are reproducing harm to marginalised groups, is also part of caring curating.

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[95] Freeman, E. "Defying Description", 462.
[96] Reay, Barry. "Sex in the Archives",103-13.
[97] Freeman, E. "Defying Description", 462.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

In the current state, institutional archives are not hospitable to queer history, so what is the alternative? Based on the challenges within institutional archives, the communities have been forced to find alternatives, such as creating and managing their own museums & archives.

4. Intersections of Queer and Sex Worker Histories at the Schwules Museum

When the Schwules Museum (SMU) first opened in Berlin in 1985, it was the first museum worldwide dedicated to the history of the LGBTQ+ community. They aim to create more equitable narratives of queer history and culture that reflect a wide range of experiences, stories, struggles, and viewpoints, acknowledging both their diversity and occasional contradictions.[100]

Since the founding of the SMU, the number of museums specialising in LGBTQ+ history and culture has increased across Europe, including newly established museums like Queer Britain in London, which opened in May 2022, and Queer Muzeum Warszawa in Warsaw, which opened its doors in the fall of 2024. Usually, this type of museum arises out of the need for a space and the desire to showcase items from queer archives that need a home. For example, the Queer Muzeum Warszawa is run by Lambda Warszawa, the oldest LGBTQ+ organisation in Poland, which also oversees its archive, containing more than 100,000 artifacts gathered since 1997.[101]

The SMU has developed from a local museum, library and archive into a renowned collaboration partner and is an international hub for the preservation and research of the history of sexuality and gender diversity.[102] The SMU's in-house archive is made up of documentation of the LGBTQ+ movement and culture, artworks and individual testimonials.[103]

It was created initially to preserve the history and culture of gay men. Over the years, this focus has been interrogated and expanded. Now the SMU works with the umbrella term "queer", which encompasses a myriad of sexual and gender identities.[104] According to the gender studies theorist David Halperin, "queer" is defined as anything deviating from the ordinary or dominant social norms.[105] This means the term queer is not exclusive to the

[100] Schwules Museum Berlin. "About Us".

[101] Queer Muzeum "About Us: Queer Muzeum Warszawa".

[102] Schulze, H. "HIV/AIDS in the context of a queer institution", 147.

[103] Schwules Museum Berlin. "About Us".

[104] Ibid.

[105] Halperin, David. *Saint=Foucault: Towards a Hagiography*, 62.

LGBTQ+ community but describes anyone diverging from what is considered normal. Therefore, sex workers can also be defined as queer – regardless of their sexual identity or affiliation to the LGBTQ+ community. There is a significant overlap of members of the queer and of the sex worker community. The UK based sex workers and activists with the Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM) Molly Smith and Juno Mac confirm that contrary to popular belief, not just women but "all genders sell sex: transgender and cisgender men, non-binary people, and those with indigenous or non-western genders such as hijra, fa'afafine and two-spirit people."[106] Depending on the person's gender, however, how they enter the sex industry, their experiences performing sexual labour, and their lives outside of sex work can differ greatly. It is equally vital to remember that the sex industry is inherently gendered, due to the majority of clients paying for sex being cisgender men.[107]

Activist and sex worker Carol Leigh introduced the term "sex work" in the late 1970s to apply to "people who sell or trade their own sexual labour in exchange for a resource, which is often money but can also be drugs, alcohol, or shelter".[108] Leigh intended to create new vocabulary free from stigmatisation and the gendered associations of "prostitute". The term "Sex work" foregrounds the labour involved by separating it from the individual's identity, thus making it possible to characterise the labour performed within the commercial sex industry. It expresses the desire not to be defined by the work one does and by terms devised and imposed without their input.[109] Nowadays, "sex work" has established itself as the value-neutral standardised option within progressive scholarship, but also workers' rights narratives and labour-focused activism.[110] Due to the development of new media, the term encompasses a wide variety of sexual labour and is not limited to what is traditionally considered prostitution. Even though it has remained relatively neutral within academia, it does retain political connotations, hence not all individuals part of the sex industry openly use this label. By calling yourself a "sex worker", you align yourself with the belief that selling sex is or could be considered work. [111]

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[106] Smith, M., and J. Mac. *Revolting Prostitutes*, 4.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Smith, M., and J. Mac. *Revolting Prostitutes*, 1.
[109] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open,* 27.
[110] Berg, H. "Working for Love", 963.
[111] Smith, M., and J. Mac. *Revolting Prostitutes*, 1.

Both queer people and sex workers share similar viewpoints on pleasure, sexuality, bodily autonomy and the struggle for human rights. Their body and the use of it are vilified because they do not conform to sexual norms. Contradicting societal morality results in restrictions, exclusion, and discrimination.[112] Sex workers were crucial agents within the social movements fighting for queer liberation.[113] Arguably, sex workers can be considered the initial feminists as they have been integral in building and sustaining social movements for human rights.[114] Without sex workers facilitating the necessary conditions, queer uprisings such as the 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City would not have been possible.[115]

Queer museums, which were born out of a need and desire to authentically represent intersections of marginalised groups by passionate volunteers, are aware of and often actively engaged in the human rights struggles outside of the museum. As Sandell states: "Museums' interpretive practices must be shaped by an understanding of inequalities beyond the institution."[116] The SMU maximises the potential of combining personal beliefs, values and agendas with larger social and structural factors which influence the moral standpoints and narratives presented within their exhibitions.[117]

The SMU utilises the popular yet controversial strategy of temporary exhibitions to tell a broad range of queer stories. In the case of the SMU, curating temporary exhibitions maximises the use of their space, providing opportunity to showcase a wide range of topics and viewpoints, which reflects the diversity of the queer community and the intersections within it. Since all 280+ temporary exhibitions were made by and for the queer community, the use of temporary exhibitions is the way in which the SMU has chosen to provide agency to the widest possible number of groups within their community.

Museums created through community activism such as the SMU are not immune to sexism, racism and ableism within their organisation. This can be seen in the programming, collection criteria and day-to-day operations of the museum. As Birgit Bosold, curator and board member of the SMU, confirms, in 2018 the museum was "not accessible, hospitable, or useful for WLINT (women, lesbian, intersex, nonbinary, and trans) communities, especially

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[112] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 9.

[113] Schwules Museum Berlin "With Legs Wide Open".

[114] Ibid., 5.

[115] Stern, S. W. "The Forgotten Role of Sex Workers at Stonewall".

[116] Sandell, R. *Museums, Moralities and Human Rights*, 84.

[117] Ibid, 9.

those of color."[118] In response to this, the SMU dedicated 2018 to the "Year of the Women*" and changed its curatorial practices and programming to specifically counteract the exclusion and violence perpetrated within its collections, programming, and staffing. They dedicated a year to dismantling power structures within the institution by focusing on queer and feminist perspectives. Together with Vera Hofmann, the second female board member at the time, Bosold curated the highly successful programming which altered the collections, organisational structures and programming long-term. By applying the practice of caring curating to all parts of the institution, they were able to identify and adapt their organisational culture and curatorial practices to be more inclusive.

Based on the experience of "Year of the Women*", Bosold's advice on creating an intervention from the inside goes as follows:

> "Build a good team of fierce and competent feminists. Find cis male allies. Fundraise enough and distribute wisely. Learn nonviolent communication and self-regulation. Negotiate and commit. Get ready to snap. Dare it, do it! Learn to rest, not to quit. Be accountable. Lift each other up and cross the finish line together. Don't forget aftercare."[119]

Building communities and caring for each other, be it through looking out for each other on the street, advocating for each other's basic human rights and providing emergency funds to prevent evictions, especially within the sex work community, is continuous and political work.[120] Marginalised groups such as the queer and sex worker communities have a different understanding of care as they have to rely on each other to provide support. This different understanding of care is reflected in the mission statements and collaborations of queer heritage institutions such as the SMU.[121]

However, very few museums focus specifically on sex work, with rare exceptions like the "Red Light Secrets" Museum in Amsterdam. For the most part, heritage institutions display sex work in temporary exhibitions. Of the 280+ temporary exhibitions at the SMU, only a handful were related to sex work. One example is the first collaboration with the sex worker-led collective Objects of Desire in 2019, resulting in an exhibition with the same

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[118] Krasny, E, S. Lingg, and L. Fritsch. "Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating—An Introduction.", 11.

[119] Bosold, B., and V. Hofmann. "The "Year of the Women*" at the Schwules Museum Berlin", 217.

[120] Smith, M., and J. Mac. *Revolting Prostitutes*, 6.

[121] Schulze, H. "HIV/AIDS in the context of a queer institution", 147.

name, displaying stories around the everyday practice of sex work in Berlin.[122] Five years later, the SMU presented the temporary exhibition "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" which showcased the history of sex work in Germany, curated by an international sex-worker-led team of artists, anthropologists and curators based in Berlin. It was open to the public from the 26th of March till the 11th of November 2024.

It was facilitated by the SMU and funded by the Berliner Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt.[123] The SMU allowed the curatorial team to retain their autonomy, which ensured that the sex worker-led team was in charge of all aspects of the project. By doing so, the museum was acting in line with the caring curating approach, prioritising resources to marginalised communities for genuine self-representation rather than institutional tokenism. Even so, the team was working on a tight budget.[124] This shows that projects such as this one are not immune to broader issues of funding within the cultural sector. Some curatorial team members continued sex work alongside their curatorial responsibilities, leading to scheduling difficulties and added strain to the less-than-one-year turnaround.[125]

Despite creative ambition, limited funds forced reliance on favours, under-compensation, and utilising the team members' networks and social currency. They performed the full range of curatorial responsibilities, including developing and utilising professional networks, initiating collaborations, and drawing upon prior training and experience in the field. However, due to their work in the sex industry, and more broadly as members of a marginalised community, the reductive assumption that they must lack formal education or curatorial expertise remains. This misconception reflects a broader institutional reluctance within the heritage sector to engage meaningfully with marginalised communities, particularly through a caring curating approach. Collaborating on equal terms would require in-house curators to relinquish control and to place trust in the skills and expertise of individuals from the marginalised communities. The assumption that marginalised individuals lack professional qualifications or curatorial competence not only undermines their contributions but also serves to justify exploitative practices. Institutions such as the People's History Museum, for example, framed unpaid labour as a development opportunity,

[122] Schwules Museum Berlin "About Us".

[123] Schwules Museum Berlin "With Legs Wide Open".

[124] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".

[125] Ibid.

thereby avoiding the obligation to offer fair compensation while positioning themselves as benevolent enablers of professional growth.[126] Especially when it comes to sex workers the expectation is that they do the work because they have no other options because of limited access to resources and education.

One of the key mandates of the SMU, apart from self-determination of the queer community, is also fighting discrimination and providing agency to other communities.[127] The exhibition was made under the philosophy of *Nothing about us without us!*, associated with the fight of sex worker communities for agency over their own representation. As described in the Exhibition Catalogue of "With Legs Wide Open – a Whore's Ride Through History": "Knowing and imagining whores of the past, in their humour, ferocity and complexity, counteracts the isolation of feeling that we have no lineage, providing a balm for stigma the same way our community does in the present."[128]

Created by a curatorial team that included sex workers, new narratives were forged in self-determination, pride, and the pursuit of human rights.[129] Narrative decisions were made collaboratively within the team, allowing themes and stories to emerge organically. This inclusive, community-driven curatorial approach authentically exemplifies caring curating, supporting the marginalised group to author their own narratives and prioritise their perspectives. The curators preferred a thematic to a chronological structure.[130] For the duration of the exhibition, the SMU turned into an imaginary Museum of Sex Work, made up of various departments, including an Apothecary, a Cloakroom, a Department of Complaints, a Department of Health, an Office for the Reclamation of Public Space, a Department of Destruction, a Department for Horizontal Labour and a Chapel.[131] As the exhibition catalogue states, the visitor was shown "how whores challenge traditional structures of reproductive labour, and how our experiences shed light on social constructions of gender and sexuality."[132] This exhibition reflected the history and culture of sex work from the Middle Ages until today and highlighted the intersections of the queer and sex worker communities.

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[126] O'Donnell, C. "*Never Going Underground*", 219.

[127] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 9.

[128] Ibid., 13.

[129] Schwules Museum Berlin "With Legs Wide Open".

[130] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".

[131] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 12.

[132] Ibid., 31.

In the words of the curators, the exhibition offered the visitor "a queer, playful, sometimes magical linking of documents and associations – about alternative body knowledge, working conditions, non-normative sexuality, celebration and memorialization of ancestors, German bureaucracy fetishism, colonialist and National Socialist alienation and mourning."[133]

As curator Rori Dior explained in an interview as part of my podcast *Culturally Curious*, the repetitive nature of the history of regulation in Germany was created by oscillating periods of progression and regression, detectable in the levels of repression or visibility of sex workers.[134] The exhibition illustrated the connection between the history of regulatory systems and Berlin's geographical development through the eyes of the city's contemporary sex workers. In addition to being a critical analysis of the regulation, surveillance and institutional silencing part of sex work history, the exhibition provided a visual representation of sex work culture spanning from protest banners linked to contemporary activism to clothing reproductions based on sex workers' work attire in the 19th century, sewn by one of the curators herself. The curators combined archival material from the SMU's in-house archive, institutional archives, the community archive Objects of Desire, and oral history with original artworks by Emre Busse, Ernestine Pastorello, Ginger Angelica, Gómez Diego, L'Adios, Rori Dior, Una You and Valentin Rion, some of whom were part of the curatorial team. Artworks specifically made for the exhibitions and items from the archive Objects of Desire have been added to the SMU's in-house archive following the exhibitions. This demonstrates a continued commitment of the SMU to increasing the representation of sex work in its collection and archive.

Usually, the content in institutional archives and museum collections pertaining to the queer community is limited to pornography, sex education specifically regarding STIs/STDs due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, police records and commonly sensationalised media reports.[135] There is a general lack of sources regarding sex work history, especially when it comes to primary sources created by sex workers. Contrary to the history of the dominant groups of society, "the traditionally sought diaries, letters, published articles, meeting minutes, and books are not found in abundance, carefully catalogued away in sex worker archives or kept in family libraries."[136]

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[133] Schwules Museum Berlin "With Legs Wide Open".

[134] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 32.

[135] Freeman, E. "Defying Description", 465.

[136] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 57.

During my conversation with Dior, it became apparent that the curatorial team faced similar archival and collection challenges to those which Freeman identified. Issues of accessibility and terminology also apply to items pertaining to sex work. Dior described facing these issues when trying to access archives, especially those of concentration camps in Germany. When she contacted the archives asking for specific documents, she was met with denials of their existence, even though the curatorial team "knew that sex workers had been persecuted as "Asozial" and sometimes under other labels."[137] The archives were supposed to house archival material testifying to that fact.[138] It is unclear if Dior's experience was down to a mismanaged archive, archivists who did not know the extent of their archive, bias towards the individuals asking, unwillingness to cooperate due to the topic of the exhibition, or another unrelated reason. She did indicate that when the SMU contacted archives on behalf of the sex worker-led curatorial team, the process ran more smoothly and yielded better results.[139]

The terminology used at any given point in history tends to reflect the public narrative regarding the marginalised group. In this case, the most prominent example of terminology is the word "whore". Based on the English and German titles of the exhibition "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" the curators embraced the word "Hure" or "whore". "Hure" stems from the old High German *Huor*, which described women whose actions went against the accepted sexual behaviours of contemporary society, such as sex workers.[140] The term can be traced back as far as the Middle Ages within German legal documents and wider literature.

These terms fluctuate based on the time period, yet continuously determine how society defines sexuality and labels deviance by singling out individuals who do not conform to the accepted categories of virgin, widow, or wife.[141] To this day, "Hure" is still used as derogatory language in both German and English. Through the reclamation of the term, similar to other derogatory words, sex workers now take pride in this label.[142] Hence, the deliberate choice for the title of the exhibition and the naming of International Whores' Day.

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[137] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 28.
[138] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".
[139] Ibid.
[140] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 27.
[141] Ibid., 28.
[142] Ibid., 27.

Dior points out that by defining "whore" in relation to who is expelled from society, it is open to intersections with disability and feminist history, to name a few.[143]

These intersections become clearer when examining the persecution of marginalised groups during the Nazi regime in Germany. A significant German term related to sex workers' history is "Asozial". This category has its origins in the Weimar Republic and was created "to label groups of people deemed to be living outside of societal norms".[144] The broad wording of the definition made it possible for the Nazis to criminalise anyone not in line with their ideology. This provided them with the grounds to send not only sex workers but also beggars, drug users, and unemployed people to concentration camps. The legal category lived on in East Germany, the GDR, under § 249 StGB and is still used colloquially in Germany to this day.[145]

The exhibition thematised the diversity of oppression sex workers have faced, be it during the Nazi regime or in recent history, by the passing of the Prostitutes Protection Act in 2017. This is a recent example of how Germany utilises the legal model of regulationism, also known as legalisation or licensing, when it comes to sex work. This legal model severely restricts the parts of the sex industry it classifies as legal. However, if sex workers are unable or unwilling to adhere to numerous administrative requirements, including official registration as a sex worker, employment in specific establishments or mandatory health tests, their work is deemed illegal. Instead of dismantling existing laws, legalisation entails the creation of additional laws focusing on restrictions and penalties of sex work. Usually, changes in legislation regarding sexual labour are made without consultation with the workers themselves. History demonstrates that, despite the claims of policymakers to the contrary, the main objective of criminalisation and regulating laws has not been to protect sex workers but rather to protect society from them, by exerting control over sex workers through legislation at the expense of sex workers' safety.[146] Smith and Mac identify the roots of this oppressive political discourse and policy making as follows:

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[143] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".

[144] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 28.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Ibid., 57.

> "This is, in part, because a mindset that advocates for legalizing sex work tends to see prostitutes not as workers but as anxiety-inducing vectors of disease or symbols of disorder who must be controlled."[147]

This systemic silencing of sex workers' voices is also reflected in the public discourse, which is dominated by strong feelings and opinions that are not backed up by data.[148] "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" and other exhibitions like it can function as a public interjection by sex workers, through using a public platform such as a museum to have their experiences heard and existence validated. It can be a vital source of information that can influence the public discourse. By utilising the caring curating approach, providing sex workers with a platform to have their voices heard and authentically represent themselves, the SMU is acting as an agent of social change, empowering the marginalised community and openly engaging with their human rights struggles. This openness and support are uncommon in institutional museums and archives, but not unusual in the setting of queer museums.

Just as sex workers are commonly not consulted on laws that pertain to their lived experiences, their documentation and characterisation in museums and archives is usually made without their input. The exhibition was also a reclamation of physical space within museums and the city of Berlin, as not only the sex workers' working conditions but also their rights and access in all aspects of life were restricted. For example, this affected sex workers' mobility within the city, their autonomy over their own bodies within healthcare and their living conditions. Violating the rules could result in forced labour, fines or imprisonment.[149] The narrative was clear: it was the responsibility of the government to protect its society from the dangers associated with sex workers by segregating and controlling them. This also included the restriction of movement throughout cities, such as Berlin, where at the beginning of the 20th century, sex workers were barred from certain streets and squares across the city. Theatres, zoos and museums were also off limits.[150] The exhibition was not only an opportunity to rewrite the narratives created about sex work and its history, but also a reclamation of physical space within museums and the city of Berlin.

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[147] Smith, M., and J. Mac. *Revolting Prostitutes*, 176.

[148] Schwules Museum Berlin "With Legs Wide Open".

[149] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 56.

[150] Ibid.

Providing the opportunity to reclaim space to gather, connect and create new narratives and experiences for all demographics, but especially marginalised groups, is central to caring curating.

4.1 Archiving with Care: Objects of Desire and the Politics of Sex Worker Memory

Museums and archives created by and for the community demonstrate how heritage institutions can be a space for identity creation and community care. Community archives and museums are the result of grassroots initiatives that were created as an alternative way to get their voices heard. The subject of sex work is underrepresented and politicised in archives and heritage organisations since it is still heavily stigmatised, and the work is criminalised. This results in scattered grassroots initiatives and private archives, which rely on volunteer work, donations and are thus structurally vulnerable.

The archive Objects of Desire, for example, is specifically designed to function as a community resource and pop-up exhibition which can be used to counter oppressive narratives, especially regarding political discussions and policy making.[151] It relies on a strong involvement of the sex worker community. As Rori Dior, co-founder of the archive, was also part of the curatorial team for the exhibition "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History", the archive was an integral source of objects used within the exhibition.

In January 2025, I interviewed Dior to find out more about their archive and the collaborations with the SMU. As mentioned before, Dior was an integral part of the curatorial team of the exhibitions "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History" in 2024 and its predecessor "Objects of Desire" in 2019, both held at the SMU. The archive Objects of Desire emerged from a conversation about the absence of historical accounts of sex workers and the importance of and value in the community, taking ownership of preserving its own history.[152] The archive's goal is to use art and archiving to prioritise individual voices and challenge perceptions about sex work internationally.

Since 2016, the group of anthropologists, artists, and sex workers has been gathering artefacts and memories related to sex work experiences in a varied collection. They discovered that focusing on objects provided an effective way to share stories about sex work without framing it in simplistic terms. The project's aim was not to label sex work as either

[151] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".
[152] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 20.

empowering or exploitative, but to avoid the common binary found in many public discussions.[153]

Whilst Dior was studying Anthropology in London in the years prior, she became fascinated by material culture and the notions of exchange. Dior also reflected on the dynamics of social relationships at work, wondering how a gift from a client, given while the sex worker was inhabiting their work persona, transitioned into their personal life. Due to the legal situation in the UK at the time, many sex workers were forced to work from home, which made the line between work and personal life blurry.[154] Dior was interested in how sex workers rely on physical objects to navigate the boundaries between their professional and personal identities. This might involve rituals like shaving with a particular razor, wearing a favourite perfume believed to bring good luck, or preparing a space by putting special sheets on the bed before a client arrives. Each object helps to signal and support the transition into their work role.[155] Based on her personal experience and discussions with other sex workers, Dior found that sex workers have a distinct sense of physical items.

Items may be incorporated into a person's daily life, encapsulating several functions and meanings simultaneously. As stated in the article about the Archive Objects of Desire within the Exhibition Catalogue: “These objects reveal the banal, the bizarre, the difficult, and the oddly touching. This object-focused methodology shifts the gaze from an objectifying or oversimplified idea of who sex workers are.”[156] Working in residential environments entails dealing with household items that are typically not related to this profession. In contrast, a lot of items or presents from clients’ end up in the sex worker's daily life. Dior observed that clients, when visiting the sex worker’s home, would sometimes bring gifts—like a toaster or, in one case, a carbon monoxide detector.[157] According to her, the concerns from clients could feel excessive, at times, since they were rooted in the assumption that sex workers cannot take care of themselves.[158] Non-sex workers often expect the relationship with clients to be more transactional and devoid of care. For Dior, however, these relationships highlight unique dynamics of care, for better or for worse. Thus, maintaining a

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[153] Ashby, N. “Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work”.
[154] Witton, H., “Sex Workers Rights With Lady Charlotte Rose Transcript”.
[155] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 30.
[156] Ibid., 20.
[157] Ashby, N. “Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work”.
[158] Ibid.

rigid separation of work and personal life can be challenging. Dior pointed out that sex workers can use objects like bags or suitcases to try and preserve boundaries between their work and private life.[159]

Sex workers often have a heightened awareness of physical objects and their placement. Dior illustrated the insights that everyday objects can offer through an example she connects to her time working as a sex worker in London: towels. Since many people work from home, there's a lot of laundry involved, making towels a significant part of the job. The size of the towel plays a role: if it's too small, it slips off when a client returns from the shower; if it's too large, it takes too long to dry. Through these details, Dior emphasised how such everyday objects can reveal a great deal about the routines and multitudes of associations attached to objects as well as the dynamics between workers and clients.[160]

The collective created and maintains a mostly online archive consisting of objects and the sex workers' memories and experiences connected to them. The online archive consists of images, video, or sound files connected to a corresponding story, which the object represents.[161] The photographs are either taken by the individuals of the collective or by the person submitting their story to the archive. The only criterion for the objects is that they are submitted by someone currently or formerly working in the sex industry. The stories do not necessarily have to be connected to their work. This means the archive consists of a wide variety of everyday objects that people outside of the sex industry would not attribute to sex work. Dior noted that some of the objects are not submitted with extensive stories explaining what they mean to the individual. That lack intrigued her, appreciating the mystery that surrounds them.[162]

Some objects are made for the collection, specifically to complement the submitted story, such as a Derrida book dipped in chocolate. Another example is a meth pipe, which Dior confessed was created by burning sugar in a brand-new pipe to give the impression that it was smoked. For the sake of secrecy, certain story details have been altered; the collective gives itself considerable leeway and creative flexibility. Dior mentioned a case in which a necklace was changed to a bracelet.[163]

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[159] Ibid.

[160] Ibid.

[161] Objects Of Desire, "Archive"

[162] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".

[163] Ibid.

The collective not only accepts submissions to the archive but actively creates opportunities for sex workers to contribute. For the "Objects of Desire" exhibition in 2019, the curators wanted to include stories specifically from the area of Berlin where the SMU is located, the Kurfürstenstrasse, known for its street-based sex work. Achieving the goal of including stories from local sex workers proved challenging. Language barriers were one factor, as many individuals did not speak English or German, so the curators brought Hungarian and Bulgarian translators to assist. Dior also emphasized the importance of paying for interviews, viewing it as a crucial point of access, respect and care, ensuring that participants could afford to give them half an hour or an hour of their time.[164]

Dior explained their approach to doing interviews by establishing a conversation first and then revisiting aspects that may be more pertinent with specific questions. Asking directly about objects and their significance proved not to be an effective strategy. Instead, the collective developed various interviewing approaches to explore people's experiences at work. "Can you describe a particular booking?" or "Describe your last booking" would naturally get the interviewee talking and establish trust. Objects would consistently emerge as part of the narrative.[165] One object that all sex workers had opinions about was bags. Especially for those going out to see clients, like a dominatrix, for example, the contents and dimensions of their bag could vary significantly. It might be a large duffel bag filled with gear, or just a small bag containing essentials like condoms, lube, and pepper spray. [166]

On the surface, their simple approach of presenting an object with an anonymous story did not leave much room for moral or political arguments. However, these decisions can make the archive vulnerable to antagonisation. By changing details of the stories and creating replicas of objects, the collective not only puts the authenticity of the items into question but also the content of the stories that the objects represent. There is no way to confirm the details of the stories as an outsider. Should this be of concern? An argument can be made that all knowledge within and created from archives is constructed and does not represent lived experiences entirely accurately.

So, holding this community archive to a higher standard would be hypocritical. The collective has chosen to resist the public's voyeuristic impulses by sustaining this uncertainty

[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid.

of authenticity. It is supposed to guarantee the sex workers' anonymity and autonomy over their narratives. Taking care of the individuals who voluntarily shared personal stories with strangers is more important than striving for arguably unachievable authenticity. Some items are very specific and could identify the sex worker. Outing the sex worker could have detrimental effects for them and their loved ones. This takes on a greater meaning within grassroots museums, where oral history and stories are artifacts. Those who are providing the stories are putting a higher level of trust in the curator and the institution to represent their stories in an unbiased way.

Dior highlighted the challenges of articulating nuanced experiences of sex work within dominant public discourses that tend to polarise narratives, either romanticising the work or casting it as inherently exploitative. This dichotomy can inhibit not only public understanding but also the individual's ability to process their own experiences. Dior explained that this tension is a common experience among sex workers, who may find mainstream discourse tainting their internal reflections on their work. Speaking about personal experiences can be very difficult for sex workers, especially within societies in which the work is stigmatised and criminalised. The aim was to insert their voices into conversations and political debates about sex work by telling stories from their perspectives in a way they felt comfortable with and that was more relatable for non sex workers. To Dior, this is what makes the project powerful.[167] She explained that creating and working on Objects of Desire was essential to being able to speak up and express oneself.[168] This is a clear illustration of how caring curating can provide social agency.

Queer community archives, guided by principles of caring curating, are increasingly intervening where traditional heritage institutions have failed to adequately preserve or prioritise marginalised histories. Queer archives such as Objects of Desire are placing the community in full control over the selection of objects and the narratives through which they wish to be remembered. This self-determined approach not only challenges institutional exclusion but actively creates new opportunities for preserving the history and culture of marginalised groups.

Even though the online archive showcases a significant collection of items on its website, I was curious about whether there was a physical archive to go alongside it, and if

[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.

so, where the items were stored. After the first exhibition at the Red Gallery in London in 2016, many objects were returned to their owners and are still in their personal use. Owners are informed on an individual basis if the items are needed again. Typically, people would lend items temporarily and then take them back, unless they specifically chose to donate something.[169] As discussed previously, the effectiveness of temporary exhibits is a matter of debate, particularly if the items are not included in the host institution's permanent collections or displays. Some objects of Objects of Desire now reside in the archive of the SMU as a result of their collaborations. The limited number of physical items in the collective's possession resides in Dior's basement in Berlin. Dior keeps a few boxes containing a mini exhibition, as they've occasionally been invited to present it at various events or conferences.[170] However, the majority of items, such as wet wipes or feminine hygiene products, are repurchased especially for an exhibition. Consequently, the future of the archive depends on the networks and knowledge established by the four collective members because of its physical transience. The location of the artefacts and, hence, the archive may be in danger if the members are unwilling or unable to continue their voluntary work for Objects of Desire. The collective is at the centre of a network of lenders and objects it needs to keep track of. Thus, the full breadth of the archive is not physically accessible without a member of the collective.

This highlights a common issue of community archives: the curator needs to know about their existence and have connections to the community members maintaining them. This requires specialised knowledge and investment into building a network within the marginalised communities. Additionally, the lack of funds and institutional support, as well as the reliance on volunteer work and personal finances, make the long-term survival of archives such as Objects of Desire challenging. Archives, be it institutional or community-based, are a main source of information for curators when researching the topic of their exhibition and provide a source of objects for their exhibit, the approach of caring curating extends to them as well.

[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid.

4.2 Crafts as a Method of Caring Curating: Reimagining Sex Work Histories Through Quilting and Clothing Reproductions

When archiving and curating the history and culture of marginalised groups, in this case sex work, it is vital to find a balance between historical rigor and an openness to emotional and intuitive forms of engagement. [171] It is beneficial to critically analyse sources while also acknowledging the subjective, affective connections that contemporary queer individuals and sex workers may experience when encountering historical narratives. For instance, reading archival euphemisms—such as referring to a queer couple as "roommates"—is interpreted differently through the lens of present-day identities and experiences.

This mode of engaging with history, while speculative, is, in this case, viewed not as a deficiency but as a meaningful method of connecting with the past. According to Dior, the curatorial team often discussed the importance of including a felt, intuitive aspect when exploring the history of sex work and recognised that there are certain nuances or details that individuals with lived experience in sex work might notice, which could easily be missed by those without.[172]

In the first section of "With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History", outfit replicas, including a medieval cloak, a sex worker's outfit from the early 20th century, and one specifically from 1885, made by the curator Ernestine Pastorello, are the main attractions.

Since childhood, Pastorello has enjoyed expressing herself through clothing and has learned to sew her own. Whilst she was pursuing a career in fashion, she was struggling financially and turned to sex work out of necessity.[173] Her historical knowledge and work as a designer and sex worker informed her choices regarding some aspects of the clothing, which were not specifically documented.

When asked if she gained new insight by recreating the garments combined with her perspective as a sex worker, she said yes, and went on to explain how wearing the garments revealed more questions and unexpected answers. When creating reproduction clothing, the

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[171] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".
[172] Ibid.
[173] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 114.

goal is to mentally step into the past by immersing yourself in the period. Gaining more knowledge about the time period helps strengthen that sense of connection and imagination.[174]

The reproduction of the Medieval Cloak is one example where imagination and creative freedom came into play. There were no drawings connected to the source, which stated that medieval sex workers were required to don a certain cloak with a hood to be identifiable. The weave and colour of the wool used in the new rendition are in line with Medieval times, providing warmth and functioning as a decorative garment. Additionally, documents indicated that sex workers wore bells, adding a layer of sensory experience, opening the door for further insights and conclusions. Ernestine's creation, which combined the sources, resulted in a refined piece imagined produced a pleasing sound as the sex worker moved around in public spaces.[175]

The second costume is a reproduction of sex worker clothing specifically worn in Bülowkiez, Berlin, in 1885, made of cotton twill and spiral steel boning. Designed with a middle-class sex worker in mind, the costume demonstrated how sex workers repurposed clothing from earlier periods, in this case, the 1860s, by changing the bustle and skirt shape to match modern styles. The largest expenditure related to new clothes was fabric, so upcycling and sewing their own clothing was a common practice for sex workers.[176] Pastorello shared her experiences of wearing a corset:

> "One of the things I love about corsets is when you put them on, you immediately are transplanted into the physicality of that era and how you could have breathed – or not. If the corset is laced tight enough, it changes your blood flow. When I wear it, my breath comes up more into the chest. At first, it makes me feel a little bit anxious, but then there's a secondary feeling of feeling held."[177]

Pastorello also observed how wearing a historical dress during the walking tours she led altered how she engaged with her surroundings. The skirt was more prone to becoming coated with dirt, and depending on the weather, soaked with rain or snow.[178] The reproduction is also worn, specifically the hem of the skirt, in line with this realisation. The

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[174] Ibid., 115.
[175] Ibid., 18.
[176] Ibid., 19.
[177] Ibid., 116.
[178] Ibid.

petticoats, corsets, and layers made it difficult to urinate, so women refrained from wearing closed underwear until the 1920s. Instead, stockings covered their legs up to the thigh, and any undergarments had an opening in the crotch. Women used a pad attached to a belt during their period. This especially influenced how street-based sex workers worked.[179]

Pastorello points out that it was not time efficient to take off all clothing items, including the corset, and redress for each new client. From experience, she learned it takes about 15 minutes to shed the layers of fabric, so she concludes that sex workers kept the garments on. However, different classes of sex workers had diverse experiences; for example, some classes of sex workers had access to varying locations such as bordellos or other indoor workplaces. Lower-class sex workers were exposed to the elements on the street and were forced to wear as many layers as possible to stay warm.

The "Weatherbeaten" reproduction made of linen and cotton represents an early 20th-century sex worker who is employed as a housemaid but compelled to moonlight as a sex worker on the side. The lines between domestic labour and sex work are frequently crossed. Working as a maid indicated limited options for economic improvement. One possibility was to leverage their employer's sexual interest in them, however, demands for sex without consent or compensation were more common. In that case, occasionally working as a street-based sex worker outside of working hours was the more profitable option, especially if you needed to support your family.[180] The reproduction includes the apron, a new and well-taken care of chemise, and an outdated skirt fashionable in the 1880s.

All three reproductions were created by the curator specifically for the exhibition. These objects show a distinct kind of care performed by the curator, which used to be limited to the preservation of artefacts but could include their production as well. The creative and physical labour involved in making three period costumes is substantial. These reproductions also highlight the benefits of the unique insights of members of the sex work industry or, more broadly, the marginalised group, in creating or adjusting knowledge about their history and culture.

The same curator and artist created one of the centrepieces of the exhibition, the "Red Light Utopia" quilt (2022-2024). The two by two meter-wide quilt is made of assorted

[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid., 19.

fabrics, beads, batting, and embroidery thread.[181] It visualises the ideal working conditions based on interviews with sex workers. Pastorello discovered quilt making as a teenager and would sew after school to find respite from the stress and depression she was experiencing at the time.[182] For Pastorello, the quilt is a way to express herself artistically.[183] When she started experimenting with quilting figures, the imagery of a bordello became possible. The idea for the "Red Light Utopia" quilt originated from Pastorello's thoughts on how different a Bordello designed and led by sex workers would be regarding care, wellness, and wealth.[184]

The chance to work in a bordello with coworkers instead of alone, as Pastorello did in the US for six years previously, where sex work is largely illegal, provided a new experience of security unfamiliar to her. However, working in a bordello still meant being employed by the owner. Pastorello collected ideas from friends and coworkers about what their sex work utopia would look like. They would work in a beautiful, vibrant historic building where they can enjoy one another's company, seek each other's advice in difficult times, and, of course, generate a substantial income. Their vision included ample delicious food, books, and many cats.[185]

The quilt depicts a multi-story house with grand doors and a large staircase, which has multiple rooms in the style of *Altbau* houses in Berlin. In two rooms, couples are having sex, and one is reminiscent of a BDSM dungeon, including a person in a cage, shamelessly indicating that all kinds of consensual sexual expression are welcome. Another room, designated as a library or salon, includes a fireplace in which the *Hurenpässe* (sex worker registration documents) are burning. The building also includes a free and anonymous clinic. An angel is hovering above the roof of the building. On the left-hand side, the LGBTQ+ flag is flying from a mast on the roof. In the upper right-hand corner are a set of maps, one of the city of Berlin, then one focusing on the area of Schöneberg known for its queer history, and lastly a zoomed-in street view of the red light district. The slogan "we have always been everywhere" frames the bottom of the quilt. The scenes are rich with colour and texture, infused with warmth rather than voyeurism.

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[181] Ibid., 35.
[182] Ibid., 114.
[183] Ibid.
[184] Ibid., 35.
[185] Ibid.

The Schwules Museum is situated in Bülowkiez, which has been recognised as one of Berlin's primary red light districts.[186] As gentrification increases and property values rise, sex workers are being actively expelled from this neighbourhood. Sex workers made it possible for other groups facing stigma due to their deviation from sexual norms, including the LGBTQ+ community, to settle in this area in the first place. For the audio tour "We Have Always Been Everywhere", available on the Berlin History App, sex workers were asked what the return of their red light district would mean to them. According to those interviews, it would give them a sense of belonging and a designated place in the city to call home. For anyone looking to relocate there, they would be made aware that they would be living among sex workers. Coexistence is essential. Anyone who is tolerant is welcome. The systematic exclusion that sex workers face would not be practiced in their utopia.[187]

Pastorello connects the aesthetic and process of quilting to creating something beautiful from a lack of resources, comparable to the mentality of sex workers and arguably curators.[188] The physical movements needed to make textile art include a wide range of potential connotations. The repeated motions associated with needlework can be connected to other forms of monotonous labour, such as housework or caregiving. The process of quilt making and its materiality visualise the connection of crafting with caring and the labour associated with textile art with care work, commonly designated to women. As early as the 1500s, textile crafts such as sewing and embroidery were recognised as women's labour.[189] During the 1960s and 70s, craft and textile art flourished, as textiles were no longer confined to their associations with domestic use and the labour allotted to women, leading to an increase in artists specialising in this medium. Craft includes a wide range of techniques, such as knitting, embroidery, sewing and ceramics. Even though craft as a medium lends itself to connecting cultures and lived experiences, it is commonly perceived as demeaning, invisible, and challenging to define.[190]

Craft can initiate discussion of political issues relating to how we value objects and thus the labour required to produce them.[191] Maria Buszek, curator and Professor of Art

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[186] Ibid., 34.
[187] Ibid., 35.
[188] Ibid., 115.
[189] Emery, E. "Subversive Stitches", 106.
[190] Smith, T. "The Problem with Craft.", 82.
[191] Ibid., 80.

History at the University of Colorado Denver, explains that "a dominant aspect of contemporary craft has been in artists' focus upon its economic, gender and class associations in relation to the labour necessary for its production."[192] Because craft is linked to common production techniques, mass-produced objects, and physical labour, it has received little attention in the history of modern and contemporary art.

However, craft, along with materials like fibre and textiles, continued to serve as a medium for representing rebellion and resistance to the male-dominated art world because of its relationship with the home.[193] The second feminist wave was known for fighting for reproductive rights and rebelling against the societal structure confining women to the family and the domestic sphere throughout the 1960s and 70s. The political discourse of the time inspired artists to utilise this new medium to develop a feminist visual shorthand. The ideology of specific gender roles was entrenched and sustained by associating certain types of work, such as craft, with femininity.[194] The emerging feminist idea that the personal is political could now be communicated through this versatile and association-heavy materiality. The fact that crafting can be an egalitarian practice and is not exclusively produced by artists made it conducive to communicating feminist values.

Similar types of caring labour, including childcare, cleaning, clothing production, and other forms of domestic labour, are still susceptible to large-scale exploitation. Providing care for another person carries a distinct mental and physical burden, one that is felt most by women, who make up the majority of private caregivers globally.[195] Historically, those who provide care have been made dependent and stripped of their economic and political rights, for example by being exploited for un(der)paid labour. Pervasive disparities in care are shaped and determined by a variety of factors, including race, gender, and class.[196] Museum collections systematically omitted the culture of the working classes, of women, and the culture created by anyone considered a member of the caring class. Their culture was not in line with the values and ideologies that museums were and still are built upon, enacting the class and gender biases.[197] Defining curatorial labour as caring work opens the door to

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[192] Buszek, M. E. "Labor Is My Medium", 73.
[193] Emery, E. "Subversive Stitches", 103.
[194] Ibid., 106.
[195] Schmidt, E. "Caring for Those Who Care".
[196] Krasny, E., and L. Perry. *Curating with Care*, 3.
[197] Ibid.

Krasny's argumentation that reproductive labour provided by curators correlates with the feminised and invisible domestic labour taking place in the private sphere.

The new interest in care within curation highlights the fact that care has been, and continues to be, systematically overlooked, marginalised, racialised and feminised, withheld, denied, or delegated.[198]

Sex work can be characterised by its repeated actions. Sessions with clients can follow a certain script or routine. Sex work also includes repetitive physical movements, similar to the repeated hand movements needed for needlework. The sex worker represented by the "Weatherbeaten" reproduction demonstrates the connection between domestic labour and sex work by likely not changing her work clothes before transitioning from a long day of parenting and housework into a night of sex work.[199] Similar to other forms of women's labour, sex work is done in private or secret, sometimes in domestic settings such as sex workers' homes, to avoid prosecution. However, laws in the UK, for example, prohibit a group of sex workers from living and working together, thus forcing them into isolation.[200]

The practice of quilt making as a form of remembrance and collaborative storytelling is embraced by marginalised groups such as indigenous communities and the LGBTQ+ community. This is a form of community art embraced and facilitated by caring curating. One famous example is the "AIDS Memorial Quilt", whose concept was first created by the *NAMES Foundation* in San Francisco in 1987. Due to a growing disconnect between generations and the fragility of the material of the quilt, the future preservation of the quilt and the stories it contains are not guaranteed.[201]

The Dutch version, which was inspired by the *US NAMES Project* quilt, also faced preservation issues. The Dutch quilt remained at a moderate size compared to its predecessor in the US, with only thirty quilt blocks. This is attributed to the smaller number of fatalities of HIV/AIDS. Of those affected, only a few took the chance to create a quilt panel in memory of their deceased loved one. There was not as pressing a need to publicly depict the scope of the disease as in the US. Until 2012, the Dutch AIDS Memorial Quilt was exhibited once a year on AIDS Memorial Day by the HIV Vereniging Nederland (HVN). When the organisation's main focus changed from memorialisation to advocacy and support for those living with HIV,

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[198] Ibid., 5.

[199] Diego, G., Christy, J., Dior, R., Rion, V., and Klugbauer, C. *With Legs Wide Open*, 19.

[200] Ashby, N. "Objects of Desire: Curating and Archiving Sex Work".

[201] Parry, M. S., and H. Schalkwijk. "Lost Objects and Missing Histories", 121.

the quilt needed a new home. Multiple institutions refused, stating that the work either lacked artistic merit or did not sufficiently represent Dutch nationality.[202]

These decisions demonstrate how rigid collection procedures are and how inappropriate they are for assessing the cultural relevance of remembering HIV/AIDS or the experiences of other marginalised groups. The shape the collective memory takes also influences its archival value. In this case, because quilts are often considered to be folk art, they are less desirable.[203] The thirty blocks were eventually divided up between multiple museums because the cost of caring for the entire quilt was thought to be too expensive, and space constraints made presentation difficult.

Additionally, all blocks have been digitised and can be viewed online via the *NAMED Project Nederland*. However, due to the fragility of the material and the challenges it causes in preservation, museums, not just in the Netherlands, but Australia, New Zealand, and the USA, restrict access to similar objects. This means the communities that created the object have to fight with the institution to use their own objects for educational or memorial purposes. The curators, academics and historians Manon Parry and Hugo Schalkwijk come to this regrettable conclusion:

"Ironically, the transformation of the quilt into a heritage object thus contributes to the forgetting of history - it is stored away until World AIDS Day and then exhibited as a memorial of the past."[204]

Parry and Schalkwijk demonstrate that, in regards to HIV/AIDS history, important artefacts have been lost or destroyed as a result of a lack of urgency toward the collecting and display of this group's history and material culture. Current collections fall short in capturing the variety of historical experiences and current difficulties.[205] The existing collection of artefacts in archives is insufficient to adequately depict the past, record its current conditions, and influence its effects in the future. This is also the case for sex workers. Though the fetishisation and curiosity of audiences could make it more enticing for museums to showcase sex work history, these efforts are limited to temporary exhibitions and do not change the underlying problem of exclusion from collections and archives.

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[202] Ibid., 120.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid., 121.
[205] Ibid., 113.

For groups that are commonly missing in museum collections and archives, such as LGBTQ+, disabled and sex worker communities, and are thus not used to seeing themselves represented, the notion of documenting their experience through collecting and exhibiting their material culture could feel foreign. When heritage institutions designated to capture lived experiences do not deem a group worth documenting, why should they feel compelled to do so themselves? As one of many underrepresented groups, sex workers have learned not to trust mainstream media or heritage institutions to represent their lived experiences authentically. Marginalised communities have to rely on their own capabilities and means to document and archive themselves. Parry and Schalkwijk, however, point out that:

> "Although we might assume that collecting the contemporary is significantly easier than locating historical objects from a distant past, unless collecting is being actively undertaken, people may not realize that the materials they are working with are historically significant and should be preserved."[206]

Furthermore, a lack of resources is a significant issue, especially in times of crisis. Being part of a marginalised group means being exposed to crisis on a regular basis. Creating arts or crafts can be expensive, resulting in a limited number of artworks to collect in the first place. Preserving the past takes a back seat when all resources need to be reallocated to cover basic needs that are not being met, such as healthcare or safety. It cannot be expected of marginalised communities to do it themselves in light of their struggle for survival and human rights. It is not the job of the marginalised groups to try and fix the systems of exclusion and silencing within heritage institutions, but a collective responsibility.

[206] Ibid., 120.

Conclusion

Caring curating is a holistic approach that influences all aspects of heritage institutions, from staff wages to the terminology employed in archival practices, as well as every decision made throughout the curatorial process. This approach encourages cultural workers to critically engage with the systems of exclusion and oppression that continue to harm the marginalised communities, which heritage institutions are mandated to represent. The care enacted by curators, originally reserved for the collections' objects, has extended to the communities the artefacts belong to and arguably back to the gaps within the collections, which need to be filled. In the absence of archival material and objects, commissioning and making new artworks is now part of the curator's job description.

If museums, such as queer museums, which are commonly created by and for the marginalised communities they represent, harness their power of knowledge production and cultural agency to inform public discourse, they can support marginalised groups in their ongoing struggle for human rights. Heritage Institutions, especially archives, must be made genuinely accessible. There is little value in acquiring artefacts from marginalised communities if those communities are unable to access them. When archives or museum collections, whether consciously or unconsciously, restrict access, they undermine the agency of marginalised groups over their representation and inclusion within heritage institutions.

Including the perspectives, histories, and artefacts of these communities within heritage institutions, and providing opportunities for them to author their own narratives, can yield both short- and long-term benefits for both the heritage institutions and the marginalised communities. The heritage institution's impact can shape contemporary political discourse, influencing law-making, validating the lived experiences of the marginalised groups, and strengthening community identity, all of which are essential for the preservation of the marginalised communities' culture and the protection of human rights.

However, it is more common for heritage institutions to use the symbolic power of care performatively. They do not take the necessary steps to dismantle the institutional misogyny, racism, ableism and homophobia within the organisation, which would require time, resources and the intent to foster relationships with the marginalised communities. It is all too common for institutions to deflect responsibility by citing financial constraints, relying instead on the charity, desperation, and gratitude of marginalised groups to be consulted. This strategy only reinforces the exploitative systems.

The burden of responsibility to counteract the consequences of the practice of care washing should not fall solely on the individual curator. The documentation and representation of entire demographics rest on the shoulders of passionate volunteers who have managed to gain access to museums or archives. Initiatives like the V&A LGBTQ Working Group, if left isolated from the heritage institutions' internal structure, while valuable, act merely as temporary band-aids on a deeper systemic wound.

Outsourcing the work to artists or external collaboration partners, such as activist groups or NGOs, does not fix the underlying power dynamics either. Yet the tasks of developing new protocols and policies focusing on care and pushing institutions to implement them meaningfully largely fall to artists and underpaid cultural workers, who feel responsible and are able to act.

Meaningful engagement with marginalised communities requires earning their trust, especially in light of historical exclusion and persecution. Moreover, members of the marginalised groups often cannot afford to contribute their time or expertise without fair compensation. Efforts to increase representation can unintentionally reproduce patterns of re-exploitation. This begs the question of how feasible the application of the caring curating approach is with the current financial situation of the cultural sector.

Community-led museums and archives, such as the Schwules Museum and the Objects of Desire archive, exemplify institutions that, by design, adopt a caring curating approach. Within these spaces, best practices for the care and meaningful involvement of marginalised communities are actively being developed and refined. The curating and archival process demonstrated by the SMU and used in the curatorial process of the exhibition "With Legs Wide Open - A Whore's Ride Through History" highlight that caring curating and archiving practices can be used successfully to provide agency to the queer and sex worker communities. The exhibition ensured that members of the marginalised group were actively involved in the design, interpretation, and presentation of their own narratives. The collaborative approach fosters the co-creation of narratives that is both respectful and relevant to the marginalised community, allowing for more authentic and meaningful representation. The process also emphasises the importance of accessibility and wellbeing by creating safe, inclusive spaces where community members can connect. The recognition of the deeper meanings held within objects supports a more ethical and sensitive mode of preservation and display. The exhibition showed how effective and valuable it is to work directly with marginalised communities. The production of art and reproductions is shown to

be most valuable when it involves the community directly, positioning their expertise and lived experiences as central to new knowledge production. Caring curating promotes inclusive narratives through the presentation of multiple perspectives, particularly those that have been historically marginalised or silenced. It required curators, who may or may not be members of marginalised groups themselves, to continuously evaluate the effects of their decisions on both their audience and collections.

Sex work, as a curatorial and research focus, offers valuable insight due to its numerous intersections with broader issues such as gender, sexuality, and labour rights. Its inclusion within museum contexts allows for critical engagement with overlapping systems of marginalisation and resistance. While the research offered meaningful insights into the curatorial practices used, gaining multiple perspectives from all curatorial team members could add further depth and nuance. Especially adding the perspective of the host institution, the SMU, could offer more practical insights in how heritage institutions can partake in caring curating.

The pursuit to define the approach of caring curating began relatively recently. It remains to be seen how the various emerging ideas and trials to apply this new perspective to archival and curatorial practices will develop and whether they will produce a successful solution. As it is a new approach, the long-term effects of utilising caring curating will have to be studied in the future.

Change must occur not only from the ground up, through marginalised groups persistently knocking on the doors of archives and attempting to gain a foothold within museums or archival spaces, but from the top down. Institutional archives and heritage organisations must reform their internal structures by revising policies related to staffing, funding distribution, and job security of cultural workers, including curators. Meaningful structural change is a gradual process, requiring sustained pressure both from within and outside of heritage institutions. In the meantime, it is essential to explore how best to equip marginalised communities with the tools and knowledge needed to care for and preserve their own histories and cultural narratives, using minimal resources and effort. The aim must be to care for marginalised communities by preparing them to be able to claim their rightful space on the heritage institution’s walls and shelves.

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