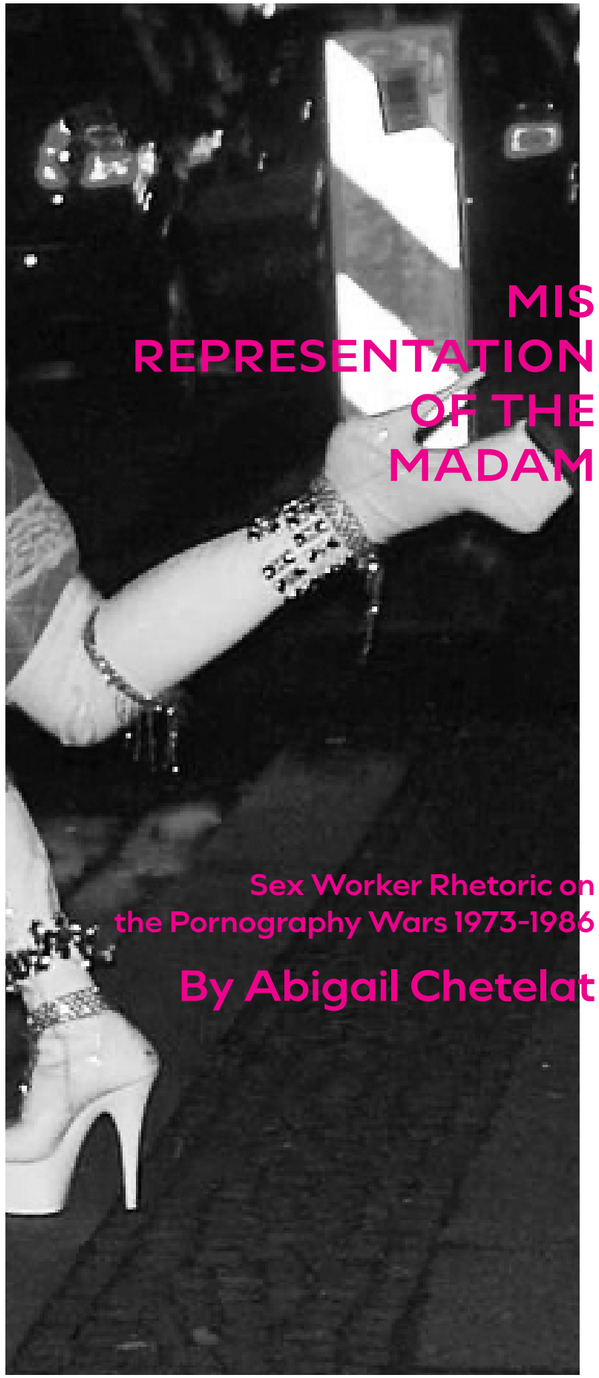

MISREPRESENTATION OF THE MADAM

Sex Worker Rhetoric on the Pornography Wars 1973-1986

By Abigail Chetelat

Pornographic films have existed since the early twentieth century. "Stag films" were usually very brief depictions of copulation secretly watched by underground groups, but the invention of the 16mm film changed everything. The 16mm film was cheaper and more accessible than the 35mm and led to amateur 1950 "beaver films" that depicted nude females licking their lips or grinding their pelvises on furniture but with no narrative behind them. During the 1960s there was a major shift in values between younger generations in the United States and their parents, causing a "moral anarchy" which was expressed through anti-war culture, the civil rights movement, the hippie free-love movement, and the questioning of authority among college age people.[1] With the emergence of the birth control pill in 1960 women were given control over their own fertility, allowing for women to be increasingly sexually active without the fear of pregnancy.[2] Production of pornographic magazines, films, and books began to increase as a result. In 1970 there were more than 100 sex shops, and topless[3] adult movie theaters dedicated to showing pornographic films began to sweep the nation, showing more hardcore films that were still missing plots but now had longer run times of around an hour on average and explicit depictions of sexual acts. In 1972, hardcore pornographic films hit the mainstream with the release of Gerard Damiano's *Deep Throat*, which depicts a sexually frustrated Linda Lovelace (Linda Boreman) visiting psychiatrist Dr. Young (Harry Reems) and learning that her clitoris is in her throat. This is the first example of a hardcore erotic film having any semblance of a plot, and it put pornographic theater into conversations around the American home. However, there was opposition brewing against these developments. As pornographic filmography grew as an industry, the fight against pornography was also on the rise from anti-pornography feminists, right wing organizations, the federal government, and urban city management.

While academics have examined the sex wars through the lens of feminism, conservative organizations, and government regulation, they haven't considered the perspectives of sex workers. This paper analyzes newsletters from prostitute-run organizations between 1973 and 1986 and exposes that although decriminalization and legalization groups had different goals for how prostitution affects women and how it should function in society, there was a common belief that the creation of pornography is a male dominated field which misrepresents the reality of prostitutes. A porno prostitute is a guide to every John's fantasy but hinders society from viewing sex workers as fully autonomous human beings. Her pleasure is derived from the man's pleasure, she has no family, she enjoys what she does but has an understanding that she is less than because of it, she operates in the shadows of the law, and every service is a display of how malleable she is to her client's needs. This paper argues that across different prostitute-run organizations there is a common theme presented in combating this stereotype, which lies in prostitute-made erotic films.

In 1968 President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration established the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography which was then released in 1970 by President Richard Nixon's administration to respond to the rise in erotic material made accessible to the American public, which stated that there was no correlation between consuming pornography and a decrease in moral character or an increase in crime.[4] This reflected the sexually liberated culture growing during the 1970s. However, in 1985 President Ronald Regan's administration voiced concern that there were connections between the organized crime industry and the pornography industry and created their own commission on pornography, the Meese Commission. At 1,960 pages the report contains a variety of evidence ranging from witness testimony, analysis of social science research on the topic, a history of the regulation of pornography, First Amendment considerations, examination of the production and distribution of pornography, sample forms used by the commission, approximately 2,700 titles of pornographic magazines and clinical descriptions of their contents.[5] None of the commissioners believed pornography was harmless before the process began, and more than half of the witnesses called were definitively anti-porn. All the Meese Commission findings culminated in the claim that there was direct evidence that proves explicit material leads to an increase in sexually violent crimes.[6] The results were immediately contested in

magazines and journals by social scientists cited within the commission who claimed that the commission misrepresented data collected in their studies.

One of the biggest oppositions to pornography and driving factors behind the Meese Commission was the anti-pornography feminist movement. Born out of grassroot feminist media reform organizations in the 1970s and 80s, such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), Women Against Violence in Pornography (WAVPM), and Women Against Pornography (WAP), whose arguments originated around the eradication of depictions of violence against women in all forms of media. As the feminist movement grew during the 1960s, feminists were regularly convening in their communities and discussing their roles within the sexual revolution. Common themes in women's experiences were that women had been given a more disadvantageous role in the sex revolution because now there was an expectation that the woman had to put out or be labeled a prude, and that societal problems of rape, incest, and battering had not been addressed in the movement at all. This began a movement conflating men with using rape and domestic violence as tools to keep women submissive, which led to feminists' attempts to identify the roots of this culture of violence against women. Originally feminists were concerned with the sexploitation of women in commercial ventures and the commodification of domestic abuse seen in advertisements such as the 1976 Rolling Stones advert that depicted a bruised and bound woman sitting above their new album with the caption, "I'm 'Black and Blue' from the Rolling Stones- and I love it." In 1975 feminists concerned with the roots of violence against women began to shift their focus towards explicit media after radical feminist Susan Brownmiller posed the theory that pornography and prostitution were leading sources of where young males are receiving the "need to commit rape" and be violent towards women.[7] WAP built their organization on this premise and organized demonstrations outside of adult theaters, organized letter writing campaigns, advocated for Times Square cleanups, and pushed for censorship laws concerning pornography. The belief was that in eradicating pornography, the influence to batter and oppress women would decrease and women would live in safer environments.

Pornography had long been a subject of opposition for religious and secular conservatives even before the sexual revolution occurred. Opposition stemmed from a place of concern about depictions of nonmarital sexuality, lust, and encouragement of masturbation and the effects these concepts would have on the traditional nuclear family. Encouraged by Reagan's election in 1980, conservative anti-pornography groups began to pop up such as Citizens for Decency Through the Law, the Religious Alliance Against Pornography, and Morality in Media. These organizations sought increased enforcement of obscenity laws and zoning statutes to drive sex shops out of business and to define pornography as a violation of sexual morality to decrease consumption of erotic materials.[8]

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Understanding the differing perspectives held by prostitutes on the sex wars requires an understanding of the overall goals of prostitute organizations. In the face of the growing sex industry, there was a push by conservative right movement, the feminist anti-pornography movement, political officials, and the local police force to "clean up the city" in various urban communities. Any woman found with condoms on her person would be arrested under suspicion of being a prostitute. "Pimp squads" would be sent out to entrap prostitutes by soliciting them and then arresting the sex worker, and in the case of an arrest, the only options were a $500 fine or incarceration.[9] Paying the fine was a vital and pressing matter in an industry that when working independently meant by client pay. Each day spent locked up was money prostitutes would be losing.

On top of facing legal obstacles from the police, officers were also known to follow a sex worker to her home, functioning also as her workplace in some cases, and make the neighbors aware of her occupation causing social ostracism and in many cases forcing sex workers to relocate.[10] While the police found themselves comfortable intruding upon a prostitute's work life, officers became scarce when sex workers were assaulted or murdered. Harassment was not taken seriously and often led to deadly consequences. From 1976 to 1983, David Rogers served as the Sheriff of Kern County, Virginia and developed a reputation for harassing prostitutes verbally and in some instances physically. Eventually he was convicted in 1988 on the charges of killing two sex workers aged twenty-one and fifteen.[11] In the case of murder, it was not unheard of for the culprit to work within the force, and even if they did not, the sentencing lengths were disproportionate when compared to other crimes committed by women. In 1976, nineteen-year-old Terry Moore and her seventeen-year cousin stole $5 from a cabbie. Terry found herself charged with fifteen years despite no previous record. Two years later Lawrence Singleton sexually assaulted a fifteen-year-old hitchhiker leaving her to bleed out in a ditch and received only fourteen years in prison.[12] Prostitutes were not viewed as people worth protecting by law enforcement. Their criminal status and low social status made prostitutes easy targets for crime and low priorities for justice. Under these conditions prostitute advocacy groups began to appear, one of which being COYOTE (Call Off Your Tired Old Ethics). Founded in 1973 by Margo St. James after police surveillance of her house led to her arrest, this organization aimed to provide employment, health, legal, and financial advice for prostitutes as well as advocate for the decriminalization of sex work. This organization was more radical in its views of sex work, arguing that prostitution was a "crimeless-crime" in which no one was physically harmed, and no property was lost or stolen, but which the government spent around $600,000 a year on in an effort to police morality. Legalization would not change the egregious amount spent or improve any of the dangers prostitutes faced but would instead create a system of government pimping. Rather than working

within feminist organizations that were rampant with savior complexes and the notion that the prostitute was the most oppressed woman because she provided sexual services to men, COYOTE held the position that the prostitute was the most liberated woman because she lived outside of the self-deception that most women find themselves in. Stemming from the Old Testament, women were programmed to be viewed in parts of the female body in the eyes of men, and so when a woman has any form of relationship with a man, she must always question the real drive behind his attentions whereas in prostitution there is a clear understanding of a transactional exchange of funds and sexual time and energy.

While offering critiques of the porno prostitute as being used as an accessory to men in films, COYOTE also offers the perspective that when prostitutes are consulted in the creation of movies they can serve to reflect a more accurate and humanized sex worker. Margo St. James engaged in this idea with the 1975 short film *Hookers: An Inside Look at COYOTE: A Loose Woman's Organization* in which she and other women collaborated with George Paul Csicsery to advocate for the decriminalization of prostitution and allow for the legal and social trials that prostitutes face to be illuminated. *Hookers* depicted prostitutes facing sexual harassment and racial discrimination from hotels, but it also allowed for people to see moments of real fun and joy in events such as the 1974 Halloween Hookers Ball. The ball was a costume party open to the public held just before Halloween which served to destigmatize prostitutes and raise proceeds for COYOTE. The event "belongs to the women themselves."[13] While there is no direct mention of the sex wars or either of the Presidential Commissions on obscenity, COYOTE was a proponent of all forms of sex work, including pornography, but believed there was a more effective and informative use of adult films than the typical phallocentric depictions of sex. Tails from PUMA (Prostitutes Union of Massachusetts) was another decriminalization organization that argued media reflections of sex workers outside of pornography was the catalyst for anti-prostitution laws. In a 1976 edition of the organization's newsletter, soap opera *Days of Our Lives* was credited with depicting prostitutes in a sensationalist light that made the public perceive sex workers as immoral.[14] The argument does, however, fall under the category of prostitutes advocating for better uses of sexual media, explicit or implicit.

A more vocal organization in respect to the sex wars is Oldest Profession Times (OPT). In an article about a 1987 segment on prostitution on *The Phil Donahue Show*, OPT follows the trend of advocating for prostitute-made pornographic films by shining a small spotlight on the mention of the 1986 film *Working Girls* by feminist filmmaker Lizzie Borden.[15] In this film the viewer follows Molly, a lesbian prostitute going throughout a tedious shift as an escort. Throughout her day she faces a sort of monotony of clients and coworkers coming and going, finally coming to a head when she quits after being bullied by her boss into taking a second shift, returning at the end to her girlfriend at home. If the context of sex was removed from the film, this scenario could be applied to almost every career, which is what makes the impact of this film so remarkable. Although Borden had not revealed it at the time, she engaged in sex work in the past which allowed her to make a film that de-sensationalized sex workers and allowed the audience to engage with the characters on a level most soft-core films did not attempt to provide. The sex worker on film was a wage-earning individual who loved her job in the way many people love their occupation, as a means to an end, but she had a life outside of sex work. The porno prostitute was given more dimensions and respect on the screen than most prostitutes on the street.

Oldest Profession Times also reported on the ACLU's battle against the Meese Commission's attempts at censorship of explicit material. Legislative counsel Barry Lynn's commentary of the censorship debate was cited, stating that the Meese Commission was deliberately tasked to reach the conclusions that consuming pornography caused people to be sexually violent. "Not a single Commissioner was selected who had previously found pornography to be harmless. Of the witnesses 106 out of 208 were determinately anti-porn, only 48 were questioning the set position."[16] Unlike COYOTE's focus on the effects of pornography, OPT's coverage of the sex wars serves to bring awareness of the legal threats to the production, distribution, and consumption of porn. As seen in Lynn's statement, there were holes in the argument against pornography, including misuse of data which this organization sought to expose. The Meese Commission maintained the claim that there was a "casual relationship" between sexually explicit material and violence against women, and yet the data gathered by several social scientists at the time found that it was specifically sexually *violent* material that encouraged harm to women.[17] OPT referenced a direct statement to the commission from social scientist Donnerstein about the lack of evidence supporting the correlation of pornography and rape and yet, "The Commission continued to cite Donnerstein's studies as scientific evidence of just exactly what had testified was not the fact." Original studies completed by the commission itself were found by the ACLU and OPT to have been changed and contorted to fit the conclusions they sought. A study of 1986 men's magazines for "force, violence, and weapons" found that only 0.6% reflected those characteristics, and so the commission used a Canadian study that had found 10%.

OPT conducted their own studies on the matter of pornography, with a focus on the economic impact. In a 1986 issue of their newsletter there was a published study of the economic results of the closing of sex shops.[18] Sex shops were to be defined as retailers that sell erotic materials such as toys, pornography, or lingerie as well as massage parlors, peep show houses, and playhouses. The study

is based on a 1983 Sacramento Union article that listed arrests in the area at 23 different sex shops that had closed within the previous two years. Fifteen of the stores remained vacant, one had been demolished, six had been replaced with non-sexual commercial shops, and one had been turned into a residential living space. Anti-sex shop arguments in the past had centered around the demoralization of the neighboring businesses causing a decline in money to all retail shops in the area, and that by removing the sex shops businesses would see an increase in sales. However, Oldest Profession Times found that there was no revitalization of neighborhoods, only an increase in the number of vacant spaces where the shops used to be. The vacancies cost around $1695 to $1895 in rent that was paid by sex shops, as well as around $200 to $300 spent in the surrounding area by the contractors working in the shops, and an indeterminate amount of money spent by "Johns" in neighboring businesses. OPT presented information proving sex sells, which made it difficult for their opposition to challenge. It also revealed that although the complaints against prostitution and pornography were endless, when given the opportunity to make any replacement for them monetarily, there were no notable attempts.

While Oldest Profession Times was vocal against the Meese Commission and legislation surrounding sex work and sexual content, there were organizations that were more focused on other political movements at the time. The Hookers Hookup was another prostitute-run organization that advocated for decriminalization and presented itself as a professional trade journal. In a 1980 issue of the journal there was an article surrounding a call by feminists for the eradication of sex-based businesses in Times Square.[19] The article exposes the hypocrisy of the anti-pornography feminist movement, more specifically Women Against Pornography (WAP). The Hookers Hookup began by reminding readers that only four years before, during the 1976 Democratic Convention, there had been an anti-loitering law passed that allowed for sweep arrests of prostitutes in the Times Square area and feminists had rallied alongside sex workers in a march to "take back the night." During the time of the 1980 clean-up most of the feminists advocating for the arrests of prostitutes and closing of sex shops were the same feminists that stood with them less than five years before. Ties between WAP and right-wing organizations are drawn throughout the article. Hookers Hookup argued that just by joining the fight against "immorality" in Times Square WAP was fighting for the economic oppression of people of color who made up a significant percentage of the workforce in the area, and thus they were aligned with the political agenda of right-wing organizations as a whole. There were explicit ties as well seen in the exchange of literature and petitions between WAP and Morality in Media, a well-known conservative anti-pornography organization with the conception that pornography's ideology is sex anywhere, anytime, with anyone of any gender. Hooker's Hookup placed this connection deliberately to beg the question of whether WAP held those same conceptions.

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Further data gathered in the Hookers Hookup article found that while WAP argued a sort of moral superiority over the "most oppressed women" their morals did not extend to their pocketbooks. Cleanup of Times Square would only have economic benefits for business owners, and so anti-pornography feminists' support was already skewed in the direction of economic opportunity and not morality. The office space they operated from was given to WAP by the Midtown Enforcement Agency, a branch of the police department, for free. WAP was against law enforcement until it benefited their cause. Financial aid not only came from the local police force but also from businesses in the area, "League of NY Theaters Owners and Producers" and "New York Off Track Betting," displaying once again that economic gain was the ultimate goal. Hookers Hookup was not specifically in defense of pornography but did contribute to tearing holes in one of the largest opposition forces explicit media faced at the time.

While feminist organizations' efforts were at times not cognizant of the perspectives and goals of sex workers, there were legitimate concerns over the safety of prostitutes. There were wide ranging accounts of customers becoming violent and assaulting sex workers, and in some cases, there were individuals who would actively seek out prostitutes to abuse. In 1977 Officer Craig Piro tried to hire twenty-four-year-old epileptic sex worker, Janet Phillips, but having heard about a local rapist impersonating law enforcement, Phillips attempted to run away. Phillips was caught and beaten by the officer to the point where she could no longer see out of her left eye.[20] Phillips had no protection from illegitimate or legitimate law enforcement. Sex workers were also regularly subjected to invasive strip searches by police.

Prostitute-run organizations with a platform built on the decriminalization of sex work all found different manners in which to support the pornography industry. Whether it was through creation of their own films, exposing the gaps in arguments for legislation, or exposing holes in rival movements, the end goal of preserving uncensored media and sex workers' rights were the same.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, legalization-based prostitute organizations viewed pornography under the lens of exploitation of women and a beacon of misinformation. One such organization was Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt (WHISPER), an organization that was born out of women who were dedicated to ending prostitution and sex trafficking. In a 1986 release of the organization's newsletter, WHISPER covered the feminist group National Organization of Women's hearing on pornography.[21] The hearings were made up of testimony from both former and current prostitutes who had been harmed in their work. The conclusions gathered from the hearings stated that prostitution was victimizing, and that prostitution and pornography were intertwined with the exploitation of women.

Despite establishing pornography as a contributor to the use and view of women as objects, in a 1987 newslet-

ter, WHISPER reviewed the movie *Mona Lisa* (1987) which centers around a man named George and his dive into the world of prostitution through his work as a pimp.[22] The movie began with violent and clearly painful anal fisting of a sex worker, followed by the removal of a sterile glove which reinforces the idea that prostitution encourages the exploitation of women and profits. Pornography functioned the same way and yet had the luxury of condemning it as wrong. WHISPER went on to argue, like all previously mentioned organizations, that non-prostitute made films were complicit in the misrepresentation of prostitutes. The review went on to say that if the film had been made by a sex worker it would have had a prostitute with emotions, interests, hobbies, and ties to the outside world. Within *Mona Lisa* the mob boss who runs the prostitution ring does so under the business of a porno shop. The review states that in their movie there would be depictions of how women use pornography as guides to what they should emulate physically. The film reveals at the end that the main prostitute "Mona Lisa" had a mission the entire storyline to find a teenager who was her wife-in-law, referring to a lower ranking prostitute in a ring, before a man kills her but Mona ends up shooting the potential attacker and in the confusion the girl she was aiming to protect. WHISPER states that if prostitutes had made this film there would have been no murder, because women do not possess the "craving for death that men have."[23] Instead, a film made by prostitutes would focus on the love between the two women, and the way the relationship between the sex workers would allow for survival.

Ultimately the rhetoric displayed by sex workers about pornography did not destigmatize sex workers to the public, nor did it cause a shift in the production of pornography. Sex workers continued to receive the same treatment socially and legally throughout the 70s until the HIV-AIDS crisis during the 1980s-90s in which prostitutes took the global stage as a disproportionately affected group. Sex workers organizations in the west began to shift their focus towards preventing sexually transmitted diseases and protecting the health of prostitutes in the global south by distributing condoms to prostitutes in third world countries. These efforts put sex workers on the global map and changed the vocabulary of international actors from using the term "prostitute" to "sex-worker" which established sex workers as human beings doing labor and deserving of rights.[24] Legally prostitutes' rights had no major improvements in the years following the sex wars and in some cases the treatment became worse. In 1986 Pasadena Superior Court Judge Gilbert C. Alston ruled that prostitutes could not be the victim of rape.[25] Pornography continued as an industry, although the number of adult movie theaters dropped. VHS tapes became popularized in the 1980s and 90s.

During the 1970s the sex wars exposed that whether the perspective came from organizations that regarded sex work as harmful or liberating, pornography was a sliver of common ground. Although decriminalization driven organizations held the belief that porn stars can make films with full consent, and abolishment driven organizations held the belief that pornography cannot be made without exploiting women. There was an understanding that prostitution in the media, explicit or not, was not reflective of who sex workers were as individuals and contributed to the narrative that prostitutes were just oppressed bodies for men's pleasure. Pornography made by prostitutes could remedy this, allowing for a forum of sex worker self-expression and humanization that in turn advocates for prostitute rights.

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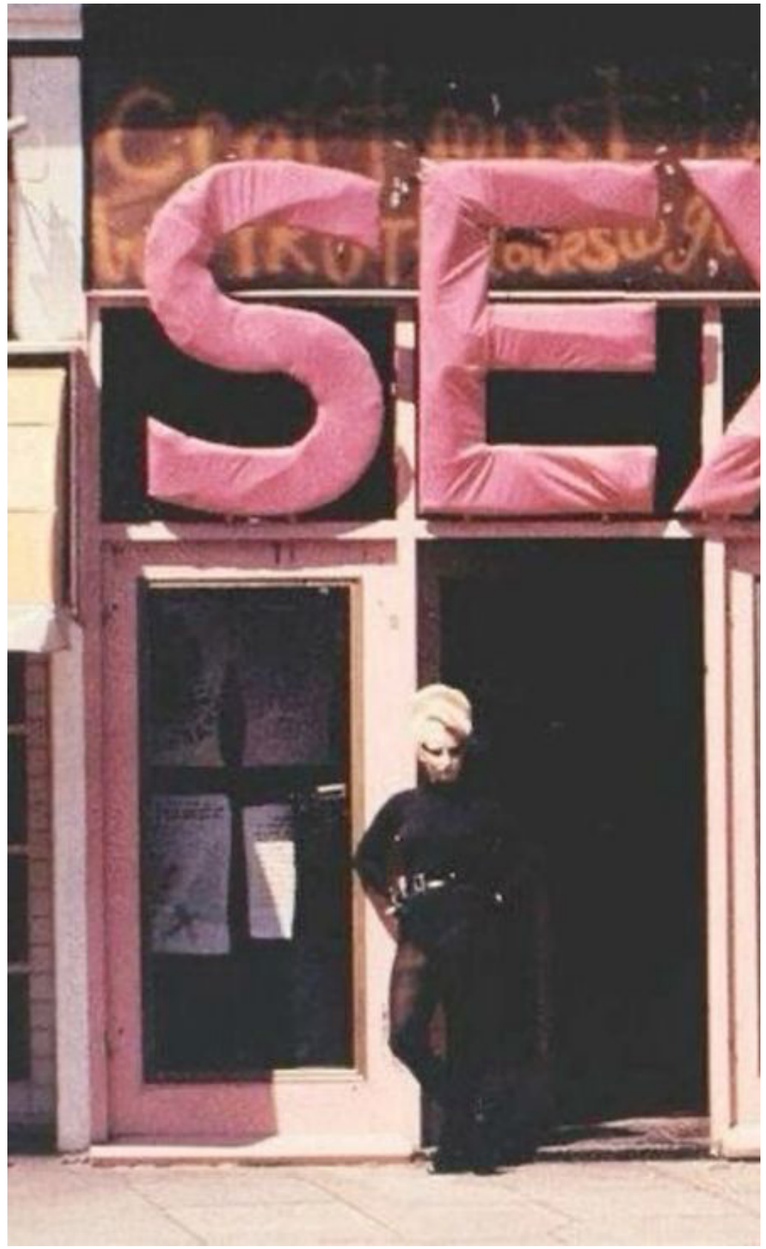

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