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As told to Leah Mandel, 3038 words.

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On making art through subversion

Artist and sex worker Lindsay Dye on subverting sexist power dynamics, fetishism as performance art, and the origins of her "cake sitting" performances.

When did you know you wanted to make art, and be a cam girl?

I've made art since I was a child. I remember, at 10 years old, I watched the Jean-Michel Basquiat movie and was like, "I wanna move to New York and be an artist. That's my plan." I studied advertising during undergrad in Florida but found it soul sucking, so I switched to photography and art history. Immediately after, I applied for an internship at Aperture and moved to New York for that. Then I studied photo at Pratt for grad school. Photography is still my first love, that's where my technical skills are. I'm not trained in performance art or painting. But as much as I wanted to be an artist when I was 10, I also knew I wanted to be a stripper. And from 13 to 16 I spent my time in strip clubs—viewing, not stripping. So this was always a part of my life and goals.



I learned performance art through sex work. And the sex work came in grad school, where my work was about cam girls and camming. I did not want to make their work mine unless I was participating in the community. So that became my full-time job, and it's still my full-time job now. I like things to be circular. If I'm gonna have this job, I want it to feed my art, and I want my art to feed the job. Otherwise it doesn't make sense to me.

Many people with creative practices support themselves with a day job. But the way you support yourself is also where you get material for your work. Do you feel like you're making art when you're working, or is it more that the two are intertwined?

When I'm working, I'm gathering material for what will come later. I don't consider my everyday cam performances performance art—that's a job. I'm learning from different pockets, things I can pull from. Like the cake sitting, that whole world. It's fetishism, and I wanted it to be regarded as art, something uplifted. Subversion has always been the way to make the art work. It needs to be flipped one or two times, at least two places removed from its origin. The flipping of the environment made the cake sitting something different. And by adding the singing, there's a non-sexual element that confuses the audience: "Do I react to the sad love song, or do I react to her action of destroying the cake that we all have a connection to?" I like this duality, the conflicting emotion.



If I stop the job, it's almost like I'm not making art. I've been thinking a lot about the word "job." I think "artist" and "sex worker" mingle under the same umbrella of "get a real job." Have you seen the shirts I made? There's the "cam girl resume" one, and now I have the "cake sitting resume." I called them "resumes" because they include a bunch of different sites that you can work on. And with the cake sitting, it includes all the brands you could use.

Everyone talks about sex work as having a gap in your resume. Sex work isn't part of what society deems as "work." I very much disagree and will prove you wrong with the amount that I work. Self-employed people work double time to make sure they're making their money. I don't have anyone telling me to show up. I don't have anyone telling me I'm doing a good job. I am extra hard on myself, and work 80 hours a week. I am proving to the world that this is a job.

How do you choose the songs you sing?

I've used R. Kelly as a symbol in my artwork since I started making art, because he was my idol as a child. I knew he wanted younger girls. I knew he was a pedophile. But because he liked younger girls and I was the younger girl, I wanted that. I've used his music to go back to that confusion of childhood sexuality to adult sexuality. Where is the line drawn?

When I was doing this two years ago, people were less informed. If I did a performance like that now, I think it would be received totally differently. People have said things about past performances. Like, "You know he's a pedophile, right?" I do know. I'm using that as a symbol for how I experienced sexuality as a child, and how I'm rectifying, or dealing with that, as an adult. There's a power dynamic between me and the cake. I have agency in the situation: I'm crushing an object, I have control. I see the cake sitting as power. I'm the dominant one. But also, I'm singing this song that is almost contradicting what I'm physically doing.

When a performance is effective, what makes it work?

I had one performance where I was like, "This is it. I can stop now because that was perfect." That had to do with the way I performed, but also the audience's reaction. There were people crying in the audience when I was finished. That's what I want. I don't see it as sensational, I see it as emotional. The song was "Putting The Dog to Sleep" by The Antlers. It was a very tender, soft performance. Now, I roll around in cake and cover my whole body. But this was just a few movements and smears. All the symbols worked without having to over-exaggerate or feel like novelty.



How did you learn camming?

Now, you can go on YouTube and girls will have videos: "Here's 10 steps to be the best cam girl you can be." But when I started, they didn't. I've been doing it for six-and-a-half years now. I thought it was a scam—I signed up for it, but I didn't know if it was going to work, or if I'd get paid. I put in all my banking information, they have your social security number, they have your ID to make sure you're 18.

The first time I did it, I pretended I didn't have audio because I didn't want to speak out loud. I was scared. I just typed to everyone. And then there was a person in the chat room named Coach Dom, and he was like, "I'm your cam coach." The site didn't send him there, but this person wanted to help me become a better cam girl. I'm sure they got off on helping me, but they still helped me.

There are things I like and things I don't like. Big money is made through making content, producing videos, and selling them while you're online. When you're offline, you can have a store open and sell videos all the time. That's not something I wanted to do. I just wanted to be in a chat room. I wanted to perform live. My income comes from streaming live, not from selling content. You're there for my live stream and that's it. It hurts my income, but there's no way I could make someone a custom video in two days for 50 bucks and it be the caliber that I expect it to be. I find my enjoyment is live and direct connection.

It's interesting, because the live camming is similar to your art performances, in its temporality.

I've thought about this, too. What's the difference between the performance in the chat room and the performance IRL? I purposely do not face the audience in my live performance for many reasons—I think that conceptually makes sense, because I can't see my audience in the chat room. I know I can give a great performance with my back turned to them, and that's also my perception in the chat room. I can't see them.



People will not engage with me IRL the way they engage online. In my chat room, people will tell me the best things and the worst things and everything in between. In real life, maybe one person comes up to me and wants to talk about it. There's a freedom to be inquisitive online.

Your work also reminds me of Bread Face.

I've heard that, too. I was writing a piece last night about the history of sploshing, and I was thinking about women and food. There's also Stephanie Sarley who works with fruit, fingering fruit and stuff like that. Our connection to food I feel is really strong. And I was thinking about sex and food. There's a concrete way, like having sex with a banana, but then there's an abstract way. Like sploshing, and cake sitting, and crushing. I was thinking about the lineage of sploshing. In Medieval Europe, people were shunned or locked up and people threw rotten food at them. Then we can move to a dunk tank, or wet t-shirt contest, that's a form of it. Or even on Nickelodeon, someone being slimed for not winning. There's humiliation built into those things. It exists in so many different ways.

How has SESTA/FOSTA affected your job?

It affects me in a bunch of different ways. Anyone who's messaging you on the camming site cannot ask you to meet. There are key words that get picked up by a bot that will warn your clients. The other thing is raffling. Raffling was a huge part of making money on the site. You'd have a raffle for a couple weeks or a month, where people bought tickets to be a part of a pot where you pick to meet someone—not even necessarily to have sex with them, or to provide any service, just a meeting. You're not allowed to do that anymore. It's the same on Seeking Arrangement, which I use for escorting. Seeking Arrangement even changed its name—it's now just called Seeking, and they're advertising it as an upscale dating site. It says very clearly, "If you are an escort, do not use this site." But the site is used by sugar babies and escorts.



It's so dystopian. And Instagram and Tumblr cracking down, too. Has your account ever been deleted?

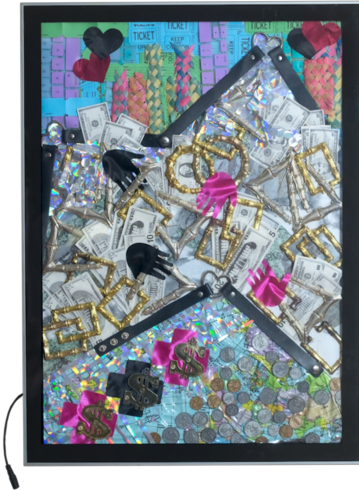
My account was deleted, but I know the person who reported me—a woman who told me I ruined her birthday because she saw that I sat on cakes. It turned into a horrible feud. But I got it back. There's actually nothing against the guidelines on my account.

I have all of my cake sitting performance documentation on YouTube, though, and many of them have been taken down. YouTube has sent me letters saying they do not allow fetish content. I went back to them saying, "This isn't fetish content, this is the documentation of an art performance." I've gotten some of my videos back up because of that. It's almost all in the phrasing. Not even the actual image. Instead of tagging something as "fetish," I'll tag it as "performance art" and it might not get deleted. It's all in perception. Even with my shirts, I'm having trouble printing the cake sitting ones. Sometimes they go through, and sometimes they'll say, "The content isn't appropriate." It's just based on whoever's working at the time at the company I'm using to print the shirts, or on Instagram, or YouTube. It's that one person making a decision to deem it inappropriate or not.

It's wild. It makes me think of the obscenity trials with cartoonists in the '70s. But where that was the government deciding what is art, what is worthy of being consumed, now it's also these tech companies. And it's all concentrated into the hands of these few corporations.

With the cam sites, I think they're able to keep operating because they advertise it as performance, and no relation to sex work. When you sign on, it has this quick thing that says something like, "Here you'll find the best artists and performers of our time." It doesn't say, "Here you'll find the biggest titties and the best dick suckers of our time." It's all in disguise, really. So it can keep existing.

Porn sites—the bad ones like PornHub and X Videos—are able to keep operating because one, they're not based in the United States. And two, they're multi-billion dollar companies owned by like, two men. They just seem untouchable. And I'm sure they fraternize with other billionaires, like Trump. It scares me for the smaller sites that do have the potential to be shut down.



PornHub's content is also 95% stolen. The reason it's even able to operate is because people upload videos that don't belong to them. That's the most infuriating part of it. Most of the porn that I see out there, I don't think that person knows it's there. That's not right. That's not how a porn site should operate. It should be commission-based. All the performers that are in the videos should know it's there, and should be getting a cut. But it is that way because it's the way we regard porn. We do not regard porn with respect. It's all about shame. So why would we [regulate] a porn site if we don't care about the people who are on it? Which is crazy, because we *should* care about the people who are on it, because they make us feel good! It's disregarding something that's a very important part of life. I blame our societal education about sex to begin with.

It's a drag that in 2019 there is still so much shame around sex.

I've been labeled an "oversharer," but that's where the problem is. That people don't share enough. And then they think street harassment is okay, or assault is okay, or a sexual experience they had was okay. It's because we're not talking enough. I was thinking about having sex with my boyfriend when I was a teen. I didn't know I could have an orgasm. I was there to please him. That fucks with me, because I feel like I carry that with me through so much of my life: "I'm here to please men." No! We are all capable of the same amount of pleasure. Why aren't we told that?

The reason camming feels good is because it's mutual. I'm deciding to be there as much as they are. I'm not gonna do anything I don't wanna do. It's a level playing field. If anything, I'm the boss, because they're in *my* room, they're in *my* space. So, in terms of power dynamics, I almost feel like I'm getting a little back of what I've lost.

Tell me about the last sentence of your piece for Office magazine: "I'm an artist, my work is sex, this is my cake period." Will you have another period?

It's a chapter. I think about Picasso's Blue Period, and then I look at artists like Sophie Calle or Marina Abramović. You can have an art piece last for years, or practice it intermittently, but it has been just as emotionally and physically draining. The cake sittings are not as potent to me as they once were. It had its peak, and I want it to end on a full note. I want it to evolve into something else. I've already started to move on. I have a project coming out with a photographer, and I'll be making sculptures about three archetypal women who are cake sitters.

I am so thankful it had a run. Sure, I'd love to get a tour bus and go across the country. But I've been doing this by myself. I bake the cakes, I do the wardrobe, makeup, hair, and singing. Making sure everything fits together in that moment. I'm anxious like a month before the event, wanting to make sure it's this perfect experience for people.

The cakes are beautiful. And baking them yourself adds a whole other layer—no pun intended. You made it, and you destroy it.

I like the circularity of birthing the thing that I am destroying. It feels good. Some might ask: "How do you maximize this? How do you keep this forever?" And that's where I think sculpture will come in. First, they were going to be replicas of the cakes that I've made. But, no. I'm going to make the *smashed* cake. I'm going to make the aftermath. I don't know how that's going to come to fruition yet, but I'm excited for a piece of cake art that will last longer than the performance.



Lindsay Dye Recommends

- No one can shame you if you're not ashamed.
- Go to Tootsie's Strip Club in Miami, FL. It's the biggest strip club in America in a defunct Costco.
- Persistence is everything.
- Do not be scared to lose a relationship, lovers, friends, or family. Your life is about your power and agency, not succumbing to others' thoughts or visions of who you are or what you should be. How could someone else know you better than you know yourself? Know yourself.
- Be willing to un-learn everything you've been taught.
- Do not become entrenched in one point of view; consume everything and everyone.
- Go lay down in the Dream House every so often for an hour or so. It's a vibrating meditation room, sound and light installation [that's been] in an old apartment in Tribeca for over 25 years. 275 Church St, they'll buzz you up.
- Take a steaming hot bath and then a cold plunge. To find relief from anxiety or stress, shock your body.
- Eat, or be eaten
- Sit, or be sat on

Name


Lindsay Dye

Vocation

Artist, performer, cam girl

Fact

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