

# On setting clear boundaries in what you make



Artist and writer Sophia Giovannitti discusses asserting what you want, learning as you go along, and giving primacy to the work itself.

November 30, 2021 -

As told to Shy Watson, 2484 words.

Tags: Writing, Art, Performance, Money, Process, Income, First attempts, Sex.

**What was the most surprising thing you learned during your six week performance work, Untitled (Incall)? To quote the gallery's statement, you "turned half of the gallery into an incall, a space of transaction of services between the artist and the visitor."**

I thought that I had made what I was available for explicit—being very literal and clear—but a lot of people still approached me with ambiguity and hesitation. I felt like I had a lot of interactions where people's desires would go by unsaid and unmet. It was surprising to me how hesitant people were to say what they really wanted, even while given every opportunity.

It made me think that impediments to asserting what you want are so strong and also deeply internalized. I feel there are a lot of barriers in place to prevent people from speaking openly about their desires if they feel ashamed or haven't been given the opportunity. I thought I was being clear about what people could say, like "I want this specific thing from you," or "I want to fuck you," or "I want you to answer these questions for me." "And this is what I can offer you in return," whether it's money or trade or whatever. And it just seemed really hard for people to do that. Maybe I wasn't making it as clear as I thought.

**I read that you changed the monetary terms after someone who didn't want to pay you attempted to see you for free. You set the boundary: "This is work. And if this is a space of work, I am going to charge." After realizing what you just shared, are you thinking about changing anything with how people ask for what they want or giving them any specific guidelines?**

For the next version of this piece, which I'm staging at Duplex this winter, I want to create a much more specific choreography. Partly because I think that will also help the piece be more legible as performance in art spaces if it takes after a more traditional, instructional model, like having a physicalization of what's happening, a card that says, "Here's the rules of engagement: Number one, enter the space. Number two, pay X amount of money Number three, state three things that you want." Or something like that. I'm still working on it.

I'd like to prevent exchanges where the guidelines aren't clear and people are reticent to say what they want. Another thing that still surprises me is realizing I'm not good at setting boundaries in the moment. I'm sort of like, "Okay, I'll just get through whatever's happening and go with it." And then after the fact I'm like, why didn't I just say, "If you're not going to pay me, you can't talk to me about that," or something?

A lot of that was happening at Recess [the gallery where "Untitled (Incall)" took place]. I didn't assert certain structures or boundaries in person and then people went with that and felt they could ask invasive questions or expect certain things, certain types of intimacy, even emotional.

I want to put up a physical paywall to begin this sort of "process of engagement" and then have everything thereafter be bespoke in terms of cost, but have there be specific steps that people engage in that are even just, "You have to answer these certain questions," and force the interaction more than just letting it play out. I also want to put in places for me to decide, to think about it beforehand. If somebody wants to ask me about something that I don't want to talk about, these are the conditions under which I would talk about it. And these are the conditions under which I wouldn't. Or, if someone wants to do X, then these are the conditions under which I would, or wouldn't. I want it to be less free form. I'm most interested in enacting the reality that what a lot of people want from artists is not to collect their work, necessarily, but their self, particularly their erotic self.

Because I was doing this for the first time at Recess, I had this feeling of not wanting to alienate people and wanting to just see what would happen. Now that I've had that experience, I don't need to have it again. If I put certain structures in place and people don't want to engage with those structures, that's fine with me. That would be just as interesting as if they did engage.

**Half of the gallery was a library, the Erotic Labor Reading Room, that you curated. What titles did you choose for it and what were their significance?**

I chose a lot of my favorite writing around erotic labor and sex work. Much of it is not in book form, or is more online. The website [Tits and Sass](#) has an amazing trove of sex worker writing. So I also printed out some of that stuff. I had a copy of *Playing the Whore*, the Melissa Gira Grant book. It's a primer on what she calls the "prostitute imaginary," which is a genius way of framing what people think about when they think about sex work and criminalization. I had all of Charlotte Shane's books. I had [Samuel Delaney's](#) *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, which is more about public sex and gentrification. *The Black Body in Ecstasy* by Jennifer C. Nash. *Close to the Knives* by David Wojnarowicz.

I had one of my favorite pieces that I've read in the last few years on sex work, which is by the Clandestine Whores Network from the first issue of *Pinko*. It's sort of a manifesto called "Beneath Everything." It's about this beautiful crime utopia taking place in five years. It's basically about hookers not relinquishing their criminal potential, and being and forming bonds with other criminals. I had a lot more, too.

**The concept behind "Beneath Everything" brings to mind the harm reduction workshops that you facilitated during your duration at Recess and the kits you provided for drug-using sex workers, which leads me to wonder, what does community mean for you?**

Thanks for asking that. I feel like a huge problem today is that people constantly invoke the word "community" and don't think or talk about what it means. It's so interesting to me when people will be like, "Oh, because you're part of the sex worker community." Like, I don't even know what community they're talking about. I don't think of myself as part of any particular community other than just the people that I love and are close to and spend time with. Those people don't necessarily have any particular labor position or identity signifiers in common other than maybe a certain politics.

But I do feel allegiance to people in New York who sell sex and do drugs. And, if you want to talk about that as a certain community, just for the sake of conversation, I definitely feel an allegiance to those people and a desire to help keep certain people safe or make certain people feel welcome in different spaces.

At Recess and just in general, that's been really important for me, for people to feel comfortable coming there who aren't even sex workers, but also maybe aren't super professionalized sex workers, or don't even have a particular feeling around selling sex but maybe have some other kind of material need, like for narcotics, condoms, lube, or self defense stuff, or whatever. I just really didn't want there to be any prerequisite for coming to the reading room. I think a lot that comes from me often feeling disillusioned and alienated when expecting to find community in certain spaces and then being like, "Oh yeah, just because me and this person maybe do the same job or have been at the same event or whatever doesn't mean we have really anything common in terms of what we actually think or feel." That's fine, but then another way to bring people together is to offer materials that they need.

**Aside from money, what are the rewards of your creative practice?**

Most of the creative work I do is the result of stuff I just think about about all the time on my own. So, making, doing, and then sharing that creative work is a way to push my thinking around it and to open up new ways of thinking. I'll think a whole thing around what transaction means or around people's desire for transactional intimacy or whatever. And then actually putting that into practice and people being willing to engage with it in different contexts is really surprising. It can be disturbing, intriguing, hot, boring, whatever. It keeps ideas regenerating and it keeps things from getting boring or stagnant or on a loop in my head. I think a lot of creative work to me just feels like externalizing stuff that is caught in a web in my brain. And then making room for more spiders to crawl.

**As far as your creative work is concerned, how do you define success and how do you define failure?**

Institutional success and failure is definitely important to me in that it affects me emotionally and financially. I'm not going to say that's not important. But, in a deeper way, something feels successful to me when it continues to feel alive and interesting and generative, intellectually stimulating. I'm still grappling with whether or not it's important to me how other people engage with my work or if that's just kind of none of my business. But with failure, the deeper I go into the art world, certain stakes feel higher in terms of certain successes that can feel like failures by being sublimated into various mainstream platforms that are always absorbing things on the margins, being kind of aligned with those things or accepted and then used by them. I feel afraid that ultimately that would feel like a certain type of failure, failing myself or failing someone whose opinion I respect. If I did something and then was like, "Wow, I really don't like that I did that."

**You're finalizing your book, *Working Girl*. It's out on Verso in 2023. What aspect of it are you most excited about?**

I'm excited to see how it changes. It's still in the editorial process for sure, so I think it will change a lot. I also just feel really lucky and excited to share something that I think about. Like, "Wow, the thing that I probably spent most of my adult life thinking about is sex, art, and work. So it's cool that I get to write about this and write in a long form way." The book engages with contradictory things and feelings in a way that maybe a shorter form essay couldn't. It's the first time I've written something so long like that.

I feel really excited about being able to share that. I feel excited to see how people will respond to it, particularly the anarchist/anti-work sentiment that it's coming from. I'm curious if that will resonate with people or not. I'm honestly also curious if by the time it comes out, I'll think totally differently about it. It feels a distillation of a certain moment in time around my thinking, which is cool.

**I was curious how you arrived at the title for your short film, "In Heaven: An Alternate Reality Game."**

It came out of thinking and research that I was doing for the book around artists who have engaged with various forms of sex work or who made really sexualized art. I was reading about Jeff Koons' and Illona Staller's "Made in Heaven" series and thinking about how I read a lot of interviews that he gave at the time about this pornographic work he made with his wife, and then all the reviews and stuff were like "Is this art or is this pornography?" It was scandalous. And then ultimately he divorced her and destroyed a lot of the work. In their divorce's custody battle, he was nasty to her and showed her porn in court and claimed she was an unfit mother. It was sketchy.

That was all looming in my mind. They were going to make a film together. One of the most recognizable pieces from the series is a poster for a forthcoming pornographic short film. And then they never made it. I thought it was interesting that he was hyped at the time about making it and then a few years later was just like, "She's a hooker. Can you believe how horrible her porn is?" Also, I don't really like him as a person, but I think that work is beautiful and I love how she looks in it. I love that kind of aesthetic. And so I think I borrowed a bit from the aesthetic to style me and Tourmaline.

Our film isn't pornographic, but it is suggesting the opportunity for sex in a certain way. I called it an

alternate reality game because I think that's an interesting way to think about escorting, that you're calling up this alternate reality. When someone contacts you and follows the steps of the game, it calls these alternate realities into being. You're this other person for a little bit of time, because somebody's watched your video and contacted you and booked the hotel. I wanted it feel like both an invitation to participate in a game and also to be a bit referential to work that had come before. Also, I just love heaven and angel aesthetics, so that's a part of it, too.

**I can't stop thinking of the stanza "as below, so above" that shows up in the film. I was curious what those lines mean to you.**

I was playing around with the high, low, exalted, desecrated type stuff. And obviously the more traditional version of that is "as above, so below." I wanted be like, "No, what's happening here, on Earth, in this room, is hotter and better and as good as anything you could ever imagine," basically, to give primacy to the material.

**Sophia Giovannitti recommends:**

Beneath Everything by Clandestine Whores Network in *Pinko Magazine* Issue #1

*Real Housewives of New York* Season 8

Don't Forget The Streets, a harm reduction project doing clean needle distribution in LES every Wednesday

Pellegrino

The music video for Johnny Cash's cover of Hurt, it's so beautiful. I watch it all the time, I've always wanted to write about it but I have nothing to say beyond the video. June died 3 months later and Johnny 7 </3

Name

Sophia Giovannitti

Vocation

Artist and writer

□

Max Lakner