

BUNDESKUNSTHALLE

Press kit

SEX WORK
A Cultural History
2 April – 25 October 2026

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Exhibition Information

Duration	2 April – 25 October
Press officer	Sven Bergmann
Curators	Johanna Adam Ginger Angelica Rose, Ernestine Pastorello Objects of Desire and
Scientific trainee	Maximilian Reifenröther
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General Information

Director	Eva Kraus
Managing Director	Oliver Hölken
Opening Hours	Tuesday 10 am to 6 pm Wednesday 10 am to 9 pm Thursday to Sunday 10 am to 6 pm Public holidays 10 am to 6 pm
Combined ticket for all exhibitions	14 €/reduced 8 € All visitors up to and including 18 years of age have free admission 7 € happy hour ticket for all exhibitions (1 hour before closing time, for individual visitors only)
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Deutsche Bahn / UN-Campus:
Lines RE 5 (Rhein-Express), RB 26 (MittelrheinBahn), RB 30 (Rhein-Ahr-Bahn) and RB 48 (Rhein-Wupper-Bahn)

Parking

There is a car and coach park on Emil-Nolde-Straße behind the Bundeskunsthalle.
Navigation: Emil-Nolde-Straße 11, 53113 Bonn

Press Information (German / English)

www.bundeskunsthalle.de
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Media Information

SEX WORK

A Cultural History

2 April – 25 October 2026

The history of sex work can be traced from well before antiquity to the present day. The way sex work was treated reflects the prevailing view of humanity, the values of the time, and who wielded power. In some eras, it was one of the few opportunities for women to generate their own income. Until now, its history has mostly been told from an outside perspective. SEX WORK tells this story differently: together with a collective of researching sex workers, art, cultural history, and archival material are presented at the Bundeskunsthalle, guided by a central principle: nothing about us without us!

The exhibition highlights art and cultural history as well as contemporary socio-political issues. In the visual arts, heterae, prostitutes, courtesans, and nude dancers have long played a primarily motivational role, perceived at best as muses. The fact that sex workers also play a creative, artistic role is a perspective that is also made visible here. To tell a cultural history of sex work means entering terrain permeated by moralizing and highly political discourses. Media and popular culture all too readily resort to one-dimensional stereotypes when portraying sex workers. The public debate oscillates between moral condemnation and positions that categorically classify all forms of sex work as exploitation. The terms used in the context of sex work have always reflected social conditions, power structures, and gender orders. While historical terms like "whore" or "prostitute" primarily marked a moral stigmatization, the term "sex work" focuses on the aspect of gainful employment and detaches it from a fixed identity. Created together with sex workers, the exhibition offers historical and contemporary insights into sex work as well as perspectives on labor and human rights.

The history of sex work is characterized by an interplay of restriction, persecution, tolerance, and liberalization. In the 17th century, prostitutes were a common motif in Dutch genre painting—as a projection screen for erotic fantasies or a mirror of moral concepts. The close connection between trade, migration, and sex work was not a marginal phenomenon, but rather an expression of structural changes in urban spaces. In 19th-century Paris, too, art and eroticism were closely intertwined: wealthy men expected sexual favors from opera dancers in return for their "patronage." In the nightlife of the major Western metropolises, a new, liberal zeitgeist developed from 1900 onward, with which artists, intellectuals, and the bohemian set rebelled against conservative society. In 1920s Berlin, amidst glitter, smoke, and jazz, a brief dream emerged that gave women and queer people hope for greater rights – until the National Socialists violently destroyed this diversity. Among those persecuted and murdered in concentration camps under National Socialism were also alleged or actual sex workers. Since the 1980s, sex workers have increasingly made their voices heard. Restrictive measures and public stigmatization in the wake of rising police violence, gentrification, and the AIDS crisis led to protests and organized resistance – often in solidarity with the queer community. Trans* sex workers were at the forefront of the queer civil rights movement. For sex



workers, this experience of community is crucial for developing strength and independence. Spaces where experiences and trauma can be discussed without being reduced to a victim role create self-efficacy and protection. Many of the objects and stories from the sex worker archive "Objects of Desire" deal with this. The personal stories are about love, joy, and shame, about fear and frustration, as well as the everyday drudgery of work. The exhibition invites visitors to take a look inside these spaces – and to gain new perspectives on a topic marked by prejudice and taboo.

The exhibition is part of the Bundeskunsthalle's theme year on social sustainability. The motto "what we have in common" places social responsibility at the centre of this year's programme and asks how art, education, cultural exchange and social dialogue can contribute to a mutually beneficial coexistence for all.

Sex Work. A Cultural History is a further development of the exhibition *With Legs Wide Open – A Whore's Ride Through History*, Schwules Museum Berlin, 2024.



Exhibition Texts

The history of sex work can be traced from far before antiquity to the present day. It has been shaped by an interplay of restriction, persecution, tolerance, and liberalization. The prevailing image of humanity in a given era, the values that were upheld, and who exercised power can also be discerned from how society dealt with sex work. In certain periods, it represented one of the few opportunities for women to generate income independently. To tell a cultural history of sex work means entering a terrain permeated by moralizing and highly political discourses. Media and popular culture are all too eager to rely on one-dimensional stereotypes when portraying sex workers. In history and academic research as well, they are usually described only from an external perspective. The exhibition SEX WORK adopts a different viewpoint. In collaboration with a collective of sex workers, it presents art, cultural history, and archive material, guided by a central principle: Nothing about us without us!

Someone You Know Is a Sex Worker

Sex work has always been part of social and economic life. Across times and places, people from many backgrounds have done this work. Historically, it provided one of the few income-earning opportunities open to women and other marginalized groups excluded from formal employment. Due to persistent stigma, many with experience in sex work do not speak about it openly.

Sex Work is Work

Sex work is a form of labour that diverse people use to survive. Across different layers of privilege, people have varying degrees of choice over the work they can do. Stating “sex work is work” does not aim to romanticise it or mean it is “good” work—or that any work is..Rather, it opens a conversation about labour, inequality, and the right to safer conditions.

Sex Worker Rights are Human Rights

The history of sex work is also a history of oppression. Sex workers have long faced violence and exploitation—at the hands of clients, employers, and the state. Trafficking, coercion, and abuse form part of this history, but not the whole. Evidence shows that criminalization and stigma make sex work more dangerous, not less. Addressing injustice begins by listening to those most affected.

Sex work cannot be separated from wider histories of labor, migration, class, race, gender, and sexuality. It intersects with feminism, queer and trans movements, and demands for workers' rights. The fight for sex worker rights is inseparable from broader struggles for equality and social justice.

GLOSSARY

Throughout history, a wide range of terms have been used to describe those who sell sex, each carrying assumptions about morality, gender, and class. These shifting terms complicate the study of sex work history. Across these terms, distinctions of class and privilege are clear: defined as courtesans, the wealthy consorts of kings traded sex yet were not labelled with the same stigma as street-based or brothel workers.



Prostitute

A term rooted in the social scripts of 19th Century Europe. It doesn't describe a type of work, but a stigmatized social identity. Deeply gendered, it is tied to ideas of the "fallen woman" and fears of moral and venereal contagion. Some sex workers have reclaimed it. Used here for specific historical or legal contexts.

Sex worker

Coined by activist Carol Leigh in 1979 to mark the "transition from a state of being to a form of labour." It is favored today because it rejects gendered stigma and was created by sex workers themselves. It is used in this exhibition to describe historical situations of transactional sex, even where those involved would not have defined themselves as sex workers.

Whore

From Old High German *huor*, historically may refer to women selling sex or to any woman violating sexual norms. Appears in medieval law and literature; still used today as a slur but also defiantly reclaimed as a badge of pride.

Stricher

Refers to mostly young male sex workers in public spaces such as parks or train stations. Used pejoratively, it implies queerness and marginality. In Berlin it is closely tied to the Bahnhof Zoo scene of the 1990s–2000s.

Sexual Assistance


Sex work supporting people with disabilities. In Germany the role is unregulated and varies from companionship to intimate or sexual contact, depending on individual needs.

Porn performer

A job shaped by online platforms such as Pornhub and OnlyFans, where many produce and distribute their own content directly to viewers. Some performers identify as sex workers, while others do not.

A CULTURAL HISTORY

The cultural history of sex work can be reconstructed from various sources. These include written records, archaeological finds, and works of art. As with many marginalised groups, the surviving evidence is often fragmentary. Nevertheless, such traces appear again and again throughout history. While sex work is often referred to as "the world's oldest profession", the people who engage in it are seldom recognised as historical actors or included in the traditional canon of art history. The term "sex work" did not emerge until the 1970s. It refers to the provision of sexual or erotic services. Other terms, such as "whore", "courtesan", or "prostitute", reflect the attitudes of their time, shaped by notions of sexuality, gender, class, and labour. They are often associated with moral judgements. In classical antiquity, *heterae* were depicted on pottery and in mosaics. They were portrayed as educated companions, musicians or in explicit scenes. In the Middle Ages, under the influence of Christianity, such motifs became less common and were usually framed in moral terms. During the Renaissance, courtesans reappeared frequently, often portrayed as elegant and confident women. By contrast,



17th-century Dutch painting frequently focused on sex workers from poorer social classes. These works offer glimpses of daily life in different eras, but they also reveal changing ideas about humanity and gender roles. Viewed from the perspective of contemporary sex workers, this history takes on new meaning: they appear not only as subjects of representation, but as active participants in cultural history.

THE STAGE


Throughout cultural history, art and sex have long been closely intertwined. The female body, so often captured in art, reflects the real power dynamics between predominantly male artists and their models. Dancers were among the most popular motifs of the 19th century. Many came from poor backgrounds. At the Paris Opera, it became common practice for young, often underage dancers to meet wealthy male audience members after their performances in rooms specially set up for this purpose. These men expected sexual favours in return for financial support. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was a regular visitor to the neighbourhood around the Moulin Rouge. His circle of friends included sex workers, dancers and barmaids. The nightlife scene became a meeting place for artists, intellectuals, and a bohemian milieu that defied strict social norms. A similar spirit prevailed in Berlin in the 1920s. After the First World War, the city was marked by stark contrasts: economic hardship was accompanied by a new sense of freedom. Feminist ideas, new gender roles, and sexual diversity gained visibility. Berlin's nightlife, in bars such as the Eldorado, became a focal point of these developments. The dress, self-presentation and lifestyles of dancers and sex workers influenced middle-class women. Large cities became spaces of experimentation. At the same time, conservative and fascist forces gained ground, ushering in the end of the Weimar democracy.

Paris Around 1900

In Paris at the turn of the century, art, entertainment and economics were closely intertwined. Institutions such as the opera and variety theatre embodied two sides of the same system: while the ballet at the Opéra represented bourgeois prestige, it was shaped by exploitative structures behind the scenes. Dancers from poor backgrounds sought social advancement and were often dependent on relationships with wealthy patrons, who not infrequently expected sexual favours in return. The Foyer de la Danse behind the stage served as an exclusive meeting place. In the entertainment district of Le Pigalle, on the other hand, sexuality was explicitly staged as a commodity. In variety shows such as the Moulin Rouge, dance and eroticism, art and entertainment fused into a signature expression of the mod-ern Zeitgeist. Artists such as Marcelle Lender, acclaimed for her work in operettas and variety theatre, embodied a new, self-assured vision of womanhood.

The Roaring Twenties

After the First World War, Berlin became a city of extremes, where social hardship intersected with artistic experimentation and moral liberalisation. The collapse of the German Empire opened up new avenues for feminist activism and challenges to traditional gender roles. Nightlife in particular emerged as a testing ground for new ways of living. Sex workers and dancers set trends in fashion, desire and urban culture, presenting a vivid kaleidoscope of gender expressions. Figures such as Celly de Rheidt



and Anita Berber blended art, provocation and commercial savvy, becoming icons of a period oscillating between excessive freedom and political instability. At the same time, conservative and nationalist movements were gaining momentum, ultimately bringing about the end of the short-lived Weimar democracy.

BACKSTAGE


Whether on stage or in the bedroom, sex work has always involved an element of performance. And as with any performance, clothing plays a crucial part. High heels, sneakers, or patent leather boots help performers step into a role. Clothing thus becomes an instrument of transformation. Some sex workers reinvent themselves for their work, changing their identity, gender, or appearance depending on the situation. Others cultivate a consistent persona that extends into everyday life. Clothing is not only a tool of the trade; it can also become a means of control. For centuries, there have been rules dictating how sex workers should dress or where they are allowed to be. The goal is to separate them from the rest of society. These experiences have taught many sex workers how to manage scrutiny and evade surveillance. They use clothing, make-up, and body language strategically to make themselves attractive to clients, inconspicuous to authorities, and identifiable to one another. In this context, spaces like locker rooms, changing facilities, and private apartments become important meeting places. They provide a setting for building community, exchange, and mutual support.

Objects Of Desire

Throughout this exhibition are items on loan from Objects of Desire, an archive of sex worker stories told through personal objects. Founded in 2016, Objects of Desire is a sex worker-led collective that emerged from conversations about preserving community history on its own terms. The archive focuses on the material realities of sex work, collecting stories through objects that range from hygiene products to gifts from clients. Together, these items reveal the banal, the bizarre, the difficult, and the oddly touching. Temporary exhibitions featuring objects from the archive were held in London in 2016 and at the Schwules Museum in Berlin in 2019. The archive remains accessible online and continues to grow.

THE OFFICE

For centuries, sex work has been regulated and monitored by the state. This system has deep historical roots. Between the 14th and 16th centuries, many European cities established municipal brothels. The women who worked in them were tolerated, while those operating independently were persecuted. Since then, periods of regulation and limited acceptance have alternated with phases of repression. The underlying logic remains the same: people are classified as either permitted or forbidden. Those who meet certain requirements receive limited protection. Those who do not are often criminalised. Germany's Prostitute Protection Act, in force since 2017, places high bureaucratic demands on sex workers. It requires them to register with the authorities, as well as undergo medical examinations and counselling. For people whose residence status is uncertain, who are undocumented, or who live in precarious circumstances, this is often impossible. Fear of deportation or exposure can push them into dependency, criminalised contexts, and invisibility. If they face threats or violence, their options for reporting them are limited. Around the world, legal frameworks range from full criminalisation to decriminalisation. Evidence from various countries shows that



where sex work itself is prosecuted, the risk of violence and exploitation increases. Even the “Nordic model”, which criminalises clients, does not improve safety: fear of punishment drives sex work into illegal settings, leaving workers little opportunity to create safe working environments. Sex worker organisations therefore maintain that decriminalisation provides the most effective foundation for safety, labour rights, and self-determination.

Morality Police

From the mid-19th century, German cities created morality police, the Sittenpolizei or Sitte, to regulate sexuality and public behaviour. Women who sold sex had to register with the Sitte, but officers also monitored any woman whose clothes, behaviour, or presence in certain streets seemed ‘improper’. Men and gender-nonconforming people who sold sex were likewise persecuted under anti-gay and public-morality laws. Sex work, queer life, and gender nonconformity were treated as forms of ‘deviance’ to be controlled and punished. Much of what historians know about sex workers from this period comes from Sitte archives—police files, registration lists, and reports that describe addresses, health checks, and daily routines but reveal far more about police surveillance than about sex workers’ own voices.

Migration


Movement and migration are part of everyday life. People travel for holidays, study, work, love, to escape economic or political instability, or in the hope of a better future and income. While middle-class professionals can sometimes secure visas and contracts, those in low-paid sectors are blocked by restrictive regimes and treated as ‘illegal’ if they move first and look for work later. Many migrant women end up in traditional jobs such as cleaning, cooking, and caring, often badly paid, indebted from travel and immigration costs, and exposed to racism and isolation. Some turn to sex work because it can offer faster earnings and more control over their time than domestic or care work, even if they face stigma and danger, and their experiences are diverse: some leave sex work, some stay, some combine it with other jobs.

Berlin

Berlin has long been imagined as a city of sex, nightlife, and queer experimentation, with sex work deeply woven into its urban fabric from the 1920s to the present. After 1945, the divided city reshaped this landscape: unlike other German cities, Berlin adopted no Sperrbezirk, and sex work remained dispersed across neighbourhoods. Yet certain sites, such as Kurfürstenstraße, became well-known ‘Striche’ – historic zones of street-based sex work that endure even as gentrification and redevelopment pushes workers into less visible spaces.

Hamburg

Hamburg’s Reeperbahn in St. Pauli is Germany’s most famous red-light district, shaped by the harbour where colonial trade and a steady flow of sailors fuelled demand for erotic labour. Around Spielbudenplatz, an urban entertainment culture emerged in the late 18th century: bars, cabarets, peepshows, and brothels formed a dense zone that remained a major sex-work hub into the 2000s but now faces gentrification. After 2004, new port-security rules sealed the harbour, ending a centuries-old exchange. East of here, the former working-class Gängeviertel—cleared after the 1892 cholera epidemic—once



housed notorious dives and registered 'control girls'. St. Georg by the main station remains linked to queer, migrant sex work, now squeezed by rising rents and urban redevelopment.

Cologne / Bonn

Cologne's history is closely intertwined with Catholicism and its cathedral. Church charities targeted 'fallen women' for moral rescue projects, while the city channelled 'wild' prostitution from central squares into licensed brothels. The 1970s saw the creation of the still-active megabrothel Pascha. Throughout the 20th century, Cologne expanded its Sperrbezirk, eventually establishing a regulated street zone on Geestemünder Straße. As a gay city, it has long been a key site for male–male escort work. In neighbouring Bonn, visible sex work has been concentrated on Immenburgstraße, marked by its Eros Center and a municipally imposed 'sex tax': since 2011, street-based workers must buy a nightly €6 ticket from a converted parking meter in order to work legally in the zone. When Bonn served as the federal capital, travelling diplomats and politicians created a lucrative demand that also drew many workers from nearby Cologne.

Trafficking

'Trafficking' is defined by UN Palermo Protocol of 2000 as situations where people are recruited or moved through force, coercion, deception, or abuse of power for purposes such as forced labour or sexual exploitation. Although this can occur across all labour sectors, public debate often collapses trafficking into sex work and focuses scrutiny on the sex industry – especially migrant sex workers. In practice, raids, arrests, and deportation frequently target migrant communities while doing little to change the restrictive immigration rules and exploitative labour conditions that make people vulnerable in the first place; sex worker organisations stress that not all migration or sex work is trafficking and call instead for rights-based support, options to safely report abuse at work, and labour protections.

PUBLIC SPACE

Sex workers have always been part of urban life. Yet the public space they are allowed to occupy has always been limited and tightly controlled. In the 19th century, industrialisation led to rapid urban growth. Many people moved from rural areas to large cities such as Berlin, Hamburg, or Cologne. Overcrowding and poor sanitation fuelled the spread of disease. Fear of infection grew and increasingly targeted poor and socially marginalised groups. These anxieties were often projected onto sex workers. Their visibility in public spaces challenged contemporary notions of femininity, which confined women to the private sphere. Within a rigidly binary view of gender, non-binary and queer people had even fewer opportunities to express their identities. The figure of "the prostitute" came to symbolise a moral and physical threat. Across the German territories, prostitution was regulated by the state. Under a system known as Kasernierung, sex workers were often allowed to live and work only in designated streets. These specific regulations no longer exist today. Nevertheless, there are still areas where sex work is banned. These often cover entire city centres. Along with gentrification and so-called "clean-up" campaigns, they continue to push sex workers to the outskirts of cities.



HEALTH

Throughout history, sex workers have often been seen as a threat to public health. This was evident in responses to syphilis, AIDS and, most recently, Covid-19. The perception of sex workers as primary carriers of certain diseases has proven remarkably persistent. As many sex workers were visibly part of the urban poor, they soon became targets of state authorities. These authorities were under pressure to manage health crises and the anxiety and panic they caused in society. Notably, little attention was paid to the bodies or the responsibility of clients in this context. From the 19th century onwards, the state resorted to harsh measures. These included compulsory examinations, often carried out under degrading conditions, as well as forced sterilisation and confinement in locked hospital wards. The medical profession, social services and the police frequently worked together in this context. The bodily autonomy of sex workers was completely disregarded. In response to violence and control, sex workers developed their own forms of health care over the centuries. These were based on mutual support and shared knowledge, sometimes operating in defiance of state prohibitions.

Witches And Their Apothecary


Between 1560 and 1630, witch trials reached their height across Europe, with tens of thousands—perhaps even hundreds of thousands—accused. The German-speaking territories lay at the centre of this persecution, where around 25,000 people, mostly women, were executed. Although the causes remain debated, the witch hunts coincided with growing state control over reproduction: contraception and abortion became punishable by death, and childbirth came under closer supervision. Women who sold sex, often versed in herbal knowledge concerning fertility and miscarriage, could also fall under suspicion. Their embodied expertise and marginal status marked them as figures of the occult. Interrogations of witches, heretics, and prostitutes often employed similar coercive methods, making both witch and whore instruments for disciplining those deemed deviant.

'Born Prostitute'

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, German doctors advanced the pseudo-scientific idea of the 'born prostitute', portraying certain women as inherently 'degenerate' and destined for prostitution. Cast as a social danger and deemed beyond reform, they were subjected to state control and confinement in locked wards, psychiatric hospitals, workhouses, and prisons. These gendered medical and moral discourses later fed into Nazi ideology, where women who sold sex were labelled 'asocial' and marked as hereditarily deviant. After 1945, notions of 'asociality' and female 're-education' persisted in welfare and medical policy. In the GDR, thousands were detained in closed venereal-disease wards, while in West Germany, institutions such as Brauweiler and Hamburg-Farmsen continued coercive welfare and forced-labour practices, publicly confronted only in the 21st century.

HIV / AIDS AND SEX WORK

"Nothing is more punitive than to give a disease a meaning — that meaning being invariably a moralistic one." Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) Every era has its own "super disease" onto which it projects its anxieties and moral beliefs. In the medieval and Early Modern periods, this role was filled by syphilis and the plague. After it was first reported in 1983, AIDS quickly became a cultural myth. The debate oscillated between education and alarmism, with responses ranging from carefully



considered prevention strategies to repressive and coercive measures. Gay men, drug users, and sex workers, as the most severely affected groups, organised their own health care and social welfare initiatives. They distributed condoms and organised demonstrations and community events. Civil society structures emerged, including AIDS support organisations and sex worker projects such as Hydra, Cassandra, and HWG. At the federal level, the debate was shaped by CDU/CSU politicians such as Peter Gauweiler and Rita Süssmuth. While Gauweiler pushed for the internment of high-risk groups, Süssmuth campaigned for education and support. Thanks to medical advances, people with HIV are now able to live largely normal lives. The spread of infection can be contained. Nevertheless, access to education and health care remains a challenge for marginalised groups. Unequal distribution, expensive patents and poor-quality medicines are leading to rising infection rates worldwide. In South Africa alone, the withdrawal of international funding is predicted to cause a dramatic increase in mortality rates, which will particularly affect sex workers.

PERSECUTION AND DESTRUCTION

The exclusion and disenfranchisement of the Other is a structural feature of repressive state systems. Control over sexuality in particular was a core element of German colonial rule. "Racial hierarchies" were constructed through the regulation of intimate relationships. The same logic later shaped National Socialist ideology. Certain groups were stripped of their rights, and morality, "racial hygiene", and health policy became closely intertwined. Some of the concepts of exclusion and devaluation developed during this period persist in political discourse to the present day. One key instrument was the invention of the category "asocial". In the 19th century, this led to the establishment of re-education facilities and workhouses. Under National Socialism, individuals labelled "asocial" – such as homeless people, sex workers, and those accused of engaging in prostitution – were deported to concentration camps. Sexualised violence was used as a tool of domination. Women were systematically controlled, abused, and forced into prostitution. Even after 1945, "non-conforming" women continued to be disciplined in institutions such as the Brauweiler labour camp well into the 1960s. It was not until 2020 that the German Bundestag officially recognised those persecuted as "asocial" and "professional criminals" as victims of National Socialism.

Camp Brothels

From 1942, brothels were established in several concentration camps on the orders of Heinrich Himmler. They were part of a reward system designed to increase the productivity of male prisoners. More than 200 women were forced into sexual labour there, most of them inmates of the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp. Many of these women were imprisoned after being labelled 'asocial', partly because they were actually or allegedly involved in sex work. Promise of early release and better living conditions than the gruelling physical labour, cold, and lack of food in Ravensbrück prompted some women to volunteer for the brothel commando – but without any real prospect of freedom. Others were forcibly selected and had no idea that they would be working in the camp brothel. The SS controlled the women's bodies through compulsory examinations, sterilisation and coerced abortions. The facilities were systematically hidden from the outside world. After the war, the women's decision to use their sexuality as a means of survival was severely stigmatised. Their suffering remained invisible for a long time and they received no compensation.

Brauweiler

In 1815, the former Benedictine abbey of Brauweiler was converted into a Prussian workhouse and correctional institution. It became a site for disciplining people labelled 'asocial'. Many of the inmates were women and girls accused of prostitution, poverty or a 'dissolute' lifestyle. The institution's central aim was re-education through forced labour and strict discipline. Under the Nazi regime, Brauweiler served as an early concentration camp and Gestapo prison. Deportations of prisoners to the Ravensbrück women's concentration camp are also documented in the form of so-called 'prostitute transports'. Brauweiler remained a site of coercive welfare until 1969. Prison conditions, defined by military-style severity, imposed working days of up to 13 hours, and escape attempts were punished with solitary confinement. It was not until 2020 that the German Bundestag formally acknowledged those persecuted as 'asocial' as victims of the Nazi regime.

Colonialism


From the 1880s until the end of the First World War, the German Reich controlled colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Colonisers encountered diverse local understandings of sexuality and commercial sex that they neither grasped nor easily regulated. Within an imperial logic of conquest, authorities sought to impose a new moral and medical order by policing intimacy through surveillance, health inspections, and regulated brothels. In shifting colonial economies, selling sex could offer women income and limited autonomy, even as they faced racialised control and violence. In colonies such as German South-West Africa (now Namibia), white sex workers were brought from Europe to serve soldiers and to discourage sexual contact between white men and Indigenous women.

ACTIVISM

Despite criminalisation and violence, sex workers have repeatedly and openly fought back against oppression. Evidence of this dates back as far as the 15th century, when brothel workers protested against poor working conditions. The modern sex workers' movement emerged during the second wave of feminism (1960–1990), which emphasised self-determination and body politics. In 1975, sex workers occupied the Saint-Nizier church in Lyon to protest police violence – an event that sparked global solidarity and is now commemorated as International Whore's Day. Sex work activism has increasingly developed along intersectional lines, connecting issues of gender, sexuality, class, and migration. Some of the most powerful voices and initiatives today come from the Global South. Sex workers campaign for mutual aid, solidarity, and political recognition. Central demands include decriminalisation, protection from violence, access to health care, the right to self-determination, and social equality. Marginalised groups build alliances and join forces to oppose exclusion and demand safety and justice. Many of these rights have yet to be secured, and so the struggle continues.

Global Activism

The modern sex worker rights movement emerged in the 1970s and, while initially dominated by groups in the Global North, has increasingly been led by sex workers from the Global South, with a strong commitment to intersectionality and social justice. The Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), founded in 1990, now



links hundreds of organisations in more than 100 countries, all advocating for decriminalization. The 2012 Sex Workers Freedom Festival in Kolkata, India, was an example of this global activism: held as an alternative to the International AIDS Conference in Washington, D.C., which many could not attend due to US visa restrictions on sex workers, it highlighted Global South leadership and inclusivity, with panels led by male, female, trans-gender, and HIV-positive workers and performances addressing freedom of movement and migration within sex work.

The Modern German Whores' Movement

The modern sex workers' movement began in Germany in the 1980s. Hydra in Berlin and HWG in Frankfurt am Main were founded in 1981 as the first autonomous sex worker projects. Further organisations emerged within the context of the feminist and gay and lesbian movements, some becoming more professionalised during the AIDS crisis. Their main concerns were rights, recognition, the prevention of violence, healthcare and support for people entering and leaving the industry. After the abolition of the legal classification of prostitution as immoral in 2001, new approaches were developed. The St. Pauli Protocol of 2008 sought to strengthen the inclusion of migrant sex workers. Debates surrounding the Prostitute Protection Act of 2017 put these alliances to the test. Today, sex work activism is marked by a diverse landscape that, in the face of sex purchase bans and growing conservatism, depends on new coalitions.

BOUDOIR

Often, the spaces that other people associate with rest, relaxation, recreation, or retreat are the very places in which we work: bedrooms, hotel rooms, public toilets, or cars. We step into the intimacy of these otherwise private spaces to undertake a transaction that is dramatically distorted in the public imagination. In our ideal bordello, all the necessary tools are comfortably within reach. Surrounded by art created by our sex-working siblings and comrades on nearby shelves and walls, we are supported by our community across time. Our colleagues work in rooms along the corridors, and we gather in the kitchen for tea or to share chocolate gifted by a regular while we wait for the next client. When counting out the money onto the bedside table, we know exactly how much of it we will be taking home at the end of the night. We are recognised as experts on our own bodies and sexual health, and our decisions are respected. In this chapter, we indulge in dreaming and speculation. We talk about what our ideal workplace would look like and share oddities from the past.

The Chapel

'All nature, all formations, all creatures exist in and with one another, and they will be resolved again into their own roots.' — Gospel of Mary Magdalene, 4, 22
A shrine to the sublime perpetuity of whores, living and dead. Creation's cycles are hand-rendered with rhinestones in a high-camp invocation of the sacred feminine. Faces of sex workers from living memory form a layered allegory over figures from history, scripture, and mythology, drawing upon the Gnostic Gospel of Mary Magdalene, an early Christian text which portrays her as Christ's closest disciple, sole bearer of His true message of inner spiritual knowledge. Canonical or not, this whore-saint's place in the popular imagination reflects a deeper need to reconcile this most perennial dichotomy, while the sacred and profane coexist within all of us.



St. Mary Magdalene

A central figure in the New Testament, she is frequently depicted holding a jar of ointment, referencing her role in anointing Christ's body. Legends claim she later escaped to Southern France, to the Sainte-Baume cave where she spent years in isolation, praying and experiencing divine visions. When 6th century Pope Gregory I conflated her with another biblical 'Mary', the 'sinful woman' who anoints Jesus' feet, recast her as a 'repentant whore' in the western Christian imagination. Since then 'The Penitent Magdalene' has been a wildly popular subject in Christian art, arguably living on in the archetype of the 'hooker with a heart of gold'.

Whores In The Story Of Art

In the dusty streets of ancient Athens, sex workers were said to be wearing sandals that left an imprint reading ΑΚΟΛΟΥΘΕΙ — "follow me." At the race courses of 19th-century Paris, respectable wives stood in their designated enclosures while demi-mondaines occupied another. The married women craned their necks for a glimpse of the latest fashions which they would, in time, studiously imitate. The same story circles through time: whores at the wellsprings of culture, until the dust blows away and our footprints are gone. Our images cover the walls of museums all over the world, but stories from our own lips have yet to be excavated. Whilst outsiders have long used our bodies and our liminality as metaphor, this exhibition's survey of 21 artists with sex-working histories reclaims our place: not as objects of pity, lust or curiosity, but as subjects of our own gaze.

Publication



The exhibition is accompanied by a publication

Sex Work. A Cultural History

Published by
the Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany

With contributions from
Johanna Adam, Ginger Angelica, Laura María Agustín, Ernestine Pastorello,
Maxime Poulain, Ruby Rebelde, Max Reifenröther, Hildegard Titus, Objects of Desire

Scope and format
Brochure, 17 x 24 cm
192 pages, c. 130 illustrations
German edition
Distanz Verlag, Berlin
Price: 24 €
Book trade price: 28 €



Educational Programme

Mediation in the exhibition

Sundays and public holidays, 12–5 p.m.

A contact person will be available in the exhibition during opening hours.

You are welcome to ask questions and discuss the exhibits and topics in the exhibition with us.

GUIDED TOURS

Public tours

Sundays and public holidays, 11–12 a.m.

€4/reduced €2, plus admission to the exhibition

Tickets are available at the ticket office or via bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets.

ArtCard reservations: T +49 228 9171–200

Curator tours

With Johanna Adam (curator)

Wednesday, 15 April, 22 April, 29 April, 6–7 p.m.

With Maximilian Reifenröther (scientific trainee)

Wednesday, 27 May, 10 June, 9 September, 30 September, 6–7 p.m.

Sunday, 19 July, 3–4 p.m.

With Ernestine Pastorello (external curator – tour in English)

Thursday, 21 May, 3–5 p.m.

Sunday, 11 October, 12–1 p.m.

With Objects of Desire (external curators)

Wednesday, 15 July, 6–7 p.m.

Each tour 60 minutes

6 €/reduced 3 €, plus admission to the exhibition

Tickets are available at the ticket office or via bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets.

Guided tour during lunch break

Art break

Wednesday, 6 May, 8 July, 7 October, 12.30–1 p.m.

To balance out your daily work routine, we offer an entertaining speed tour during your lunch break.

€8 (tour and admission)

Tickets are available at the box office or at bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets.

Can be booked individually for groups


Information and registration at buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de

The queer perspective

Sunday, 14 June, 13 September, 2–4 p.m.

16 €, including exhibition visit

Whether old or new, surprising or hidden, queer content is addressed in the exhibition tour. The subsequent discussion offers the opportunity to talk about the topic with other participants.



Group tours

60 minutes, €75

90 minutes, €95

60 minutes, guided tour with curator €190

60 minutes, guided tour with artistic director €270

plus group admission

Written registration required: buchung@bundeskunsthalle.de

Telephone etiquette

When culture calls!

Thursday, 22 October, 5–6 Uhr

Historically, sex work has been documented from antiquity to the present day. The prevailing view of humanity, the values that held sway, and who wielded power can also be seen in how society dealt with sex work.

In some periods, sex work represented one of the few ways for women to earn an independent income. In the visual arts, however, prostitutes, courtesans, and nude dancers long played primarily a motif role and were, at best, perceived as muses. The exhibition demonstrates that they also play a creative, artistic role. It presents works from art and cultural history as well as extensive archival material on a topic that has received little research attention to date. The exhibition was created in collaboration with a collective of research sex workers and is guided by a central principle: Nothing about us without us!

This offering enables people to participate in cultural life regardless of their place of residence, mobility, or any limitations they may have.

Experience exhibitions nationwide – live and free from home.

Free participation

You can register via the website www.beianrufkultur.de by clicking on the 'Register for free' button in the description of the respective telephone tour until shortly before the tour begins. Immediately after registering, you will receive a landline number to dial in via email. Please also check your spam folder.

Dial the telephone number you receive on the day of the event, approximately 2 to 3 minutes before the start.

Alternatively, you can register for tours by telephone with the 'Bei Anruf Kultur' team a few days in advance: (040) 209 404 36.

Further dates and information: www.beianrufkultur.de

WORKSHOPS

Workshops for adults

Guided tour, Creative activity & Discussion

Queer Space - „Sex Work Is Work – But Whose Work?“


Hosts: Sarah Waschke and Jan Faber

Sundays, 12 July and 25 October, 2–5 p.m.

During a guided tour of the exhibition, we will explore queer themes, which we will then delve deeper into through a creative activity.

20 € adults/reduced 10 €/free for refugees and people with disabilities

One drink is included in the price.



Workshop with the artist Midori

Sunday, 5 April

Learn about Japanese knotting techniques. The artist will also talk about her work as a sex worker.

More Information coming soon.

VERANSTALTUNGEN

WEDNESDAY_LATE_ART

Speed tours_DJ_Drinks

Wednesday, 20 May

Your evening after work filled with art, culture and music!

SPEED TOURS

(German, English)

Amazônia. Indigenous Worlds

Peter Hujar. Eyes Open in the Dark

PARTICIPATIONAL ACTIVITY

Community Quilt

Upcycling of fabric squares with fabric paint or embroidery

With Sarah Waschke

LOUNGE & DJ & DRINKS

16€/8€ with ELLAH Card, including one drink

ELLAH – The annual pass for young art lovers

Tickets are available at the box office or via bundeskunsthalle.de/tickets.

Next date:

WEDNESDAY_LATE_ART

Wednesday, 15 July

MUSEUM MILE FESTIVAL

The five museums on Bonn's Museum Mile are celebrating a big family festival.

Admission to all exhibitions is free!

Saturday, 6 June and Sunday, 7 June.

The complete programme will be available in May at: www.museumsmeilebonn.de

DIVERSITY FAMILY FESTIVAL – ALL MY COLOURS

Sunday, 26 July, 11 a.m.–5 p.m.

We are celebrating diversity with a colourful programme for all children and families: fascinating insights into our exhibitions, a bubbling water feature, creative hands-on activities and great music.

Participation in all activities is free of charge and no advance registration is required.

Admission to the exhibitions is free for everyone up to and including the age of 18.

SUNDOWNER BAR ON THE ROOF

Starting in May, every Wednesday, 6–9 p.m.

Electronic music, relaxed atmosphere, interactive art, cool drinks and delicious finger food on the beautiful museum roof with a view over Bonn.

Free admission!



Current and Upcoming Exhibitions

EXPEDITION TO THE WORLD'S OCEANS

until 6 April 2026

Approximately 70 % of the Earth's surface is covered with water, of which 96.5 % is seawater. The oceans are thought to be the source of all life on earth. They provide raw materials, energy, food, transport routes and function as a climate machine. Humans have been using the ocean as a global highway for 4,000 years, so it seems almost paradoxical that today we know more about the surfaces of the Moon and Mars than about the world's oceans, only 5 % of whose depths have been explored.

The complexity of the theme of the world's oceans means that it can be approached from many different perspectives and angles. Taking a cultural, historical and scientific approach, our immersive exhibition focuses on the exciting and pleasurable exploration and investigation of different facets of maritime worlds and their processes of transformation. The exhibition concentrates on three main subjects: The deep sea with its mysterious habitats and fragile ecosystem, the oceans as a contested economic space and the basis for globalisation and, finally, the oceans as a place of longing and a space for the transfer of people and ideas. These mysterious realms have always inspired creative and enquiring minds: alongside objects from the realms of nature, science and technology, a selection of historical artefacts and works of contemporary art sheds light on the endangered beauty of maritime flora and fauna and encourages reflection on the colourful and chequered history of man and the sea.

AMAZÔNIA

INDIGENOUS WORLDS

until 9 August 2026

Amazônia. Indigenous Worlds gives a voice to the indigenous peoples of the Amazon region and offers a new perspective on this part of the world, which is often reduced to the cliché of an exotic society disconnected from the world of today. Yet Amazonia is a vibrant whole, made up of dense networks, intercultural exchange, and expanded sociability among hundreds of indigenous communities. With around 400 exhibits, the exhibition focuses on the concepts of creation, community, and future prospects from the perspective of the inhabitants.

PETER HUJAR

EYES OPEN IN THE DARK

until 23 August 2026

Photographer Peter Hujar (1934–1987) was a central figure in the New York Downtown scene of the 1970s and 1980s. His primary focus was portrait photography. He photographed his friends, lovers, and those around him with striking intimacy and emotional depth. In his work, which also includes animal, landscape, and architectural subjects, Hujar reveals himself as a sensitive chronicler of a time of social and sexual change.



When Peter Hujar died of AIDS-related pneumonia, his work was largely unknown. Today, however, he is considered one of the most important photographers of the second half of the 20th century.

The exhibition was originally organized by Raven Row with thanks to the Peter Hujar Foundation.

In partnership with the Bundeskunsthalle, the Gropius Bau, Berlin, presents *Peter Hujar / Liz Deschenes: Persistence of Vision* from March 19 to June 28, 2026.

Save the date:

INTERACTIONS 2026

1 May – 1 November 2026

Media conference: Wednesday, 29 April 2026, 11 a.m.

Interactions 2026 will once again feature selected artworks and performances that invite visitors to engage in interactive play in the outdoor space of the Bundeskunsthalle. All works and projects contain their own narrative or vision, which visitors can explore alongside the interaction. They demonstrate that openness serves both individual and collective experience and promote togetherness, tolerance, and sensitivity.

BONN SUMMIT 2026

International Forum on Culture and Politics

16–18 September 2026

Once a year, the BONN SUMMIT brings together leading figures from the arts, culture, science, politics, business, and society from around the world in Bonn to discuss current challenges of our time and their cultural dimension, guided by the theme of planetary boundaries and global interdependencies.

The first edition in 2026 focuses on the relationship between culture and politics in times of geopolitical power shifts. We examine current developments in the USA and explore the

consequences for Europe, shed light on selected sites of culturally coded conflicts over values and worldviews, and invite participants to a collaborative exchange on future scenarios, options for action, and strategies for shaping the future.

Subject to change

Status: March 2026