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Paris-Amsterdam Underground

Essays on Cultural Resistance, Subversion, and Diversion

Edited by Christoph Lindner and Andrew Hussey

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9. Red Lights and Legitimate Trade: Paying for Sex in the Branded City

Joyce Goggin

Introduction

As the articles in this volume all in some way argue, the ‘underground’ is an ambiguous concept. On the surface, the word itself has a number of meanings and can refer to location, as in ‘the Paris metro’ or catacombs; to sketchy and sometimes illegal practices, such as drug dealing and prostitution; or to the avant-garde, as in ‘The Velvet Underground’. And the ‘underground’ can move in and out of its marginalized position over time and under various conditions. For example, as an expression of the avant-garde, the underground can cross over into the mainstream, and underground activities like prostitution and drug use can be tolerated to a greater or lesser extent depending on the historical juncture in which they occur, or the location in which they operate. So given that the many meanings of ‘underground’ are not entirely stable or straightforward, the term is an uneasy fit with anything it may be used to describe, such as Amsterdam’s Red Light District, which is the subject of this essay.

To further muddy the waters, Amsterdam’s centuries-old Red Light District is, in many respects, as complex and convoluted as the winding canals and narrow streets in which it is located. For example, the history of the Dutch tolerance for both prostitution and the district itself is as varied as the notion of what, exactly, was or is being tolerated. In this case, moreover, tolerance also involves the question of exactly how far underground red-light practices are driven. For example, centuries ago tolerance meant turning a blind eye to prostitution if it was conducted in a designated area, although this *laissez-faire* attitude could quickly veer off into sporadic round-ups whenever prostitutes became the subject of civic debate. And although in the seventeenth century ‘prostitution was widespread in Dutch society in contrast to other European counties [it was] characterized by a relative absence of soliciting in streets and a tendency to disguise brothels as something else’ (Israel 682). In other words, as long as it was kept more or less underground and within the parameters of a district that contained brothels to conceal the business within, this specialized neighborhood was permitted to operate at the very heart of Amsterdam’s busy port, and service the bourgeois population as well as seafaring traffic.

In the Netherlands, prostitution went from being tolerated to being legalized in 2000, which moved the Red Light District forcefully out of the underground,

although a tantalizing racy aura continues to surround it. A sort of special reverence for prostitution is present in contemporary Dutch culture and this is reflected in various popular media, including, somewhat surprisingly, the University of Amsterdam student weekly magazine. In November of 2010, *Folia* featured an article entitled ‘Je moet wel van seks houden als je een baantje in de prostitutie wilt’ (‘You Have to Like Sex If You Want a Job in Prostitution’), about two female students who were financing their university studies by working as call-girls. The article’s byline laments that one cannot put a job in prostitution on one’s CV, while the author wonders if this might not be the ideal student job (*‘ideale studentenbaan’*).

One of the issues lurking behind the gritty image that accompanied this feature article has to do with the notion of ‘authenticity’. Both visitors to Amsterdam and residents of the city relate the Red Light District, and its ‘cool’ aura of ‘underground’ panache, to a time before the advent of political correctness and Starbucks, as a kind of last frontier that resists Disneyfication, homogenization, and standardization. This nostalgic view of authenticity informs much of popular musing on the topic, as one 2008 blog entry entitled ‘Amsterdam – So Colorful’ attests. The author urges the reader to ‘get over and enjoy the brothels in the Red Light District of Amsterdam while you can’ since ‘new laws are changing the area, in response to an increase in crime and trafficking from Eastern European pimps who are getting out of hand’, and concludes by lamenting the authenticity of the ‘good ol’ days’.

9.1. ‘You have to like sex if you want a job in prostitution’, cover of *Folia*, a weekly news magazine for students and staff members of the University of Amsterdam. 19 November, 2010. (Photo: Pascal Tieman)

The ‘good ol’ days’ that the author of this blog invokes are part of a temporal duality or disjunction, often associated with the ‘authentic’ experience that (former) underground urban areas may stimulate. As Sharon Zukin has observed in *Naked City*, on the streets of such areas one can feel the presence of another kind of time:

The Greeks called it *kairos*; a sense of the past that intrudes into and challenges the present ... The streets and buildings ... are reminders of an alternative time that [provides] ‘a sense of authentic origin and justification for present hopes’ ... Such neighbourhoods supply the visitor with a sense of ‘a history of artistic energy and resisting authority’. (101)

Importantly, however, the aura of resistance and bohemian hipness that hangs around Amsterdam’s Red Light District is also tempered with the more banal consideration of commerce and the kind of monetary transaction that drives prostitution. As Jean-François Lyotard once explained, the economy of prostitution is based on the transformation of ‘the client’s *jouissance* into money, which converts ‘the surplus of pulsional energy scattered in society, and dangerous to it ... into money, and then into commodities ... bringing about the return of these “lost” expenditures into the circuit of social exchanges’ (157). Far from the romance of underground culture, which is often synonymous with the notion of anti-commercialism, the Red Light District is then a center for financialized sexual transaction. Add to this Amsterdam’s privileged relationship with commerce since the seventeenth century as a center for banking and trade, and the Red Light District takes on a much more ‘business-as-usual’ air. Seen in this light, the toleration of prostitution has more to do with its potential as an economic driver than any special relationship to authenticity or the underground.

Ironically, the secularized commercial climate that made Amsterdam famous for its red lights may well be the one force that, after these many centuries, spells its demise. In an effort to clean the area up and diversify its offering by adding more mainstream attractions for the contemporary tourist, the city bought up about one-third of its red-lit windows and began a process of conversion in 2007. The desired effect of this strategy is best demonstrated by an entry entitled ‘Amsterdam: Sex, Drugs and Civilized Living’ in *Time Out: The World’s Greatest Cities*. This entry on Amsterdam begins with prostitution and commerce, explaining that visitors will ‘find themselves endlessly looping back – just like randy sailors did in the seventeenth century when the city was the richest port in the world – to Amsterdam’s near geographic center, the Red Light District’ (24). The *Time Out* guide then apologetically notes that ‘it is true that Amsterdam still has a certain reputation’ and quickly moves on to advertising the city’s clean-up and gentrification campaign:

The recent ‘I Amsterdam’ city-branding campaign has done much to distract the global imagination away from the sex and drugs and towards the ‘creative capital’, once home to Rembrandt, now abuzz with designers and advertising companies. Meanwhile, the city is gentrifying quickly as the authorities are

committed to making what is already the safest Red Light District into an area more conducive to wine bars and sushi joints. (24)

This plan to open the district for other forms of city experience and entertainment is perfectly in keeping with trends that scholars working in urban studies have noted. As Zukin explains, the ‘gritty’ vibe that the Red Light District communicates can be used to create a ‘desirable synergy between underground cultures and the creative energy they bring to both cultural consumption and city growth’ (*Naked City* 53). As part of this effort to make the ‘area more conducive to wine bars and sushi joints’, and to enhance the city’s creativity profile, the ‘Red A.I.R.’ (Artists in Residence) program was launched, through which artists were allotted space in the brothels that the city had purchased. The idea was to short-circuit squatters who might have occupied the buildings if left empty until the properties could be redeveloped for high-end housing and boutique retail space. Using the buildings as temporary ateliers and gallery spaces was thought to have the added benefit of boosting Amsterdam’s image as a ‘creative capital’ known for its heritage brand that spans the centuries from Rembrandt to Van Gogh.

In what follows, I will unpack various aspects of the ongoing developments which I have just briefly enumerated. All of these developments are in some way involved in the gentrification of Amsterdam’s Red Light District, and throughout my analysis I will be particularly mindful of the historical developments in both commerce and culture that led the city to adopt its current branding strategy. Part of this analysis will also involve a discussion of those elements of Amsterdam’s cultural heritage that intersect with the city’s most notorious ‘underground’ neighborhood and its shifting reputation.

It is important to note, however, that writing about the Red Light District in the limited space of one chapter necessarily means selecting certain topics above others, such as the straight history of prostitution as opposed to the current problem of slave trade in sex workers, or other kinds of prostitution on offer in the district. And while a detailed financial geography of the area would also be useful, this chapter will provide a discussion of city-branding that has to forego the obvious benefits that such a study would entail. Therefore, my argument in the following sections will focus largely on straight prostitution in the Red Light District as it has been cast in cultural production, and particularly in painting, beginning with the seventeenth century. My aim is to discuss the contradictory aims of the Red A.I.R. project and the perception that creativity is the answer to the bristling bouquet of issues plaguing the district.

Historical Notes: Painting and Prostitution

In analyzing Amsterdam’s Red Light District and the services it provides, one might be tempted to begin with the contestable psychoanalytical notion that (sexual) desire is predicated on lack, or the craving for some impossible object of fulfillment. Prostitution effectively inverts this axiom by making the seemingly unobtainable readily available for a price, so that transactions between johns and

hookers render the impossible object of desire fully attainable, thereby temporarily satisfying drives and impulses with straightforward lust fulfillment. As one blogger explained in a post from 2010 titled 'Dating Amsterdam Prostitutes', he 'really enjoys the no-strings-attached screw ... the fast-forward-to-the-juicy-bits [of the] semi-anonymous ... fuck, [and] the freedom from social and emotional monitoring that comes along with purchased whoopee.' As he goes on to explain, it 'is a different and pleasant feeling that is also beautiful and nice now and again', yet he feels oddly compelled to refer euphemistically to purchasing sex as 'dating an Amsterdam prostitute who feels well-paid'.

Amsterdam has long been known as a center where sex with strangers is on offer for a price. According to Reuters Online, 'prostitutes have plied their wares in the narrow alleys of the old center of Amsterdam for centuries ... [where] they used to attract sailors and merchants in the city's heyday as the heart of a global trading empire' (Thomasson). For hundreds of years, seamen arriving in Amsterdam stopped first in the port to make a sexual transaction before penetrating into various arteries of the city where more legitimate trade and commerce would be conducted. This tradition of exchange is so deeply embedded in the culture that the expression '*ouwehoeren*', or 'old whoring', is still commonly used in Dutch to refer to idle verbal intercourse.

The brothel and the procuress were also frequent subjects of seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings that featured the popular music houses, or '*musicos*' ('*speelhuizen*') where men could gamble, drink, dance, and enjoy the company of available young women. Located primarily in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, these settings for merry companies 'were schools of vice, just as home was the great school of virtue' (Schama 467). It was here that one found a world of drunkenness, immoderation, and carnality that 'inverted humanism's domestic norms [of] cleanliness, honesty, comfort, sobriety and moderation' (Schama 467).

These upside-down seventeenth-century microcosms boasted a workforce of girls, many of whom had traveled to Amsterdam to ply their trade as seamstresses, knitters, or lace makers only to become part of a rowdy anti-family, conducting business in a reversed version of domesticity. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, these young women who had started out as migrant textile workers were subject to incarceration in the Spinhuis, where they were put to work spinning or knitting as punishment for prostitution. While these unfortunate women were incarcerated in the Spinhuis, upstanding citizens could pay money to stand and peer in at them, just as they had captured titillating glimpses of them working as prostitutes in houses of pleasure or in genre paintings.

When Mandeville visited Amsterdam early in the eighteenth century, he concluded that brothels were tolerated in certain zones so that 'honest housewives might go unmolested by what would otherwise be the uncontrollable licentiousness of the maritime population' (qtd. in Schama 467). The government, he wrote, is 'always endeavouring, though unable, to suppress what it actually tolerates' (467), whereby the upstanding and the derelict maintained a kind of mutually beneficial interdependence. According to Simon Schama, this was typical of Dutch seventeenth-century 'moral pluralism', whereby virtue and vice are permitted to coexist for the 'sake of effective social management', resulting in a 'prophylactic

9.2. Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out* (ca. 1663).
(Courtesy of Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

approach to civic morality' (468). Hence it was the very presence of a segregated, corrupted, inverted world order – or underground – that made it possible to maintain the ostensible virtue, cleanliness, and thrift of the rest of society.

Until very recently, these two realms continued to co-exist in Amsterdam in remarkably unchanged intimacy, which is why, according to art historian Svetlana Alpers, Amsterdam bordellos have been constructed 'on the model of the domestic house' (64). In 1987 Schama wrote of the coziness of red-light establishments in Amsterdam, and their gaudy version of '*gezelligheid*' (coziness) that amounts to a 'travest[y] of the Dutch bourgeois household or the bric-a-brac bibelot shop, full of knickknackery, lace curtains, ... and potted plants' (467). Similarly, in his 1984 novel *Small World*, David Lodge remarked that two things prevented the Amsterdam traffic in prostitutes from being merely sordid:

The first was that the interiors of the houses were spotlessly clean, and furnished in a cosy petit-bourgeois style, with upholstered chairs, embroidered antimacassars, potted plants, and immaculate linen turned down on the bed that could usually be glimpsed at the rear. The second thing was that ... the women were ... in many cases ... passing their time in the homely occupation of knitting. (201)

According to Lodge, one was still able in 1984 to glimpse a prospective scene of lust through the petit-bourgeois interiors of the Red Light District, just as one suddenly spots the copulating dogs in Van Mieris's otherwise tame and tidy brothel scene of 1658.

9.3. Frans van Mieris de Oude, *Bordeelscène* (1658). (Courtesy of Mauritshuis Museum)

For some time then, historians and art historians, including Svetlana Alpers, have concurred that Amsterdam has tolerated vice and a booming underground at its very hearth and heart as a means of preserving ‘good women’s virtue’ and civic hygiene (Schama 467-8). It was also here in the seventeenth century that the economic necessity of maintaining a thriving port, open to unseemliness as well as to wealth, and the moral imperative of nurturing a decent, hardworking citizenry, became the subject of copious genre paintings (such as Van Mieris’s pictured here above) that circulated in a booming free art market. As recorded in the travelogues of those who visited Amsterdam in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, homes of the wealthy and the lower classes alike were festooned with affordable paintings, as were taverns, brothels, butchers, bakers, and even stables. ‘Such is the generall Notion, enclination and delight that these Countrie Natives have to Painting’, wrote one traveler of the Dutch in 1640, that pictures seemed to cover every available surface in private homes and public places (qtd. in Fuchs 42). Therefore, given the imperative, or privilege, of producing saleable art for the market, artists who no longer relied solely on wealthy patrons produced genre paintings intended to intrigue and titillate the virtuous while providing a point of identification for purveyors of vice, as both were now potential buyers.

Re-Writing Heritage, Re-Branding the City

Some claim that Amsterdam has been famous for prostitution for 800 years, and indeed the city's red-light districts have been prophylactically located in the same areas at least since the fifteenth century. The geographic stability of the red-light districts – and particularly of the world-famous Wallen – coupled with the deep cultural embeddedness of prostitution to which I have been referring, make it a powerful urban signifier and a huge tourist draw. Yet while prostitution has organically become an essential part of the city's identity, Amsterdam is currently engaged in a campaign to re-brand itself as part of a new kind of 'global trading empire', under the English-language slogan 'I Amsterdam'. While this slogan seems to imply that everyone belongs in Amsterdam – that I, too, am Amsterdam – the city's branding makeover campaign involves re-purposing all of the red-light districts, and thereby necessitating the partial exclusion of one particular class of the city's citizens, namely the prostitutes themselves.

Since 2007 the city has been concertedly acquiring and reselling buildings in the district to commercial developers, and has launched a program to replace a number of the windows where prostitutes were formerly on display with chic apartments, upmarket shops, galleries, and high-quality hotels and restaurants, along with outlets for young fashion designers. Although the extent of the gentrification and its impact has, as yet, been neither fully assessed nor achieved, Charles Geerts, who sold 18 of his properties in 2007, claimed that there were 250 windows in the city and that the sale of his 18 buildings meant the loss of 51 windows, or 20% of the Red Light District's venues. Former mayor Job Cohen announced plans to halve the number of brothels, and estimated that the 51 windows the city had taken over amounted to one-third of the total.

But there have been obvious and predictable objections to this grand-scale gentrification. For example, Mariska Majoor, a former prostitute who now runs an information center in the Red Light District, asks 'where the women should go' and fears that hundreds of women would be put out of work or forced 'underground' were the district disintegrated and replaced with standard tourist fare ('Window Brothels'). Metje Blaak, who runs a support group for prostitutes, has stated that without the exposure and ostensible protection afforded by the windows, prostitutes 'may end up in a back room somewhere where we can't reach them' ('Window Brothels'). Blaak sees the clean-up as 'a big mistake' since, without the windows which have now taken on a sort of reverse panoptical function, no one could 'keep tabs on the women by looking at the windows to see if they are there' ('Window Brothels').

The other, perhaps more obvious, objection to the complete dissolution of the Red Light District, is that Amsterdam relies heavily on tourism and this sector accounts for about 70 million euros a year. So the question that arises is this: what is a city to do, faced with increasingly unfavorable attitudes toward human trafficking and forced to compete with other cities that have joined the second wave of experience economics? How does a city appeal to consumers in a race to offer high-class, emotional experiences while competing with the kind of aggressive urban branding going on in other cities and tourist destinations?

What Amsterdam, like many other cultural capitals, has to offer is, according to Zukin in *Naked City*, ‘an authentic *experience* of local character [which] becomes a local *brand*’ (121). In this case, however, a major part of that local character is an 800-year-old reputation for a particular brand of ‘sleaze’, which does not appeal to family tourism and high-end visitors, nor does it sit comfortably with a number of feminist and political concerns. As just noted, the strategy thus far has been one of half measures involving moving other kinds of businesses into the Red Light District, and advising visitors to ‘take a walk there nowadays, and you can admire Dutch couture next door to the well-known girls of pleasure’ (HTNK). But while the hope is that the Red Light District will become an international hotspot for design tourists, when asked about this development, Majoor replied that ‘the story about the fashion industry coming to the Red Light District is laughable. This is definitely not going to turn into some wonderful Walt Disney story’ (qtd. in ‘Amsterdam to Clean Up’).

I would hasten to raise another objection, however, that has nothing to do with commercialization, Disneyfication, or authenticity, and everything to do with the basic dynamics of attracting and assisting tourism. As it is well known, travellers and indeed customers of all kinds use their ‘cognitive maps’ – and their expectations – to guide them from one axis or hub of interest (i.e., a red-light district) to the next. Once internalized, these points or markers help visitors to navigate any city with the confidence of a ‘sleep-walker feeling safe and at home’ (Mikunda 18). This is why axes, hubs, mnemonic points, and districts have become part of every ‘experience world’ and most cities in the branding race map space to assist visitors as they navigate.

Interestingly enough, this is what Amsterdam’s city gentrification project has avoided doing with the Red Light District by adding clothing designers and other kinds of venues to the mix. Hence, while the ‘randy sailors’ to which the *World’s Greatest Cities* referred above now find it difficult to find the Red Light District, other tourists not interested in the sex trade are often surprised to turn a corner and find themselves confronted suddenly with a woman in a g-string in a red-lit window. In other words, this move to mix offerings would appear to go against the grain of standard city-branding techniques designed to guide visitors comfortably from one experience location to the next.

Artists, Pimps, and Whores

In one online article that discussed what to do with the Red Light District, bizarrely entitled ‘How to Turn Prostitutes into Artists’, the author asks, ‘if your city is overrun with prostitutes, what do you do?’. The answer, it goes on to explain, is simple: ‘just replace them with artists.’ In the RED A.I.R. project, the government has joined forces with private enterprises to install artists temporarily in bordello spaces, and to replace prostitutes in windows with artists and the products of their creativity. The goal is to turn the Red Light District into an artistic area like SoHo, the East Village, or Chelsea. Yet in the face of all the new space that gentrification has created, artist Niels Vis lamented, ‘It feels a bit like

9.4. Designer dress shop next to a brothel in Amsterdam's Red Light District.
(Photo: Tess Jungblut)

we pushed the prostitutes out. Only one prostitute window is left on the Korsjespoortsteeg' (qtd. in 'Amsterdam Brothels'). Similarly, Laurence Aëgerter, who was involved with RED A.I.R. and was originally assigned Korsjespoortsteeg 23, chose not to use the space as a studio, but rather as a place to question her role as an artist in the city's political plans for the gentrification of Amsterdam. In other words, this attempt to repurpose the district seems to have resulted in anger, frustration, and discontent on the part of artists and sex workers alike.

Yet in spite of all the somewhat predictable objections, the notion of throwing artists and prostitutes together is based on a tacit yet popular tradition that links the two, at least since artists began explicitly painting prostitutes in the seventeenth century. This carries through to the nineteenth century and the romantic concept of the starving artist sharing urban space with prostitutes and bohemians, hence Toulouse-Lautrec's supposedly authentic renderings of prostitutes, and the use made of prostitutes as models by academic painters such as Gérôme and Manet. Yet I would like to suggest that there is a deeper, subtler similarity or association to be made between these two professions, which emerges when erotics and aesthetics are commercialized in Western culture.

Between 1946 and 1949, Georges Bataille wrote *La part maudite*, in which he elaborated on Marcel Mauss's *Essai sur le don* (Essay on the Gift) of 1922. In particular Bataille was interested in 'potlatch', a premodern form of economic exchange that Mauss had heard existed among people like the Haida natives of British Columbia, involving a meeting of tribes in which one tribe gives enor-

mous gifts to the other without any clear reciprocal arrangement. Although goods certainly do circulate and come back, Mauss contrasted this form of economic exchange with modern forms that have now replaced it in so-called developed nations where utility and accumulation are the backbone of economy. For Bataille, although potlatch economics have been supplanted by notions of utility in modern societies, he argues that instances of potlatch break through economic regulation in the form of seemingly non-utilitarian expenditure such as fireworks which cost a great deal of money but produce nothing but sensual enjoyment; unsanctioned, non-procreative sexuality; and aesthetic production that has no aim other than to be visually pleasing. This might help to explain why we tend to think, deep down, that recreational sexuality and artistic production should be 'free' of the workaday world and that artists should live hand-to-mouth on grants, producing 'priceless' works of art. This is why, when erotics and aesthetics start to look like business, as in the sex trade or the art market, we tend to invent figures that make it all seem okay, like the whore with the heart of gold who would really give it away if she only could, or the starving artist who dies penniless in the name of Beauty.

Andy Warhol is one famous artist who challenged this notion, claiming that he wanted to be 'an Art Businessman or a Business Artist', and that his fantasy was to one day overhear someone saying 'There goes the richest person in the world', as he walked by. He also claimed that he would not be happy until all museums had become department stores, and his own career began with commercial window dressing in New York in the late 1950s. In a similar vein, Claes Oldenburg periodically presented exhibitions titled *The Store* at his storefront studio on New York's Lower East Side, for which he would fill the space with manufactured objects he bought and coated sloppily with commercial enamel paint.

But the relationship between art and the department store got underway long before Warhol, with the opening of Le Bon Marché in Paris in 1852, designed by L.C. Boileu and Gustav Eiffel, which featured impressive architecture embellished with priceless masterpieces. Five years later, Macy's opened in the United States with elaborate displays of commodities, fashions, and fine art, and in 1913 the Gimbel brothers took to displaying Cézannes, Picassos, Braques, Constables, Reynolds, Turners and even the occasional Titian in their stores alongside goods and in their impressive window displays. The path of influence between the department store window and the modern gallery became blatantly reciprocal in 1914 when the Metropolitan Museum of Art hired Richard Bach to develop commercial products, and again in 1927 when the Met co-sponsored an exhibition at Macy's devoted to modern art and sales (Taylor, 33-34). More recently Thomas Hoving, a former director of the Met, hired Gene Moore, whose Tiffany's window displays had made him famous, thereby inverting Warhol's notion of turning the store window into a museum by turning the museum into a store window.

Moreover the practice of window shopping is modern, commercial, and aesthetic at the same time and is entirely predicated on the invention of plate glass late in the eighteenth century. While urban centers had been bristling with com-

mercial markers and signage since the middle ages, the display window made the sumptuous arrangement of goods and art objects possible, coalescing in the erotic desire for consumption, hence the French expression '*lèche-vitrine*' for window shopping, meaning literally to 'lick the store window'. In red-light districts, the powerful display afforded by the technology that produced plate glass moves the window shopper's desire along the libidinal scale from consumption to consummation. And by placing artists' work in red-lit windows, the developers who choose to do so, whether consciously or not, are effectively reiterating the tradition of merging libidinal and aesthetic economies, while reinforcing the developments I have been outlining here.

Plate glass also had a serious impact on the urban experience of the stroller or, in Walter Benjamin's terms, the thoroughly modern figure of the *flâneur*. For Benjamin the modern urban experience entailed being subjected to a constant barrage of images, announcements, and advertisements, and this ultimately led to a new kind of consciousness and aesthetic vision. According to Anne Friedberg, the shop window is quite literally a show window, so that 'from the middle of the nineteenth century, ... the shop window succeeded the mirror as a site of identity construction, and then – gradually – the shop window was displaced and incorporated by the cinema screen' (66). In other words, the shop window becomes our experience of the aesthetic, and as city-branders know, the trick is to keep pedestrians moving from one highly emotional and enhanced point of purchase to the next, by means of landmarks, concept lines, axes, hubs, mnemonic points, and areas such as the Red Light District. All of this is calculated to provide tourists with a compelling, emotional experience as well as one that is thoroughly commercialized. In short, the casual stroll has now become part of what economists refer to as the 'financialization of everyday life', whereby every aspect of our lives has been colonized by pricing, commodification, instruments of credit, insurance, and points of sale (Martin).

In this regard, it is interesting to contemplate the notion of a red-light chain that would form part of the new Amsterdam brand, with standardized prices for various services, so that the pre-modern, romanticized practice of haggling, which bloggers claim is still a part of paying for sex, would be entirely eliminated. Recall the blogger with whom I began, who insisted on referring to paid sexual transactions as 'dating', thereby returning this intimacy to the order of the gift exchange, at least in his imagination. Indeed, we have a knee-jerk reaction to the notion that every nook and cranny of our existence is susceptible to being standardized and financialized, just as we are loath to face the commerciality of art. In a similar vein, Pierre van Rossum, one of the clean-up campaign's project managers, described a butcher who ran a few brothel rooms on the side. 'He was selling cold meat and warm flesh at the same time', van Rossum explains, invoking once again the hominess of the seventeenth-century brothel which co-existed with and supplied the 'decent' household, thereby acting as a bastion of domesticity ('Window Brothels').

And finally, consider Love Club Thai 21, whose owner invited a journalist inside, saying 'come see, we are a normal business', before giving the reporter a tour of his small office, fitted with a computer, a washing machine, and a row of

drying towels – hardly the romantic image of an old-timey bordello. Similarly unromantic was the club owner's insistence that Love Club Thai 21 'ha[s] a license' and 'pay[s] taxes' (qtd. in Thomasson). As the city mayor insists that he does not want 'to get rid of prostitution entirely, since it is part of the area's history and a major tourist draw for the city' (qtd. in Thomasson), the status of the Red Light District, how it is marketed and its uneasy fit with the 'I Amsterdam' brand is likely to become increasingly complex.

Conclusion

Since I began research on the Red Light District, there have been countless developments associated with the city's ongoing efforts to gentrify this dynamic historic neighborhood. For example, I participated in an 'Inspiring Cities' workshop organized in 2010 by an international network for cities and culture whose goal was 'searching for the soul of the city', by which, in this case, they meant the Red Light District. Also in 2010 the Amsterdam Historical Museum, under the curatorship of Annemarie de Wildt, hosted an exhibit entitled 'The Hoerengracht'. This enormous installation, created by American artists Ted and Nancy Kienholz between 1983 and 1988, measured over 13 by 4 meters, and provided viewers with a 'walk-through reinterpretation of a section of Amsterdam's Red Light District' ('The Hoerengracht'). For Kienholz, the narrative he thought he was creating with the piece 'was supposed to make the viewer feel uncomfortable' as he or she views 'society's rejects' depicted in an 'awkward and challenging' way (qtd. in 'The Hoerengracht'). Previously, this 'world-famous' installation was on display in the National Gallery in London, where it also drew viewers in, 'to peer into the windows and doorways in order to discover the secrets concealed within' this 'superb example of assemblage art' and 'monument to the Wallen of the 1980s' ('The Hoerengracht').

Whether the installation, safely on view as a simulacrum of one of Amsterdam's neighborhoods in the city's own historical museum, manages an effective critique or celebration of the Red Light District is open to question. Yet however one wants to read this piece, it remains as strange and complex as the district itself. At the same time the piece also seems to herald at least one possible future fate of the Red Light District, namely that it becomes sanitized, historicized, and placed on view as a monument to a part of the city's past that, after 800 years, is ceding to urban and economic pressures to be offered as a safe tourist destination, part of the new Amsterdam brand of experience, and a reminder of its own underground past.