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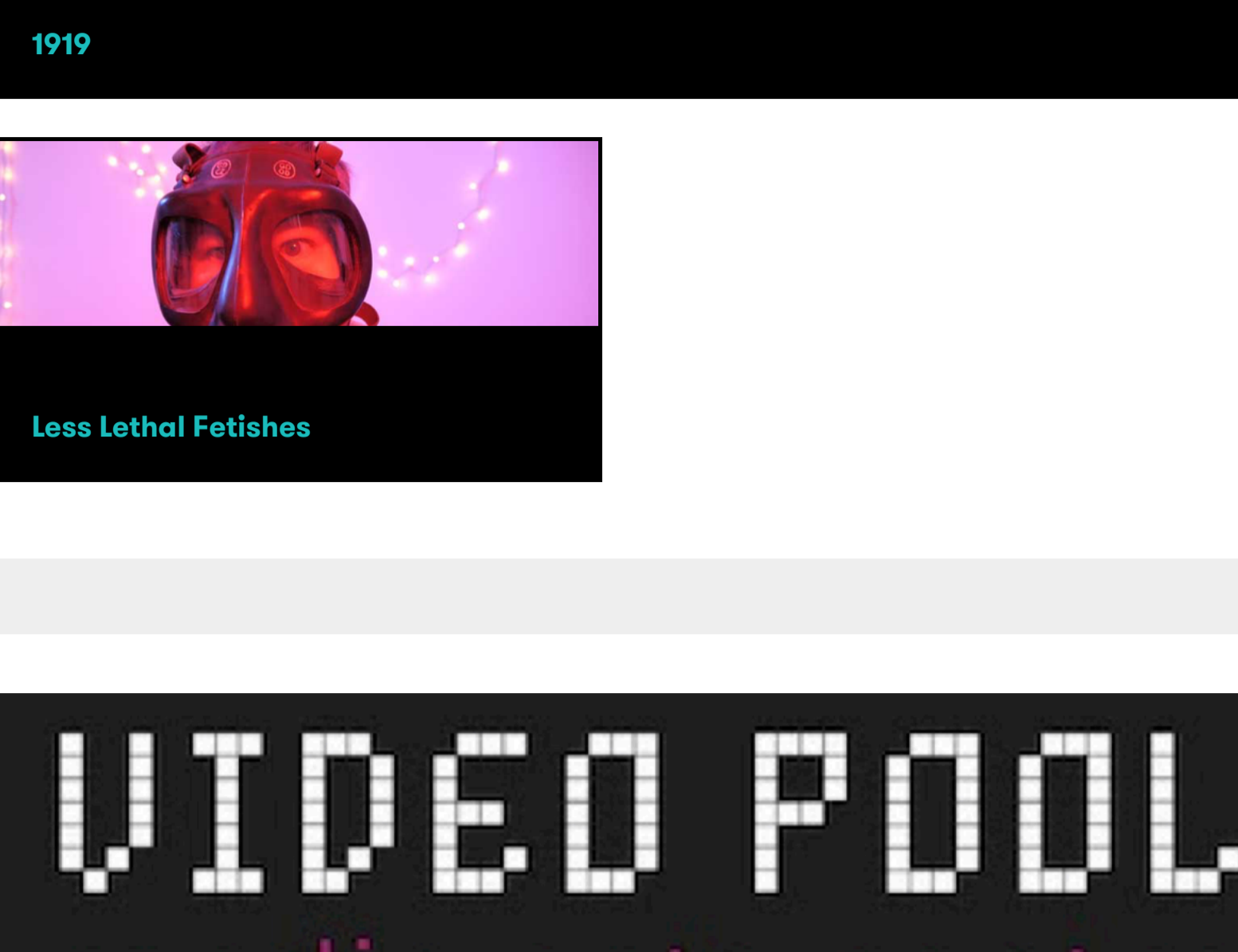
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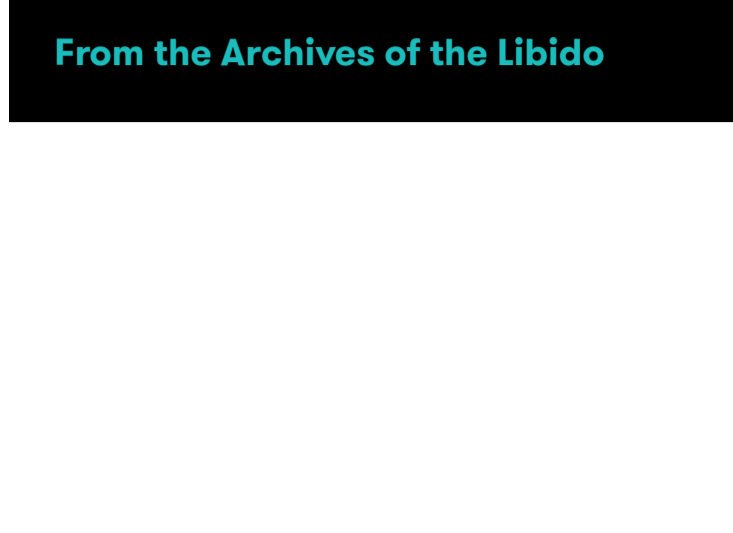
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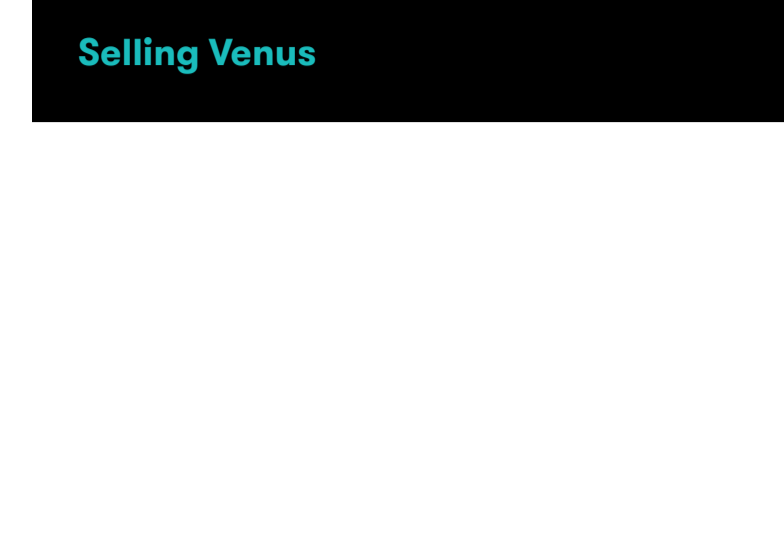
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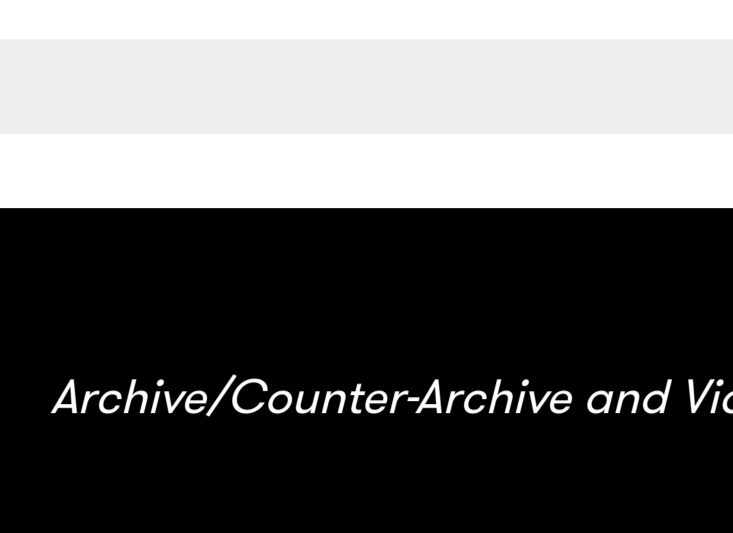
1919



videoout



Hair Cuts



From the Archives of the Libido



Selling Venus



Less Lethal Fetishies

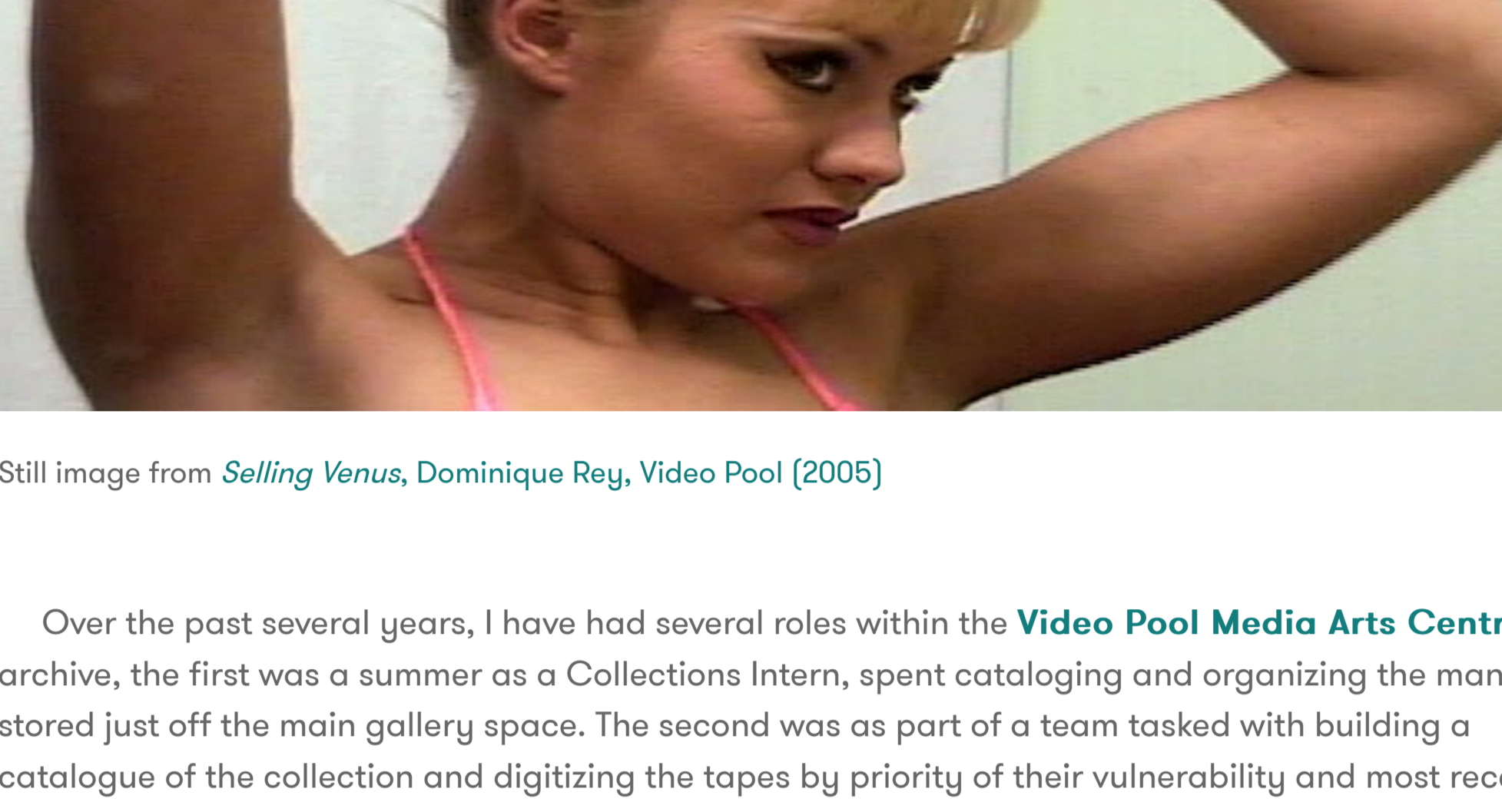
Everything is Permitted; Nothing is Possible: Desire and Labour Under Late Capitalism

Archive/Counter-Archive and Video Pool Media Arts Centre Presents.

The title of the following program of films is named for a mistranslation I once heard attributed to French Marxist Michel Clouscard, in his critique of liberalism and free markets. While I haven't been able to find a source for this citation, nor any conclusive context as to when and where it was printed, I misappropriate it here to invoke the enduring tension between capitalism, social liberty, and desire. The monopoly that consumer culture claims on pleasure conditions the belief that refusal is the only path beyond capitalism. By this logic, proponents of capitalism can neutralize dissent by appealing to the *pleasure principle*. Subjugating and manufacturing desire has proven an effective tool in naturalizing capitalisms' inevitability, as filmmaker and writer William E. Jones claims,

"sexuality can be an agent of social control, as anyone can see by turning on a television. But it also has a utopian promise."¹

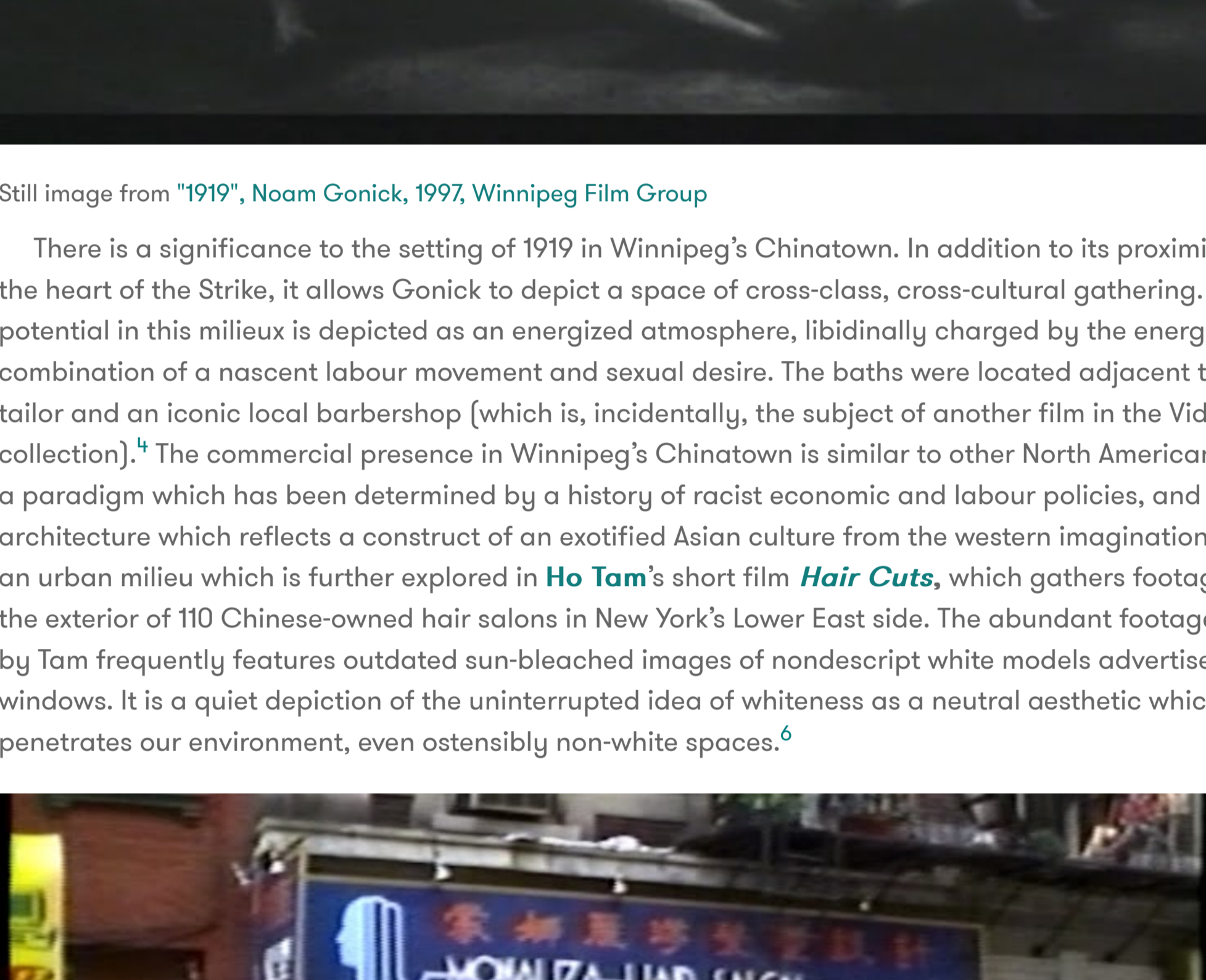
The following program of films was selected to elicit the complex relationship between capitalism and desire both in terms of the libidinal capture of consumerism, and also the utopian potential Jones refers to. In the same interview, Jones very cautiously speaks of his nostalgia for a bygone era of queerness when "sex was still able to create a space for resistance and individual/collective agency."² Produced across a span of several decades, these films express varying attitudes towards the utopian potential of sexuality against the instrumentalization of desire in neoliberalism, and the politics of both labour and sex.



Still image from 'Selling Venus', Dominique Rey, Video Pool (2005)

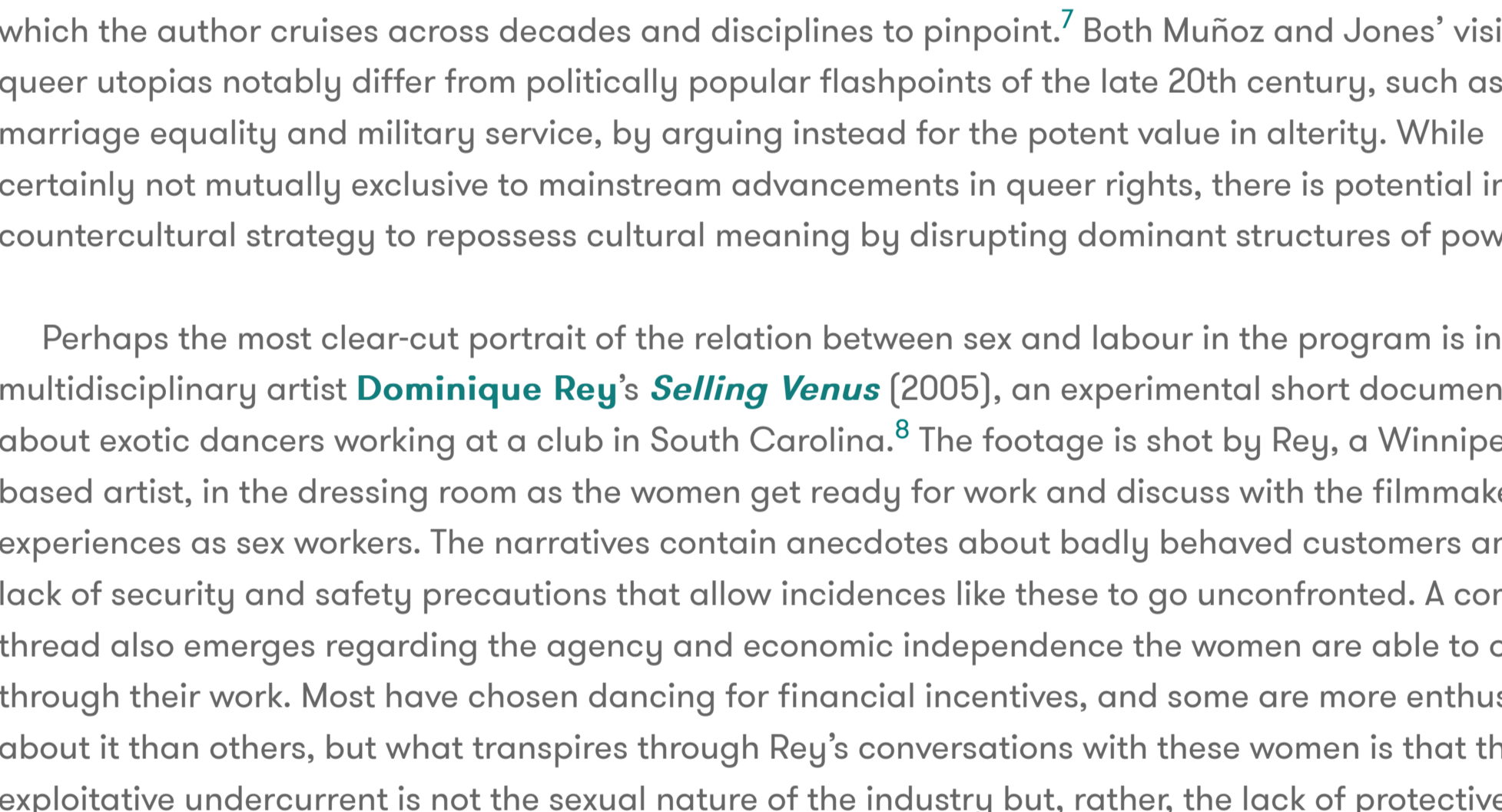
Over the past several years, I have had several roles within the **Video Pool Media Arts Centre** archive, the first was a summer as a Collections Intern, spent cataloging and organizing the many tapes stored just off the main gallery space. The second was as part of a team tasked with building a catalogue of the collection and digitizing the tapes by priority of their vulnerability and most recently as the Manager of Media Collections, caring for the physical and digital archive of films in the collection. Before it became digital the tapes were the primary vehicle of distribution, they now exist as vulnerable relics of video art made (primarily) on the prairies between the mid-1970s and the early 2000s. Bracketing the rise of neoliberalism and the crash of 2008, the tapes in the vault were produced alongside an era of social and global transformation, culminating in the demise of collective confidence in the market's self-regulatory capacity. None of the films directly address neoliberalization, nor the economic collapse, but all were produced parallel to an era of economic deregulation in which the promise of permissibility doomed succeeding generations to debt and precarity. These conditions run parallel to the themes of personal desire and sexual politics, which are prominently addressed in each of these films. Taking the paradoxical bondage elicited from Clouscard's quote, I sought out films which express video's tenuous position situated between commodity culture and social activism. The program assembled here touches on issues of desire and labour under late capitalism through a collection of work that corresponds to a period of major shifts in all three, and with a focus on Queer and Feminist perspectives.

In the century since it occurred, the **Winnipeg General Strike of 1919** has occupied a prominent space in the regional memory. Deeply embedded in the city's creative consciousness, the Strike serves as evidence of a civic predisposition to social activism that many Winnipeggers hold dear as leftist credibility in a region that is often dismissed as socially conservative. In his queer historical fiction, **1919** (1997), artist **Noam Gonick** revisits the climactic days of the infamous Strike. Set in Winnipeg's Chinatown just a few blocks away from where a streetcar was overturned at the height of the protests, the short film reauthors the history of the Strike, positioning the baths as the cradle of the action, a homosocial atmosphere where patrons congregate for sexual encounters and a nice schvitz. Gonick describes the film as "a cocktail of early twentieth-century labour politics and late twentieth-century sexual politics,"³ a combination which conjures the utopic essence alluded to by Jones by underscoring the indivisibility of queer and labour politics.



Still image from '1919', Noam Gonick, 1997, Winnipeg Film Group

There is a significance to the setting of 1919 in Winnipeg's Chinatown. In addition to its proximity to the heart of the Strike, it allows Gonick to depict a space of cross-class, cross-cultural gathering. The potential in this milieu is depicted as an energized atmosphere, libidinally charged by the energetic combination of a nascent labour movement and sexual desire. The baths were located adjacent to a tailor and an iconic local barbershop (which is, incidentally, the subject of another film in the Video Pool collection).⁴ The commercial presence in Winnipeg's Chinatown is similar to other North American cities, a paradigm which has been determined by a history of racist economic and labour policies, and architecture which reflects a construct of an exoticized Asian culture from the western imagination.⁵ It is an urban milieu which is further explored in **Ho Tam's** short film **Hair Cuts**, which gathers footage of the exterior of 110 Chinese-owned hair salons in New York's **Lower East Side**. The abundant footage shot by Tam frequently features outdated sun-bleached images of nondescript white models advertised in windows. It is a quiet depiction of the uninterrupted idea of whiteness as a neutral aesthetic which penetrates our environment, even ostensibly non-white spaces.⁶



Still image from 'Hair Cuts', Ho Tam, 1999, Video Pool Media Arts Centre

The images of these models in Tam's film are familiar in their blandness, part of a shared aesthetic lexicon which demands hyper-legibility. Images and desires that exist outside of this regime of legibility is perhaps where the latent utopian promise Jones spoke to lingers. The oft-cited author of queer utopias, scholar José Muñoz, seeks out queerness as a utopic horizon; animating fragments of the past to incubate a queer futurity based upon the moments he identifies as possessing a utopic modality, which the author cruises across decades and disciplines to pinpoint.⁷ Both Muñoz and Jones' visions of queer utopias notably differ from politically popular flashpoints of the late 20th century, such as marriage equality and military service, by arguing instead for the potent value in alterity. While certainly not mutually exclusive to mainstream advancements in queer rights, there is potential in this countercultural strategy to repossess cultural meaning by disrupting dominant structures of power.

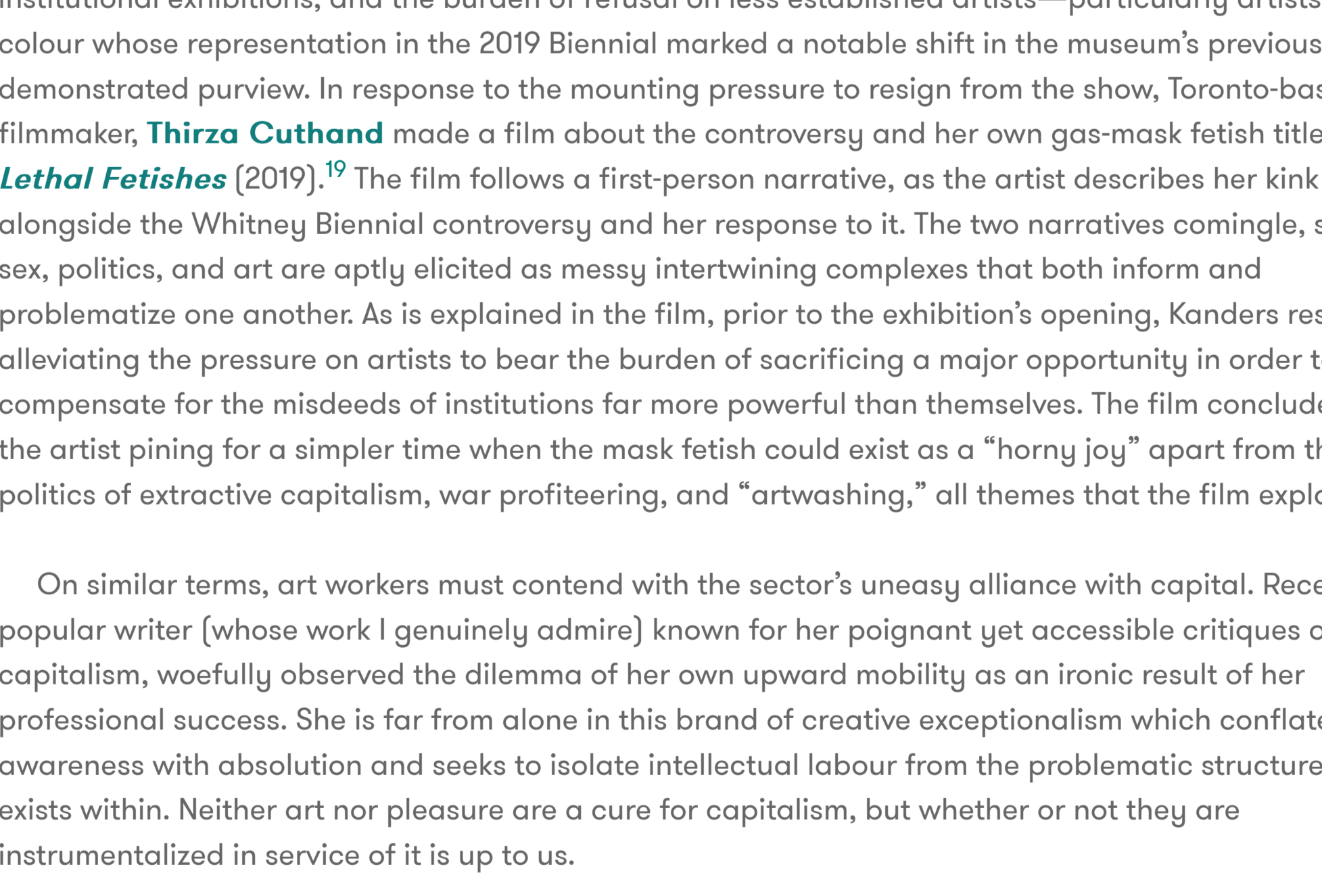
Perhaps the most clear-cut portrait of the relation between sex and labour in the program is in multidisciplinary artist **Dominique Rey's** **Selling Venus** (2005), an experimental short documentary about exotic dancers working at a club in South Carolina.⁸ The footage is shot by Rey, a filmmaker based artist, in the dressing room as the women get ready for work and discuss with the filmmaker their experiences as sex workers. The narratives contain anecdotes about badly behaved customers and the lack of security and safety precautions that allow incidences like these to go unreported. A common thread also emerges regarding the agency and economic independence the women are able to obtain through their work. Most have chosen dancing for financial incentives, and some are more enthusiastic about it than others, but what transpires through Rey's conversations with these women is that the exploitative undercurrent is not the sexual nature of the industry but, rather, the lack of protective labour practices for those who do the work.

If there is a tendency to isolate creative practice from other forms of work, perhaps this is partially to protect the aura of the artist from the decidedly unsexy realities of labour. **Joanne Bristol's** film **videoout** exposes the occupational hazards of the editing suite, claiming that "video is hard, it is the furthest thing from the erotic." However, as the film progresses, the sincerity of this statement is jeopardized by the artist's description of her practice in sensually charged language. Contradicting Bristol's claim, theorist **Laura U. Marks** explicates an electronic media's eroticism and tactility in relation to spectatorship, arguing that video forces the viewer's perception onto the texture of the media itself, guiding them to respond to the "screen as another skin."⁹ As Marks notes in another essay, since video's inception as an art form, it has been uniquely attuned to television and pop culture.¹⁰ Because of this connection, video art is especially adept at capturing the aesthetics of consumerism and instrumentalizing them for critique or subversion. While a claim like this rests on generalizations regarding the field of "video art," it seems particularly applicable to the era Bristol's film emerges out of. This is an era Marks refers to as the second generation of feminist filmmakers, focusing on pleasure over activism, not as a rejection of the political aspect of video art, but rather as a shift towards the personal as an intimate vehicle to express such politics.¹¹

Like other media arts centres across the country, Video Pool serves as an incidental archive, housing films and ephemera which might otherwise be lost to history. The extraordinary vulnerability of these archives is the subject of scholar Marusya Bociurkiw's article, published in Camera Obscura in 2016, which explores the parallel histories of media centres and 2nd wave feminist activism in Canadian cities. As Bociurkiw claims,

"thus far, this has been an archive without archivists, an era without a publicist, a history without a memory."¹²

One of the groups she profiles is the Winnipeg based outfit WAIV (Women Artists in Video), whose work is part of the Video Pool archive. Bociurkiw describes the short-lived group's style as "hybrid feminist poetics."¹³ Having spent a great deal of time in the archive, I can attest to the original tapes' embodiment of this spirit of production; many titles share a single cassette and are inconspicuously labelled with vague artist attributions. It's an example of what separates such media collections from more institutional archives, their counter-archival embrace of messiness. This approach preserves and nurtures not only the material remnants of a scene or community, but what scholar Ann Cvetkovich calls an "archive of feelings," the affective sociality of the works that exceeds the objects themselves.¹⁴



Still image from "From the Archives of the Libido", Hope Peterson, 1995, Video Pool Media Arts Centre

Co-founder of WAIV and former Video Pool employee **Hope Peterson's** 1995 film, **From the Archives of the Libido**, captures the ostensibly objective tone of archival hindsight by presenting a voice-over of a future archivist who looks back to footage of 20th century lesbian porn to observe the fetishization of such images in mainstream culture against the queer politics of the archive. The dualism—which Peterson's film presents regarding queer porn and "ersatz material" that fetishizes lesbian sex to fulfill heterosexual desire—carries of shade of this program's borrowed title, "everything is permitted; nothing is possible."¹⁵ What was once transgressive becomes acceptable, so long as it serves the cause of dominant cultural forces. Similarly, feminism is accepted so much as it conforms to a heteronormative white and middle-class paradigm. Quiescently, feminist rhetoric has entered the mainstream but is so often instrumentalized to serve "Leon In" culture, obscuring the anti-capitalist bent of theorists like Silvia Federici who directly ties the exploitation of labour to the subjugation of women's bodies.¹⁶

In July of 2019, Artforum published an article titled "**The Tear Gas Biennial**" which called on the participating artists to withdraw their work from the **2019 Whitney Biennial**.¹⁷ The demand was levelled in light of the museum's affiliation with Vice Chair of the Board of Directors, Warren R. Kanders, whose company Safariland manufactures tear-gas, a chemical weapon often used as a suppressant against protesters and asylum seekers.¹⁸ Following the article, eight artists very publicly withdrew from the exhibition. Prior to this, discussions had already been taking place around the politics of participating in institutional exhibitions, and the burden of refusal on less established artists—particularly artists of colour whose representation in the 2019 Biennial marked a notable shift in the museum's previously demonstrated purview. In response to the mounting pressure to resign from the show, Toronto-based filmmaker, **Thirza Cuthand** made a film about the controversy and her own gas-mask fetish titled, **Less Lethal Fetishies** (2019).¹⁹ The film follows a first-person narrative, as the artist describes her kink alongside the Whitney Biennial controversy and her response to it. The two narratives comingle, so that sex, politics, and art are aptly elicited as messy intertwining complexes that both inform and alleviate the pressure on artists to bear the burden of sacrificing a major opportunity in order to compensate for the misdeeds of institutions far more powerful than themselves. The film concludes with the artist pining for a simpler time when the mask fetish could exist as a "horny joy" apart from the politics of extractive capitalism, war profiteering, and "artwashing," all themes that the film explores.

On a similar terms, art workers must contend with the sector's uneasy alliance with capital. Recently, a popular writer [whose work I genuinely admire] known for her poignant yet accessible critiques of late capitalism, woeefully observed the dilemma of her own upward mobility as an ironic result of her professional success. She is far from alone in this brand of creative exceptionalism which conflates awareness with absolution and seeks to isolate intellectual labour from the problematic structures it exists within. Neither art nor pleasure are a cure for capitalism, but whether or not they are instrumentalized in service of it is up to us.

- Essay by Madeline Bogoch

- Madeline shares special thanks to Dr. May Chew, her thesis supervisor.

CITATIONS

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- Ann Cvetkovich, "In the Archives of Lesbian Feelings: Documentary and Popular Culture" Camera Obscura vol. 49 no.1 (2002): 112.
- Peterson uses the phrase "ersatz material" in her synopsis of the film.
- While broadly referencing Federici's oeuvre, I am particularly referring to her 2004 text Caliban and the Witch throughout which this point is explored extensively.
- Hannah Black, Ciaran Finlayson, and Tobi Haslett, "The Tear Gas Biennial," Artforum, July 17, 2019, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/a-statement-from-hannah-black-ciaran-finlayson-and-tobi-haslett-on-warren-kanders-and-the-2019-whitney-biennial-80328>
- Black and Finlayson, Haslett, "The Tear Gas Biennial."
- The phrase "less lethal" has been used frequently by Safariland to rationalize their production of tear-gas canisters.

ABOUT THE CURATOR: MADELINE BOGOCH

Madeline Bogoch is a writer and programmer based in Treaty One territory/Winnipeg, MB whose work is focused primarily on experimental moving-image practices. She is the Manager of Media Collections at Video Pool Media Arts Centre, part of the programming committee for the Winnipeg Underground Film Festival (WUFF), and has additionally curated screenings with Vtape and Video Pool Media Arts Centre.

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