

PHOTOGRAPHY

Sophia Giovannitti's performance art unpacks gender, ownership & the erotic

Sophia Giovannitti's new solo show examines self-commodification and the power dynamics behind her conceptual performances.

BY [CHRISTINA ELIA](#) | 30.9.22

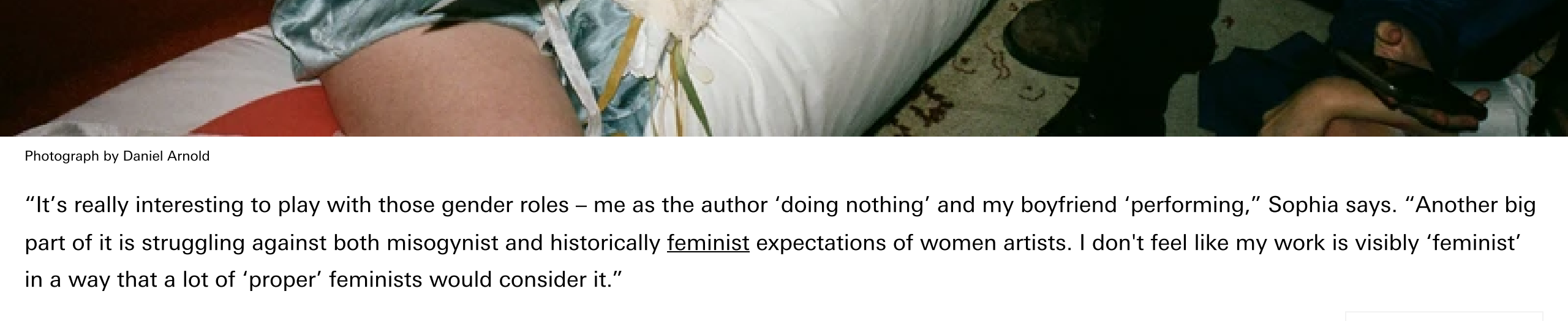
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The artist Sophia Giovannitti's boyfriend welds a white bed frame into a sculpture, as she sits alongside him in an alleyway, embodying the role of the author and viewer, muse and [artist](#). She is nearing the culmination of her six-hour performance piece, titled *A Machine*, when we meet during the off-site opening of her newest [solo show](#) with DUPLEX Art, *Study 4: Collateral*.

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A Machine subverts gendered expectations of labour, recalling Robert Morris's 1964 tour de force work *Site*, first performed with the visual artist Carolee Schneemann, who sat like the subject of Edouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) behind sheets of plywood that Robert moved, first to unveil – and then hide her – from view. Sophia's [conceptual](#) practice thrives on these layers of self-referentiality – a meta exploration of the work that surrounds the work.



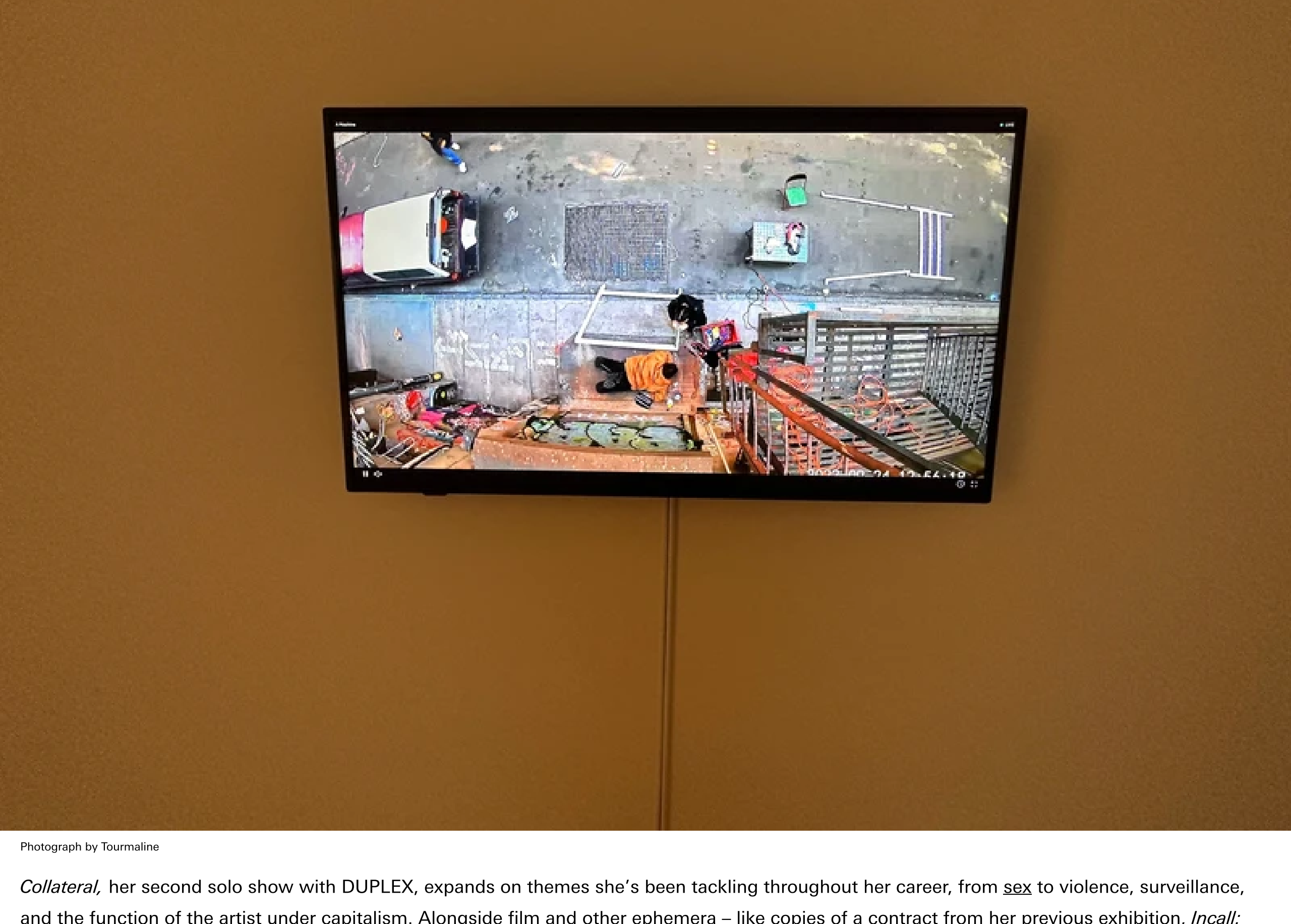
Photograph by Daniel Arnold

"It's really interesting to play with those gender roles – me as the author 'doing nothing' and my boyfriend 'performing,'" Sophia says. "Another big part of it is struggling against both misogynist and historically [feminist](#) expectations of women artists. I don't feel like my work is visibly 'feminist' in a way that a lot of 'proper' feminists would consider it."

During the performance, her short film *A Monopoly On Violence* also plays inside at [PPOW Gallery](#), alongside a live camera feed that showcases an aerial view of the alleyway she sits in during *A Machine*. The film is a philosophical rumination on state-sanctioned force and how "someone has to hold the gun" in every [marketplace](#), as stated in her poetic voiceover. "I'm super open to commodifying myself as an artist," Sophia says. "A huge genesis for a lot of my work is the idea of leaning into commodifying myself, then resisting. To me, an artist in a marketplace is themselves a commodity. You can only lean in or lean out to varying degrees."

Miles Greenberg is embracing the surreal through performance

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Photograph by Tourmaline

Collateral, her second solo show with DUPLEX, expands on themes she's been tackling throughout her career, from [sex](#) to violence, surveillance, and the function of the artist under capitalism. Alongside film and other ephemera – like copies of a contract from her previous exhibition, *Local: Study 2: Contract*, which was appointment-only and required visitors to pay a \$1,000 fee – the exhibit showcases a selection of ten captivating photographs, some [self-portraits](#), and others captured by photographer Daniel Arnold. It's all part of an ongoing, collaborative dialogue about "how to make performance and conceptual art more legible," according to Sophia, who's fascinated by the minutiae of power dynamics and working [relationships](#).

"My work is also about figuring out what kind of records I want to show and addressing questions like 'is a photograph of a performance piece a distinct piece from the performance?' The experience of having my photo taken while I'm performing is also conceptually part of my process," Sophia says. "The negotiation and all of the facets surrounding the photography practice become my focus, and what I then produce more work out of."

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Photograph by Daniel Arnold

For her past performance *Failure As Form*, pictured in a few of the photos, the artist celebrated an off-site opening at The Bowery Hotel for her show *Contract*. Reading aloud from her chapbook while sitting cozily on a hotel bed, Sophia later stained her guests' own chapbooks with drops of her blood, making the scene resemble some sort of [mystical](#) initiation ritual. Other intimate shots from *Collateral* show her at DUPLEX when *Contract* was on view, inside a white room consisting of nothing but a canopy bed and some stools. In one fuzzy image, Sophia becomes a mere blur in the background as the bed takes centre stage.

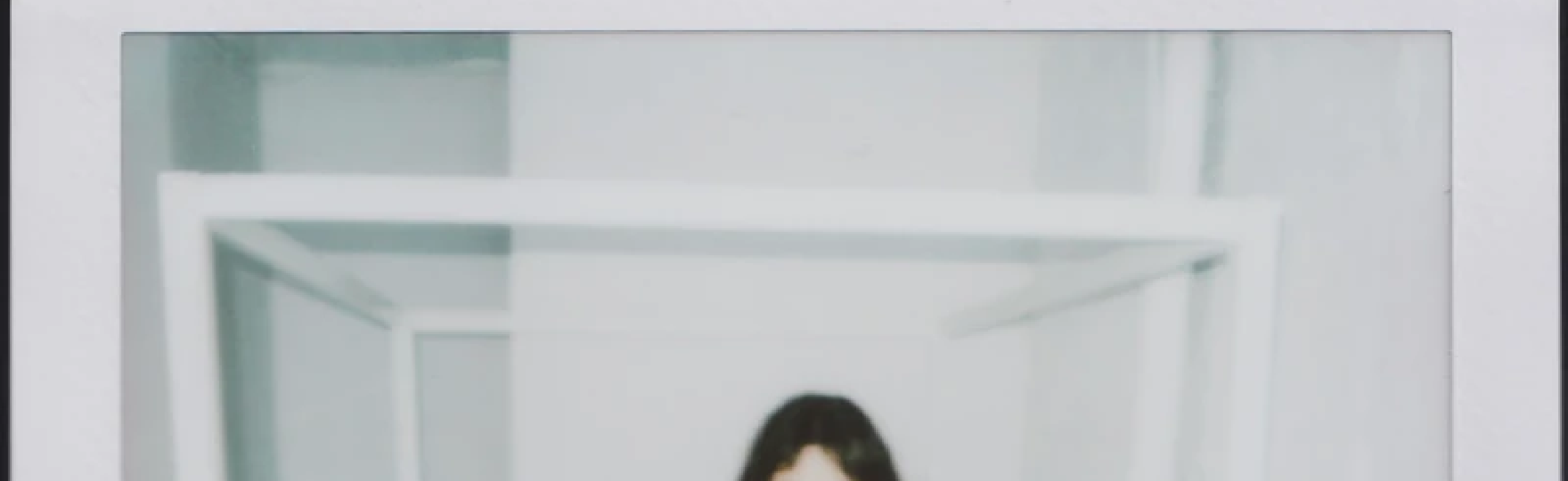
"With a lot of work that deals with [sex](#) or anything potentially salacious, it's really easy for that to become the visual focus. Whereas a lot of what I do is site-specific and how sites change when different things occur in them," Sophia says. "What does it mean to have a bed in a [hotel room](#) versus a bed in a gallery space? What does it mean to be in a room with a bed with someone who is just coming to interview you? What are the dynamics at play there?"

The downtown curator nurturing New York's community roots



Photograph by Daniel Arnold

Set to be released in the spring of 2023 by Verso Books, Sophia's forthcoming book, *Working Girl*, further explores the similarities between selling art and selling sex through her experience as a sex worker. Both industries capitalise on creativity, desire, and [authenticity](#), she argues, harking back to her examination of self-commodification in *Collateral*. "Ultimately, the show is called *Collateral* because I believe whatever object someone buys is often a stand-in for something else that person wants," Sophia says. "Whether it's cultural capital or actual capital." Through the show, she's continuing to toy with the idea of creating tangible art for collectors, and by extension, selling her likeness as a collectible.



Polaroid by Sophia Giovannitti

"I wasn't always so comfortable in front of the camera," she explains. "There's a part of me that still feels weird imagining someone having intimate [self-portraits](#) of me in their house or warehouse or whatever. And then there's another part thinking, 'well, that's none of my business.'"

Study 4: Collateral is on view at Duplex Art until October 16th, 2022.

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