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Short project description

The link between sex work and technology extends back to classical Greece, where all prostitution fell under the domain of the goddess Aphrodite. The *pornai* (the 'streetwalker' class of prostitutes) walked the dusty streets of Athens. In one early hack, they put tacks on the bottom of their sandals to leave footprints with the words "Follow Me" written in the earth. This inspired the *Platforms* project: contemporary silver leather sandals with built-in safety, video and GPS technologies that link the wearer to emergency services and an online community network. This functionality is based on extensive social research and interviews with sex workers and their allies.

The *Platforms* sandals, the latest series of work in the ongoing *Aphrodite Project*, have been presented in gallery installations, performances, panel discussions and screenings internationally. They are social sculptures: interactive, wearable devices that are a conceptual homage to the cult of the Greek goddess Aphrodite, as well as practical objects for the contemporary sex worker and vehicles for public dialogue. An integrated system of shoes and online services, *Platforms* sandals use the latest technology to improve the working conditions of sex workers. Implicit in this gesture is an acknowledgement of sex work as comparable to those socially and culturally esteemed public professions that likewise engage risk in order to serve a community's needs.

Platforms websites

<http://theaphroditeproject.tv>

(project website with blog, project description, etc.)

<http://sexygpsshoes.com>

(brochure site with PSA)

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/platforms/sets>

(most recent images of shoes and performances)

<http://projectwalkway.com>

(shoe hacking workshop with Eyebeam's Girls Eye View program)



Full project description

As an artist I have explored female sexuality and its contrary relationship to contemporary culture. *The Aphrodite Project*, which I began in 2000, took me to Cyprus on a Fulbright Fellowship to explore the cult of Aphrodite in both antiquity and present-day contexts. Early on during my research I discovered that in addition to Aphrodite's well-known association with the control of human love, both men and women worshipped her influence over nature, fertility, seafaring, and civic harmony, as well as raw sexuality. Temples to Aphrodite were built across the ancient world, and her priestesses would often perform sexual acts both in homage to her, and as a sacrifice for the fertility of the land and its people. Because Aphrodite's power was broad in scope, the prostitution of her priestesses was intrinsically tied to religion, ritual, and public policy. It was seen as a social service and legitimate commerce. It was practiced openly at places of worship, and was taxed and legislated, making prostitutes a vital part of city life.

All prostitution fell under the domain of Aphrodite, whether the workers were priestesses, high-end escorts or common streetwalkers. There are numerous

references that describe the prostitute-priestesses and *hetairai* (courtesans) of antiquity as beautiful women bedecked in fine clothes and jewels. Other sex workers included the *auletrides*, who would lure men with their flutes, and the *pornai* or *chamaitype* (literally translated as "earth beaters") who would walk the dusty streets. One of the most compelling descriptions of prostitutes in antiquity is of their sandals, which would leave footprints with "Follow Me" written in the earth.

The Aphrodite Project: Platforms is an interactive artwork created for modern day prostitutes who work the streets. The main components of *Platforms* are sandals that combine the rich mythology of Aphrodite with the concerns of contemporary streetwalkers: safety, advertising/promotion, and community. The sandals are a sexy yet practical platform-style shoe large enough to accommodate an LCD color screen, as well as the requisite electronics for safety and communications features. Social and technical research to assess and meet the needs of user groups in urban areas around the globe continues, and is a significant aspect of the project.

The Platform 001 sandals feature video artwork inspired by the Cypriot landscape, including pink roses, rock doves, and classical forms. The wearer or other artists can later personalize these videos. A video overlay with a phone number, email address, and other customizable graphics is included for promotion. A speaker in the back of the heel plays audio tracks of environmental phenomena associated with Aphrodite: the sound of the ocean at Petra tou Romiou (Aphrodite's birthplace), the waterfall from the Baths of Aphrodite in Cyprus, and the cooing of pigeons and other birds. Audio and visual media, such as new heel tones, are available to download from the *Platforms* website.

One of the main concerns of contemporary urban sex workers, even in areas where prostitution is legal, is violence. Because of this, each sandal is equipped with an audible alarm system that emits a piercing noise to ward off attackers, as well as hidden compartments for storing cash, house keys and condoms. The shoes are also outfitted with a built-in GPS receiver and an emergency button that relays both the prostitute's location and a silent alarm signal to public emergency services. Where there are problematic relations with law enforcement, as in most places, the shoes will relay the signal to sex workers' rights groups, such as PONY or COYOTE in the US, HYDRA in Germany, SWEAT in South Africa, or to any other trusted recipient.

To send these signals, the prototype shoes employ a technology that is gaining acceptance on college campuses across the country. Rave Wireless' "Rave Guardian" allows students that feel unsafe to use their mobile phone as a personal alarm device. Students initiate a timer on their mobile phone. If the timer expires before the student turns it off, Rave Guardian uses the e911 infrastructure to locate the phone and let local authorities know to check on the student. The Platform 001 sandal uses a customized version of this application, developed with Rave Wireless.

The use of position awareness and transmission systems to aid sex work communities was inspired by APRS (Automatic Position Reporting System) originally developed by Bob Bruninga of the US Naval Academy Satellite Lab in the late 1970s. APRS uses amateur radio to transmit position reports, weather reports, and messages between users. It is free and open to the public, and used by police officers, fire fighters, and other public service workers across the country to track

their locations. The application of position and transmission technology to sex workers recognizes their function as public servants, and the dangers they face in their profession.

The online component of *Platforms* is a prototype website that provides sex workers with a basic email client, calendar, "problem client" blog, chat rooms and an area for downloading audio and video for the shoes. There will also be a link on the website to track the user's shoes (and other registered sex workers with transmitters) via the Rave Wireless system. This will be a secure community network that protects the privacy of its users. Tracking is voluntary and can be turned on or off at any time. Each sex worker will have their own login to program their shoes, access email, and post information. Workers can set up appointments, create schedules, and access health and other resources.

The *Platforms* sandals were designed in 2003, and developed in 2006 during an artist's residency at the Eyebeam Art and Technology Center in New York with Technical Lead Andrew Milmoe, a new media artist and physical computing expert. Our team now includes Technical Lead Ed Bringas, and Web Director and Community Advisor Melissa Gira. Together we are developing new versions of the shoes, along with other projects that use technology to improve the working conditions of sex workers.

Project Presentation

In its current iteration, *Platforms* has been presented in six ways: gallery installations, panel discussions, performances, workshops, screenings and online.

Gallery Installations

The *Platforms'* shoe is a prototype, but it is also a beautifully crafted art object, created for a carefully lit and designed space. Each gallery installation included the Prototype 1 sandal on a custom-built rotating display stand with a mirrored glass tile top, a wreath of roses, and a base finished with ground glass and marble dust. The shoe's video, audio, and LED components were fully functional for demo purposes. A video (on a monitor or as an LCD projection) that demonstrated the complete *Platforms* system of integrated shoes and online services was screened next to the shoe. There was also a terminal where visitors could access the *Platforms* websites and leave feedback.

Panel Discussions

At a basic level *Platforms* is designed to function as a public proposal and intended to stimulate open dialogue, making a panel discussions that are free and open to the public an integral part of the project. Discussions were held during exhibitions and covered a range of issues including: the true value of sexual services, access to new technologies, the role of art in technology and the ethics of surveillance. The panels consisted of sex workers, sex work advocates, artists, writers and industrial and media/communications designers, each bringing a unique perspective to the conversation.

Performances

For the live performances, a sex worker or stand-in (escorted to insure her safety) walked a predetermined route wearing the Prototype 2 shoes. During that time she was tracked live in the gallery via the website, shown as a large-scale projection.

Instead of soliciting customers, she handed out promotional material (postcards, stickers) on *Platforms*.

Other presentations included fashion shows, and performances where the public can try on and model the Prototype 3 and Prototype 4 shoes.

Workshops/Do-It-Yourself (DIY)

The Platforms team developed instructions for creating your own *Platforms* sandals and audible alarm systems in 2007. Instructions were first published in Make magazine, and can now be downloaded for free from our website:

<http://www.theaphroditeproject.tv/diy/>.

We lead workshops that started with an overview of the *Platforms* project, along with demos of our shoe hacks. Participants then designed and built their own hacked shoes, embedding new technologies into existing footwear and creating customized shoes that combine safety and fashion. In other workshops, students built audible alarm systems, which can be used in shoes, handbags or clothing.

Workshops have been held at Eyebeam in New York, Inclusive Foundation in Tbilisi, and Zer01 in San Jose. Please see <http://projectwalkway.com> and <http://theaphroditeproject.tv/georgia/>.

Screenings

The project includes a 5-minute P.S.A. that demonstrates the complete *Platforms* system of integrated shoes and online services. The P.S.A. has been screened internationally.