

Name:

Lotte Louise de Jong

Title:

A Liminal Connection

Student-number: 0956198

Thesis, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the final examination for Master of Arts in
Fine Art and Design: Lens-based Media.

Piet Zwart Institute, Willem de Kooning Academy.

2019

Adviser: Steve Ruston

Second Reader:

0. Introduction

I. The body as an object

more personal story about objectification, the male gaze, being looked at, and being in control of one's image. So making a difference of being objectified by another gaze and being in control of that gaze and choosing for objectification.

II. Sex work as emotional labour..

Based also on interviews and personal stories from performers as well as viewers, mixed with some theoretical research into emotional labour and cam practicing.

III. Performed fantasy

Based on the different stories of the performers and their relationships with the men they deal with. Connecting to the internet as a place for this performance.

IV. Digital vs Corporeal spaces for sexuality

Reading of spaces / and the meaning of the mediation of these spaces.

V. Conclusion

0. Introduction

(Has to be re-written to include the different subjects touch upon and explain the form of the thesis -> different bundled essays).

In recent years the main thematics in my work as a filmmaker and artist have closely related to identity and sexuality. More specifically the work I make investigates how we, as a society, view and shape our sexual identity through mediated spaces like the world wide web. I look at these spaces through different lenses, to create a distance from its explicit content, to re-contextualise it. The digital space as a space/place for sexual encounters has been the main focus of my past projects.

My interested in these subjects started with webcam site's like *chaturbate.com* and *myfreecams.com*. These are website where webcam-models earn money by performing (sexual) acts. Visitor's can tip them in 'tokens', which are converted to dollars. In my research and work I mainly focus on cis female performers and cis male spectators and moderators. Moderators are people that keep a chatroom 'clean', it's a form of free labor, in return for private shows and/or 'friendships' with the performers. I emphasise the word friendship here because it is seen as a medium of exchange.

During my research I came across performers that work from home (e.g. their own bedroom, living room, etc.) and performers that work for and from webcam studios. Cam studios are company's that hire webcam models to work for them. They provide a safe environment and 'sets', colourful rooms set up with lighting, a webcam, a keyboard and a mouse, a screen and a high speed internet connection, from where the cam models can work. Sometimes theses companies also provide hairdressers and make-up artist. Most of these companies are situated in Bulgaria, Romania and Russia.

The rooms that are created within these studios really intrigue me. A lot of rooms have names like 'Los Angeles', 'Hollywood' and other names referring to the western world which probably sounds attractive to work in. The rooms are filled with kitsch and cliché ideas of what wealth looks like. They are in themselves liminal spaces, almost like you step into a virtual reality box. A room created just to exist in an online digital setting, for the spectator not one to be experienced offline or unconnected. Sometimes they are even provided with a green screen.

At the same time these spaces are corporeal, they hide things in the corners that the webcam can't reach, sometimes they even hide an 'operator'; a person, often a guy, present in the corner of the room talking as if they were the webcam model. They also translate requests to the models and moderate the chatrooms.

I. My body as a disembodied object

When I was around eleven years old I once dialled the number of a sex-phone. I remember the choice menu you had to go through very vividly; what kind of woman did you want to talk to? Old and experienced, young and naive, etc. I don't remember what choice I made, but what I do remember is that my parents found out quite quickly and I was confronted with the high telephone costs. Not a lot later I downloaded my first porn. Back then it was normal you had to pay for pornography on websites, but I'd learned my lesson by then, and everything I downloaded was illegally, through peer2peer software like lime-wire. With a software that doesn't moderate its material in any way, and everyone being able to share whatever they like, my eyes have crossed a lot of wonderful and (sometimes at the same time) disturbing material. Throughout my youth and still, the magical world of the internet has influenced and shaped me and my sexuality in different ways.

Not only in porn, but in general, the objectification of the female body has always worried and fascinated me. Especially during my teenage years I felt that the insecurities I dealt with found their origin in the way the female image was portrayed in magazines, movies, videoclips, etc. My high-school research project was a short documentary I shot visiting several dancehall music parties. I edited the material together with some explicit videoclips that were shown on TV at that time, to make a comparison between the way me and my peers behaved at these sort of parties and the images we were confronted with daily. During the public presentation of my project, the grandparents of one of my classmates stood up and left. The school almost failed me for showing such explicit content. At that moment it struck me that some people willingly close their eyes and don't want to be confronted with the reality of sexuality present within our society. We can *consume* porn but we can't *talk* about it.

Although objectifying the (female) body has obvious negative aspects to it, it also fascinates me a lot. I have always fantasised about how it would feel to be wanted just for your image, there to be looked at, to get off on. Maybe this is has been my 'taboo'. It has something to do with the gaze and the pure physical desire as well as the opportunity to be something and somewhere 'else'. Apart from some occasional sexting, I didn't really experience having virtual sex myself until I had a boyfriend that was living in another country at the moment. Seeing myself on camera was a turn-on. Often I caught myself gazing at my own body rather than my boyfriend's. I could see my own body and my actions through some-one else's eyes, dissociated from my person. Somehow the representation of my body as an object for desire was something very sexual.

By viewing my body as an object through a digital lens, I could see my body as something different, something disembodied from my self (selfhood). The body, much like the self, exists as both a viewed object and an experienced subject. As Dennis D. Waskul describes in *The*

naked self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex, participants of webcam-sex manipulate this relationship by presenting themselves as only a body, the experience of which acts back in an erotic "looking glass" affecting how the self conceives of the body.

Representing the body, especially a naked body, through digital mediation, gives you the opportunity to see yourself as someone else might see you. To look at your body as a sexual object, an object of desire. For me, this experience was very liberating and exciting. Even with someone I knew dearly I already experienced this partly disembodied state. But imagine having this connection with someone you don't know, without showing your face. Since the face is the most identifiable feature of one's body and self; it is the single human physiological feature that concretely conjoins the corporeal body with the self. This experience can be taken even further. We can reimagine our own identity on our body, or maybe even imagine that our bodies aren't ours. As we grow up, we have to acquire a self by looking at how other see us. (Mead, 1934). Waskul argues that the same applies to the body. We are born into a body but not born with the capacity to understand that body as an object. — to see it as other might see it. It acquires meaning in a symbolic process that is no different from any other object. We need to view our body through others to understand it as a body.

Being naked on webcam reduces the self to the body. Selfhood is not only reduced to the body but is also made into an object; a naked sexual body to be looked at and commented on. In research done on online-sex (webcam-sex but also even more disembodied research on sex in second life) participants play with this experience of being the object/subject and gain much more than a sexual gratification. In everyday life it is almost impossible to reduce the self to the body in the same extend we do as in the online.

[[—> need to add appreciation of body through affirmation here

Link to research done with anonymous webcammers.. But maybe also to the job as webcamming ->

"but i was complexed feeling ugly because i have big nose round face normal weight but big hips.... in a way this job made me feel beautiful and liked appreciated" [interview with Jessica]]

Objectifying our bodies through a digital lens is off course not limited to webcam sex, although the naked body is the ultimate disembodiment in a way. But also through representing sexuality online in other forms, do we, being female, contribute to the 'male gaze' by objectifying our bodies and showing our objectified bodies online? There is one important and notable difference between my own objectified body and someone else's. As there is a choice in when, and more importantly how, I objectify my body. This way of giving agency to one's own sexualised body has in recent years been looked at by different theorists, including F. Attwood.

She argues that since this age and time we are more in control of our own image than ever. Creating our own cultural production of the sexual body and with that creating agency (2011).

Although it is important that it requires explanation in the case of female bodies being over-exposed in the representational system of modern and late-modern cultures, explaining bodily display merely as an index of male fantasy or of female discomfort is too simplistic to be of real use when applied more widely.

This is especially the case in the context of exposure of the body - male and female - seems to be increasingly central to forms of popular representation and to individual self expression.

In this sense, 'experiencing', (not as an experience) objectification of the body in the traditional sense, as described by Laura Mulvey's, where woman are 'turned ... into objects of display... Yet, in a real sense, woman are not there at all.' They are 'simply the scenery on to which men project their own fantasies' (1987, p. 131) is very different from 'creating' an objectified body. Creating an objectified body asks for experimenting with ways of refusing, commanding and controlling the representation of woman as passive sexual object (Attwood, F. 2011, p. 13).

[[—> Expanding this with texts and analysis from *The Body and The Screen* (Michelle White) and the text of Attwood..]]

II. Sex work as emotional labour

There has been a long tradition of stigmatising and marginalising sex-workers and sex-work. With the introduction of online based sex-work, especially those focussing on a live-connection, also comes a possibility to look at sex-work in a new way. In traditional feminist theory and research, sex-work, and especially prostitution, has always been seen as inherently exploitative, mostly due to the physical vulnerability that comes with the work.

But looking at new forms of sex work, also asks for a new definition of the work. One of these new forms of sex-work is 'camming'; models performing sex acts, often from their homes or other indoor domains like web-cam studios, for online viewers who pay them. When looking at these new form of sex-work, the hybridity and complexity of contemporary sex work should be taking into consideration.

Sex-work like camming is next to body work mostly emotional work¹. Many of the models say that the biggest part of camming is forming connection and friendships with the clients that come into a chatroom. What is different from regular porn is that these viewers want to be heard, they want to connect. Camgirls offer visually explicit images like in traditional porn but offer the personal contact and 'customization' normally associated with prostitution, however unlike physical sex-workers, cam girls are protected by the streaming medium. (Bleakly 2014) with the performers and create an intimate relationship.

"[...] He was like 15 years older than me, but he was nice and polite and romantic. [...] He was jealous, he didn't understand that it's my job [...] to compliment other people. Because, why do they come here? Because they are frustrated, they have enough to fight with their wives or have their own problems. Here they need here a smile, they need a compliment. [...] They come here to feel appreciated, to feel good. But he didn't understand that. He thought, maybe I'm not loyal to him. But loyalty is a hard word in the virtual space, almost impossible so to say. I mean, loyalty is in the hart, not in the words you share with the clients." (FROM INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA)

Looking at sex-work, especially digital sex-work, I don't see it as being inherently exploitative, in that sense I would categorise myself more of a 'liberal' feminist [1]. At the same time I do recognise that the industry of web-camming, especially when looking at studio based work forms of labour, *can be* exploitative. I have read many messages on online fora from models that had bad experiences with studios, (like no payment, not being able to move to another studio or work individual within a certain time, etc.) but almost all of them are about the monetary aspect of the labour. Like marxist feminist argue; sex work is inherently exploitative due to the oppressive nature of work under capitalism. [2] But this would be the case for any

¹ 'Always hot, always live':¹ Computer-mediated sex work in the era of 'camming' (2017)

form of making money within this economic system. It is a wide spread misunderstanding that women and men are forced into this line of work in Romania. [Put in the link to research on Filipino webcam-workers + the quote of the internet fora about Romanian webcam girl]. The reason that there are so many webcam studios is because of the economic situation and liberal rules towards the webcam industry and high-speed internet. [3]

So defining sex-work as body-work and emotional-work gives us the possibility to move past the marginalisation of sex-work and move towards giving an agency to those performing the work. At the same time we can step away from the problematised definition of 'sex'-work since sex is a contestable definition grounded in a problematic heteronormative ideal.[4] We can place the emotional side of sex-work, and the mental pressure and problematics that come with it, in the same line with other professions that ask for emotional labour like nursing, counselling, teaching, etc. By doing this we can move past the stigmatised aspect of the work and look at what is important to support these types of labour.

It has to be addressed that the emotional labour involved with this line of work can be physically draining and can lead to physical and mental health issues. It's important to note that this is not specific to sex-work - also for example counselling to nursing, also involves clients benefiting from emotional work. This emotional labour (in sex-work and other professions) has been researched extensively, especially in relation to the ways it is devalued and under compensated. Camming is also a form of labour with issues and concerns similar to those which relate to other creators of 'amateur' online user-generated content.

In order to do so we should listen to workers performing these kinds of professions. Talking to different webcam girls gives good insight to the fact that the possible psychological damage has little to do with getting naked and performing on cam (this also makes sense as there is little physical danger connected to the performance). The pressure that comes from constant connection and being in a 'service' industry stand out in the conversation's I had.

"... about the insults maybe I wasn't clear enough; This job isn't for sensitive girls [...] some of my colleagues cried or got depressed and quit the job you need a strong character and understand it s a game not something personal, and yes there are more compliments than insults" (FROM INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA)

The idea that sex-work is in it's definition, harmful, despite the fact that sex-workers themselves continuously try and subvert this idea, shows intense social and legal policing of an industry. (For example, dentist show high suicide rates but there is no movement to abolish those practices).

-> moving to the dealing with sexualities and perversions, but also creating relationships that can be taken away within a second. -> camming is also a form of labour with issues and concerns similar to those which relate to other creators of 'amateur' online user-generated content.

////

“They [clients that act like slaves] should learn to respect themselves, they shouldn't be paying girls just to laugh of them [...] I mean I would like to help them, I would like to teach them to accept themselves how they are and to appreciate themselves. [...] I had one client, he was addicted to blackmail. He told me that he had lost two houses, his car, two jobs. Just because he paid some mistresses, very expensive girls, not me! He came to me just to cry and complain.” (FROM INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA)

/////

-> both ways, the performer build a relationship with the client, helping them. On the other side the client communicates positively or negatively with the performer, making them feel bad or good about themselves. From talking to most performers tho, they deal with the abuse and mostly hold on to the positive feedback they get.

III. The fantasy exists.



[Based on the different stories of the performers and their relationships with the men they deal with. Connecting to the internet as a place for this performance.]

Since I was young, the wonderful world of the computer fascinated me. My family was the first in our neighbourhood to own a computer, and I used to have daily fights with my brother over who could claim it. I am pretty certain this hasn't improved our relationship. I was around 5 years old, in 1994, when I started playing my first computer games. Just like films, this magical place of fiction, sucked me into a different world. I was a little stuffed animal bear for a while, trying to cook a cake for a birthday party (unfortunately this is all I remember). A couple of years later, my friend introduced me to Leisure Suit Larry's², a game she had on her father's computer. Leisure Suit Larry was a graphic adventure game with an adult theme, the aim of the game being; to get 'lucky'. We on the other hand only got lucky if we entered the age verification questions right, by pure guessing since we didn't speak any English at that point. On the rare occasion we did pass it (there was a time-out after guessing wrong), the fun of the game was quickly over since it was all text adventure based. But I do remember the fact that it was exciting and naughty, even though the pixels were barely decryptable.

The protagonist, Larry Laffer, is a 38-year-old virgin living in his mother's basement. Being sick and tired of his loneliness, he decides to visit the city of Lost Wages (Las Vegas) hoping to finally find the woman of his dreams. In the course of the game he 'meets' a couple of different women to try his luck with. The first woman Larry encounters in the city of Lost Wages is a sex-worker.

² Published by Sierra On-Line in 1987

I imagined many virgins, just like Larry Laffer himself, have played this game from their mom's basement. In early 2003 the game Second Life³ came into existence. The special thing about Second Life was that it was based around the interaction with other players through chat and avatars in a 3D world. Although not intended as an adult-oriented game, through second life it was possible to experience adult entertainment including nudity and full-on sexual activities, almost all player-made content.

Turner (1967, 1969) suggests that all social worlds exist with parallel worlds, on the one hand 'the structure of rural, political and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles, in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona'. And on the other end there is the 'society as a *communitas*' a relatively unstructured and undifferentiated '*comitatus*, community or even communion of individuals'.

In short, Turner (1969: 138) emphasizes how individuals are necessarily tied to their social world through institutionally grounded statuses and social roles, yet also experience with equal necessity moments of *ekstasis*; circumstances where they 'stand outside the totality of structural positions one normally occupies'.

The relation between these two seemingly contrasting models of social and cultural life are mediated by experiences of *liminality*. Waskul (2002:205) suggests that we can look at the internet as "a natural environment for liminality": a place separate from one's space where the ordinary norms of everyday life easily may be suspended. It gives space to playfully enact selves that are in between the person and the persona. The internet is a place where people do not need to conceal their stigma nor have to be concerned with "cooperatively trying to disattend it." (Goffman 1963:81). People feel free to openly engage in playful deviance. "Enacting the performance of transgression and traversing the realm of the taboo in backspaces (backspaces/backstage) allow secret selves to materialise (Redmond 2003:36)

The famous Belgian psychotherapist Esther Perel describes that cheating is not about the infidelity but about the secret-self that needs to be explored outside of the set boundaries of everyday life. (The State of Affairs - Rethinking Infidelity - 2017)

As Giddens (1992) claims the 'pure' relationship, which emerged in the late 19th century and was based on the idea that a durable emotional tie could bind people together. Parallel to the pure relationship is the countertrend of "plastic" sexuality (Giddens 1992) - ludic sex-based relationships that are free of commitment, reproduction, and other closely connected projects of the self. According to Falk (1994:65), "The more articulated and multifarious the restrictions

³ Second Life was published by Linden Lab in 2003

on corporeality, the more sophisticated the forms of transgression become." The liminal nature of the computer-mediated medium facilitates these active transgressions and make the porous boundaries between first and second life more one-sided than the other, That is, first life bleed into second life more than vice versa.

So the dislocated and disembodied nature of computer-mediated communication make cyber-sex an experience that potentially expresses a sexuality separate from and transgressive of the person, the body, and everyday life. This makes it possible to explore and experiment with new forms and different forms of sexual play.

—> Webcamming, although more set with 'real rules' still offers this experiencing without risks in a way..

—> Talking about fantasies from woman who work as webcam models.

-

/////

"This other man, [...] He was so romantic, he came to see me for 2 years almost all the time, on the same hour. Daily, just one day he couldn't come. And he stayed for like half an hour. He sent me, everyday, two or three poems, that he wrote for me, haha. [...] So this man, he didn't even insist to meet me in real... I mean I think he was aware it was just the virtual stuff. He stayed anonymous. Not everyone shows themselves. I respect that. Maybe he wanted his identity to stay secret"

IV. Pixelated wallpapers and empty echoes of luxury

When I close my eyes I wander through the spaces, like a digital ghost, slowly moving forward through the hallways, into the rooms, limited by the interface these websites provide. Red is definitely a colour that appears in front of my eyes. Pixelated wallpapers and empty echoes of luxury. When 'walking' through these spaces I am subjected to the transparency these websites provide. They upload these 360 walkthroughs as a means to entice potential webcam models to work for them. For me its an inexhaustible source of data. Although the rooms in itself appear meaningless, an empty subject, they promise something to the workers and the viewers. I wonder for who these spaces are designed. Do they want to hide the actual conditions of the webcam models working from them, to act like they are in a wealthy environment, or pretend that they are girly? Or maybe they are designed for the models themselves, designed as a promise of prosperity.

I enter the hallway, the first space that pops up on my screen when opening the digital walkthrough. On the left hand there are lockers. There are more lockers situated in the hallway further up. In total there must be like 100 different lockers, all to be opened by keys, none of them sticking out of the locks. This webcam studio maybe has ten different rooms, so there will be no more than ten people working at the same time. I wonder why there are so many lockers, are they meant for the models to store stuff during working hours or are they for when they leave for home, to stow their sexy outfits? All the windows in the hallway and the rooms are covered by fake wallpaper views, nowhere to look out to the real world. There are three paper holders above the lockers and they are all empty except one. -> *The paper has to be translated*

The hall connects to an open smoking space, which basically makes the whole hallway a smoking space. I've been walking through this hall a lot, clicking forward and backward, always wondering why I couldn't pass through the smoking room to the other side of the hallway. I kept bumping into borders. It took me several visits to realise it's mirror I've been bumping into. Somehow they did a very good job in erasing the 360 camera. Because of the absence of any human form or digital capturer these mirrors become very disconcerting, with no reference to where a space stops existing. I'm baffled by how clean the mirrors are and how much mirrors there are.

The hallway turns into the smoking room on one side and the kitchen on the other end. The kitchen is equipped with a tv, a washing machine and a dryer. The kitchen also connects to a corridor with a total of six doors. On the other end of the hallway there is also a corridor consisting of four doors. All these doors lead to different rooms except for one, that leads to a room with a cabin inside it. I presume it's like a stand-up tan-bed but I haven't figured it out yet. The hallway and smoking room are covered in low quality prints. Mostly consisting of images of an American subway, probably New York. I tried reverse image search these different images, hoping to find the source and location but I could only find one picture of a girl in front of a graffiti wall. I found the image pop-up on a number of computer-wallpaper websites

that look like they are designed in the 90's. I wonder if someone hand picked this image and printing it especially for this room. The one who did these wallpapers must have done the room interiors as well.

The smoking room keeps confusing me every time I visit it. The mirror in the back just makes it look like its's very narrow space with four ashtrays, instead of it just being one room.

Even the bathroom is visitable. It looks really modern, like it has recently been refurbished. There are purple led-lights surrounding the space. It doesn't seem like the most convenient spot to put make-up one. There is hand-soap next to the sinks but no shampoo or shower-gel in the shower cabin, unless it's hidden in the cabinet under the sink. Maybe they all have to bring their own?

There are some random photo's scattered through the hallway, big prints with wooden plinths around it. There's two of a bowling trip; one of a young woman holding a bowling ball and in the kitchen there's a group-photo consisting of three men and six woman all holding each other and pulling weird faces, it seems like it was a company outing.

The kitchen is the only room with a window that hasn't been stickered. The blinds are almost hermetically sealed. Across from the kitchen there's a washing machine and a TV. On the screen there's a paused image of an 'angel' on the catwalk of a Victoria Secret show. The image is clearly superimposed during the editing of this 360photo walkthrough. The house is filled with empty promises [Statement]. The confinement of the space makes it feel like it exists in a different reality. It is made to exist for people to sell fantasies, must they therefor live and believe in these fantasies?

There are 7 rooms, they are all numbered. The fact that they wouldn't exist without the internet fascinates me. They wouldn't exist if there weren't people looking for sexual pleasure combined with a sense of intimacy. What makes us want to look and gaze into these rooms from across a screen, mediated through wires, codes and lenses. The distance this creates to the subject at the same creates a possibility to connect. Every body shows just what they want to show, a distilled or morphed version of theirselves. [being able to see yourself through the web cam on the screen, to choose what you want to show, by looking at yourself in the way others do you can control your own image, control of one's own mediation = managing one's own image - controlling my image [cite] [The Work of Being Watched - see also video therapy. 0]]

[perhaps it's the case that the fact we can see the wires and cables carries the burden of proof [cite]]

[[How does the online world of web-camming influence these physical spaces and vice versa? What desires and fantasies arise from this liminal space? What freedom do the clients and workers have within this performed reality?]]

The interior architectures, who might just be the owners of the studio, or friends, or acquaintances, who knows, they try to create something which has identity, but at the same time is a fantasy. The themed rooms make you think about cheap porn sets.

.... (TBC)

SOURCES

Sites Used

myfreecams.com

chaturbate.com

Ambercutie.forum

<http://www.gertsog.ru/tour-en.php>

Laura Mulvey (1987)

Books / Texts:

'Always hot, always live': Computer-mediated sex work in the era of 'camming' MADELINE V.

HENRY and PANTEÁ FARVID *Women's Studies Journal*, December 2017

Ekstasis and the internet: liminality and computer mediated communication, Dennis D.

Waskul (2006)

Typing, Doing, and Being: Sexuality and the Internet, Author(s): Michael W. Ross, Source: *The Journal of Sex Research*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Nov., 2005), pp. 342-352

"I Get Paid to Have Orgasms": Adult Webcam Models' Negotiation of Pleasure and Danger (*Signs Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42(1):227-256 · September 2016)

Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism, *New Media & Society* 12(4) · December 2010

C'Lick Me: A Netporn Studies Reader, Editors: Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, Matteo Pasquinelli (2007)

The Body and the Screen, Theories of Internet Spectatorship, Michele White, The MIT, (2006)

The MIT Press Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England

"Make Love Not Porn": Entrepreneurial Voyeurism, Agency and Affect, Stephen Maddison in *Networked Affect*, eds. Susanna Paasonen, Ken Hillis, Michael Petit, MIT Press (2014)

The 'Gaze' and Live Stream Sex Shows an essay by Hector Franco

Camgirls: celebrity and community in the age of social networks / Theresa M. Senft. (2008)

The Naked Self: Being a Body in Televideo Cybersex - Dennis D. Waskul

Now the Orgy Is Over - Dennis D. Waskul

Websites:

<http://myfreecams.com>

<http://chaturbate.com>

<http://Ambercutie.forum>

<http://livejasmin.com>