

Thesis Lotte Louise de Jong

Introduction

In recent years the main thematic 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 studio's. Cam studio's 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 studio's 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 richdom 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.

Thesis Outline

I. Introduction

A. Background

The internet changed the way we have sexual encounters. Webcam website's make a gross 2 billion dollars out of the 5 billion dollar porn industry. ¹. Webcamming creates a new form of intimacy. It's not a traditional sex job, not a relationship but rather something within that.² For this thesis I look at this online space as a liminal space and compare and draw parallels between these digital spaces and the corporeal spaces. In what way does the liminal digital world shape narratives that explore our sexuality and intimacy? What inhabits these spaces, how are they represented? What forms of intimacy arises from them?

B. Thesis Statement

The representation of corporeality create new forms of intimacy and sexuality. Engaging in online sex asks for us evoking a body (Waskul 2005)³. This is done through webcam images but also through typed words, speech and other forms. This online digital space also trickles down into the corporeal world. It determines the condition of these spaces. What relationships does this mediated form of representation create and what do the spaces they are set in tell us? To address these questions I will do a close reading of the different spaces where webcamming takes places, making a distinction between webcam studios and home spaces. I will investigate the relationship the performers have within this space with their clients and moderators. Furthermore I will look at the offline setting as well as the online setting.

II. Working method

These close readings of spaces, online and offline, will be the body of my thesis. Within these close readings I will investigate the differences between webcamming from a studio and from home, the relationships the performers have with their clients and what moderating means in these contexts.

III. Chapters

A. Close Reading Of A Space

1. Pixelated wallpapers and empty echoes of luxury

B. Space

- **What do these spaces say without the digital translation and context of a website.**

- **What makes a space personal?**

1. Home

- a) Models that webcam from home put a lot of effort in their environment, whether it's from their bedroom, kitchen or living room. Online they discuss the best webcam and lights. What kind of background they should use. Some cam in front of a green screen to playfully create different environments every time.
- b) Decorations play a big role in the personal space of the cam-models. They can be seasonal decorations, like Christmas lights and attributes or playing with the role of the webcam girl, for example placing a lot of stuffed toys or other 'teenage' attributes in the room.

2. Studio

- a) Models that work from a webcam studio share the studio's with others. A standard set-up is always there; good lighting, good webcam's, a computer, etc. Sometimes the space is shared with a translator/moderator, so there is another computer spot somewhere in a corner. The rooms are small and feel more like closet sometimes. They are themed rooms.
- b) *In what way do decorations play a role in the environment?*
The rooms are all decorated differently, from city themes like 'San Francisco' fully embellished with matching wallpaper. Some rooms have a renaissance-like decoration completed with fake fresco's. Other ones are decorated for role-playing like the office or classroom spaces.

C. Digital Identity

1. Profiles

What kind of profiles do the performers have? What do they have in common with other woman working for the same studio? How are the profiles of the cam models working from home different from the models working in a studio?

The personal profiles on websites like myfreecams.com and chaturbate.com are very important to viewers. They tell something about the models they are watching; what are their hobbies? Where are they from? Why are they in the business. A lot these profiles are HTML / CSS based. The performers that work from a studio have the framework of their profiles made by the company they work for. They are not allowed to put any personal information on there, and if you look closely to the other profiles of the models working for the same company, they mostly look the same. Some models that work from home have put a lot of effort in their profiles. All the profiles are very girly backgrounds; pink, glittery gifs, photoshopped photo's. Some are in a very 'nerdy' theme others are more serious. They often have personal messages on their thanking their highest tippers and listing ways to support them.

2. Chatbox

What automated messages do the models use? How do they compare?

The chatboxes are situated next to the girl's webcam on their profile pages, showing the general chat of the people visiting the room. These chats are characterised by the automatic generated messages from the models. These can be decided in different kind of messages; welcome messages, rules, tip-menu, thank-you's, gifs, and other messages like; this model is on a break and will be back in 5 minutes.

3. Rules

How are these rules articulated and maintained?

4. Games & Sextoys

- a) A lot of the models use games to seduce their clients in to tipping more and for entertainment. What kind of games are there? How are they designed?
- b) A lot of the models use games to seduce their clients in to tipping more and for entertainment. What kind of games are there? How are they designed?

D. Relations

1. Moderators

- a) The division between moderators. Moderators who work as fans for the models who work at home. Moderators who work in direct contact with the models who work from a cam-studio, sometimes even in the same space, also double function as a translator.

2. Narratives of online encounters

"The internet is a natural environment for liminality and ekstasis, a place where self and society must be made to exist in a process where both are translated into the convention of the medium." (Waskul 2005)

- a) What are specific traits of digital spaces for sexual encounter? How do these attributes exist online?
- b) In what way does the liminal digital world shape narratives that explore our sexuality and intimacy?
- c) The digital world one that is eminently suitable for exploring our sexuality because of it's liminal qualities.

1. Pixelated wallpapers and empty echoes of luxury

1.1 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.

Event 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. 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?

1.2 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 themselves.

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.

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Sites Used

myfreecams.com

chaturbate.com

Ambercutie.forum

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

¹ The money generated by cam sites is hundreds of millions of dollars at least, and possibly upwards of \$2 billion annually, according to industry insiders and analysts surveyed by *Newsweek*.

² "They're defining a new kind of intimacy. It's not traditional sex work, not a relationship, but something in between." *The Purchase of Intimacy*, [Viviana Zelizer](#),

³ Waskul (2005) *The looking glass*