

# GRADUATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

## INTRODUCTION

Regarding my graduation work I would like to make series of works which will examine digital spaces and corporeal spaces relating to online intimate and sexual encounters and relationships. These works will consist of a short found-footage movie, a short documentary and a short docu-fiction. I have particular interest in how we view and shape sexuality and experience intimacy within a digital, liminal, space. How do these mediated forms of bodily representation influence us and what do the spaces they are set in tell us? What forms of relationships emerge from these settings?

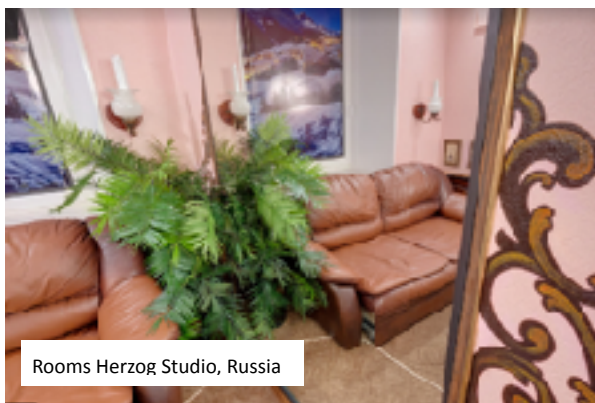
My goal is to make works that compares or aligns the digital liminal space to the corporeal one and investigate the relationships within this context. I will start with different experiments, and work from there.

*“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)

## BACKGROUND



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.



Rooms Herzog Studio, Russia

My interest 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 these 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 richness 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.



Room San Fransisco, Herzog Studio, Russia



Room Quebec, Herzog Studio, Russia

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.

## PROJECT

For my graduation work I look at and draw parallels between the on-line space and the physical. Engaging in online sex asks for us evoking a body (Waskul, 2005). This is done through webcam images but also through typed words and other forms fantasy. How do we shape and form lust and desire within this liminal space?

The questions that I want to research within this project are;

- What do these spaces say without the digital translation and context of a website.
- Can we extract a different meaning from these corporeal spaces, that are liminal in itself?
- How do online intimate and sexual encounters form these liminal spaces, and what do these spaces say about the relationship between viewer and being viewed?

### Spaces in Render

This first project will be a combination of experiments I've recently made. They are created out of captured video (capping in webcam terminology), captured and designed audio and collected chat conversations. I have found different webcam-studio websites that let you take a look inside their working spaces and webcam rooms. They do this to attract potential workers to come to their studio and work for them. These studios provide a 360 walkthrough that works the same as google-street-view. Without the models they are ghost-like, empty hallways. In my recent experiments I have linked these rooms to the online chat-boxes where the webcam models work from live. I have recorded these live streaming along with other content like profiles, audio and chat conversations. I will combine these different materials into a new work. For example by superimposing the recorded audio-material and the 360 images to search for a new tactility.

### Corporeal Digital World

Beginning of next year, I will hopefully visit a webcam studio, most likely in Eastern-Europe. Here I want to combine my research into spaces with shooting a short documentary. In these spaces I will focus on what is not seen and heard through the digital lense. What do we find within these empty places and spaces, neither meant for the offline and online reality. This will become a short observing documentary focussing on specifically the spaces and their characteristics. I will record the sounds that happen in these spaces, but just as a present atmosphere and not a leading narrative. Instead of focussing on the people in these studios I will focus on what the spaces tells us about the users and uses of the spaces. A recent inspiration to how I will let this environment tell a story of it's own is the documentary *Closing Time* (2018) by Nicole Vögele.



### In touch

Next to the research and short projects I will create a short film by re-enacting an online space and chat-conversation on film. In this way I will make the digital space a corporeal one. Exposing the differences between these spaces. How do these online digital translate to a corporeal one?



This could be in the form of an adaption of the phone-scene in the film *Paris, Texas* (1984) by Wim Wenders. In this particular scene the two main characters, Travis (Harry Dean Stanton) and Jane (Natassja Kinski) meet for the first time in four years, through a one-way mirror of a peepshow booth she now works. This peepshow-booth for me comes very close to an offline translation (or a predecessor) of what websites like [chaturbate.com](http://chaturbate.com) are. But these modern peepshows contain extra elements, things only existing in the online. The division is not only in the interface, it's also the conversations and the way the online culture creeps into conversations. I want to take these symbols and interfaces and translate them also into the corporeal.

This will be a short film based on online conversations and events. These will be the inspiration of the short narrative. The film will explore the liminality of webcam-sex by translating it into a corporeal space.

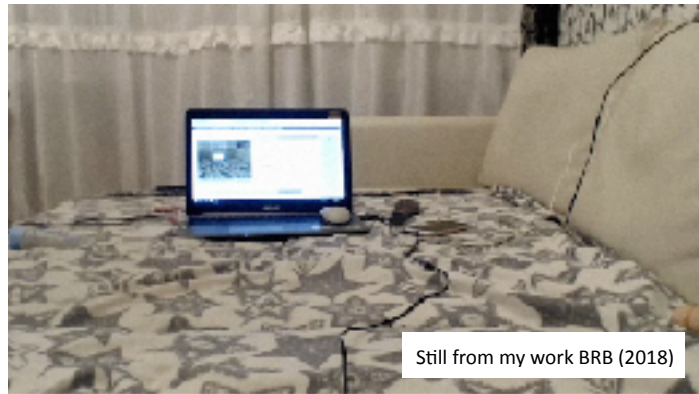
During the coming months I will write a script alongside my research for my thesis. This script will partly derive from interviews with performers, viewers and moderators through digital platforms like [chaturbate.com](http://chaturbate.com). At the same time one of my first experiments is visiting the webcam companies the performers work from and documenting the offline liminal spaces, this will turn into a short documentary. The experiments and close readings I'm doing in the meantime will also be part of my graduation project. Although I have quite a clear idea of how my project will develop I will also keep an open attitude towards the things I bump into along the way. Different elements can influence or change my concepts and I will not hold on to tightly to what I have written now.

## **Relation to previous practice**

My background is in filmmaking. In my practice as a filmmaker I always tried to create films that reflect upon a certain subject without it becoming pamphletistic. As a person you form your own ideas and opinions, and as a filmmaker I want to give people the possibility to view things from a different (or closer) perspective. This room for the viewer to reflect upon is very important to me. At the same time I don't want my work to be vague. I hope that when people see my work it's clear to them what questions resonate through the work.

The digital space as a place for sexuality has been a subject of my work for the past years. Often my method of working involves investigating what reveals or remains when you put pornographic or sexual content and references in another context.

One of my recent video works is *BRB* (2018). *BRB* is a poetic observation of online sex webcams where the absence of sexual acts is the focus of the work. In the form of subtitles we follow several online community chats, users talking amongst other users. In video images we see empty rooms, a poetic reflection of what is not there. The recordings are made when the girls are gone, just before they come back or go online. The chat that occurs when the girls are gone sometimes create funny situations where others have a darker context.



For a workshop I did led by artist Shimon Attie I came up with the idea of working with a website that I've know for a while now. It's a dutch review site where you can review sex-workers. This research resulted in the work *On Holiday* (2018). Me and Salvador Miranda worked together on this project.

The reviews fascinated me because of the explicitness and the harshness (the extremeness, the shock), but also what also interested me was the fact that people would actually advise each other on sex-workers. We took these reviews as a starting point for the work and came across the term 'holiday' a lot. Most of the sex-workers in Holland are not originally Dutch and come here under false pretences. It's a thing amongst these reviewers or 'clientele' to keep track of where the (mostly) girls are (i.e. if they moved windows/city's, etc). They use the term holiday a lot to describe the sex-workers mostly going back home for a while to visit their family's. The reviewers sugar-coating the sex but also the visit back home was something that stood out.

In my work I try to create a situation where people can reflect their own idea's and opinions. Although theoretic research informs my work, it's very important to me that my work communicates on its own, without people having to have a knowledgable background concerning the subjects.

## Relation to larger context

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<sup>1</sup>. Webcamming creates a new form of

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<sup>1</sup> 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*.

intimacy. It's not a traditional sex job, not a relationship, but rather something within that.<sup>2</sup> Although consumer internet has been around since the 80's, and people realised very quickly that it's very well suited to spread pornography, there has been very little research into how these rendered images and widely available sexual encounters shape us as a society.

Feminism in relation to pornography is an undeniable part of my work. At the same time I try and engage with these online worlds as open as possible. I try to not have any moral judgement and see the beauty and the ugly at the same time. For me some of the webcam-models I encounter online are very much empowered, and at the same time I see some webcam-models that are not as happy with the job as others. Of course I won't ignore the part of sex-labour that the subject I have chosen entails, but I try to provide insights and create a different context in which people can form their own opinion and views about the matter.

In my graduation work I focus more on the relationship we, as humans with sexual desires, have to this online and personal space. I don't want to make much judgments with my work, mainly because I don't feel like I am the person who is in the position to judge. Everyone has their fetishes and kinks and I also see the online as a space to free yourself.

I think a strong example of an artist that works deals with sexual encounters online is Frances Stark. I've seen one of her works, *Observate, Legette con me (2012)*, in the KW institute of Art in Berlin. I didn't think about it until a month ago, when I was thinking of transcribing webcam chats. In a work I've seen of her online, *My Best Thing (2012)*, she put's her personal social encounters on sex-cam sites into animation. By taking away the explicitness of the sexual contact its possible for the viewer to distill a different meaning.

My work is also strongly influenced by other artist like Jon Rafman and Kate Kooper and the way they deal with digital culture and virtual embodiment. In his work, Jon Rafman relates to online spaces as being a liminal one. Kate Kooper makes work that plays with the relation between the digital and the corporeal and with her female characters.

For more artists and films that inspire my work please see the references list.

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<sup>2</sup> "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 (2005)

## **References**

### **Artists & Artworks:**

- Stark, F. (2012). *Observe, Legette con me*
- Stark, F. (2012). *My Best Thing*
- Rafman, J. (2014), *Mainsquize*
- Rafman, J. (ongoing), *9-eyes*
- Rafman, J. (2010). *You, the World and I*
- Kate Cooper

### **Filmography**

- Paris / Texas (2011), motion picture, 20th century fox, USA, directed by Wim Wenders, cinematography by Robby Müller.
- Hot Girls Wanted - Season 1 - Turned On, (2017), Tv Programme, Netflix
- A Cam Life (2018), documentary, WeBros entertainment, USA
- Dragon Fly Eyes (2018), documentary, China, Directed by Xu Bing
- Rate Me (2015), Motion picture, directed by Fyzal Boulifa
- Closing Time (2018), documentary, directed by Nucle Vögele.

### **Books / Texts**

- 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)
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- 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>