

GRADUATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

INTRODUCTION

Regarding my graduation work I would like to make series of works which will examine online intimate and sexual encounters and relationships within the world of webcamming and how these encounters relate to the digital spaces and corporeal spaces connected to them. These works will consist of a short documentary and/or a short docu-fiction. I plan to exhibit these works at the PZI graduation show.

I have particular interest in how we view and shape sexuality and experience intimacy and connection within a digital 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? How are these relationships sustained and managed?

BACKGROUND

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; what kind of woman did you want to talk to? Old and experienced, young and naive, etc. I don't remember what I chose, but what I do remember is that my parents found out quite quickly when 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 software that doesn't moderate its material in any way, and everyone being able to share whatever they like, I've seen a lot of different things come by. Throughout my youth and still, the wonderful world of the internet has influences 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 had to do with the way girls and woman were 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 the time, to make a comparison between the way teenagers behaved at these sort of parties and the images we were confronted with daily. During the presentation of our projects, one of my classmates grandparents 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. We can watch 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 always wonder how it feels to be wanted for just your body, there to be looked at, to be wanted, to get off on. Maybe this is my 'taboo'. Somehow it turns me on more to see my boyfriends watch porn than actually consuming it myself. It has something to do with the gaze. Apart from some occasional sexting, I hadn't really experienced having online sex myself until I had a boyfriend that was quite some years younger than me and was living in another country. Seeing myself on camera turned me on. Often I caught myself gazing at my own body rather than my boyfriend's. I could see my body and my actions as someone else would see it, dissociated from my person.



In recent years the main thematic in my work as a filmmaker and artist have closely related to my sense of 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 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.

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 with the performers and create an intimate relationship.

¹ '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

Camming is done from a webcam-studio or from home, a place, but the internet juxtaposes these "spaces" and "places", and creates a natural environment for liminality; a place separate from one's space where the ordinary norms of everyday life may easily be suspended. In this liminal space there is room for new forms of connection to arise.²

I don't see sex-work, especially digital sex-work, inherently as exploitative. In that sense I'm more of a 'liberal' feminist³. I am not ignoring the fact that the business of camming, especially studio-work, *can be* exploitative. I have read many messages on online forums 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 timeframe, etc.) but almost all of them are about money. It is a widespread misunderstanding that women and men are forced into this line of work in Romania. 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.

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 companies 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. They are mostly situated in Bulgaria, Romania and Russia.

PROJECTS

1. LIMINAL CONNECTIONS

Short documentary

+/- 15 min

(extracts from the more elaborate concept)

Set in a web-cam studio this short documentary will explore the way digital and physical space inform each other and how sexuality and intimacy is experienced within this digital space. It is set in the decor of projected fantasies, fantasies that sometimes are in stark contrast with the blunt, almost banal, reality.

In this short experimental documentary we will visit several rooms and spaces set in a webcam studio in Bucharest, the web-cam capital of the world. A webcam studio is a

² Ekstasis and the internet: liminality and computer mediated communication, Dennis D. Waskul (2006)

³ '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

company where models work for. Performers broadcast their shows from different 'themed' rooms, set-up in a studio-like way with lights, a camera and a computer.

Visually the studio setting will act as a metaphor for the performed reality. The camera moves through the different spaces and rooms and will play with what is 'in front' and 'behind' the web-cam. It will also focus on the different computer screens in the studio and the conversations that go on these screens.

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?



This short documentary will try and answer some of these questions through interviews with webcam models. It will explore the different forms of connection that are created within the mediated landscape. Through interviews with models we will explore fantasies and relationships that the cam-girls perform and create, at the complexity of maintaining these connections.

The interviews will focus on the selling of illusions as well as how sometimes these illusions sometimes slowly turn into something more meaningful. We will hear models tell about special relationships they have created online; sometimes with people they have been talking to for over 5 years on a regular basis. Sometimes these connections turn into a 'real' friendship, one where there is no money transactions involved but one that is based on mutual interests and acknowledgment.

We see how being a webcam model is so much more than performing sexual acts in front of a webcam. They are exploring the fascinating world of the liminal space where sexuality takes place, which gives them interesting, funny and useful insights into our own sexuality and search for connection. The documentary aims to provide insight in the emotional labour part of the job and will try and reframe the work outside of the marginalised and stigmatised framing of sex-work.

2. IN TOUCH

Short experimental film

+/- 5 min

Within this 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 of fantasy. How do we shape and form lust and desire within this liminal space?

This short experimental setting will visually focus on how a space is created for the on-line world. What elements influence this space? In audio you will hear different sexual fantasies that cam models have experienced, giving us a little insight in performed fantasy.

In these spaces I will focus on what is not seen through the digital lens of a webcam. What do we find within these empty places and spaces, neither meant for the offline and online reality. This could be in the form of an adaption of the phone-scene in the film *Paris, Texas*



Stills from Paris, Texas, 1984

(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 are. But these modern peepshows contain extra elements, things only existing in the online world. 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. The film will explore the liminality of webcam-sex by translating it into a corporeal space.

PLANNING

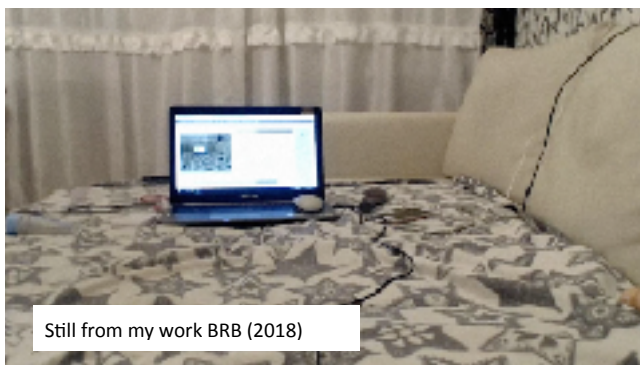
During the coming months I will finalise the scripts alongside my research for my thesis. These scripts will partly derive from interviews with performers, viewers and moderators through digital platforms like chaturbate.com and forums like ambercutieforum.com

From 13-17 February 2019 I will go to Bucharest and visit *Best Studios* to do visual and substantive research, this will consist of in-depth interviews with different models and visits to different studios and documenting the offline spaces. 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 too tightly to what I have written now.

After this research I will come back and start working on my final documentary concept. At the same time I will use the conducted interviews for my thesis. From this experience I will also develop the idea for the short film further, which I will shoot end of April. I plan on going back to Bucharest end of March to film the documentary. In May I will be doing the postproduction.

PRACTICE

My background is in filmmaking. In my practice as a filmmaker I always try to create films that reflect upon a certain subject without it becoming militant. 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 for empty promises. 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 industry⁴. Webcamming creates a new form of intimacy. It's not a traditional sex job, not a relationship, but rather something within that.⁵ 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.

Like stressed earlier in this text; it's important to look past the problematised and stigmatised image that sex-work traditionally has. Like marxist feminist argue; sex work is inherently exploitative due to the oppressive nature of work under capitalism.⁶ But this would be the case for any form of labour for money within this economic system. As a

⁴ 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*.

⁵ "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)

⁶ '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

relatively new practice, camming is currently under-researched and under-theorised. In my work I seek for an approach that focus on the individual wellbeing, a participatory approach. This doesn't mean I don't take a critical stance towards the social, cultural and economic structures that create the inequality within and outside the industry. But it's also important to be able to move past that discussion and focus on the other aspects that come with. The 'emotional' side of camming is an important aspect that gives us a more varied insight into performing sex and sexual culture.



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, *Osservate, Leggete 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.

References

Artists & Artworks:

Stark, F. (2012). *Observate, Legette con me*

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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:

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- *Now the Orgy Is Over* - Dennis D. Waskul

Websites:

<http://myfreecams.com>

<http://chaturbate.com>

<http://Ambercutie.forum>

<http://livejasmin.com>