

Camgirl.com: Women Creating Space for Themselves Online

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Table of Contents

Introduction: To Be Watched

1. Contextualizing the First Camgirls

2. Monetization versus Commercialization
in Webcam Modeling

3. The Modern-Day Camgirl: Instagram
and Subjectivity-as-Value

Authenticity: A Conclusion on
Empowerment, Exploitation and Paradox

Introduction: To Be Watched

In July 1998, a young Meredith Doeksen appeared on the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) talk-show program *Net Café* in an episode titled “Cyber Chats”. During the interview, she explained a new form of video conferencing technology called CU-SeeMe. Developed at Cornell University, Doeksen was connecting with others via live refreshing images coupled with instant messaging. With her CU-SeeMe account embedded on her website concretecam.simplenet.com¹ Doeksen was creating an online community she knew personally. At one point, the interviewer suggests Doeksen had become so well known that she was a CU-SeeMe celebrity. This was a young woman, online, broadcasting herself in the hope of connecting with others. After the interview and at some point in 1998, Doeksen purchased and transferred her personal site to the domain: camgirl.com.²

Doeksen was not alone in identifying as a camgirl, during the late 1990s she was part of a large trend of young women broadcasting live online. Looking back on the publically archived pages of camgirl.com, when it was Doeksen’s personal site, one could say that she was inspired by the very first camgirl, Jennifer Ringley. Jennifer of [jennicam](http://jennicam.com) (1996–2003) saw her broadcast as a kind of social experiment to live stream 24/7. Ringley’s live broadcast was groundbreaking, as the first woman or for that matter person, to be live online for a continuous amount of time. As she described in an interview with David Letterman in 1998 she saw nothing odd about her experiment because we turn on the TV to view animals in “wild America” but for some reason wanting to watch people eating and sleeping was considered “sick and perverse.”³

Defined in today’s context, a camgirl or webcam model as they are more often referred to, is typically a female performer who sells a variety of services (exotic dance masturbation shows) to online customers.⁴ These performances are captured by a webcam and broadcast live on a service website such as camgirl.com. This being the same domain once owned by Doeksen however, in 2016 she sold the camgirl.com domain⁵ to ICF Technology, a live streaming service.⁶ While a webcam model performs and makes conversation in a public chat room customers can send her tips (tokens bought from the camming site.) And in a private chat room, a one-on-one videoconference, the customer often pays per minute for a show. Prostitution, setting up a face-to-face meeting for paid sex

1. “Net Café: Cyber Chat,” Archive.org Video, PBS, 26:36, July 31, 2002, <https://archive.org/details/CyberCha98>

2. I made this chance discovery, during my own research in 2018. Using the Wayback Machine provided my archive.org I searched Meredith’s original site concretecam.simplenet.com and was redirected to camgirl.com. I found that Meredith owned the domain from 1998 to 2016.

3. Alex Goldman, “Jennicam,” *Reply All*, Podcast Audio, December 2014, <https://www.gimletmedia.com/reply-all/5-the-jennicam>

4. Angela Jones, “‘I Get Paid to Have Orgasms’: Adult Webcam Models’ Negotiation of Pleasure and Danger,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 42, no. 1(Autumn 2016): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1086/686758>.

5. I emailed both mdoeksen@gmail.com and oceanmandolin@gmail.com the email address that was archived on camgirl.com as the contact for the sale of the domain. These two addresses are interconnected so when I emailed them separately they automatically joined together. Showing that Meredith was the owner of both email addresses and therefore the direct seller of the domain.

6. ICF Technology’s ties to the pornography industry are not clear, in fact the company’s purpose or mission is not exactly clear either. I discovered their ownership in the “Privacy Policy” section of camgirl.com.

to occur, is prohibited on camming websites, as it is illegal in the majority of the United States. Webcam modeling is intended to remain within the World Wide Web.

Camgirls like Ringley and Doeksen, of this early trend were trailblazers of the World Wide Web: coding their own websites, enabling live streams of images from their personal spaces and essentially setting up social networks before the standardized forms of Myspace and Facebook came into existence. These women often amassed popularity far greater than social network celebrities and influencers of today. In 1998, camgirl Ana Voog of anacam (1997-2009) who saw her camming as part of her art, had seven million people watching her daily, in other words, 1 out of 20 of the entire world's online population was watching Ana's bedroom, everyday.⁷

In comparing early camgirls to today's webcam models, it is important to note that these women of the late 1990s to early 2000s sometimes featured nudity and sex in their broadcasts, and some later chose to set up paid sites for more viewing access. However, sexual imagery and payment were not so directly linked as today's virtual rooms and tipping system. For webcam models of today, camming is a form of sex work. Whereas for the first camgirls the original intention for most was to broadcast their lives so that their audience becomes an engaged community. The label of camgirl evolved from encompassing multiple possibilities to a purely sexualized commercial role. However, for camgirls of the past and present elements of empowerment and exploitation have always existed along with the desire to be authentic and gain celebrity.

Today, I think another version of the camgirl exists. In the form of women artists who use Instagram and other social media platforms to "broadcast" their lives. In a methodical way these artists attempt to critically mirror society's stereotypical images of women either in the reverse or in a more heightened form. This usually involves embracing or rejecting Western beauty standards, for instance the use or non-use of facial makeup. These women do not self-describe as camgirls, but they document themselves, usually in the form of self-portraiture, on a near daily basis. I am speaking of the artists: Molly Soda, Signe Pierce, Alexandra Marzella and Arvida Byström. These women and others are consistently included in the current conversation of female digital identity within the art world. The majority of them have been featured in the recent exhibition *Virtual Normality Women Net Artists 2.0*.

The theories I use as my feminist framework involve questions of neoliberal feminism, how technology and capitalism have come to form a new era in which a multiplicity of feminisms exist. The authors I cite for these theories include: Rosalind Gill, a professor of sociology who is described as a feminist cultural theorist. Hester Baer, also a professor, whose research interests focus on gender and sexuality in film and media, as well as, historical and contemporary feminisms. Additionally Catherine Rottenberg, a professor of foreign literatures and linguistics, as well as, gender studies.

7. Sirin Kale, "In 1998 This Webcam Woman Was the Most Famous Person Online," *Dazed*, January 27, 2016, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/29457/1/in-1998-this-webcam-woman-was-the-most-famous-person-online>

Informing my knowledge of the first camgirls is the writing of Theresa Sneft and Katherine Bzura. Sneft authored *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (2008), which is a comprehensive analysis of early camgirls, she herself experimenting with camming. Currently Sneft is the senior lecturer in Social Media at Macquarie University with previous teaching engagements at New York University. While writer Angela Jones informs my understanding of webcam models of today in the context of sex work. Jones has a background in sociology and teaches sociology and anthropology, as well as, women, gender, and sexuality studies.

What connects camgirls of the past and present is that their position as women online has always been complicated by the intersections of pornography, commercialization and capitalism. What is feminist about being a camgirl? Considering art as social commentary these women attempt to use their digital identity as critique, but I have concerns about the cycle of commercialization within capitalism. In that critiques of its effects on society are then appropriated by advertising often times taking advantage of these voices. For instance, the uptake of popular feminism by clothing brands in order to sell merchandise. How can women artists form a critical yet productive relationship with their digital identity? What kind of gender performativity goes into being a camgirl of any time, or for that matter simply a woman online creating art? In a larger sense, how do we create work about our identity that is not exploitative or enacted in exclusivity?

1. Contextualizing the First Camgirls

The first camgirls were at the beginnings of live streaming and our current social media landscape, but what came before camming? In her master's thesis, "I'm Not Who I Was Then, Now: Performing Identity in Girl Cams and Blogs," written in 2007 University of South Florida art history student Katherine Bzura examined the early camgirls. Before Jennifer Ringley began her constant live broadcast, Bzura explains, "Home pages were the first and simplest form of online identity. If you wanted people to be able to find you on-line, it was necessary to define a space and deposit personal information in it..."⁸ Most academics who wrote about the first camgirls believed that these young women wanted to provide an accurate; authentic snapshot of themselves by offering viewers a continuous web cam view.

In the documentary, *Webcam Girls* (2005) interviewee Theresa Sneft, author of *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (2008), describes camming as autobiography reiterating the importance of a consistent online presence to create a personal brand that may achieve micro-celebrity.⁹ Sneft's fascination with these camgirls came from the contextualization of their web cams. Through the addition of diary-like blog posts, chat rooms, image galleries and fan clubs all coded and interconnected within the design of their home page. Everything a camgirl wanted her viewers to know was featured in one place rather than scattered across various social media platforms. And all of this was monitored and regulated by the camgirl herself, a stark difference from today's social media with its community guidelines and reporting systems for censorship.

Melissa Gira Grant, who went as shakticam and echocam during her time as a camgirl, wrote a reflective piece on the short-lived community for *Rhizome* in 2011. Here she explains the importance of LiveJournal. Launched in 1999, LiveJournal was a service that allowed for diary-like blog postings to be embedded into one's personal home page.

The tone and content of those early LiveJournal comment threads defied the peep show tease of the little JavaScript countdown clocks under our cam images. The timer would tick down the seconds to a new image, but it was our LiveJournals that provided the context and exposure. Over time, asking and answering our own questions publicly on our blogs was regarded as a practice as essential as being on the camera.¹⁰

Today's posts on Instagram lack the contextualization provided by an interconnected home page and the creative expression that comes with coding one's own online space. Current social media platforms offer users a standardized platform to deposit personal information within its confines where value is to be judged and placed on subjectivity. The kind of editing and curating of one's own

8. Katherine Bzura, "I'm Not Who I Was Then, Now: Performing Identity in Girl Cams and Blogs," (Graduate Theses and Dissertations, University of South Florida, 2007): 10, <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/651>

9. Tsneft, Aerlyn Weismann (Director), "Terri in Webcam Girls," Youtube Video, 4:52, June 16, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wBAjPWnkCg>

10. Melissa Gira Grant, "She was a Camera," *Rhizome*, October 26, 2011, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/oct/26/she-was-camera/>

image we see today on Instagram could not fully be achieved with the constantly refreshing web cam images included on a camgirl's site. Despite the conditions online, we all perform or stage our identity to some degree especially when it comes to our gender and sexuality. Being in public, whether that be physically or digitally, necessitates this performance. So what did it mean to turn the private into public with the democratization of computer technology and therefore the World Wide Web? Camgirls able to invite large amounts of people to watch their bedrooms at any time... What kind of performativity were these women participating in?

In a 2016 interview with writer and academic, Moira Weigel, digital performance artist Ann Hirsch, whose work has been inspired by camgirls, said of current social media,

So often we feel we must conform to more stereotypical portrayals of ourselves in order to be part of this attention economy and to have a voice. This has happened for me on a personal level—where, in order to be seen, I know sexy selfies will be liked the most.”¹¹

Whereas the first camgirl Jennifer Ringley has maintained that her intention with camming was never solely about her sexual identity. In a 2014 interview for the podcast Reply All, Ringley explained that the broadcasting of sex on jennicam was more about not wanting to turn away the cameras, “...if I really wanted to be able to ignore the cameras as much as I wanted to, then they just had to keep running.”¹² Critical articles in the late 1990s from small newspaper outlets chronicled her “striptease” performances, as well as, a section of jennicam called “Anatomy One-oh-One” which was a head-to-toe tour of Ringley’s body with detailed comments.¹³ In considering how writers and interviewers have continuously questioned Ringely’s intentions and that of other camgirls past and present I’d like to point out the title of Weigel’s interview with Hirsch... “We socialize young women to seek attention and later punish them for it.”¹⁴

Judith Butler, the philosopher and gender theorist, confirms this socializing in *Undoing Gender* suggesting that we perform gender norms as they were taught to us by our society, “...the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author.”¹⁵ The Internet only heightens and furthers this sociality in what Hirsch describes as the “attention economy.” In “Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics and Neoliberalism” by Hester Baer the author writes that social media

11. Moira Weigel, “Moira Weigel interviews Ann Hirsch: We socialize young women to seek attention and later punish them for it,” *e-flux*, June 2016, <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/moira-weigel-interviews-ann-hirsch-we-socialize-young-women-to-seek-attention-and-later-punish-them-for-it/3936>

12. Alex Goldman, “Jennicam,” *Reply All*, Podcast Audio, December 17, 2014. <https://www.gimlet-media.com/reply-all/5-the-jennicam>.

13. Cathy Alter, “Voyeur Eyes Only: Jennifer Ringley’s real-time web of life,” *Washington City Paper*, August 29, 1997, <https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/news/article/13013765/voyeur-eyes-only>

14. Weigel, “Moira Weigel interviews Ann Hirsch: We socialize young women to seek attention and later punish them for it”

15. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 1.

platforms emphasis “on commodified self-representation and the widespread digital dissemination of images of the material body escalate the demands of hegemonic femininity.”¹⁶ And in a Western society, the standard of hegemonic femininity is one of young, white cisgendered women of able bodies.

The Internet intensifies pressure to perform and conform, but what kind of good could come out of camming and its sociality? In the introduction to her book on the early camgirls titled, “The Personal as Political in the Age of the Global Network,” Sneft discusses her mother’s participation in consciousness-raising groups of the sixties and seventies. According to the National Women’s Liberation organization, a feminist group born out of the 1968 movement that called for the elevation of women in society, Consciousness-Raising was and is a tool for uncovering the political root of women’s so-called “personal problems” by relating their lives to group questions.¹⁷

Sneft contemplates C-R within the World Wide Web emphasizing the ability to consume and then respond, “...on the Web, the dialectical nature of communication is itself political in nature, regardless of content, particularly if one understands politics as the leveraging of power between connected entities.”¹⁸ Sneft emphasized the micro in several respects in her book, the micro-celebrity camgirls could garner and the micro-political; the idea that localized discussions in nonpolitical arenas could lead to larger macro-political effects. However, I question if the dialectical possibilities of the WWW have come to be hindered by the dilution of communication through standardization and censorship of social media, as well as, the increased inclusion of commercial advertising.

By offering a site of comparison with the possibility of unhindered response from viewers, could the online spaces the first camgirls created be considered feminist simply because of their motivation to be authentic? In that these young women by presenting their “unfiltered” lives subverted commercialized images of femininity that surrounded them in advertisements, magazines and movies. Images that embraced shaving body hair, wearing makeup, being discrete about one’s menstruation, saving oneself for heterosexual marriage, etc. Or has this idea of empowerment only later been analyzed and placed by academics like Theresa Sneft?

In considering self-portraiture and its connections to feminism, the kind of individualistic sharing these camgirls did and we currently do on social media, may be more isolating and exclusionary than it is relatable and therefore dialectic. Theresa Sneft gets to this point when she quotes feminist scholar Rita Felski,

Is the act of confessing a liberating step for women, which uncovers the political dimensions of the personal experience, confronts the contradictions of existing gender roles, and creates an important sense of

16. Hester Baer, “Redoing Feminism: Digital Activism, Body Politics and Neoliberalism,” *Feminist Media Studies*. Volume 16 No.1 (2016): <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2015.1093070>

17. Women’s Liberation, “Feminist Consciousness Raising,” accessed August 2018 <http://www.womensliberation.org/priorities/feminist-consciousness-raising>

18. Theresa Sneft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008): 5.

female identification and solidarity? Or does this kind of [confession] uncritically reiterate the “jargon of authenticity” and ideology of subjectivity-as-truth which feminism should be calling into question?¹⁹

Although Sneft’s opinion varied on the political nature of camming she certainly saw a power in participating and creating media rather than just simply consuming, author Susan Hopkins saw camming as merely young women and girls chasing after celebrity. In “Camgirls: Live on the Net” written in 2002 author of *Girl Heroes: The New Force In Popular Culture* describes camming as “obsessive self-documentation” being “more than narcissism.”²⁰ Confirmed by the shallow idea of “girl power” in which “being a sex object is not about sex at all—it’s about power.”²¹ Hopkins seemed to believe that these young women were self-exploiting and was dismayed to see that, “The vocabulary and images of sexist exploitation have been appropriated by camgirls.”²²

The previously mentioned digital performance artist Ann Hirsch’s work “Scandalishious” (2008-2009) intentionally appropriated the language of camgirls for an eighteen-month long performance on YouTube. Hirsch’s character Caroline was a self-described “hipster college freshman” who regularly uploaded videos of herself “dancing provocatively.”²³ Hirsch’s work is uncomfortably playful; there is a kind of irony and parody to the work as Hirsch exaggerates the tropes of the camgirl, essentially a woman who self-exploits for attention. Caroline’s YouTube profile became widely popular engaging more than an art world audience. In its restoration by *Rhizome* in 2018 for the *Net Art Anthology*, a two year long exhibition presenting net art history, “Scandalishious” is presented with viewer’s comments and video responses, their engagement with the work equally as important as the performance itself.²⁴

By positioning the work as an art performance Hirsch played into our expectations of women in media. She exposed camgirls to be any other genre with conventions that could be followed to gain access to a community. However, over time Hirsch believes that Caroline’s imitation of mediated “sexiness” began to crack revealing awkwardness and insecurity.²⁵ She took the standardized platform of YouTube and exerted some degree of control by assessing the trends and tropes to create something staged yet altogether real, performance becoming the context to understand her actions online.

19. *ibid* from Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989)

20. Susan Hopkins, “Camgirls: Live on the Net,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 9, 2002, <https://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/08/09/1028158010523.html>

21. *ibid*

22. *ibid*

23. Ann Hirsch, “Scandalishious,” *Net Art Anthology by Rhizome*, accessed February 7, 2019, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/scandalishious>

24. *ibid*

25. Eva Krysiak, “Ann Hirsch on the art project that invaded her private life,” *The Start Podcast*, Podcast Audio, February 8, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/audio/2018/feb/08/ann-hirsch-art-online-youtube-scandalishious-the-start-podcast>

2. Monetization versus Commercialization in Webcam Modeling

Today's webcam model is the epitome of what it means to monetize camming. The camming that began in the late 1990's as young women sharing their personal spaces and information about their lives in the hope of creating an online community evolved into a profession. I believe these women monetize their labor as a source of profit, but this work most often occurs within systems that then commercialize or exploit them.

Before the token system of direct payment for a webcam model's performance monetization of camming came in the form of Amazon Wishlists, eBay auctions and pay-for-view camgirl sites. Amazon Wishlists were a common feature on early camgirl sites and still exist today on the websites of webcam models. For Meredith Doeksen, the original owner of camgirl.com, the first link to an Amazon Wishlist appears in 2000. Amazon Wishlist allows users to create a list of desired products from the online marketplace that others can then access and purchase from. For those documenting and critiquing the early camgirls, these methods of creating revenue from their viewers blurred the line between sharing for the sake of creating a community and profiting off and perhaps taking advantage of viewer's interest in camgirl's personal lives.

In a *Vice* profile and photo essay current webcam model, Lindsay Dye, says of the clients who send her gifts from Amazon, they are...

People who don't exist in your physical space, but want to. So they buy you something that you will touch, wear, or feature on your [camgirl] set. The presents suggest how far people are willing to go (or invest) in a relationship with someone that they don't know.²⁶

Today, these gifts confirm the transactional relationship between webcam model and client; and yet these items also conform to the convention of "romantic" gestures as symbols of a relationship's progression.

These were the first steps of monetizing camming, what follows are the first steps towards today's webcam model. Theresa Sneft briefly discussed the "porn camgirl" in the chapter titled, "The Public, the Private, and the Pornographic." At first, highlighting Danni Ashe of Danni Hard Drive (1995) who used her homepage as a kind of archive and purchasing point for the pornography she was a part of.²⁷ A current example of this kind of do-it-yourself camgirl business is that of artist Leah Schrager who launched "celebrity-as-art-practice" "ONA" in 2015, which is set to run until 2020.²⁸ @onaartist has garnered over two million Instagram followers and features only erotic images of Schrager. Images that don't follow Instagram's nudity guidelines²⁹ are placed on Onagram.com and for a monthly membership of \$29.99 members can view the archive of explicit images and videos, as well as, constantly updating content.³⁰ In considering this

26. Elizabeth Herring, "The Gifts Horny Men Give a Popular Camgirl," *Vice*, January 17, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8gkzkv/photos-of-the-gifts-a-busy-camgirl-receives-456

27. Sneft, 40

28. Leah Schrager, "About," accessed October 2018, <http://www.leahschrager.com/about/>

29. Instagram Community Guidelines: "We know that there are times when people might want to share nude images that are artistic or creative in nature, but for a variety of reasons, we don't allow nudity on Instagram..." Instagram, "Community Guidelines," accessed October 2018 <https://help.instagram.com/477434105621119>

a digital art performance, if Hirsch drew from the language of the early camgirls for Caroline in “Scandalishious”, then Schragger has taken her cues from the webcam models for “ONA”.

Sneft broke down the categories of porn camgirls that existed during the late 90’s early 2000’s period as follows. Some women Sneft termed “Company Girls” these were the first webcam models working for company websites that regulated their pay and created the very concept of public and private shows.³¹

“Independents” who wanted to set their own prices for shows and therefore used video chat services with more relaxed guidelines such as Internet Friends Network (iFriends).³² These women are perhaps equivalent to webcam models today that couple their camming on a cam site with a broadcast on the live streaming service Twitch as a means of broadening their fan base and perhaps exploring a different kind of performance.³³ Creating a kind of freelance business in which the model is not tied to just one company website that perhaps underpays. However, this has not gone unnoticed by Twitch users who believe webcam models misuse the service, for “unintended” purposes.³⁴ Based on Twitch’s Community Guidelines released in May 2018, commenting and therefore calling someone a “camgirl” is considered harassment.³⁵ Simultaneously, these Guidelines began the process of eliminating webcam models from the service, by prohibiting sexually explicit content.³⁶ Considering the context of Twitch is necessary, but I think this serves as a clear indication of how “camgirl” as a label is perceived today, synonymous with something negative, as well as, how censorship can lead to the expulsion of certain users from a platform.

And finally Sneft described “Porn House Girls” as women living for months and some times years at a time in houses equipped with webcams.³⁷ Paying members to voyeurdorm.com could watch from seventy-five live cameras and instant message with the six to eight young women living in the house at any time, a kind of online reality show that promised “sexiness”.³⁸ Just as camgirls are now referred to as webcam models, cam houses still exist in a sense, only now they

30. “Sign-Up Form,” My Private Onagram, accessed February, 7, 2019, <http://private.onagram.com/amember/signup>

31. Sneft, 81

32. *ibid*

33. An ACF discussion on the advantages of using Twitch, “Cam models that stream on twitch!!” started by Elizabethnoir, May 18, 2016 <https://www.ambercutie.com/forums/threads/cam-models-that-stream-on-twitch.24420/>

34. Mel Hawthorne, “A Group on Twitch Calling Themselves ‘The Anti-Boob Police’ are Masters at Trolling Female Streamers,” Gamebyte, March 23, 2018, <https://www.gamebyte.com/group-twitch-calling-anti-boob-police-masters-trolling-female-streamers/>

35. Twitch, “Twitch Town Hall: Community Guidelines @ 2pm PT,” Twitch Video, 37:39, May 2018, <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/227053255?t=0h16m9s>

36. “Nudity and sexually explicit content or activities, such as pornography, sexual acts or intercourse, and sexual services, are prohibited.” “Sexually suggestive content or activities are also prohibited, although they may be allowed in educational contexts or for pre-approved licensed content, in each case subject to additional restrictions.” Twitch, “Community Guidelines” accessed October 2018, <https://www.twitch.tv/p/legal/community-guidelines/>

37. Sneft, 82

38. Carl S. Kaplan, “Florida Community Can’t Shut Down ‘Voyeur Dorm,’” *The New York Times*, October 5, 2001, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/05/technology/florida-community-cant-shut-down-voyeur-dorm.html>

are called camming studios. In an episode of *Slutever* (released March 7, 2018) titled “Cam Girls” for Viceland sex writer and host Karley Sciortino visits the United States’ largest camming studio, Studio 20, in Hollywood, California.³⁹ The studio is made up of manufactured bedrooms that are professionally lit and equipped with a large monitor, camera and computer for webcam modeling. The models take turns using the various “bedrooms” for their camming shows to be perceived by clients as their authentic personal space. Unlike *Voyeur Dorm* they do not live in the studio full-time creating a professional distance between the performance of webcam modeling and the model’s actual life, their true living space.

To have some kind of recollection of the first group of women who were camming as a form of sex work is important in understanding the evolution of the camgirl label. Another important step between the first camgirls and the monetization of camming is when Jennifer Ringley, the first camgirl, set up pay-for-view access in the form of a \$15 annual subscription paid by members via PayPal.⁴⁰ Ringley insisted in 1998, that the subscriptions only covered the costs of running the website.⁴¹ On December 31, 2003 when she decided to take down JenniCam.org Ringley “blamed the closure on PayPal’s anti-nudity policy”⁴² in that she was no longer able to collect subscriptions and maintain her camming. After several years of being live all the time, did Ringley’s monetization of her webcam suddenly mean that her viewers were exploiting her labor? I believe it is the opposite, any kind of positive benefits Ringley’s audience gained from her broadcast sexual or not, were now being fairly profited from.

In an interview with *Rhizome* in 2015, artist and professor Shawné Michaelain Holloway spoke of the monetization of her own camming,

It’s true, camming is a super straightforward way of monetizing the male gaze; but personally, thinking about it in this way implies a kind of revenge, and that’s not what I want to communicate. Depending on how you want look at it, I’m simply monetizing my labor (both physical or emotional) and I believe this is an even more feminist motivation.⁴³

Angela Jones’ article, “I Get Paid to Have Orgasms: Adult Webcam Models’ Negotiation of Pleasure and Danger” asserts that it is reductive to believe that the sex work of webcam models is merely exploitative, “Camgirls have found employment that is oftentimes exploitative and enacted within patriarchal systems, but this work also allows them to subvert antiquated ideas about female

39. *Slutever*, “Cam Girls,” Season 1 Episode 7, Viceland, March 7, 2018.

40. Web Watch, “Final Days in the Life at Jennicam,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2003, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/business/2003/12/07/final-days-in-the-life-at-jennicam/06aef23c-6ff9-4f05-8ea3-e0857a034b4c/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ce20029ab67f

41. Jonathan Weisman, “Her life is just an open web site exhibitionism: with a camera in her bedroom, a 21-year-old woman has turned her day-to-day existence into a hobby for hundreds of thousands of web crawlers,” *The Baltimore Sun*, May 13, 1998, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1998-05-13-1998133113-story.html>

42. Hugh Hart, “April 14, 1996: Jennicam Starts Lifecasting,” *Wired*, April 14, 2010, <https://www.wired.com/2010/04/0414jennicam-launches/>

43. Gaby Cepeda, “Artist Profile: Shawné Michaelain Holloway,” *Rhizome*, September 24, 2015, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/sep/24/artist-profile-shawne-michaelain-holloway/>

sexuality and this produces empowerment.”⁴⁴ In Jones’ study of webcam models she looked at a messaging forum, called ACF (AmberCutie’s Forum), which is a virtual community of camgirls and their clients. She looked at public discussion forums in order to analyze the current pleasures and risks of camming.

Jones found that the benefits of camming are not understood in purely economic terms. She observed that “models highlighted orgasms as a benefit of their work,”⁴⁵ Unlike mainstream pornography where female porn actresses often fake orgasms during the lengthened process of filming, webcam models control the process and often choose not to fake their orgasms.⁴⁶ We could consider this to be a continued form of authenticity within the development of camgirls. And if seen as a way to subvert mainstream depictions of female orgasm within pornography and cinematography this choice by webcam models is feminist.

Whereas the early camgirls maintained control over their broadcasts by writing, editing and moderating their own websites, today’s webcam models rely on hosting platforms and live-streaming services for their work. The actions I have described: using a service like Twitch to circumvent traditional webcam company websites, choosing not to fake their orgasms during performances and emphasizing with clients the importance of building an amicable relationship through gifts and conversation could be viewed as a way of exerting control, these women empowering themselves.

The emphasis on the individual being resilient or fending for herself was a repeated finding in Jones’ study. She relates this to neoliberal feminism believing that the models negotiate the dangers of camming, in other words, the harassment in a subjective way that requires them as individuals to solve problems on their own and in turn create their own pleasure. The dangers or incessant harassment webcam models face includes but is not limited to: blackmail by clients as a means of control as well as stalking and trolling comments in their public chat rooms. There is very little regulation on company websites to protect webcam models. As is the case with most forms of sex work, webcam models are encouraged to protect themselves or leave the business.

As defined by Catherine Rottenberg in “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” neoliberalism “...is a dominant political rationality that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors.”⁴⁷ Although Jones states that webcam models employ this kind of rationality, in no way does she mean it solely as a critique. Today’s webcam models may not be critical of

44. Jones, 228

45. Jones, 235

46. The formula of mainstream pornography: “They vocalize a performative sense of pleasure with moans and squeals as their male counterparts lead them through a formulaic equation of sexual positions that ‘opens’ the penetrative action up to the camera for the viewer’s pleasure—not their own. This assemblage of ‘fast food’ pornographic sex continues until the female performer is instructed to ‘fake’ an orgasm and receive a load of hot cum on her face.” Madison Young, “Authenticity and its Role within Feminist Pornography” *Porn Studies*, Volume 1, Issue 1-2 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2014.888250>

47. Catherine Rottenberg, “The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism,” *Cultural Studies*, (2013): 3 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.857361>

“the larger capitalist system that structures their exploitation,”⁴⁸ but Jones sees these women on “the front lines of the battle for sexual freedom.”⁴⁹

Lindsay Dye is a webcam model, artist and writer. Within her artistic practice she creates work almost exclusively from her experiences as a webcam model at times critiquing the forms of harassment Jones outlined. In her series, “Buy Me: Offline Shop”, Dye finds stolen screenshot images from her private lives-stream performances. This stealing is commonly known as “capping” which is shorthand for “capturing.” Clients, in order to control webcam models, often use these images as a form of blackmail or to simply undermine a model’s profits.⁵⁰ Dye takes the captured images and creates prints that people can then buy, recreating a fair profit. I first came upon Dye’s own article “Camgirl 101” in the zine, Pull Out, a publication that explores how technology affects millennial sex life. Dye refers to herself as a camwoman in this article, when I emailed to ask about this conscious decision she wrote back saying,

I thought that the term “Camgirl” had been used purposely to create a more ‘juvenile’ or immature appeal that empowers the consumer (men) and not the women doing the job. As if I did not want to take the job as seriously if I’m a “girl” and not a “woman entrepreneur operating her own business.” I’m an adult making decisions, not a young girl flippantly navigating the internet.⁵¹

One could view the ACF forum for webcam models as a form of consciousness-raising these workers sharing personal stories of harassment and giving advice. In concluding, Jones questions what could come of collective activism amongst these sex workers. How could the company websites intervene in harassment and in turn, would such regulation lead to closer monitoring of models’ performances and therefore stricter rules and surveillance? Through this line of questioning Jones becomes skeptical of a negative framing of neoliberal feminism stating, “Subjectivity matters—we need less theorizing around what neoliberalism does to people and more theorizing around what people do with neoliberalism.”⁵²

In a commercialized society that unequally exploits women’s sexual appeal for the benefit of selling products, and in thinking of the individual woman within a neoliberal rationality... why should women not be able to participate and profit from this system directly? I believe the camgirl, from the beginning to now, to be a heightened example of the complications of modern feminism and as I stated in my introduction another modern-day version of the early camgirl may still exist. Like the webcam model this woman monetizes her labor, but her work is simultaneously commercialized by the system she chooses to operate within. The alternative I believe is to expose the system the paradox?

48. Jones, 251

49. *ibid*

50. Jones, 240 another form of harassment: doxxing “refers to acquiring through research or hacking identifiable information about a model and then sharing it” which again is used to blackmail models

51. Lindsay Dye, email communication, May 6, 2018.

52. Jones, 252

3. The Modern-Day Camgirl: Instagram and Subjectivity-as-Value

On January 12, 2018 *Virtual Normality – Women Net Artists 2.0* opened at the Museum de bildenden Künste in Leipzig, Germany. In the preface to the publication, *Virtual Normality: The Female Gaze in the Age of the Internet*, the director of the museum, Alfred Weidinger said, “The youngest generation of feminists face similar challenges (as the renowned artists of second-wave feminism): They still have to defend their gender, sexuality, and their self-images against the male gaze.”⁵³

Heavily referenced in this conversation, the male gaze comes from Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975). The male gaze theorizes that women are often portrayed in cinema and visually elsewhere as sexual objects for male consumption, often because these visuals are created from the perspective of heterosexual men. The subsequent female gaze is therefore the reaction. Embracing a visual representation of females from the female perspective in an attempt to challenge conventions of beauty and gender.

The exhibition, *Virtual Normality*, included the work of Signe Pierce, Molly Soda, Leah Schragger, Refrakt (as collaborator), Nicole Ruggiero, Stephanie Sarley, Arvida Byström, Nakeya Brown, Juno Calypso, Izumi Miyazaki and LaTurbo Avedon.

The majority of these artists could be considered modern-day camgirls. Using their visual “art” to subvert and reject traditional ideas of femininity in a seemingly more direct manner than the early camgirls by self-describing and linking to the female gaze. These artists tend to self-publish on Instagram, which allows them access to many people, but comes at the price of being monitored and censored. Besides the occasional gallery or museum exhibition they work mostly in the fashion industry.

In the same way the first camgirls: Voog, Ringley, Doeksen and Grant among many others were often criticized as being narcissistic, self-promoting and celebrity-obsessed these modern-day Instagram camgirls are similarly critiqued and their art’s legitimacy is questioned. To this point of legitimacy, in an interview with *Time* magazine Leah Schragger of “ONA” described earlier said,

Because if it’s a man presenting a woman in the art world, it’s okay and there’s a long history of it. But then there’s really not much history of the woman presenting herself. And especially not a history of her presenting herself in a sexual way.⁵⁴

Arvida Byström also featured in the exhibition is a queer-identifying artist who works exclusively in photography and the installation design of her photos. Her photographic work is mostly self-portraiture (although she does work with other subjects) and as she describes she is, “Exploring femininities and their complexities, which are often tied to online culture, she travels in an aesthetic universe of periods, selfie sticks and fruits in lingerie.”⁵⁵

53. Alfred Weidinger, “Preface,” *Virtual Normality The Female Gaze in the Age of the Internet*, Alfred Weidinger and Anika Meier (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2018): 3.

54. Alexandra Genova, “Exploring the Blurred Lines Between Celebrity, Sex and Art,” *Time*, last modified May 02, 2017, <http://time.com/4761944/celebrity-sex-art/>

Visually this often equates to images of her revealed body shown as unshaven with un-retouched “blemishes” such as cellulite or pimples. Byström works for clients mostly within the fashion industry like Adidas and Gucci creating advertisements for their products and for magazines such as *Dazed* and *Wonderland*. Currently her personal website is empty, a violet background with pink Helvetica text that reads “brb” the majority of her work can be seen on Instagram and Tumblr. The captions to her posts on Instagram and the design of her Tumblr blog provide a minimal version of the context the early camgirls’ home pages offered.

In the same way, I believe there was a site of comparison and therefore a power in viewers relating to early camgirls and to each other. I similarly think Byström provides an alternative image of femininity to young women, her work in the fashion industry furthering these ideas into widespread advertising. But is this enough when considering Sneft’s terms of dialectic and political? Especially when Byström, like any social media user, selectively shares glimpses of her “authentic” life, a fraction of the constant and perhaps unfiltered view early camgirls offered. Is the high-end fashion market exploiting Byström’s visual work? This work has continuously been framed as feminist especially by the fashion industry and what one could call hip art institutions.

In “Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times,” (2016) by Professor of Sociology Rosalind Gill, the author describes corporate or neo-liberal feminism saying, “This version of feminism has extraordinary visibility in the media, not least through its psychologizing discourse and promotion of female ‘confidence,’ self-love, and self-esteem as one-size-fits-all solutions to gender injustice.”⁵⁶

On October 8, 2018, Byström posted to Instagram an image of a billboard where she models for Urbanears headphones. Pictured without the hair of her legs or armpits and without revealing her body. I see a slender white woman with blonde hair in pink clothes against a pink backdrop. She’s sitting, her hand is raised to her partly open glossed lips, and her squared-off acrylic nails are just barely touching her cheek. Without knowing who she is or what her views represent I’m not looking at an alternative idea of femininity. I’m looking at the same image I grew up with in the early 2000s that taught me how to be a girl and then how to be woman, to be beautiful and desirable.⁵⁷

In reviewing current understandings and criticisms of post-feminism and its connections to neoliberalism, Gill identifies this kind of use of feminism, “...I want to suggest that claiming a feminist identity—without specifying what that

55. Arvida Byström, “Artists,” *Virtual Normality The Female Gaze in the Age of the Internet*, Alfred Weidinger and Anika Meier (Vienna: Verlag für moderne Kunst, 2018): 174.

56. Rosalind Gill, “Post-Postfeminism?: New Feminist Visibilities in Postfeminist Times,” *Feminist Media Studies*, Volume 16, No. 4, (2016): 617. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1193293>

57. It’s important to note that in an interview with Urbanears, Byström acknowledges this very point, “I’m white and middle class which makes certain things very easy for me and I think feminism should not be about work and success and definitely have to span across class and race and needs to deal with more things than what fits into popular culture, where is pretty much where I fit in. Urban Ears, “Listen to yourself by Arvida Byström—Interview,” February 10, 2018, https://www.urbanears.com/ue_se_en/inside-urbanears/arvida-bystrom-interview

means in terms of some kind of politics—is problematic.”⁵⁸ Gill was referring to the act of self-describing as feminist especially by celebrities in interviews. In the same way Urbanears has marked these images and subsequent ad campaign as feminist.

In interviews and the short captions of Instagram, Byström makes clear her views and politics. But when we turn over our work, our art and our self-image to commercial industries that pair whatever copy they see fit, we lose control over the message, the vital message that provides the context to the visuals.

In 2017, Anika Meier, who would become the editor and curator of *Virtual Normality*, interviewed Charlotte Jansen an art journalist, who in the same year authored a book, titled *Girl on Girl: Art and Photography in the Age of the Female Gaze*. Jansen would then become a contributor in the *Virtual Normality* publication. Both of these projects feature almost exactly the same group of women artists.

In a question about the context in which the audience receives this photographic work, Meier asks about the artists’ online communities and if the art world is even necessary in order for the work to be seen. Jansen confirms the existence of such a community and therefore structure that understands and promotes the female gaze, “Someone like Petra Collins, for example, or Mayan Toledano who are both in the book, yes, their work is on the Internet, but they are making their work for their own community.”⁵⁹ In response Meier says, “They are not waiting for a magazine or a newspaper or a critic to contextualize it for them.”⁶⁰ In the beginning, these artists may not have waited for media outlets or the art world to contextualize their work, but in this trend their work has certainly become contextualized by these sources.

In a question that gets at the problematic nature of Byström’s advertisement for Urbanears, Meier asks if it is easier for female artists on the Internet to get attention? Jansen responds by saying, “It helps them [female artists] if they have a certain kind of body that happens to be accepted and appreciated by the dominant male gaze.”⁶¹ She references artist Alexandra Marzella who like Byström could be considered conventionally attractive and in her practice often works with self-portraiture. The point Jansen gets to... why shouldn’t Marzella be able to play with her sexuality in images that she then shares? And why is she not taken seriously within the art world if she becomes so popular online? She puts the blame onto the audience saying, “The problem is ours, the viewer. We’re not able to see that in any other way than something to sexualize. We’re not able to accept other kinds of expressions.”⁶²

Although these artists attempt to broaden ideas of femininity by exploring their own, does the mere virtual dissemination of their material bodies just perpetu-

58. Gill, 619

59. Anika Meier, “Selfies Can be Feminist—In Conversation with Charlotte Jansen,” *Wide Walls*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.widewalls.ch/charlotte-jansen-interview/>

60. *ibid*

61. *ibid*

62. *ibid*

ate the status quo? Especially when these images most often appear on Instagram, a platform that is clearly a product of neoliberal culture... the number of followers, likes and comments determining one's importance put on display next to your "work." Again considering that advertising now plays an almost equal role as user-contributed content.

Before the collective exhibiting of *Virtual Normality* and *Girl on Girl* there was *Body Anxiety* an online exhibition curated by Leah Schrager and Jennifer Chan in early 2015. Although some of the same female artists are present again here, the work as a whole seems more in line with that of Ann Hirsch's performance of "Scandalishious" (2008-2009) than Arvida Byström's portfolio.

On the landing page of *Body Anxiety* is a quote from Ann Hirsch "Whenever you put your body online, in some way you are in conversation with porn..."⁶³ Although many of the twenty-one artists featured may not engage their work in commercial industries, their work is still strongly tied to a conversation of feminism and the digital self.

In "Closing the Loop" for the New Inquiry (2016) artist, curator and critic Aria Dean critiques this online exhibition and describes what she views as the "new white selfie feminism"⁶⁴ the theory that control over self-image making is the ultimate feminist tool for resistance,

The claim follows a logic in which circulation of personal narratives through Instagram and other social media platforms is supposed to provide points of identification for all women, everywhere; and finally, there is a demand for equality; that 'the female body' be treated as equal to its male counterpart and for its vulnerability to be without consequence.⁶⁵

Dean goes on to say, "Selfie feminism likewise claims a universal female experience located in 'the female body.'"⁶⁶ Marked by gendered difference, but not encompassing any other form of difference, "It is this that allows Chan and Schrager to place Hirsch's quote at the forefront of their exhibition without further interrogation of whose bodies are entailed, and 'what kind of conversation with pornography?'"⁶⁷

The first camgirls were as a majority white, straight, able-bodied, under the age of forty and English speaking this acknowledged by Sneft in her own study of over forty camgirls.⁶⁸ And although gay male cams have and do exist and there are camgirls who differ from the description above, the prominent visibility of these homogeneous women is a reflection of the kind of femininity that is mediated to us and then perpetuated online.

63. Ann Hirsch, *Body Anxiety*, accessed October 2018, <http://bodyanxiety.com/gallery/landing/>

64. Aria Dean, "Closing the Loop," *The New Inquiry*, March 1, 2016, <https://thenewinquiry.com/closing-the-loop/>

65. *ibid*

66. *ibid*

67. *ibid*

68. Sneft, 7

Authenticity: A Conclusion on Empowerment, Exploitation and Paradox

Meredith Doeksen most likely sat at her computer in her bedroom several hours a day, streaming her constantly refreshed image onto camgirl.com. She was a silent image, instant messaging creating her textual voice. Her life described through her personal website, an interconnected context, in a virtual space of her own creation.

For the early camgirls, being a camgirl meant being authentic, to be live from your personal space and sharing everything. For webcam models, whose existence clearly traces back to this early trend of camgirls, being live from a perceived personal space still plays a crucial role in defining an authentic intimate experience for paying clients. And authenticity defines the pleasure these women experience whether that be from their own orgasms, controlling their own business or creating a genuine sociable interaction with a client.

But for the women I have decided to label as camgirls, the artists, being live is no longer vital to this show of authenticity. For some, authenticity is still about sharing a performed identity, this identity seemingly more calculated than the early camgirls. The focus is on being mundane; average in the same way the early camgirls emphasized these characteristics. But like webcam models this performance is indirectly profited off of. Commercialized by industries such as high-end fashion and mainstream entertainment that are deemed more respectable by society than webcam modeling companies, which create the same system for commercialization. I am concerned that young female artists are overlooking the context of Instagram as a limited template-based model of publishing, as well as, a commercial and censored space ready to turn messages of empowerment into tools for selling.

For other female artists, how far you are willing to push the boundaries for your art seems to determine its authenticity or legitimacy. With “Scandalishious” by Ann Hirsch and in a similar later work “Excellences and Perfections” by Amalia Ulman (2014) in which the artist performed an extreme, semi-fictionalized makeover via her Facebook and Instagram profiles. Hirsch and Ulman created digital characters and online performances that lasted for lengthened amounts of time. They inhabited these characters in a vulnerable way creating virtual fiction and yet exposing what must be true parts of their own identity. Willing to have the audience believe they were their character only later to reveal that this was work of art. Artists like Dye, Schrage and Hallway incorporate their experiences as webcam models into their practice to expose the conditions within confined online platforms. I feel somehow the works that seek to heighten the negative conditions of being a woman often through performance of the digital self feel the most effective in exposing inequalities and are the least likely to be commercialized by another entity.

However, for almost all of these artists and camgirls their work and broadcasts emphasize being of a female body, a point of contention. The prevalence of works that explore feminism or are labeled feminist often takes the form of self-portraiture and therefore autobiography. Self-portraiture when related to

69. Bzura, 11 citing Q&A from anacam “I’m also doing this to say “HERE YA GO, HERE’S MY LIFE, I’M A REAL PERSON AND HERE I AM IN ALL MY MUNDANE AND SPECTACULAR GLORY!” <http://www.anacam.com/anaframesn.html> (accessed March 4, 2007).

feminism is like Consciousness-Raising paradoxically creating such a strong notion of individualism that relation to others differing from the woman visually pictured becomes limited. When we embrace the Female Gaze, especially in the form of self-portraiture, we need to interrogate what other kinds of gazes are in turn created that reiterate systemic hierarchies and inequalities. Works should critically expose this very fact.

Should we use the label of feminist and female gaze in regards to art more sparingly? I have compiled a genealogy of the first camgirls in order to recognize them as trailblazers of the World Wide Web and social media. Their unhindered use of the WWW allowed them to create the context around their continuous web cam broadcast through which they formed community and their own digital identities. Their identity enacted in terms of authenticity and perhaps perpetuating hegemonic femininity, however still offering some site of comparison even if only for those who mirrored them.

In the words of Judith Butler, "That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means that paradox is the condition of possibility..."⁷⁰ In terms of feminist work, paradox and inequality are the conditions we should expose. What I have discussed, what I have attempted to analyze relates not only to my own identity, but also to preemptively assess the kind of work I want to make. In closing I'd like to discuss a work that sought to expose rather than merely relate.

The byline of *Virtual Normality* was "Women Net Artists 2.0" it is valuable to discuss an original feminist net.art work. In February 1997, the Galerie der Gegenwart of the Hamburger Kunsthalle held the first net.art competition an extension of the museum into the World Wide Web. Artist Cornelia Sollfrank frustrated by the idea of an institution judging work that simply belonged to the World Wide Web, as well as, the prevalence of a "boy's club" within the net.art scene, chose to intervene in the competition. Submitting 288 simulated international female artists, complete with working e-mail addresses to be verified. Sollfrank generated individual net.art projects for 127 of these artists, using a computer program that collected random HTML material from the WWW and recombined it automatically.⁷¹ The museum, as well as, other publications touted the large number of female applications, "...in the first press release of July 3, 1997: '280 applications - two thirds are women.'⁷² At the same time as the announcement of the three male winners, Sollfrank issued a press statement revealing the entirety of her project, Female Extension. By hacking the competition Sollfrank hoped to expose the museum's selfish aims in inserting itself and its traditional ideas into the net.art movement, ideas that included boasting about female applicants, but awarding men.

Sollfrank described this work as an example of cyberfeminism saying,

70. Butler, 3

71. Cornelia Sollfrank, "Female Extension (translated)" accessed October 2018, <http://www.art-warez.org/femext/content/femext.html>

72. ibid

73. ibid

An important strategy of CYBERFEMINISM is the use of irony. Irony is about humor and seriousness. Only with irony can the contradictory views be joined... An expanded concept of politics has to contain the possibility of both paradox and utopia. It has to be in opposition, able to argue from different perspectives at the same time, and at the same time make meaningful political action possible.⁷³