

Sexcams in a Dollhouse:
Social Reproduction and the Platform Economy

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ABSTRACT

Sexcams in a Dollhouse: Social Reproduction and the Platform Economy

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Once a peripheral phenomenon on the Web, sexcam platforms have been gaining social and economic importance, attracting millions of visitors every day. Crucial to this popularity is the technical and economic model that some of those sites use. Sexcam platforms combine the practices of labor and user-generated platforms. As platforms, they mediate between users and providers, becoming the field where those operations occur. Sexcam platforms, however, are more than intermediaries, and their structures incorporate and reproduce discriminatory conventions.

Sexcams in a Dollhouse: Social Reproduction and the Platform Economy is a research-creation project exploring digital labor through the American sexcam platform Chaturbate.com. Rather than treating this platform as an exception, this project invites the consideration of Chaturbate as a paradigmatic instance of work in the context of platform capitalism. Sexcam platforms, this research argues, illustrate recent changes in the notions of what is work and what is leisure, what generates value, or the shifting nature of social relations through social media.

Using a made-up dollhouse as an interface and stage, this project set up a series of performative interventions on the sexcam platform. Through humorous yet critical play, these pieces asked about the situation of social reproduction on the platform economy, the role of maintenance practices in the generation of value, and the incorporation of new technological infrastructures into daily life.

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This was not and could not be a solitary process. While it is tempting to make jokes on the multitude required to build a dollhouse, from a social reproduction point of view, this makes absolute sense. I rejoice in this interdependence.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION I: FOUNDATIONS	13
CHAPTER 1: THE PLATFORM AND THE BUSINESS OF REPRODUCTION	14
CHAPTER 2: THE DOLLHOUSE	34
CHAPTER 3: THE JENNICAM	45
SECTION II: THE REPRODUCTIVE MACHINE	61
CHAPTER 4: THE BUILDING COMPLEX	62
CHAPTER 5: THE ROOM	115
REFERENCES	140
APPENDIX: STILL LIFE	155

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1. Dolls' house of Petronella Oortman.	36
Fig. 2.2. Frances Glessner Lee, Kitchen.	42
Fig. 2.3. Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody. Dollhouse.	43
Fig. 3.1. XCoffee.	46
Fig. 3.2. The (allegedly) first frame of the JenniCam.	48
Fig. 3.3. Screenshots from the JenniCam.	51
Fig. 4.1. Percentage of rooms per gender	65
Fig. 4.2. Percentage of performers by age	69
Fig. 4.3. Percentage of performers by gender and hour	75
Fig. 4.4. Percentage of viewers (average) per performer's age	79
Fig. 4.5. Visualization of the most common tags on the platform.	87
Fig. 4.6 Percentage of performers by age and gender	90
Fig. 4.7. The flow of money on the sexcam platform.	102
Fig. 4.8. Viewers per room ranking on may 15, 2017, 10pm est	106
Fig. 5.1. Panel 39 of Aby Warburg's "Bilderatlas Mnemosyne."	117
Fig. 5.2. Between the drawer and the dollhouse.	118
Fig. 5.3. Projections on the dollhouse.	119
Fig. 5.4. Projections on the dollhouse.	120
Fig. 5.5. Projections on the dollhouse.	121
Fig. 5.6. Projections and performance with the dollhouse.	122
Fig. 5.7. Miniature detail.	124
Fig. 5.8. Situating Maintenance	128
Fig. 5.8. Maintenance Pornography. Detail.	130
Fig. 5.9. (Performer's) view of the transmission and the chat window.	132
Fig. 5.10. Living room. Detail.	133
Fig. 5.11. On failure.	134
Fig. 5.12. Dollhouse detail.	135
Fig. 5.12. Performance in collaboration with Clivey69.	138
Fig. 6.1. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2014.	141
Fig. 6.2. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2014.	142
Fig. 6.3. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2014.	143
Fig. 6.4. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.	144
Fig. 6.5. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.	145
Fig. 6.6. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.	146
Fig. 6.7. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.	147

INTRODUCTION

PREAMBLE

I am writing this introduction amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which will be remembered by some other acronym. While the subject of this thesis, online sexwork on a digital platform, has changed considerably since I began giving it my attention in 2014, the acceleration of its transformation—in scale and relevance—has been remarkable in the current context. Concatenated factors have come together to this effect, notably the compulsory physical distance between people that limits social interactions, with consequences for work and social life. More people have lost their means of earning an income and are looking for alternatives; more people are now living in isolation and require some sort of social contact. In these conditions, the technologies that are already in place and allow the transmission of audio and video in real-time (streaming platforms, webcams, VoIP) have become the primary and privileged alternative for communication—for those segments of the population that have access to these technologies.

The crisis triggered by the propagation of this coronavirus has highlighted other crises already in place.¹ Not new, but stressed since the 2008 Financial Crisis, the response to government debt has taken its toll through austerity measures that have impacted, among other things, the access and provision of social services. Some of the consequences of these policies have been characterized by many as *a crisis of care*.² While the term has mostly been used to identify the political economies of care between wealthier and poorer countries, since the COVID-19 pandemic the term highlights also infrastructural and social deficiencies. I am following here Nancy Fraser's assessment that the crisis of care is not accidental but "best interpreted as a more or less acute expression of *the social-reproductive contradictions of financialized capitalism*."³ These contradictions, where processes of accumulation undermine the social reproduction system that sustains them, shape the terrain where *Sexcams in a Dollhouse* tells its story.

This story takes place in an odd landscape: a land of freemium services, where sharing for money is not an oxymoron, monopolies grow by promoting communities, and to exist means sending constant vital signs that will be registered and analyzed. Conducted between 2014 and 2020, this

1 An interesting exercise of imagination is to visualize several crises together. Although their beginnings, and even causes, could be sometimes traced, crises are, by definition, open-ended. Crises do not end but transmute, merging with a next time. What happens when a crisis overlaps with another? Do they overlap and combine? Or fork, diverge, split? Do crises have particular polarities, specific electric charges?

2 Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild, "Global Care Crisis"; Benería, "The Crisis of Care, International Migration, and Public Policy"; Bastia, "Women's Migration and the Crisis of Care."

3 Fraser, "Crisis of Care?"

investigation has witnessed how the network was replaced by the platform, the social by the social media, the amateur by the proamateur, and the proamateur by the professional precarious (and the rise of the *entreprenariat*⁴). The sexcam platform is one instance that illustrates these developments—and regressions. This choice is far from arbitrary. First, it is based on the conviction that commercial sex, in its various forms, embodies and pioneers technoeconomic trends that exceed their realm (with the Internet as an example). More importantly, this research attempts to not only resist the exceptionalism with which commercial sex is generally treated but to make a case for its consideration as central to understanding: the production of social subjects under new conditions of work; the structural and productive qualities of discrimination; the incorporation of technologies into newly assembled bodies.

Along with the contradictions that hold this investigation, *Sexcams in a Dollhouse* also tells another story. Influenced by Anna Tsing’s work and stance, this story is a *patchy* one. Tsing proposes to observe capitalism without the idea of progress, in its *patchiness*, where precarity involves vulnerability to others and encounters bring contamination—a word that could be used more lightly before the current pandemic. “As contamination changes world-making projects,” Tsing observes, “mutual worlds—and new directions—may emerge.”⁵ The investigation of the sexcam platform’s patches, its zones of *togetherness* and unexpected encounters, is performed here through a dollhouse. The dollhouse, as it will be developed, is not only where the *work of play*⁶ happens but *the play of work*, not only the *work of sex* but *the sex of work*—and the contamination among all of them.

CONTEXT AND PROBLEMATIC

2014, CHATURBATE

Chroniclove puts some oil in a frying pan, opens a cupboard and takes a plastic bag from inside. She puts two slices of bread in the pan and shows her feet to the camera while ties the pack, because one of the 1120 people connected through the chat asked what kind of shoes she was wearing (they were slip-on sneakers). She returns the bag to the cupboard and cuts something on a wooden board. She shows it to the camera: it is a tomato. Someone writes to her: ‘you still have that scar from the pizza pan incident.’

Chroniclove was one of the approximate 4000 performers that could have been streaming live that

4 Lorusso, *Entreprenariat*.

5 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

6 Borrowing the title from T. L. Taylor’s article on the Twitch platform. “Twitch and the Work of Play.”

day on the American website Chaturbate.com, one of the most popular sexcam platforms.⁷ Here, a grid of thumbnails shows snapshots of individual transmissions and welcomes everyone claiming to be 18 or older, no payment required. By clicking on one of these thumbnails, someone will enter into a *room*—as channels are called here— and join other online spectators on a particular performer’s channel, with each appearing as a user in the chat window. It is not necessary either to pay for having a room, just a verification of age. Although performers can broadcast shows for free, the majority vie to receive *voluntary donations* (‘tips’) from the audience in the site’s currency, which later can be exchanged for standard money. The public is not obliged to pay to watch most of the shows: encouraging tips is the performer’s job. Performers set their own prices and corresponding sexual rewards, and the public collaborates to reach those goals, tacitly crowdfunding sexwork together. The site keeps half of that money.

As its slogan states (*the act of masturbating while chatting online*), Chaturbate provides not only sexual performances but the ability to interact with the performers, conveyed through video, audio, and a chat window. Streaming in a one-to-many broadcasting model,⁸ performers can act in front of thousands of viewers. While the most popular ones will be featured on the front page of the website and will attract even more viewers—benefiting from the *stickiness* that circulation produces⁹—the majority of the performers are hardly noticed in further pages. Chaturbate does not stream only sexual content, though. Transmitting presumably from their domestic environments (or settings presented in that way) and stretching the shows’ duration to maximize profit by garnering tips, performers frequently mix sexual deliveries with domestic activities—intentionally or not. Sometimes performers are waiting for an audience. At other times, they have just finished their act and are no longer concerned about the camera. Maybe they are preparing a cake while chatting with the audience. Staged or incidental, domesticity is always present.

SALES AGENT 1

For those who may not be aware: Visiting adult cam sites can be a whole lot of fun as you are entertained by amateur cam models who strip and perform in both public and private performances. Members either tip in the open rooms or pay for private shows.¹⁰

7 A ‘sexcam platform’ is how I describe a platform that showcases an aggregation of webcams with sexual content. It is not the standard denomination, but there is no agreement on the term (also called *live sex cams*, *webcam sex platforms*, or *sexually explicit webcam platforms*). While there are several platforms of this kind, this research focuses on one of the most popular ones, Chaturbate.com. While I recognize it can be confusing, a *sexcam platform* in this research refers to Chaturbate.

8 One broadcaster, multiple peers that cannot see each other but the broadcaster. In this case, peers are also connected among them through a chat.

9 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

10 “Leading Cam Sites Where PayPal Is Accepted.”

Once peripheral phenomena on the Web, *open sexcam platforms* (such as Chaturbate, MyFreeCams, or BongaCams) have been gaining social and economic importance in the last years, attracting millions of visitors every day.¹¹ Amongst other factors, and crucial to its popularity is the technical and economic model those sites use—and the extent to which their practices are institutionalized in a late-capitalist context. Sexcam platforms, like other platforms, present themselves as mediators between users and providers, becoming the field where their exchanges occur. They are, however, a particular kind of platform. Like other companies that profit from the current spread of the *gig economy*, sexcam platforms allow people to informally provide hire-on-demand services, with minimum restrictions and lack of contractual ties.¹² This is only partially true. By allowing users to broadcast live shows, sexcam platforms can also be seen as platforms that showcase user-generated content (UGC),¹³ which generally profit from data and advertisement. This, again, does not tell the whole story. There is advertisement, but it is secondary; there is money in exchange for services, but it is not called as such. More than a hybrid of these two models, the sexcam platform is a clash of both.

While *the act of masturbating while chatting online* could graphically describe the activities of the audience, it leaves in the dark what the platform offers for doing so. On the sexcam platform, self-defined as a ‘free’ one, people are presented not as working but as expressing themselves “in the form of streaming video and messaging.”¹⁴ Money is a made-up currency with a variable cost and generic name, never exchanged as wages but as “voluntary gratuities.” Work, time, and money seem to be unrelated terms. This investigation proposes that, rather than try to solve the friction between those two platform models, the sexcam platform thrives on it. With this ambivalence is at the core of its business, Chaturbate maintains the interrogation of what is traded there, which services are offered, by whom, what is the compensation. The question, in brief, is about work.

Due to the capitalist insistence of abstracting labor from any other sphere of life (such as leisure),¹⁵ gaming platforms experience a similar problem. Although lucrative for some, streamers should not expect to be compensated because they are doing what they like, which does not look like work. The situation on the sexcam platform differs, though. With channels called *rooms* and people barely dressed smiling to an unknown audience, the paradigm that rules the platform looks like a domestic

11 Cunningham et al., “Behind the Screen.”

12 Uber or TaskRabbit are examples of hire-on-demand platforms.

13 YouTube and Pinterest are examples of UGC platforms.

14 “Terms & Conditions.”

15 Trenkle, “Value and Crisis: Basic Questions.” This idea is further discussed in Chapter 1.

one. I am adopting and adapting Alys Eve Weinbaum’s concept of the *slave episteme*¹⁶ proposing, in the case of Chaturbate, the existence of a *domestic episteme* that structures the sexcam platform. Like the slave episteme, the domestic episteme is a thought system with concrete consequences. It allows for existence of a labor market where work is not recognized nor formally waged, it is a place where people are expected to take care of strangers in real-time and where something coded as authenticity is the norm.

Sexcam platforms face another limit, and that is sex work. At odds with the domestic episteme yet entangled with it, sex work marks and limits how services are presented to the audience. Moreover, this border is structurally integral to the platform. By avoiding characterizing its services as sex work, the platform eludes legal restrictions. This line, however, is not only a technicality. The lack of recognition—of work as sex work and of sex work as work—prevents workers from organizing or receive protection.¹⁷ However, even if it were recognized as such, sex work is often unregulated, illegal, or criminalized.¹⁸ For the sexcam platform, this is a business opportunity. The domestic episteme, coupled with the lack of workers’ protection, allows the sexcam platform to establish abusive practices with no consequences—employing what Atanasoski and Vora call “differential exploitation.”¹⁹ As scholars within critical race studies have argued, I see questions of oppression are “structurally relational to, and hence shaped by, capitalist production.”²⁰ The argument that leads this research is that the sexcam platform is an opportunistic infrastructure built for enacting and taking advantage of deeply embedded systems of oppression. How those discrimination systems are structural to the sexcam platform is the question that animates this investigation.

While I resist the exceptionalism with which sex work is generally treated within media or platform studies, the sexcam platform is an exception among other platforms. I consider that this exceptionalism, however, is not related to the nature of the business but to its degree of exploitation—understanding any labor under capitalism as exploitative by definition.²¹ Thus, I argue that the sexcam

16 Weinbaum describes the slave episteme as a thought system with material effects over time. “In rendering reproductive slavery thinkable it enables continued—albeit continuously recalibrated—forms of gendered and racialized exploitation of human reproductive labor as itself a commodity and as the source of human biological commodities and thus value.” *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery*.

17 While platforms often call their workers ‘independent contractors’ as a euphemism for employees, on Chaturbate they are described as ‘independent broadcasters,’ expressing even less contractual responsibility between them and the platform. The work on sex work describes its status as a system of capital. For more on the subject, see Berg, “Sex, Work, Queerly: Identity, Authenticity and Laboured Performance.”

18 For more on the subject, see Grant, *Playing the Whore*.

19 *Surrogate Humanity*.

20 Bhattacharya, “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory.”

21 Berg, “Working for Love, Loving for Work.”

platform offers a privileged purview for the study of digital labor and the generation of value in the platform economy. Free sexcam platforms do not disguise themselves as “flat and frictionless digital labor markets.”²² Neither are they convincing as user-generated content platforms. Workers are not called as such and cannot rely on preexistent regulations. Everyone is positioned as an entrepreneur.²³ Money is a fiction, but the platform takes half of it. Denaturalizing common subterfuges, the sexcam platform can be seen as a bare one: the platform without attributes. The sexcam platform does not exist in isolation, though. Understanding infrastructure as a relational concept, this research invites an exploration of the platform that considers the ensemble where it unfolds, the people who make it exist again another day.

METHODOLOGY

What can be studied is “never a ‘thing’ but always a relationship.”²⁴ With this caveat in mind, this investigation builds on Deleuze & Guattari’s idea of the *Body without Organs* (BwO)²⁵ to imagine a conceptual and methodological model capable of analyzing relationships within the sexcam platform. It is not right to call the BwO a concept, though. “It is not at all a notion or a concept but a practice, a set of practices.”²⁶ This set of practices (or, in my understanding, this set of questions) has two main phases: *fabrication* and *circulation*. Therefore,

[f]or each type of BwO, we must ask: (1) What type is it, how is it fabricated, by what procedures and means (predetermining what will come to pass)? (2) What are its modes, what comes to pass, and with what variants and what surprises, what is unexpected and what expected?²⁷

The *fabrication* phase addresses the sexcam platform as infrastructure, the disposition of elements that will permit or prevent (but always modulate) a circulation. As infrastructure, fabrication is concerned with the “underlying system of elements, categories, standards, protocols, and operations”²⁸ of the platform, along with its discourses and policies. *Circulation*, on the other hand, deals with the various kinds of exchanges that happen in the platform, and the mechanisms that modify their velocity, trajectory, and value. Circulation is then related to work, money, the mobilization and laboring of affect on the platform.

22 van Doorn, “Platform Labor.”

23 *Entreprenariat*.

24 Bateson as cited in Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure.”

25 *Mille Plateaux*.

26 *Ibid.*, 150.

27 *Ibid.*, 152.

28 Rossiter, *Software, Infrastructure, Labor*, 5.

Although with different speeds and densities, fabrication and circulation incarnate poles of activity that arise from the same process. Across that continuum, this investigation is mainly focused on the mechanisms that contract or crystalize circulation, producing the more stable components that will fabricate the BwO in return. I am freely borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of *processes of synthesis*²⁹ for clustering these operations. Reproductive practices, such as habits and maintenance, are in this group—akin to what Foucault describes as *technologies of security*.³⁰ These divisions, artificial and debatable as any other and continuously eroding, signal the interrogations that this investigation has undertaken.

Integrating theory and practice, I have followed a research-creation methodological approach in which research and creation overlap and mesh.³¹ This approach combines art-based research through performative interventions, sensory ethnography³² of the platform, statistical analysis, and inductive content analysis. Looking for early versions of webcams and their current incarnations, I have consulted and collected textual and visual information from two different time periods (1990-2003 and 2014-2020) from public broadcastings and chat logs, dedicated online forums, blog and social media posts, and Web archives.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most relevant insights do not come from using a particular method but from examining the relations among them—including superpositions, conflicts, and disconnections. As Gilles Deleuze explains, “[w]hat defines [the multiplicity] is the AND, as something which has its place between the elements.”³³ The unplanned encounters between references from different areas is an example of this. Another collateral effect from the mix of methods, but particularly from the incorporation of performance into the theoretical research, is a particular *inclination* towards the text. I call this *performative imagination*, and it accounts for the awareness that concepts always have the potential for action. This potential could or could not be enacted—in fact, to act on it would have a transformative effect—but its recognition adds a vector, a direction that modulates the idea and the research.

The stage upon which the performative imagination occurs is, both literally and figuratively, a

29 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 5.

30 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.

31 Chapman and Sawchuk identify four non mutually exclusive categories: “research-for-creation,” “creation-as-research,” “creation-as-research,” “research-from-creation.” “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances.’”

32 Sarah Pink defines ‘sensory ethnography’ as an ethnography that recognizes the sensoriality of the experience for both researchers and researched beings. *Doing Sensory Ethnography*.

33 as cited in Coleman and Ringrose, *Deleuze and Research Methodologies*.

dollhouse.³⁴ A dollhouse is a research device here: the space of the research and a space for the research. It is the figure that allows me to probe the platform. As a scenario and space to inhabit, the dollhouse provides a place for the “intricately tangled practice”³⁵ of *witnessing* a sexcam platform. The dollhouse is the *media* of this investigation, understood in its double sense of channel and medium.³⁶ As such, the dollhouse is the manifestation of a discourse (or a discursive formation) and a generative medium. The former sense includes, as will be discussed, discursive statements but also materials and technologies. The dollhouse as channel refers to what the dollhouse, explicitly and implicitly, communicates. The second sense appears clearly when the dollhouse is observed as a performative space: a creative realm where potentials can be activated through actions. Although specific to the medium, these actions could redefine the medium in return—as in a feedback loop. The dollhouse, then, is a performative and performed space, where discourses are events.

OVERVIEW

As a made-up conceptual device, the dollhouse articulates this investigation. Through arbitrary divisions and connections, it brings together a room and a building complex, big and miniature data.

This thesis is divided into two big sections. **Section I: Foundations** presents the concepts that will perform a role in this work. It is divided in three chapters. **The first one** presents platforms and offers an overview of their discursive and infrastructural dimensions. Following Susan L. Star, “infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept,”³⁷ and the understanding of platforms as relational entities allows for the recognition of the broader contexts (social, economic, technological, cultural) where these entities exist. It also acknowledges the need for a community and their connected set of practices, placing actors (humans and not so) on the platform.

Infrastructure, however, carries its own baggage of meanings, and makes massive structures that tend toward invisibility because of their over-familiarity. As it is often highlighted, infrastructure becomes apparent only when it fails, revealing its tendency to decay, and its constant need for care. Here is where the concept of maintenance makes its appearance, in those everyday reproductive practices that sustain infrastructure. A focus on maintenance conjures the invisibility of infrastructure—or the flatness of platforms—and offers a means for exploration. The concept and practice are

34 The dollhouse as a figure, a model, and an apparatus, is developed in Chapter 3. The story that led to the incorporation of the dollhouse is told in Chapter 6.

35 John Durham Peters describes witnessing as a complex practices because “[i]t raises questions of truth and experience, presence and absence, death and pain, seeing and saying, and the trustworthiness of perception—in short, fundamental questions of communication.” “Witnessing.”

36 Mitchell, *Bioart and the Vitality of Media*, 12.

37 Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure.”

borrowed from performance artist Mierle Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art*,³⁸ who has sought to show the intertwining of maintenance and development.

Maintenance introduces the broader idea of reproduction, presented here as an assemblage of different sources. Reproduction as maintenance observes the practices involved in the preservation and continuity of the infrastructure. Maintenance, neither generative nor creative, sustains the status quo by taking care of structures already in place. Although maintenance does not interrogate what is maintained (or why), the examination of its actions problematizes discourses surrounding these structures. A highlight of maintenance practices reveals the plethora of daily actions of care and repair that a system in place requires. In this way, maintenance unveils that “the social order that is maintained through economic, social, and political systems continues only because we wake up every morning and reproduce it.”³⁹ Still, it is not only the fragility of structures that becomes visible through this method. An attention on maintenance also shows who is performing it, revealing the overrepresentation of women and migrant workers—often under many invisibility layers. Although maintenance does not produce change—on the contrary—to make it visible challenges the solidity of what is maintained.

My discussion of reproduction is also informed by Marxist Feminism and Social Reproduction Theory (SRT). Through this lens, practices and structures that are generally considered outside of production cycles—such as care labor or educational institutions—are incorporated into the analysis and reveal their structural quality in relation to capitalism. This conception unmask the wage as a tool for concealment and division, denaturalizing the factory (and its current incarnations) as the sole locus of work. Challenging a normative understanding of what work is, Marxist Feminism and SRT present “an alternative to theories that isolate capitalist production in the times, spaces, and relations of waged labor,”⁴⁰ offering a flexible and critical stance to analyze labor on the platform economy. Moreover, drawing upon black feminism and intersectionality, SRT sees questions of oppression as “structurally relational to, and hence shaped by, capitalist production.”⁴¹ These perspectives offer a flexible frame to explore the generation of value on the sexcam platform and disclose its role as a provider of reproductive services.

The third approach to reproduction draws from Rosa Luxemburg, from whom I am incorporating two main contributions. Luxemburg delves into the reproductive process of capital and shows that

38 Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969).”

39 Horisaki-Christens et al., *Maintenance Required*.

40 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

41 Bhattacharya, “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory.”

because the goal of capitalism is not to sell commodities but to extract surplus value out of them, the cycle of the reproduction of capital requires exchanges.⁴² Through this view, the idea of circulation is incorporated into reproduction. As Luxemburg develops, this circulation not only must move due to competition but is coerced into expansion. The “cheapness of commodities,” Luxemburg remarks, is “the most important weapon”⁴³ for capitalist expansion—disclosing in this way the sexcam platform’s formula. Although the business’ area of the sexcam platform is the provision of reproductive labor, its goal then is not to fulfill demand but to accumulate surplus value. This “accelerated appropriation” will require each time more capital, making expansion and exploitation inextricable from the mix.

Chapter two introduces the dollhouse in its various roles: as a figure that structures this investigation, as a model, and as a research device. I examine the dollhouse in this chapter by considering it as an apparatus of power/knowledge, based on Foucault’s propositions.⁴⁴ The dollhouse, then, appears as the bearer of a discourse, and the place where this discourse is enacted and verified—with great charm, though. The idea of enactment leads to the recognition of the dollhouse as a performative space, pivotal for the artistic component of this research. It also shows the double articulation of the dollhouse: what embodies a discourse and what offers opportunities for its disruption.

The third and last chapter of this section traces the history of another device: the webcam. It does so by exploring how current webcamming conventions were established with the JenniCam, the first webcam featuring a person.⁴⁵ Conventions, Raymond Williams says, are established relationships. Despite being historical and contextual, conventions become naturalized, making invisible their “inclusions and exclusions, the styles and the ways of seeing, [the] specific conventions [that they] embody and ratify.”⁴⁶ Using archival materials, I trace in this chapter the establishment of *the inclusions and exclusions* of webcamming, that nowadays seem to be inextricable from the genre.

The following section, **The Reproductive Machine**, offers traces of the sexcam platform investigation. There are two levels here, and each one has a chapter: *the room* and *the building complex*. The room is at the level of the performer and where the performance occurs.⁴⁷ Combined together, individual rooms create the building complex. These two levels, although mutually constitutive and

42 Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*.

43 Luxemburg.

44 *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*.

45 The JenniCam was the creation of Jennifer Ringley, an American 19-year-old college student, and broadcasted uninterruptedly to the Internet between 1996-2003.

46 *Marxism and Literature*, 173.

47 *Rooms* are also how Chaturbate’s user channels are called—depicting or not an actual room.

dependent, are explored through different strategies.

Chapter four, The Building Complex, corresponds to the platform. Its portrait, however, is no longer flat. On the contrary: the building complex is not only an aggregation of rooms but also their regulations, infrastructure, large-scale practices. This chapter describes an “illuminated 24/7 world without shadows”⁴⁸ that never stops, never sleeps, never disconnects. The conventions inherited from the JenniCam are still relevant, but their ways and scale have changed. In this chapter, I explore how perceptions of authenticity, connection, or intimacy are conveyed (and transformed) through technologies.

The Building Complex is formally presented as a play or, more precisely, a scenario. As in Richard Kostelanetz’ usage, scenarios describe “sophisticated visions of possible, but ultimately unknown futures.”⁴⁹ The different topics are introduced here as acts and there are various scenes within them. Between acts there is a chorus that offers a commentary through statistical analysis.⁵⁰ The information for this chapter is informed by the exploration of the platform and its surroundings, such as affiliated sites and discussion forums. Although the characters are generically named, the dialogues were collected from public webcams’ forums and live broadcastings and are edited only for clarity.

In **chapter five, The Room**, the change in scale is accompanied by a shift in perspective. This chapter describes the different stages of my performative engagement with the sexcam platform through the dollhouse, which have operated here as an expanded interface, a stage, and a research device. As in a misunderstanding, the *room* of the platform becomes a 1:12 scale one; a performer is someone who does performance. Although there is humor in this approach, there is no derision. As stated before, I am influenced by Anna Tsing’s strategy for observing complex phenomena, strategy that combines theory with a concrete and personal account.⁵¹ The dollhouse, but more exactly my engagement with the platform through it, it is my way to do so.

The dollhouse is in this research both the limit of the theory and its place. I will try to say it differently: describing the gaming platform Twitch, T. L. Taylor talks about “the work of play.”⁵²

48 Crary, *24/7*, 9.

49 Kostelanetz, *Scenarios: Scripts to Perform*.

50 These comments are presented as visualizations of data gathered during 2017. This data was scraped from the site every hour for two consecutive weeks, using only publicly available information.

51 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

52 Taylor, “Twitch and the Work of Play.”

I assembled a toolbox for discussing the equivalent to *the work of play* on Chaturbate. I was less prepared, though, for addressing *the play of work* there. Here is when a performative intervention becomes both the research method and (part of) its outcome. By engaging with a live audience, that might or might not show up, the room is where the encounters happen—and the contamination, the unexpected assemblages.

The dollhouse is also the place of theory. As outlined in the methodology section, the different stages of the artwork correspond with the various approaches and understandings of the concepts I have used in this research. Conversely, the different perspectives are informed and modified by the *hands-on* experiences I had in the dollhouse. This is particularly clear with the way I have interpreted the ideas of reproduction and maintenance throughout this research. First, I start with a literal approach to Mierle Ukele's *Maintenance Art*. The performance first highlights the domestic work on the platform and the invisible work it requires. Through my engagement with the platform, I soon realized that a more important form of maintenance work was involved: the care of the audience. The idea of reproductive labor then acquired more relevance and the performance shifted accordingly. While researching the monetary aspects of Chaturbate, the reproduction of capital—as conceptualized by Rosa Luxemburg—gained relevance and determined the final stages of the performative interventions.

SECTION I
FOUNDATIONS

CHAPTER 1

THE PLATFORM AND THE BUSINESS OF REPRODUCTION

To see the sexcam platform as a *Body without Organs*¹ means to interrogate its processes of fabrication and circulation—and the synthesis between them. As such, this section asks: what is the what that circulates on the sexcam platform, what gets exchanged or leaks, how is this circulation modulated, and what is the shape and paths of the structure through it will pass. If the structure looks solid, it is because it is sustained through habits and maintenance. Without a rigid distinction among these terms, the BwO drives nonetheless the way in which the sexcam platform is questioned here, presenting at the same time an overview of the theoretical background from where these questions are drawn.

I. THE FABRIC OF THE PLATFORM

Fact and fiction, the platform is what Foucault calls a *transactional reality*—something that has “not always existed[,] nevertheless real[.]”² A thing and an idea, arguably the platform has replaced the network as the concept that explains current technoeconomic formations, social behaviors, political governance. It is not, however, just the substitution of one buzzword for another. With the disappearance of the network as the privileged figure for the representation of a broad range of phenomena for more than twenty years, a vision of the world vanished as well. After the decline in the trust in centralized models of governance, the network incarnated for a moment the possibility of non-hierarchical arrangements and fair distribution of resources, rhizomatic growth and self-governing organizations. As Geert Lovink says:

Let’s face it, networks did not take over the world. Their auto-poetic dynamics, aimed at empowering the individual in societies where fixed social relationships were declining, was touching but in the end overrated. As visual diagrams or architectural constructs, networks are convincing. As a sustainable economic or institutional framework, networks deliberately do not deliver.³

Whether the figure of the network was always misleading, or the platform dormant in its core, the platform certainly incarnates a new vision. If the concept of the network has suggested even

1 This orientation is explained in the methodology section. For more on the Body without Organs, see Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

2 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, 297.

3 Lovink, *Sad by Design*.

connections among uneven components, the platform now illustrates an unequal distribution of power, the clustering and solidification of forces within a network, the effects of the network effects. Where the network seemed to empower and facilitate the creation of autonomous new communities, the platform now suggests “walled gardens”⁴: well-equipped places that can be occupied upon compliance with some unread terms of service.

Still, the platform is a flexible concept. Drawing upon various semantic realms, it depends “on terms and ideas that are specific enough to mean something, and vague enough to work across multiple venues for multiple audiences,” as Tarleton Gillespie notes.⁵ In this way, *platform* is used both to describe social, technological, economic, and political formations—along with their discourses and processes—and highly particular phenomena, such as “the capturing of digital life in an enclosed, commercialized and managed realm.”⁶ Presenting itself as an intermediary, the platform evokes a flat surface in which some activity could take place, implying in this way disposition but not causality and “a neutrality with regards to the activity.”⁷ These connotations are, as Gillespie stresses,

efforts not only to sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph or condemn, but to make claims about what these technologies are and are not, and what should and should not be expected of them. In other words, they represent an attempt to establish the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them.

As a metaphor, then, *platform* not only describes but hides.⁸ It hides the extensive labor and technologies that platforms require,⁹ the politics of the content and services they offer, their responsibility for those products.¹⁰

4 Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*.

5 Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms.’”

6 Hands as cited in Jin, *Digital Platforms, Imperialism and Political Culture*.

7 Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms.’”

8 Gillespie, “Is ‘Platform’ the Right Metaphor for the Technology Companies That Dominate Digital Media?”

9 For a graphic depiction of the human labor involved in content moderation, see the ‘The Cleaners’ documentary. Block and Rieseewieck, *The Cleaners*.

10 The entanglement between Facebook and Cambridge Analytica during the 2016 US election is a remarkable example of the political implications of privacy policies and data-driven recommendations on social media platforms. For more on the topic, see Isaak and Hanna, “User Data Privacy”; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, “How Cambridge Analytica Turned Facebook ‘Likes’ into a Lucrative Political Tool.”

Platforms are often defined in a tautological way: “platforms are what platforms do,” as Benjamin Bratton says.¹¹ But they also do what they are, I would add. Like the ‘one does not simply’ meme says: *one does not simply make a platform*. “Platforms come into being only through an already existing critical mass of users and data,” Lovink points out.¹² As such, platforms generally take advantage of existing markets, becoming the field of exchange.¹³ That position gives platforms a strategic advantage, commercially and culturally speaking. But platforms do more than that. “A platform,” José van Dijck says, “is a mediator rather than an intermediary”¹⁴ that does not only connect services and users but actively and purposely modulates the shape of those connections.

AND TECHNOLOGY

The platform’s design, the technologies it uses, is how this modulation is disposed of—hence how its governance is exercised. To question the platform’s governance, the ensemble of technologies by which control is exerted and content is modulated invites us to ask how discourses (including software routines) are performed. This entails looking critically at the “programmability” of the platform.¹⁵ This type of inquiry, as proposed by Fenwick McKelvey,¹⁶ considers the particularities of platforms and how users have to execute, run, and reassemble their components. “Programming,” McKelvey states, is “assembling.” Or, drawing upon Luciana Parisi, who brings attention to the performative aspect of software instructions,¹⁷ a way to *pre-enact* those assemblages. And how is this assemblage? In Manuel de Landa’s definition, assemblages are “wholes characterized by relations of exteriority,”¹⁸ temporal and in flux aggregations from different sorts of things with some autonomy regarding other components. The advantage of considering the assemblage as a figure is to counteract the pretended flatness and asepsis of the platform. In contrast, the assemblage, looks patchy, populated by abandoned structures, code that can no longer be run. It is about fabrication, then, but also about circulation.

Platforms, Bratton proposes, are “simultaneously organizational forms that are highly technical, and technical forms that provide extraordinary organizational complexity to emerge.”¹⁹ In this

11 Bratton, *The Stack*.

12 Lovink, *Sad by Design*.

13 Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*; Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*.

14 Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*.

15 This aspect is addressed in a further chapter through the exploration of the tools that performers can modify and run in their channels, such as apps and bots.

16 McKelvey, “A Programmable Platform?”

17 Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*.

18 De Landa, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity*, 20.

19 Bratton, *The Stack*.

way, and paradoxical as it may sound, platforms are fluid planes of emergence made of rigid elements. They gain “size and strength by mediating unplanned and perhaps even unplannable interactions” and “set the stage for actions to unfold.”²⁰ As such, platforms illustrate the capitalist trend where the market has been declared autonomous and goods emerge as by-products of circulation²¹ (or, following Randy Martin, where circulation is itself the traded matter).²² This circulation has a particular drive, a centripetal force that tends to cluster and acquisition. This propensity, however, is not unique to the Internet not only through fusions and purchases but because of *network effects*. Network effects describe the phenomenon when the product or service’s popularity increases the value of that product for its users.²³ “With network effects,” Nick Srnicek observes, “a tendency towards monopolisation is built into the DNA of platforms: the more numerous the users who interact on a platform, the more valuable the entire platform becomes for each one of them.”²⁴ The force of network effects, apparently unrestricted in the platform, creates a plane of accelerated emergence. Is it acceleration? And transformation, movement, displacement.

The programmability of the platform is important not only for its understanding but also for grasping how the platform’s governance permeates other structures. Uncontested as agents, platforms shape not only how exchanges happen within them but their surroundings, changing the landscape of the Internet this way. This process has been characterized as *platformization*, defined by Nieborg and Poell (tautologically, again) as “the penetration of economic, governmental, and infrastructural extensions of digital platforms into the web and app ecosystems[.]”²⁵ This penetration, they argue, is not only about the connection of multi-sided markets but the organization and steering of their interactions. In this way, Anne Helmond elaborates, “[p]latformization entails the extension of social media platforms into the rest of the web and their drive to make external web data ‘platform ready.’”²⁶ Besides end-users, developers have to align their designs with the requirements of these big actors, further reinforcing their predominance. On the quest of matching the social with the market, big platforms become the gateway to a plethora of interconnected and dependent services—a series of what van Dijck describes as “walled gardens.”²⁷ Platformization is more than the description of a technological and cultural process of hegemony, though. When low wages on the

20 Bratton.

21 Massumi, *The Principle of Unrest*, 11.

22 Martin, *Knowledge Ltd.*

23 Katz and Shapiro, “Systems Competition and Network Effects.” Facebook is a well-known example where its popularity increases the value for its users, making it more attractive and popular in return.

24 *Platform Capitalism*, 70.

25 Nieborg and Poell, “The Platformization of Cultural Production.”

26 Helmond, “The Platformization of the Web.”

27 Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity*.

platform are, as Trebor Scholz remarks, “a feature, not a bug,”²⁸ platformization is also a method and discourse. This discourse actively conceals the friction produced by the exchanges that the platform promotes: the environmental damages, the precarious status of workers, the opportunistic use of existing resources and infrastructure.

AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Platforms use preexisting infrastructure—and transform and compose it. The logic and mechanisms that the platform carries (interconnected and private ecosystems driven by profit) permeates what is often attributed to infrastructure (public value, long term sustainability) producing what Plantin et al. call the “*platformization* of infrastructure” and the “*infrastructuralization* of platforms.”²⁹ Although generally diverging in time and scope, to borrow ideas from the sociology of infrastructure (and the more or less recent *infrastructural turn*) seems productive for the understanding of platforms and contemporary digital media. However, if the (supposed) flatness of the platform is a sort of concealment, to identify it as infrastructure does not render it more visible. Instead, Graham and Thrift note, just to label something as *infrastructure* “often works to undermine [its] cultural visibility.”³⁰ Even when it is massive—or maybe because of that—infrastructure is designed to be unseen, boring, taken-for-granted “rather than leaky, partial and heterogeneous entities.”³¹ Through normalized use, these complexes become *black boxes*: “settled items whose users and colleagues (human and non-human) act in ways which are unchallenging to the technology.” This invisibility, then, is what prevents questioning and change. To bring light on the patchiness of infrastructure involves shaking its foundations.

Infrastructure becomes visible under catastrophe. When the pipes explode, the highway collapses, the payment does not come through. Not only the instability of the matrix appears, but the things. The *thingness* of things,³² the world they disclose.³³ A material component then becomes evident, and the relationship that this materiality entails. Susan L. Star notes that “infrastructure is a fundamentally relational concept, becoming real infrastructure in relation to organized practices.”³⁴ Infrastructure, then, “appears only as a relational property, not as a thing stripped of use.”³⁵ This

28 Scholz, “Platform Cooperativism.”

29 Plantin et al., “Infrastructure Studies Meet Platform Studies in the Age of Google and Facebook.”

30 Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order.”

31 Hinchcliffe as cited in Graham and Thrift.

32 Brown, “Thing Theory.” The question on the *thingness of things* is addressed further on the ‘Room’ section.

33 Verbeek as cited in Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order.”

34 Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure.”

35 Star & Ruhleder as cited in Star.

relationality happens at various levels. As in archaic Spanish acceptance of the word (*relación*), a relation is an explanation. Infrastructure as relation, then, reveals it as the bearer of a discourse, as something that has to be said to someone. Secondly, infrastructure does not exist in a void, but it is *embedded* in “other structures, social arrangements, and technologies.”³⁶ Digital platforms, for example, presented under the guise of individual and creative innovation,³⁷ tend to hide the other structures (preexisting technologies, venture capital and funding, commercial agreements) that make them possible. Finally, and more important for this investigation, infrastructure as a relation unveils the need for a community of people that embrace and create a set of related practices. The adoption and knowledge of conventions (or their refusal, or resistance) will influence further notions of inclusion and exclusion in the community, shaping in return both the community and the infrastructure.³⁸ Moreover, the subsistence of the infrastructure (hence the platform) depends on a particular set of practices: practices of reproduction.

II. REPRODUCTION

Overlapping fabrication and circulation, producing fabrication out of circulation, are what Deleuze calls processes of synthesis.³⁹ These syntheses are contractions, obtained out of repetition (although repetition does not exist). A habit, as it will be developed, is a contraction that produces reality out of reiteration. Processes of synthesis are explored here through the idea of reproduction. Despite its name, reproduction does not entail here “mindless replication” but “a complex, conflicted, conflicted, creative and reflexive” process, as Max Haiven points out.⁴⁰ The understanding of the concept is informed in this research by different sources. After a brief note on habits, reproduction is explored in one of its most tangible ways: as maintenance. A focus on maintenance practices reveals the performative side of reproduction and the materiality of the relationship to infrastructure. In terms of abstraction, one step back is represented through Social Reproductive Theory, which, drawing upon Marxist Feminism and Critical Race Studies, highlights the labor that social reproduction needs and the structural quality of discrimination. Finally, Rosa Luxemburg’s ideas are used to identify the connection between capitalist production and reproduction, and the form and behavior of that connection.

36 Star.

37 The storytelling on platforms has some common tropes: the solitary genius (or the two buddies), the garage, the solitary effort.

38 Star, “The Ethnography of Infrastructure.”

39 Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*.

40 Haiven, *Cultures of Financialization*.

A NOTE ON HABITS

As expressed in common speech, habits are contracted. There is a time of transition at the beginning of the summer regarding how we lay the bed. At some point, however, different decisions merge into a single action: a habit. This habit will replace a previous one and will be substituted by another. Following Gilles Deleuze, habits are not only *contracted* but *contractions*.⁴¹ They are synthesis of instants, synthesis of time: a succession of different moments merged in one distinctive articulation. This contraction not only fuses repetition but offers something new: a difference. While this synthesis is, in Deleuze's nomenclature, *passive* ("not done by the mind but *in* the contemplative mind"⁴²), a reflection on it leads to an *active synthesis* and to the domain of signs, receiving a proper name and identifier. *To clean the table, to remove the dust or to update the profile* are actions that earned recognition through repetition. The habit, however, is not contracted in the action but in the contemplation:⁴³ in the space where these actions are observed. These contractions (and retentions, and expectations) do not create just mundane habits but everything.⁴⁴ To contemplate is to question, generating the force of the expectation and receiving many finite affirmations in response.⁴⁵ Through contemplation, contractions form habits. Habits, then, as contractions of this contemplation, as contractions of different instants, are the foundation of lived time.

The habit is also a structuring mechanism, able to internalize external structures.⁴⁶ *Cleaning the table*, for example, is the name of a habit that brings together the dirt, the table, the internalized gesture, the cleaning product, and the discursive practice it entails under a common name. Habits are dependent both on "external elements and on practitioners."⁴⁷ Following Bourdieu, those external elements constitute *fields* that work under different *logics* or forces that encompass the habit, which gives in return value to the field. Rather than creating order from chaos, habits add something to it: repetition.⁴⁸ Because repetition, strictly speaking, never happens. "To act is to never repeat," Deleuze says,⁴⁹ but habits create that impression by allowing the organization of regularities and working as anchors in the unrepeated world. Although the habit is not "in itself fully determinative of conduct,"⁵⁰ it provides the basis for the recurrence of social life.

41 Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, 73.

42 Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, 97, my translation.

43 Deleuze, 100.

44 «Nous sommes de l'eau, de la terre, de la lumière et de l'air contractés, non seulement avant de les reconnaître ou de les représenter, mais avant de les sentir» (p.99)

45 Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, 106.

46 Bourdieu as cited in Pink, *Home Truths :Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*, 17.

47 Bourdieu as cited in Pink, 17.

48 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 151.

49 Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*.

50 Wacziarg as cited in Pink, *Home Truths :Gender, Domestic Objects and Everyday Life*, 17.

Habits, as distinctive articulations, become automatisms. The “[h]abit is an acquired automatic self-regulation”⁵¹ that *resides in the body*. It is the body who knows how to wash a glass: how to grab it, how much soap is required, how to rinse it. Not only are everyday habits contracted in this way. Language, for example, is arguably formed through habits: contractions that form words, sounds, figures of speech. “Although they are contracted in social/cultural context, they must be considered self-active autonomies: spontaneous self-organizations that operate on a level with movements of matter.”⁵² An accent, for instance, is a socially acquired habit that resides in the body, shaping it in return through its repeated articulation.

Anticipating actions and modes of being, habits do not only relate to the past but preconfigure the future. Habits are *the memory of the future*, active temporal contractions that will be re-enacted once again. Drawing upon Félix Ravaisson, Elizabeth Grosz identifies two vectors acting on habits:

a temporality which is open-ended, in which the future is not contained in the present, but where the present establishes certain regularities to anticipate what the future may involve; and a living being whose activities can be modified by the incorporation of stereotyped or stylized behaviours.⁵³

Habits are then an index not only of an internal organization but signal the cohesion “between the living being’s activities and its milieu,”⁵⁴ where regularities and contractions indicate modes of engagement with the real. Because the real gets modulated by habits, they attenuate the impact and surprise of new experience through the anticipation of familiar reactions, producing a “tendency to act and the diminution of the tendency to feel.” Habits signal the double direction of the adaptation of life to environmental pressures: “the way in which life accommodates materiality and brings its own materiality into coordination with the material forces that regulate its environment.”⁵⁵ The limelight over mundane activities that happens in amateur sexcams, for example, where performing private actions in public become profitable, become a change in the environmental context that modifies the set of habits performed there, modifying the situation. Moreover, if domestic space is created through habits, their modification will reshape domestic space in return.

51 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 11.

52 Massumi, 237.

53 Grosz, “Habit Today.”

54 Grosz.

55 Deleuze as cited in Grosz, 231.

For Mary Douglas, the idea of home “cannot be defined by any of its functions”⁵⁶ but for its regularities. It is not only about the duties of the home but their repetition: the hours for meals or sleeping; what it is eaten, how it is cooked. Home is ‘a kind of space’ built upon the reiteration of acts. “But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space,” Deleuze and Guattari affirm, and that space is delimited through repetition.⁵⁷ Although some of the repeated acts performed at home are explicitly regulated, most of them are implicitly acquired through time. As Brian Massumi says, domesticity is not only about “the formal application of regulations” but mostly connected with “the informal production of regularities.”⁵⁸ The inhabitants of the home know how actions should be performed, with or without explicit regulations. The home, then, is mostly “not codified but coded.” Although tacit, this coding models reality. How does this modulation operate? Through habits.

Habits that relate to others can be considered as part of a set of practices.⁵⁹ Still in the domestic arena: practices of cleaning, practices of cooking, laundry practices. The relation among these actions can be driven by different criteria, but if habits are automatisms, practices need reflection—on the practice. Although a practice can include a series of automated habits, considering it as such is a semantic operation that requires decision and awareness.⁶⁰ Practices have “a set of established understandings, procedures and objectives.”⁶¹ But they also need to be enacted. Practices, then, are at once abstract entities and performative ones.⁶² This allows attention to the elements of resistance, change, normalization or style that practices have—and problematizes the exertion of power through practices as something fixed. In this way, a practice is not inherently subversive nor normative; nor *per se* a strategy or a tactic but something that depends on its enactment, context and “relationality.”⁶³ A practice, then, is always situated. The practice’s concrete circumstances modify its “established understanding,” as it can be seen when sexwork is broadcasted from domestic space or domestic work performed in sexcams. Following Bourdieu, practices are more reproductive than productive, relying on embodied habits and replicating a set of pre-defined circumstances. But a practice not only reproduces but re-creates and re-defines the practice itself. A practice does “not come after the emplacement of the terms and their relations, but actively participates in the draw-

56 Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” 287.

57 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 311.

58 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 82.

59 Pink, *Situating Everyday Life*.

60 Carlisle, *On Habit*.

61 Warde as cited in Pink, *Situating Everyday Life*, 20.

62 Schatzki as cited in Pink, *Situating Everyday Life*.

63 Bourdieu as cited in Pink, 19.

ing of the lines.”⁶⁴ A practice has to be enacted, and to act is never to repeat.

MAINTENANCE

Because infrastructure is prone to decay and failure, it needs care—even if this is a secret. As such, a particular type of relation exists, a specific yet wide set of practices of *maintenance*. Maintenance is what connects in this research infrastructure and performance—hence work and habits. The concept of maintenance, and its enactment, is borrowed from Mierle Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art*.⁶⁵ In her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969)*, performance artist Mierle L. Ukeles calls for the recognition of repetitive, boring, and non-creative practices in the art context. She identifies the existence of two systems, *Development* and *Maintenance*:

Development: pure individual creation; the new; change;
progress; advance; excitement; flight or fleeing.

Maintenance: keep the dust off the pure individual
creation; preserve the new; sustain the change;
protect progress; defend and prolong the advance;
renew the excitement; repeat the flight;
show your work,—show it again;

keep the contemporaryartmuseum groovy
keep the home fires burning

Development systems are partial feedback systems with major
room for change.

Maintenance systems are direct feedback systems with little
room for alteration.

The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages,
housewives = no pay.

If development is all about innovation and creation, newness and change, maintenance is occupied with preserving and sustaining, with renewing and repetition. “Development encompasses that which is new and in constant flux; maintenance is the drab but necessary work that is rarely acknowledged.”⁶⁶ If development is a vector, maintenance is a loop. Apparently opposed, Ukeles saw these two systems as mutually dependent.

64 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 203.

65 Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969).”

66 Rogers, “Maintaining Development: Redefining the Relationship.”

Despite the usual invisibility of maintenance practices, compared to development ones, maintenance practices are at the core of every activity. Maintenance, although “secondary and derivative,”⁶⁷ sustains creativity and innovation. Even art movements that claim to be “utter development”—such as the Avant-Garde movement or the Conceptual one—employ “maintenance ideas, maintenance activities, [...] maintenance materials.”⁶⁸ Maintenance encompasses “the work that allows for all other work,” the backbone of society. Seeing art as part of a bigger “social ecology,”⁶⁹ Ukeles’ work seeks to challenge the diminished position of maintenance practices and their relationship with the production of social, artistic, and economic value. In this sense, “the Maintenance Art Manifesto is simultaneously a work of art and a call for a new kind of artwork.”⁷⁰

As the etymological root of the word *maintenance* reveals (maintenance= *manu tenere*= ‘to hold in hand’),⁷¹ maintenance entails the grip of something, a physical action of care and/or control. That something that needs to be maintained, however, has to preexist. “Maintenance can only maintain existing objects, people, institutions, structures, and cultural values.”⁷² Maintenance, then, neither generative nor creative, sustains the *status quo* by taking care of structures already in place. As expressed in Ukeles’ work, maintenance does not question “what systems are maintained and why”⁷³: it just does its work against entropy without challenging “the power dynamics implicit within care work or the problematics in the activity of maintaining something.”⁷⁴ Having “little room for alteration”⁷⁵ maintenance is predictable, and it is this predictability that “precludes [it] from initiating change and progress.”⁷⁶ Through practices of care, repair, and maintenance, systems are sustained. In some way, “the social order that is maintained through economic, social, and political systems continues only because we wake up every morning and reproduce it.”⁷⁷ On the sexcam platform: turn on the camera, turn on the computer, close the door, moderate the chat, update the server.

But what is that something that needs maintenance? “It becomes increasingly difficult to define what the ‘thing’ is that is being maintained and repaired,” as Graham and Thrift acknowledge.⁷⁸

67 Rogers.

68 Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969).”

69 Ashford and Ukeles, “Democracy Is Empty.”

70 Giordano, “Readymaintenance.”

71 Horisaki-Christens et al., *Maintenance Required*.

72 Giordano, “Readymaintenance.”

73 Rogers, “Maintaining Development: Redefining the Relationship.”

74 Horisaki-Christens, “Maintenance and Dependency.”

75 Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969).”

76 Rogers, “Maintaining Development: Redefining the Relationship.”

77 Horisaki-Christens et al., *Maintenance Required*.

78 Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order.”

As they ask: “Is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some ‘larger’ entity?” To determine what deserves maintenance—and what does not—involve a political decision, a decision that becomes evident when things stop to be maintained. In this way, maintenance “is already part of a political process that distributes power and labor in certain ways.”⁷⁹ Maintenance, then, does not only support the *status quo* but is required for sustaining any change. “After the revolution,” Ukeles queries, “who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?”⁸⁰

Regardless of the conservative role of maintenance (literal and figurative), its highlighting has disruptive potential. In Ukeles’s work, for example, the exhibition of the maintenance practices that an art museum requires “exposes the museum’s appearance of neutrality and purity as artifice—an artifice that requires the repression of (the signs of) bodies and time.”⁸¹ Maintenance involves a living, relational approach to structures that, in turn, reveal to be temporary and precarious.⁸² Practices of repair, tinkering, and cleaning highlight this relationship. As Steven Jackson elaborates,

Here, then, are two radically different forces and realities. On one hand, a fractal world, a centrifugal world, an always-almost-falling-apart world. On the other, a world in constant process of fixing and reinvention, reconfiguring and reassembling into new combinations and new possibilities—a topic of both hope and concern. [...] The fulcrum of these two worlds is *repair*: the subtle acts of care by which order and meaning in complex sociotechnical systems are maintained and transformed, human value is preserved and extended, and the complicated work of fitting to the varied circumstances of organizations, systems, and lives is accomplished.⁸³

In this sense, maintenance “can itself be a vital source of variation, improvisation and innovation,”⁸⁴ Graham and Thrift propose, a perspective that gives it a generative side. As it happens with development, issues of “connection and assembly” get all the attention. The idea of maintenance, however, signals that “disconnection and disassembly are just as important in that they resist entities’ means of enacting themselves: failure is key.” Moreover: an emphasis on maintenance practices shows that failure and decay are part of structures, not accidents. Or, and following Paul Virilio, “the accident is part of the thing.”⁸⁵ Although maintenance does not produce change, to make it

79 Rogers, “Maintaining Development: Redefining the Relationship.”

80 Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art (1969).”

81 Kwon, “In Appreciation of Invisible Work: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the ‘White Cube.’”

82 As developed elsewhere, precarity is here understood in the sense that Anna Tsing proposes, as an opening to contamination and encounters. See *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

83 Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” 222.

84 Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order.”

85 Virilio, “The Primal Accident.”

visible challenges the solidity of what is maintained.

Through her work, Ukeles challenges the distinction between private and public spheres, linking domestic maintenance practices with public ones, and labeling both *work* (and art).⁸⁶ Rather than erasing the gendered reality of domestic maintenance practices, Ukeles underlines their structural dimension in (a capitalist) society. Moreover, by exposing the broad range of maintenance practices that sustain art and the art world, Ukeles promotes solidarity across social classes and spheres of activity, disregarding the wage as the element of leverage (or concealment) and presenting it as a problem not only of payment but of value.

FROM THE SOCIAL OF THE FACTORY TO THE FACTORY OF THE SOCIAL

Overlapping (or encompassing) maintenance practices are reproductive actions, understood this time as actions required to reproduce the social. Marx recognized their importance by stating that “[t]he maintenance and reproduction of the working-class is, and must ever be, a necessary condition to the reproduction of capital.”⁸⁷ He failed, however, to acknowledge the labor/er involved in that reproduction: “[T]he capitalist may safely leave its fulfillment to the laborer’s instincts of self-preservation and of propagation.” Self-preservation and propagation are not, however, just solitary endeavors. Tithi Bhattacharya asks:

If workers’ labor produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker? Put another way: What kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day so that she can produce the wealth of society? What role did breakfast play in her work-readiness? What about a good night’s sleep? We get into even murkier waters if we extend the questions to include processes lying outside this worker’s household. Does the education she received at school also not “produce” her, in that it makes her employable? What about the public transportation system that helped bring her to work, or the public parks and libraries that provide recreation so that she can be regenerated, again, to be able to come to work?⁸⁸

If the only work recognized as such is the productive labor for the market, then a “tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the work-

86 It is important to remember, as Helen Molesworth recalls, that Ukeles’ gesture is possible due to her privilege as an artist, enacting a maintenance worker. For more on the subject, see Molesworth, “Cleaning Up in the 1970s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles.”

87 Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*.

88 Bhattacharya, “Introduction: Mapping Social Reproduction Theory.”

er, or more specifically her labor power, is naturalized into nonexistence.”⁸⁹ As will be demonstrated later in this thesis, this is, and it is not, the case of work on the sexcam platform.

From locations that are not generally considered workplaces, profiting from activities that have not always been regarded as work,⁹⁰ the sexcams of this research present a challenge to the *operaist* concept of the *social factory*. The term was coined by Mario Tronti in 1963, when the Marxist framework for understanding relations of production appeared as “insufficient to analyze the totality of social life.”⁹¹ As outlined by Silvia Federici, the concept of the social factory accounts for the stage of capitalist development when “capitalist relations become so hegemonic that every social relation is subsumed under capital and the distinction between society and factory collapses, so that society becomes a factory and social relations *directly become relations of production*.”⁹² In the social factory, the work discipline of the factory is expanded beyond it and “a large share of the work of production is subsequently and increasingly performed, without remuneration, in our daily social doings.”⁹³ The working class had then “to be redefined to include nonfactory workers,”⁹⁴ redefinition that would change the understanding of the factory, and of the social.

Capitalist production outside of the borders of the factory, however, is not a new phenomenon. Drawing upon anti-colonialist literature, Silvia Federici and the Wages for Housework movement asserted that the work that fed the factory was never limited to it, nor was it always paid.

[To us] it was immediately clear that the circuit of capitalist production, and the “social factory” it produced, began and was centered above all in the kitchen, the bedroom, the home—insofar as these were the centers for the production of labor-power—and from there it moved on to the factory, passing through the school, the office, the lab.⁹⁵

The family institution is key in this system, and provides “the ideological basis for relieving the state and capital from responsibility for much of the cost of social reproduction.”⁹⁶ Labor performed in this context, such as housework and care, is not only a personal service “but the work that produces and reproduces labor power.”⁹⁷ The family absorbs reproductive costs and, as Kathi Weeks

89 Bhattacharya.

90 Merteuil, “Sex Work Against Work.”

91 Hopkins, “Mostly Work, Little Play.”

92 *Revolution at Point Zero*, 7 emphasis in original.

93 Ross, “In Search of the Lost Paycheck,” 25.

94 Tronti as cited in Hopkins, “Mostly Work, Little Play.”

95 Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*, 8.

96 Mariarosa Dalla Costa as cited in Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

97 Federici, “Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint.”

explains,

functions [as] a *privatized machine of social reproduction* [that] keep wages lower and hours longer than they would be if the general assumption were that individuals needed either to be able to secure *commodified equivalents to the goods and services produced within private households* or to have enough time outside of waged work to produce the goods and services themselves.⁹⁸

On a different scale and scope, the sexcam platform of this research can also be considered as a *privatized machine of social reproduction* that offers some of these *commodified equivalents*. Indeed: through sexual shows and entertainment, attention, recognition, and a plethora of affective engagements, the sexcam platform provides services that can be understood as necessary for the reproduction of the workforce. Although under a new presentation, the platform does not remove these services from their discursive baggage. On the contrary, it is precisely their undervalued/underwaged status—the astonishing cheapness of labor—what makes it profitable.

As explored in this investigation, work on the sexcam platforms is, at the same time, paid and not paid—and work and not work. The platform does not try to solve this paradox but thrives on it. As Neda Atanososki and Kalindi Vora elaborate, novel technoeconomic projects are, nonetheless, “predetermined by techniques of differential exploitation and dispossession within capitalism.”⁹⁹ Technoliberalism, they argue, works as an alibi that obscures “the uneven racial and gendered relations of labor, power, and social relations that underlie the contemporary conditions of capitalist production.” It is against that landscape where the sexcam platform unfolds, where automation has arrived, but not quite so, and menial tasks are still performed by a “less-than or not-quite-human other.” As I have argued earlier, the existence of a temporarily called *domestic episteme*¹⁰⁰ allows for the building of a platform where workers are not only not formally waged but explicitly devaluated if they ask for monetary retributions. Indeed, and as it will be discussed later, people that ask for money are called *token whores*, and any references to work (and sex work) carefully avoided.

Sex work represents the limit of the (sexcam) platform. While the terms and struggles for recognition of sex work have been in existence for more than forty years,¹⁰¹ this platform purposely avoids labeling its services as such. This exclusion shapes the kind and type of services they are offered on

98 *The Problem with Work*, 121, emphasis added.

99 Atanososki and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*.

100 This term is based on Weinbaum’s *slave episteme* (The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery). It could, but it will not, be called *the housewife episteme*. Kylie Jarrett uses a similar figure (*the digital housewife*) for a different purpose, suggesting that the idea of the housewife (as someone used to perform work without monetary or social retribution) could better represent the ‘free labor’ that we perform on the Internet. For more on the subject, see Jarrett, *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media*.

101 Leigh, “Inventing Sex Work.”

Chaturbate, and their cost and value. Because it is not explicitly defined as sex work, the platform cunningly avoids solicitation and other legal issues.¹⁰² Because it is not work, it can be enjoyed without guilt. This paradox is not only a gendered construction of work/not work but reflects another, yet interconnected, aspect of the capitalist notion of work. Although Marx makes a distinction between abstract and concrete labor, Norbert Trenkle affirms that labor is already an abstraction.¹⁰³ If an abstraction consists of “withdrawing something from something,” labor is abstract when it is considered as taking place in a separate sphere of society—far from leisure, the pursue of “personal interests, loving, and so on.” In this way, because the work performed on the sexcam platform is presented as enjoyed, it experiences a double negation—no work, no sex work—that does not make it positive.

A MACHINIC HEGEMONY

The *domestic episteme* is not the only method by which the platform attaches people and commercializes services explicitly defined as non-commercial. Based on Félix Guattari’s concept of *capital of subjectivity*, Maurizio Lazzarato argues that the central project of capitalistic politics consists of articulating a “subjective economy” able to link “economic, technological, and social flows with the production of subjectivity.”¹⁰⁴ In this research, I approach this subjective economy as a hegemonic project—hence another dimension of reproduction. Capitalism, Deleuze & Guattari assert, produces subjectivity through two different yet complementary power apparatuses: *machinic enslavement* and *social subjection*:

We distinguish machinic enslavement and social subjection as two separate concepts. There is enslavement when human beings themselves are constituent pieces of a machine that they compose among themselves and with other things (animals, tools), under the control and direction of a higher unity. But there is subjection when the higher unity constitutes the human being as a subject linked to a now exterior object, which can be an animal, a tool, or even a machine. The human being is no longer a component of the machine but a worker, a user. He or she is subjected *to* the machine and no longer enslaved *by* the machine.¹⁰⁵

Machinic enslavement exerts control through the deterritorialization of objects and subjects, their

102 For a discussion of current restrictions of sexual content on digital platforms, as the ones provoke by the FOSTA/SESTA bill, see Farokhmanesh, “Anti-Sex Trafficking Law FOSTA Is Hurting Online Sex Educators, Too”; Month, “POLITICAL PORNO #40”; “Tech Groups.”

103 Trenkle, “Value and Crisis: Basic Questions.”

104 Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 8.8.

105 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 456.

decodification to small and manageable units.¹⁰⁶ “In machinic enslavement, there is nothing but transformations and exchanges of information, some of which are mechanical, others human.”¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, social subjection operates by recomposing these manageable molecular units in new *molar* formations that create the *persons* of capitalism¹⁰⁸ and assign roles accordingly.¹⁰⁹ Work, as Kathi Weeks argues, is one of those mechanisms.

Work produces not just goods and services but also social and political subjects. In other words, the wage relation generates not just income and capital, but disciplined individuals, governable subjects, worthy citizens, and responsible family members. Indeed, given its centrality both to individuals’ lives and to the social imaginary, work constitutes a particularly important site of interpellation into a range of subjectivities.¹¹⁰

Work “equips us with a subjectivity, assigning us an identity, [...] a body, a profession.”¹¹¹ And a class and gender, understanding these categories more “in terms of a process rather than an outcome,” following Weeks.¹¹² Work is then a site of *gendering*, where gender is “enforced, performed, and recreated.” If machinic enslavement operates through desubjectivation, in social subjection “capital relations become personified,”¹¹³ and subjectivity is re-attached to the machine under new characters and roles.

These two modes of domination operate in sextcam platforms, “as two simultaneous parts that constantly reinforce and nourish each other.”¹¹⁴ There is the machinic enslavement of the performers to the platform, a platform that modulates interactions through specific channels and forces the use of a made-up currency for monetary transactions. “[I]t is the reinvention of a machine of which human beings are constituent parts, instead of subjected workers or users.” The machine does not need individual subjects but standardized components¹¹⁵ that create the “world without shadows” that Jonathan Crary describes,¹¹⁶ where there is always someone naked and willing to

106 Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*.

107 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 458.

108 Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 34.34.

109 Call Center agents could be seen as an example of machinic enslavement even so, as Kalindi Vora notes, their role relates more to a “machinic subjectivity where workers must reorganize themselves as subjects” according to the machine. *Life Support*, 50.

110 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 16.

111 Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 12.12.

112 *The Problem with Work*, 17.

113 Marx as cited in Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines*, 25.25.

114 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 458.

115 The processes of standardization will be seen further on under Foucault’s concept of *technologies of security* (*Security, Territory, Population*.)

116 24/7. This image is developed further in the ‘Building Complex’ section.

work. Social subjectification seems to require individuals over standardized components, their creativity and uniqueness, making this process “often less a matter of command and obedience than one of inducement and attraction.”¹¹⁷ A keenness to work—and to follow a schedule, invest in new equipment—is due to social subjection *and* machinic enslavement, valid in this case for performers but for audiences as well.¹¹⁸

Sexcam platforms *factory-ze the social* because of the type and locus of the activities from which they extract value and the technologies they use for this extraction. Entangled with machinic enslavement and social subjection, the use of digital technologies allows the intensification and extension of work, “rendering the boundaries of the workplace emergent.”¹¹⁹ A quick view of the sexcams illustrates this point, when *working from home* (or something that resembles it) is not a possibility but a requirement, performers have to take care of thousands of viewers at the same time and also must engage with them off-transmissions through social media. Discourses of authenticity are mixed here, where the distinction between work and non-work is blurred but a complete identification with work, Kathi Weeks remarks, is not only expected but demanded.¹²⁰

This *factory of the social*, however, does not host the social in its complexity. Workers have to be flexible and self-managed, but this flexibility has to be, paradoxically, predictable to be profitable. The sexcam platform studied in this research, Chaturbate, epitomizes how an informal sector tends towards professionalization but has to maintain an amateur aura to keep its value. If this claim is valid for various examples of what used to be called *the sharing economy*, it is striking in the case of online sex work. When the entrepreneur is a sex worker, notions about the digital economy and commercial sex are challenged, including who participates there, how, which rights should this person have,¹²¹ and the tools to be employed for their study.

A CONTINUOUS SEQUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL SPIRALS

On the sexcams platform, reproduction describes not only its area of services but its business mod-

117 West and Zimmerman as cited in Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

118 A more developed critique of the paradoxically impoverished role of the audience can be addressed through the idea of their *generalized proletarianization*, as developed by Bernard Stiegler (Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*.)

119 Richardson, “Feminist Geographies of Digital Work.”

120 Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

121 It is relevant to ask, for example, if debates about workers’ organization and conditions of exploitation on Uber would receive a similar treatment in the media by exchanging the platform with Chaturbate, which takes a considerable bigger portion of the earnings of their ‘contractors’ (roughly 50% versus 25% on Uber).

el. Reproduction involves repetition. As developed by Rosa Luxemburg, reproduction involves a constant “renewal of the process of production,” renewal that requires standardization of practices and some control over natural conditions.¹²² Although this is also valid for traditional societies, reproduction in capitalism has specific characteristics, the most important being the expectation of profit or surplus value. Profit (or surplus value) determines both production and reproduction—and the repetition of the process, again and again. Because profit requires the extraction of value from the commodity, this cycle requires an exchange to be completed. In this way, reproduction is not a closed process. It does not only comprise the repetition and control of processes of production but trade: not only fabrication but processes of synthesis and circulation.

In a capitalist society, cycles of production do not run continuously but are driven by demand, which leads to interruptions and fluctuations. The form of these flows is then not a circle but “a continuous sequence of individual spirals.”

Every such spiral starts with small loops which become increasingly larger and eventually very large indeed. Then they contract, and a new spiral starts again with small loops, repeating the figure up to the point of interruption. This periodical fluctuation between the largest volume of reproduction and its contraction to partial suspension, this cycle of slump, boom, and crisis, as it has been called, is the most striking peculiarity of capitalist reproduction.

As Luxemburg explains, reproduction is not only repetition but entails crises, contraction, expansion. Fascinating as they are, however, these cycles do not explain reproduction entirely.

What sole attention on cycles of production and reproduction overlook is the fact that “private producers are not simply producers of commodities but are essentially capitalist producers[.]”¹²³ As such, their main goal is not to create commodities, not even to satisfy demand, but to create surplus value. And here is where the sexcams platforms start to resonate. As defined by Marx, the value of every commodity is the sum of three factors: constant capital (capital for the means of production), variable capital (the capital spent on wages), and surplus-value. The producer wants to accumulate surplus-value, and as fast as they can, because of capitalism’s inherent competitiveness. This “accelerated appropriation,” however, requires “an increased production of capital,” meaning that big companies will have a clear advantage over smaller ones. In this way, capitalist production not only incentivizes reproduction but expansion: “reproduction on an ever-larger scale.” However, expan-

122 Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*.

123 Luxemburg.

sion is not the result of individual ambition but “a coercive law” of competition, where the “cheapness of commodities is the most important weapon.” As a result, both expansion and exploitation are conditions of existence for capitalist production. “A growing tendency towards reproduction at a progressively increasing scale thus ensues, which spreads automatically like a tidal wave over ever larger surfaces of reproduction.” Luxemburg’s explanation of reproduction shows the growth of the sexcam platform and its devaluation of labor as inseparable, mutually constitutive, and in permanent development. Moreover, read in this way, network effects are not only the effects of the network but a phenomenon that carries a capitalistic seed.

CHAPTER 2

THE DOLLHOUSE

Home is the answer, but what is the question?

Joseph Grima

Between the website and the platform, the amateur and the professional, the room and the building complex, there is a house. Or, more precisely, a dollhouse. A dollhouse is here what brings together big and miniature data in this research. More than a bridge, the dollhouse is the instrument that *makes room* for those tensions.

A dollhouse, quiet and intriguing as it is, acts in three different ways: as a figure, a model, and a research device. As a figure, the dollhouse reveals a conjunction formed by systems of representation, technologies of gender and class, discourses and potential actions. “Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material–semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another,”¹ as Donna Haraway says. Half-coded and half-projected, “outlined (like a sign) and memorable (like an image or tale),”² figures are constructs that call for an active engagement with them. As Roland Barthes notes on figures: “The word is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptance,”³ as a series of movements that create a temporary impression. Figures are then attractive because of “their invitation to inhabit the corporeal story told in their lineament.”⁴ A call for instancing that outline, to perform those steps again, to participate in that construction.

The dollhouse is not only an ambiguous figure but also a well-established model, in conceptual and literal terms. Models, Annabel Wharton says, “have a life of their own: they are agents capable of acting independently of their human producers.”⁵ Conceptual models that, trying to explain phenomena, shape them in return. Architectural models that could have their own and quiet existence as projects without projection. The agency of models, Wharton warns, must be understood in its chemical sense. A model is not “merely a substance,” but one “that has physical, chemical, or medicinal effects on proximate things.” As such, the dollhouse is a model of domesticity, a model of conduct, a model for decoration that has concrete effects on its surroundings. Having a life of

1 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*.

2 Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 4.

3 *A Lover's Discourse*.

4 Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*.

5 “Doll's House/Dollhouse,” 2.

its own, however, “its actual performance can never be fully controlled,” as in subversive and disruptive games played in the dollhouse, artistic interpretations, unexpected effects.⁶ The dollhouse is in this research a physical model and a conceptual one. Moreover, it has its own made-up verb (*to dollhouse*) that accounts for the operation of taking several broad topics and plastering them together within imaginary walls to give a sense of control— even if, like Alice, arms and legs debouch through the windows. As a model with its own agency, in its chemical sense, the dollhouse allows internal passages among the different aspects of this research (with some dead ends). It also recognizes the existence of a controlling yet limited point of view: a restricted position that could be overcome through speculation and play.

Play is what leads to the third role of the dollhouse as a research device: the space *of* the research and the space *for* the research. The individual channels that broadcast on the sexcam platform of this investigation are called *rooms*. Performers transmit from their own rooms or from sets disguised in that way. As in a misunderstanding, a 1:12 scale room becomes a stage and gets broadcasted along thousands of others on the same platform. The dollhouse is the space of the research and the researcher, where the practice happens. This practice, like any other, modifies the investigation in return. The dollhouse’s genealogy as a domestic disciplinary apparatus is both confronted and enacted through critical play, following a tradition of feminist performative practices.⁷

HISTORY

Although miniaturized figures and small domestic scenes have a longer history, the first dollhouses documented in “their current Western form” —or *baby-houses*, as they used to be called—appeared in the German region of Bavaria in the XVI century.⁸ Those better documented (some of them still preserved) were not intended for children but for the amusement of wealthy adults, even though the division between children’s and adults’ activities cannot be neatly delimited with regard to dollhouses.⁹ In the XVII century, dollhouses shifted from “a male-oriented artifact to

6 Notable in this respect is the testimony of Miriam Shapiro, told below, and Annabel Wharton’s argument about the affective quality of the Stettheimer’s dollhouse (Broomhall and Spinks, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries*).

7 For more on the subject, see Nochlin, “The Recent Work of Miriam Shapiro”; Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*; Roth et al., *Miriam Shapiro: The Shrine, the Computer and the Dollhouse*; Rosler and Chicago, “Semiotics of the Kitchen”; LaBarge, “Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Verbund Collection.”

8 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920”; Chen, “Playing with Size and Reality”; Jacobs, *History of Doll Houses*.

9 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920,” 24.



Fig. 2.1. Dolls' house of Petronella Oortman, c. 1686 - c. 1710. Rijksmuseum.

a female-organized mode of domesticity,”¹⁰ as in the case of the *prank poppenhuisen* or “dollhouses for show” commissioned for wealthy adult women in the Netherlands.¹¹ Notable examples are the dollhouses that were owned by Petronella Oortman and Petronella Dunois, currently exhibit at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.¹² Like other dollhouses of the same period, they both depict detailed (and lavish) domestic scenes that emphasize their owners' wealth (but in private, according to Calvinist standards) and their savviness in the management of a complex household. Considered the women-oriented version of *cabinets des curiosités*, these dollhouses seem to contain all the information about the world a wealthy woman would need to manage, serving as edifying

10 Chen, “Playing with Size and Reality,” 279.

11 Moseley-Christian, “Seventeenth-Century Pronk Poppenhuisen,” 341.

12 “Dolls' Houses - Works of Art - Rijksstudio.”

models for others. These dollhouses are notable not only regarding what they show but what they do not. For example, in Petronella Oortman's dollhouse, the custom-made Chinese porcelain is in full display, but it is not clear how to prepare food for it. Lavish bedrooms in the front, just a glimpse of the servant's rooms in the back. As with the *cabinets des curiosités*, the exhibition of wealth and knowledge of the world is inextricable from colonialism, a relation of power and white privilege expressed in the dollhouse's case through fabrics, collection items, and Asian references. Complete and perfect worlds, "simultaneously an escape from real life and its mirror"¹³ where domestic and moral instructions are mixed with nostalgia (past or anticipated), are often characteristics of contemporary mass-produced dollhouses.

A SMALL APPARATUS

As a small yet complex device, the dollhouse can be understood as what Foucault calls a *dispositif*: an apparatus of power/knowledge formed by "the coupling of a set of practices and a regime of truth."¹⁴ A regime of truth, following Foucault, does not designate some universal nature but involves

the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹⁵

The dollhouse's regime of truth lies on the pretense that the dollhouse is nothing but a scale model of an existing reality: a house. This tautological premise articulates a set of propositions, a set of statements that will compose a knowledge.¹⁶ And who could contest this reality? Flora G. Jacobs, in her book about the history of the dollhouse, affirms that "the doll house has so accurately reflected the life about it that a book about doll houses becomes almost a domestic history."¹⁷ As Broomhall and Spinks comment, and in contrast with the more respected *cabinets des curiosités*, the Dutch dollhouses from the XVII century are often appraised as truthful accounts of domestic life, while little attention is paid to them as personal and subjective testimonies of their owners. Moreover, "do [dollhouses] reflect anything of real life, or they are simply representing

13 King as cited in Chen, "Playing with Size and Reality," 282.

14 *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979.*

15 Foucault, "Truth and Power," 73.

16 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977.*

17 *History of Doll Houses.*

contemporary conventions?”¹⁸ Indeed, although those dollhouses show domestic details (storage, servant’s rooms, kind of foods, and combustibles) that are not necessary documental but ideal, this aspect is never highlighted in their account. “My someday house shown on these few pages is a nearly perfect replica, one inch to one foot, of the house in which I grew up” says the book of a dollhouse *aficionado*¹⁹ while the commercial brand Playmobil offers to “recreate and experience the world in miniature.”²⁰ Following Foucault, however, it is not relevant to refute or validate the statements of truth related to the dollhouse but to explore how its truthfulness has articulated a system of knowledge and series of associated practices:²¹ how these *truth games* are exerted on the body and determine the self.

An apparatus is a “heterogeneous ensemble”²² composed by discourses, practices, institutions, buildings, laws, regulations—the said as much as in the unsaid—but particularly the connections among them: “[t]he apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements.” The dollhouse is the apparatus of an apparatus, but also an apparatus itself. It does refer to a particular version of domesticity but has its own components and networks. Without questioning the referent’s truth, a change in scale and purpose create new relations among elements. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues, objects gain meaning “not from the original context of the fragments but from their juxtaposition in a new context.”²³ The dollhouse as an apparatus involves routines of play, norms about who is entitled to touch it and who is not, what kind of domestic environment is represented and by whom, its materiality and economies of production—among many other considerations.

For Foucault, the apparatus is not only a multilinear ensemble but also its “strategic function,” its genesis, its appearance in a particular moment due to a specific need.²⁴ In the case of the dollhouse we encounter processes of gendering, exhibition of wealth, need for instruction, or a personal account. In this way, the strategic function of the apparatus relates to pre-existing relations of force—or “play of power.”²⁵ This play of power is formed by “certain coordinates of knowledge” which enable, yet condition, the apparatus. Because knowledge resides in truth, this status of truth

18 Broomhall and Spinks, *Early Modern Women in the Low Countries*.

19 O’Meara, *A Mansion in Miniature*.

20 Chen, “Playing with Size and Reality,” 279.

21 Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, 36.

22 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 195.

23 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*.

24 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, 195.

25 Foucault, 196.

is precisely what actualizes the coordinates of knowledge, floating until then in a virtual state in the apparatus. Deleuze identifies different systems of truth: “truths of enunciation, truths of light and visibility, truths of power, truths of subjectification.”²⁶ Applied to the dollhouse, *truths of enunciation* could identify how this representation is put in place while *truths of light* identify what is visible and what is not, who and what is represented and what is absent. *Truths of affirmations* correspond to the distribution of elements and *truths of power* to the relations among those affirmations, the forces that regulate interactions. *Truths of subjectification* relate to the self, the process of individuation the relationship with the apparatus (in this case, the dollhouse) produces. These processes are similar to what Foucault calls *truth games*: “the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience.”²⁷ In the dollhouse, truth games acquire a literal meaning.

Indeed: it is through experiences (such as play) that gender, racial, and class dynamics imprint their marks in the body. The dollhouse’s limited mobility, a trait inherited from the “private familial nature of early dollhouses,”²⁸ relegates it to a specific position where children are allowed to play—and observed. The dollhouse has, however, a double articulation regarding the panopticon. First, its construction and dimensions consider a player/observer with an omniscient gaze that can encompass the whole dollhouse at once. “The perfect disciplinary apparatus [that] would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly.”²⁹ Embracing rooms, dolls, and furniture, this perspective suggests a sense of authority and security over the environment, and it is a common trope regarding dollhouses. Susan Stewart, probably the most cited author on miniatures, argues that “[w]orlds of inversion, of contamination and crudeness, are controlled within the dollhouse by an absolute manipulation and control of the boundaries of time and space.”³⁰ Still, the dollhouse is not only a toy for the playful exertion of surveillance but a surveilled space itself. Frances Armstrong argues that the dollhouse is a *ludic space*: not an autonomous “play area” but “a space specifically designated for play, often by adults who intend that children play nowhere else.”³¹ As a “special place to play” inside of the home, the girl playing with the dollhouse “will often be subject to authority in that area: even if not confined to it as to a prison, she may be watched while she plays there.” As in a feedback loop, domestic confinement reverberates in the dollhouse. Or, quoting Susan Stewart again: “[a] house within a house[,] a space within an enclosed space[:] within within within.”³²

26 Deleuze, “What Is a Dispositif?,” 166.

27 *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 6.

28 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920,” 25.

29 Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training,” 191.

30 *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 63.

31 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920,” 27.

32 *Ibid.*, 61.

By segregating children by gender, teaching them particular domestic ideals through surveilled body actions, the dollhouse becomes a perfect disciplinary apparatus. Moreover, further bio-political aspects are present here regarding the discourses around reproduction, birth, and hygiene that the dollhouse promotes. The double articulation of sexuality in the dollhouse (its anatomo- and bio politics) reinforces Foucault's view on the pivotal aspect of sex as a political issue that relates both to discipline (over individual bodies) and regulations of populations.³³ In that view, rather than repress sexual ideas, the dollhouse arguably arouses them in children—even if they are confined to the parent's room. As an inanimate object animated through performance, the dollhouse oscillates between bio-power deployed “at the level of government” (between the technologies of the self and the technologies of domination) “and at the level of individual (human) subjects.”³⁴ The dollhouse, then, works as the miniaturized version of a bio-power apparatus, a “concrete arrangement” for the application of a power concerned with the administration of life.³⁵ It is, again, the channel of a discourse and a discursive formation itself, where some truth is enacted.

The dollhouse's macro and microsystems illustrate Foucault's understanding of power: not a solid entity but “a co-ordinated cluster of relations.”³⁶ However, even if these relations of forces are unequal, power is not always felt in a negative form. On the contrary: power “traverses and produces things, [...] produces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse.”³⁷ The dollhouse is a fascinating example of this: although it is a device that allows the enactment of an oppressive discourse, this is not done without charm, fun, and play. It is precisely through luring and play that the dollhouse, as an apparatus of power/knowledge, is performed and impinges its discourse on the body. The play in the dollhouse has been highly controlled since its origins. Expensive and barely mobile as a toy, who was allowed to play in the dollhouse and how was an adult matter.³⁸ Even in the late 19th and early 20th century, when building one's own dollhouse became a popular activity for children, boys were encouraged to use their “natural taste for architecture” and build dollhouses to be decorated by girls.³⁹

33 Foucault, “Right to Death and Power over Life,” 49.

34 Chen, *Animacies*, 7.

35 Foucault, “Right to Death and Power over Life,” 45.

36 *Ibid.*, 198.

37 Foucault, “Truth and Power,” 61.

38 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920”; Chen, “Playing with Size and Reality”; Jacobs, *History of Doll Houses*.

39 Georgiev, “This Is the House That Jack Built - Gender, Work and Play Around the Dolls' House.”

SOME NAUGHTY PLAY

The apparatus of power/knowledge that the dollhouse incarnates is enacted in the body. As Foucault asserts, disciplinary power is a project oriented to the future, “towards the moment when it will keep going by itself[,] when discipline, consequently, will have become habit.”⁴⁰ Could a different set of actions, then, challenge the regime of truth of the apparatus? It would be misleading to understand children’s play with dollhouses as merely normative. The new possibilities opened by changes in scale and closed spaces have been a constant source of fascination for dollhouse’s players.⁴¹ Through play and performance, dollhouses are not only training devices but a “space to express imagination, creativity and agency.”⁴² As Frances Armstrong comments:

Although early dollhouses were valuable artifacts supplied and controlled by adults, it seems quite clear that most girls were able to regard dollhouses as their own ludic spaces, places dedicated to their own play, rather than as sites for training in compliance. Showing flexibility and individuality, they interspersed reassuring enactment of routine with humorous or subversive innovation and readily improvised both narratives and accessories.⁴³

The bearer of a doctrine yet a space for creativity: *a dollhouse of one’s own*.

The symbolic intensity of the dollhouse, a prison and a sanctuary,⁴⁴ has made it a common figure in the arts. The use of the dollhouse as a metaphor for female domination allegedly appeared first with Charles Dickens around 1850,⁴⁵ and was further crystallized in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*.⁴⁶ Its subversion, however, has been a feminist endeavour. Among many others, notable in this respect is the work of Frances Glessner Lee (Fig. 2), although she did not herself an artist, nor was she a feminist. In 1946, Lee staged gruesome true crimes, with great charm and detail, at a dollhouse scale. Depicting women mostly as victims, *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* show the house as “a place of refuge, personal expression, and pride, but [] also a source of confinement, disempowerment, and anxiety.”⁴⁷ While the settings have an explicit educational purpose, they are fascinating portraits of domestic horrors.

40 As cited in Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, 63.

41 Chen, “Playing with Size and Reality”; Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920.”

42 Chen, “Playing with Size and Reality,” 278.

43 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920,” 24.

44 “The dollhouse, as we know from the political economy as well as from Ibsen, represents a particular form of interiority, an interiority which the subject experiences as its sanctuary (fantasy) and prison (the boundaries or limits of otherness, the inaccessibility of what cannot be lived experience).” Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 65.

45 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920,” 23.

46 Ibsen, *Doll’s House*.

47 Botz, *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*.



Fig. 2.2. Frances Glessner Lee, *Kitchen*, c. 1944-48. Photography by Corinne May Botz

In the context of the *Womanhouse*, the collective project led by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in 1971 and one of the most famous examples of feminist art practice on domestic space, there was a dollhouse.⁴⁸ In *Dollhouse*, created by Shapiro in collaboration with Sherry Brody, a seemingly conventional dollhouse reveals more complexity on closer inspection, hosting “miniature objects collected from women all over the country”⁴⁹ and staging rooms with different (and sometimes conflicting) identities. As Linda Nochlin develops,

each lovingly furnished room is disturbed by some impinging menace: a rattlesnake is curled up on the parlour floor, a grizzly bear stares through the nursery window at the tiny monster in the crib; mysterious men lurk outside the kitchen window. Above all, this dollhouse is specified as the home of a woman artist, complete with doll-sized studio and a male nude model, accompanied by a postage-stamp-sized replica of one of Shapiro’s large-scale abstractions.⁵⁰

This art project subverted a traditional dollhouse. But it had further implications for Shapiro:

48 Nochlin, “The Recent Work of Miriam Shapiro”; Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*.

49 Perry, *Playing at Home*.

50 Nochlin, “The Recent Work of Miriam Shapiro,” 5.



Figure 2.3. Miriam Shapiro and Sherry Brody. *Dollhouse*. 1972. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The crux of being in the women’s movement meant that in order to experience life fresh, I had to turn the coin around on every experience. My experience previous to the *Womanhouse* was the huge visionary, technological feat of making the computer paintings. To make a dollhouse was to turn the coin around. [...] I wanted to regress, to think as a small girl again. [After that experience], I began to work and the paintings just poured out of me. It was some liberation! [...] I found it “corny,” yet I had no wish to censor myself. [...] Formerly, I had gone into the studio with my “serious” self. Now I was going into the studio with all selves.⁵¹

Shapiro’s account exemplifies the resonances and tactics of a feminist art practice that deals with restrictions from an insider’s point of view. This is not surprising. As Kim Sawchuk says, “[r]elease

51 Roth et al., *Miriam Shapiro: The Shrine, the Computer and the Dollhouse*. Roth et al., *Miriam Shapiro: The Shrine, the Computer and the Dollhouse*.

is attainable only from *within* conditions of imposed constraint.”⁵² As a bearer of oppression, the dollhouse is also contested in the performative work of Frances Leeming and Johanna Householder, representing the “threat of domesticity [...] from we felt we might not escape.”⁵³ The dollhouse’s unsettledness, as Frances Armstrong affirms, “can make vulnerable the very ideal of domesticity it purports to represent.”⁵⁴ As such, an alternative enactment, a different placement, can challenge the dollhouse’s regime of truth.

Finally: How to queer a dollhouse? How would a queer dollhouse be? Besides questioning the performance of gender, Mel Y. Chen’s proposes a queer neomaterialist approach to biopolitics. This approach asks “how inanimate objects and nonhuman animals participate in the regimes of life (making live) and coerced death (killing),” question that Chen deems “integral to the effort to understand how biopower works and what its materials are.”⁵⁵ *Queering* biopolitics means, following Chen, opening up the spectrum of what is considered life and animating transgressions between organic and non-organic components. This questioning not only expands the biopolitical network but shows how conceptions of toxicity and contamination are already “racialized, sexualized [and] animated in specific biopolitical formations.” Material considerations resonate in the dollhouse: what would be, for example, the regime of truth of a dirty dollhouse, a rotten one, a dollhouse made of toxic materials? Which specific racialized claims are involved in considerations of ‘cheap’ or ‘noble’ dollhouses? Who would be invited to play in such houses? Who would be excluded?

52 Sawchuk, “Tanya Mars: Enthusiasm, Unbridled,” 325, emphasis added.

53 Householder, “Frances Leeming,” 300.

54 Armstrong, “The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920,” 36.

55 Chen, *Animacies*.

CHAPTER 3

THE JENNICAM

I. BETWEEN THE COFFEE POT AND THE FISH TANK

Our next guest is the creator of the very popular JenniCam website which televises the life inside her apartment 24-hours a day, live on the internet. Please welcome Jenni-Cam's own Jenni!¹

In the beginning was the JenniCam.² Or almost. Before Jennifer Ringley, a student from Pennsylvania's Dickinson College mounted a digital camera on top of her computer in her dorm room on April 14, 1996³ there was the Fishcam. The Fishcam, set up by Netscape founder Lou Montulli in 1994, broadcasted a new image of a fish tank in California to the brand new Internet every four seconds.⁴ And before the fish tank, it was the Trojan Room Coffee Pot (XCoffee) at Cambridge University, which in 1991 helped researchers evaluate if the remaining coffee in the pot would be worthy of a trip.⁵

It's late 1991, and 15 or so researchers in the Systems Group at the University of Cambridge Computer Lab share a coffee machine located in a rather uninspiring area known as the Trojan Room. Not all of the researchers are in the Trojan Room, though; others are two or three flights of stairs away and must travel some distance in search of coffee, often to find those closer at hand have beaten them to it. One pot provides enough coffee to fill just a few mugs, so it's first-come, first-served, and distance is a definite disadvantage. In the interests of fair play, some of the residents of the Trojan Room salvage a video camera, an old 680x0 VME-based computer, and a framegrabber left over from other projects. They grip the camera in a retort stand and point it at the coffeepot. The machine with the framegrabber executes a specially written server program, and an X-Windows client, which can be run by anybody in the group, grabs images at regular intervals and displays a picture of the pot, icon-sized, in the corner of the workstation screen. Those too far away to smell the coffee now have an alternative means of knowing when a new pot is brewed. The Net, once again, helps break down the barriers of distance (even if that distance was only measured in yards), and so streamlines the distribution of a resource so vital to computer science research.⁶

1 *Jennicam's Jenni on Letterman's Late Show.*

2 "JenniCam - Frequently Asked Questions," 1999

3 Hart, "April 14, 1996," 1.

4 Cole, "How a Decades-Long Livestream of a Fish Tank Helped Shape the Internet."

5 "Personal & Fun / The Trojan Room Coffee Pot | Quentin Stafford-Fraser."

6 Stafford-Fraser, "On Site."

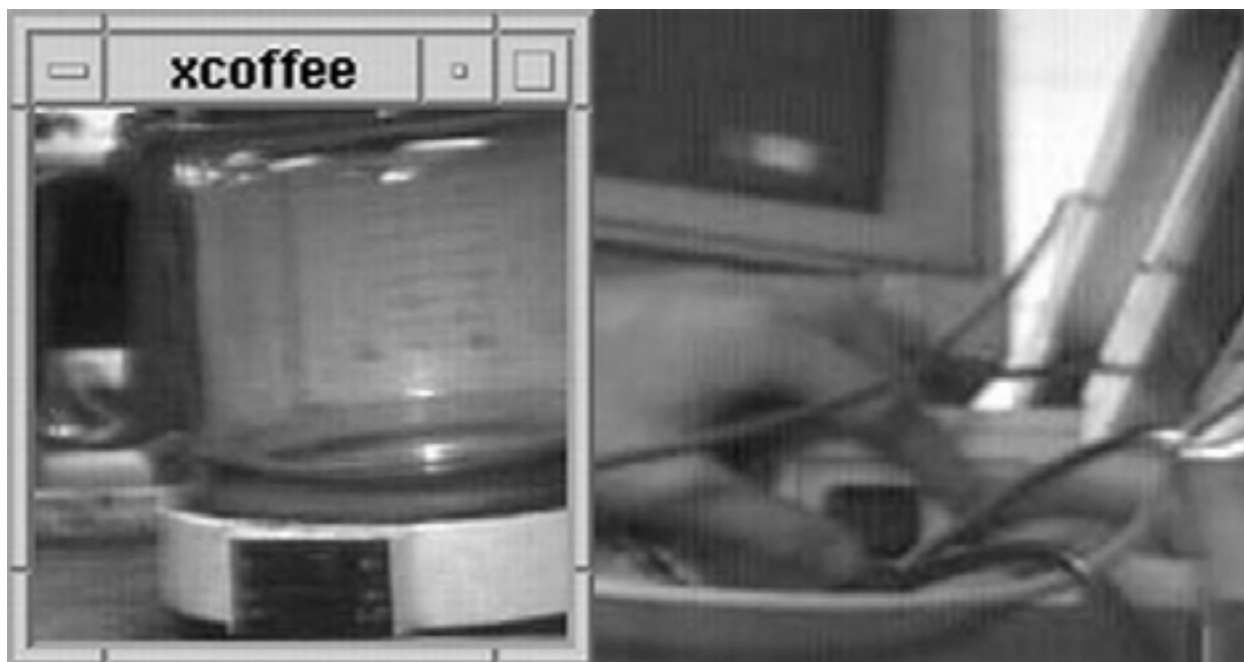


Figure 3.1. The image shows a frame from XCoffee and its last one, when it was finally switched off at 0954 UTC on Wednesday 22nd August 2001.

During its two first years of existence, the circulation of the latest frame of XCoffee was restricted only to the researchers' computer screens. But in 1993, when an IMG tag was introduced to the Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) for embedding images into web pages (and quickly adopted by the MOSAIC browser), this changed.

We soon realized something that now seems obvious: when your browser requests an image from a server, the server doesn't have to return the same image every time. For us, the most convenient source of constantly changing images was the coffee pot camera, so [we] modified the server to respond to HTTP requests, and the first Web cam was born.⁷

The XCoffee, now available for public viewing, became "one of the most popular sites on the early Web," and by 1996, it had received more than one million hits. As Quentin Stafford-Fraser hypothesized: "[i]t became famous for being famous." Two years and another million hits later, the coffee pot was no longer described as "a novelty" but as "a historical artifact." XCoffee's popularity declined over the years, but it peaked again in 2001 with the announcement of the end of its transmissions. "You want to know the secret of getting attention these days? Switch it off."⁸

7 Stafford-Fraser.

8 Stafford-Fraser.

II. WEBCAMMING AS A GENRE

A re-examination of the XCoffee and the FishCam shows that even before the JenniCam the webcam orbited around matters of contemplation and control. As in a fascinated form of surveillance, images became sites of verification from where a new/old truth could be erected. What Jennifer Ringley did, however, would consolidate the genre. But let's start with conventions. As explained by Raymond Williams, "a convention is an established relationship, or ground of a relationship, through which a specific shared practice—the making of actual works—can be realized."⁹ Albeit historical, conventions are often naturalized and the "inclusions and exclusions, the styles and the ways of seeing, that specific conventions embody and ratify" become invisible. A critical examination of the early established conventions of webcamming allows tracing the mesh of inclusions and exclusions that sustains it, the concurrence of factors, its particular conjuncture.

Both in the coffee pot and the fish tank, the subject of early webcams was not granted agency and was unable to offer restrictions to its observation. Unlike CCTV, neither monitoring the fish tank nor the coffee pot was of any use to most viewers other than entertainment. Not any entertaining, however, but one based on the contemplation of life happening, slowly, elsewhere—even if the filling and emptying of the coffee pot were not as vivid as the fish. Because of the novelty of the medium, the first webcams were not only transmitting something but broadcasting the evidence of this possibility. The medium was undeniably the message: the first webcams shown their own reflection, with the image of the Internet in the corner of the frame.

A genre, however, is more than a set of conventions. It involves a certain intensification of practices, a folding of relations, a production of regularities. Following Williams once more, a genre "is neither an ideal type nor a traditional order nor a set of technical rules"¹⁰ but the result of the combination of "different levels of the social material process." A genre recognizes three principal abstract components: stance, mode of formal composition, and subject-matter. The *stance* is the most general of the three and refers to "a mode of basic (social) organization which determines a particular kind of presentation." In the case of the webcam, the stance would be what was already determined by the coffee pot and the fish tank: the depiction of an alive (or animated) subject accessed remotely. The *mode of formal composition* would correspond to the formal elements of webcamming: technical affordances and constraints, format, lighting, duration—the aspect that changed the most since its beginnings. However, it is in the area of the *subject* and the *matter* where the innovation of Ringley would be more radical and enduring, as it will be developed. Viewing

9 *Marxism and Literature*, 173.

10 Williams, 185.

the webcam as a genre (rather than a form, for example) serves here to show the continuity and changes it has undergone, and to trace the lineage of its current incarnations.



Figure 3.2. The image shows the (allegedly) first frame of the JenniCam, in 1996.

III. ENTER JENNI

And then the JenniCam appeared. In 1996 Jennifer Ringley, a 19-year-old college student and web designer installed a camera on the top of her computer. She started her experiment as a programming challenge to herself, “to see if I could set up the scripts that would take the pictures, upload them to the site[...]kinda “look, I got this working.”¹¹ Although not her original setup, by 1998 the JenniCam required two different computers,

one Mac and one linux box, networked together through an ethernet hub, connected to my ISP via modem. My linux box uses NFS mount to mount the JenniCam server. Then, my Mac uses MacWebCam to take a picture from my Connectix QuickCam every minute (to keep the picture fresher). Every two minutes, a cron job connects to my mac using ftp and uploads the new picture to my linux box, into the NFS mounted directory.¹²

11 Goldman, “Jennicam.”

12 “JenniCam - Frequently Asked Questions.”

Ringley achieved her goal, but that was not what would make her part of the history of the Internet forever. The revolutionary act was to direct the camera to herself.

Dave Letterman

Was this your idea? You created this? Nobody else had done this before you did, right?

Jennifer Ringley

Right. Before me, there was the coffee pot cam. And where I got my idea from, the fishcam.

Letterman

And this is an aquarium? somebody's got his camera on the aquarium 24 hours a day, and people watch that? is that what it was?

Ringley

Exactly. And I don't know if you know fish, but they're interesting for, like, five minutes.

Letterman

That's right, that's right.

Ringley

So, I thought if a person were to do this, that would be more interesting.

Letterman

Now, your little thing that you've got going is much better than that aquarium thing.

Ringley

Thank you.

Letterman

Don't worry about a thing. You've got no problem with those fish.¹³

Still, the JenniCam had problems that the fish did not. First restricted just to Ringley's friends, news about the existence of the JenniCam spread quickly and the website started receiving millions of hits per day.¹⁴ However, unlike the FishCam or the XCoffee, Ringley did not have institutional support and was the sole responsible for the transmission costs that her sudden popularity brought. As Terry Senft recalls, "at the height of her popularity [...] Jennifer was also at the height of her bandwidth costs."¹⁵ Because of this in 1997 she developed a paid subscription model where the only difference with the non-paid access was the rate in which the image refreshed—two minutes versus twenty. Ringley was adamant that her goal was to cover transmission costs, not to receive revenue.

I hope you understand how much I hate doing this. I feel like I'm letting everyone down. I feel like a traitor. I hope you believe me when I say that if there were any other way to

13 *Jennicam's Jenni on Letterman's Late Show.*

14 Allen, "'Ed' of the Internet: JenniCAM Going Strong after Three Years."

15 Senft, *Camgirls*.

do this, I'd be doing it. If I had the thousand dollars to keep the site free, I would pay it. I would happily give the money to continue the site for free. But the sad fact is I hardly have enough money to cover the bills I have now, let alone my student loans that I have to pay starting next month. I want you to know that I'm not making a penny off this. [...] The site isn't up because I can make money and fame from it. The site is up because YOU continue to enjoy it.¹⁶

Jennifer Ringley never presented herself as working for the camera, nor performing.¹⁷ As defined by Ringley herself, the JenniCam was

n (1996) **1**: a real-time look into the real life of a young woman

2: an undramatized photographic diary for public viewing esp. via internet¹⁸

With only a few words, Ringley would define the main components of webcamming for the years to come.

A REAL-TIME LOOK

Despite the small number of images per hour, Ringley was prescient in lucidly establishing real-time as the first condition of the JenniCam. Real-time is the time of the Internet, a reparatory term that denies any mediation but requires an intensification that can only be brought out by technology.¹⁹ Real-time indicates both simultaneity and its impossibility: more real than real, but not quite so.

The very idea of a time that is real presupposes an unreal time, a technologically produced and mediated time. 'Real time' suggests that represented time (whether mechanical, electronic, or digital) can be asymptotic to the instantaneous — with no delay, no distance, no deferral.²⁰

Real-time is a "sufficiently immediate" time²¹ that "entails the promise of an experience of the now."²² In this way, real-time was "the new crack"²³: the condition for the Internet-version of a

16 "JenniCAM Guests", emphasis in the original.

17 The second webcam depicting a person was the Anacam, by Ana Voog in 1997. Several components of the Anacam were similar to the JenniCam (location, subject, simultaneity), but the main difference was Voog's explicit inclusion of visual arts elements.

18 "Jen-Ni-Cam."

19 Doane, "Real-Time: Instantaneity and the Photographic Imaginary."

20 Doane.

21 White, *The Body and the Screen*.

22 Weltevrede, Helmond, and Gerlitz, "The Politics of Real-Time."

23 Lovink, *Networks without a Cause*.

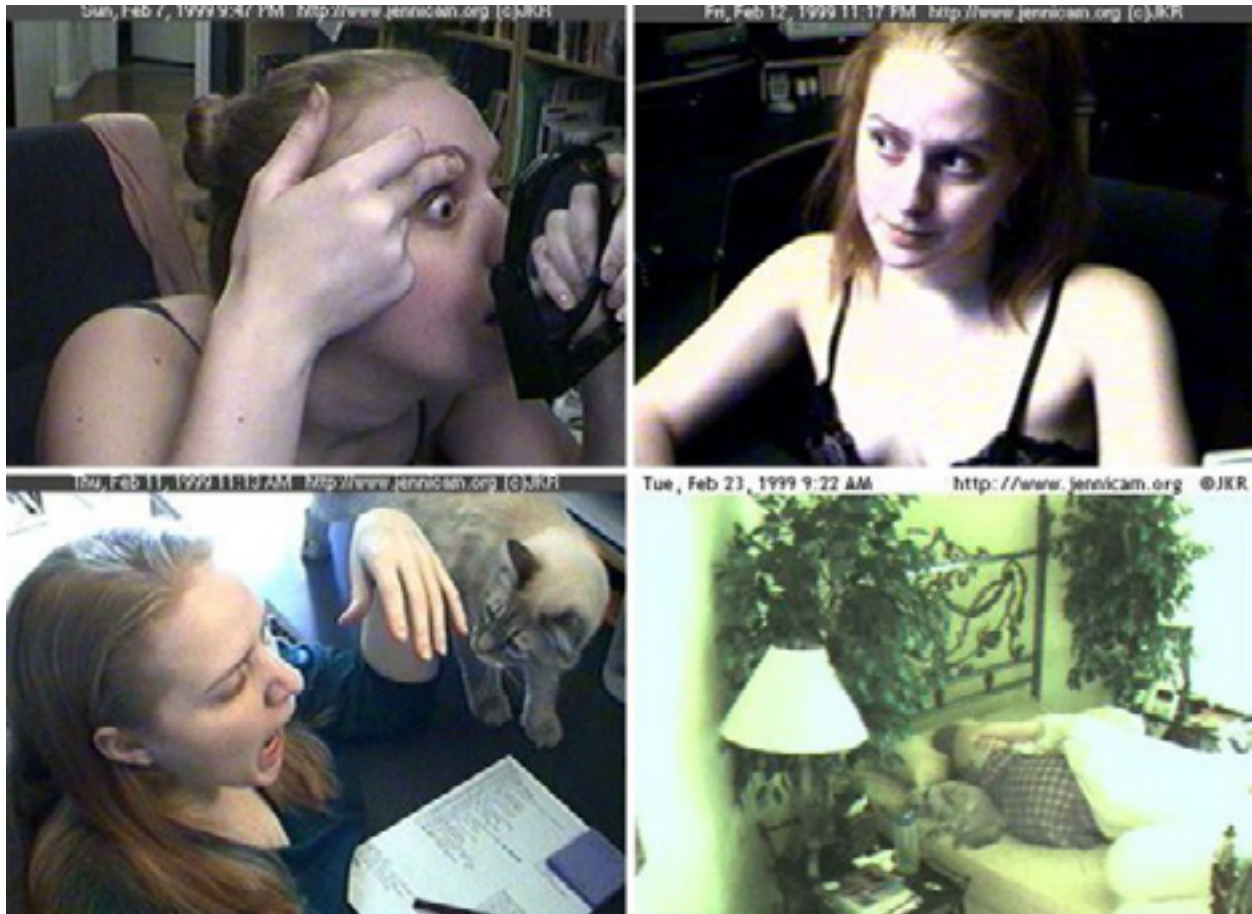


Figure 3.3. Screenshots from the JenniCam. Images from archive.org.

common present, the coincidence that demonstrates, finally, that there was someone out there—even if their vital signs update every fifteen minutes.

Ringley’s description of the JenniCam shows her awareness of the medium and the zeitgeist of the time, when the Internet was seen as an unrestricted, yet faceless, collective of potential connections and opportunities. The JenniCam emerges between the “deep anxieties about the integrity of identity online”²⁴ and “the techno dreams of cyberspace as a parallel virtual reality.”²⁵ Without warning, there is Jennifer Ringley: sitting in front of her computer and removing an eyelash from her eye, or petting her cat, or eating ice-cream out of the package. Cyberspace, imagined with psychedelic colors and populated by cyborgs, is suddenly just a 320px by 240px grainy image of a blonde young woman brushing her teeth. And it was fascinating.

Dave Letterman

24 Maguire, “Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice.”

25 Lovink, *Networks without a Cause*.

I want to tell you something. I've heard a lot of stuff about the internet [...] You know, yadda, yadda, yadda about the Internet. [But] this, to me, is like the perfect idea for the Internet. Don't you think?

Jennifer Ringley

I think so. I mean, [...] if you look around on the internet, there's so much that, [...] as far as broadcasting goes, it's just like tv on the Internet. I think what it needs is to have *something that is made for the medium*.²⁶

The JenniCam was definitely something *made for the medium*. Only possible through and because of the Internet, it proved that power was, in fact, going to be redistributed among all connected people, giving a reassuring face to at least one of them.

I was in my dorm room Saturday night doing laundry. I was a nerd! And I got an email from someone who said 'I'm doing laundry too and I just looked and saw that you're doing laundry on Saturday night. It's funny cuz I felt like a loser. I'm sitting at home doing laundry on Saturday night, but I saw you are too! So now I don't feel so bad.' And that kind of just did it for me. I was glad to hear that, somehow, I gave somebody permission to just be themselves and to be ok with that.²⁷

The *real-time look* of the JenniCam evidenced what was happening somewhere, without time for ornaments and challenging "the 'cheesy' conventions of commodified entertainment"²⁸ with the apparently objective view of the camera. The medium was, again, the message. But what did it say?

INTO THE REAL LIFE

Q: Do you ever stage what we see?

A: No. The concept of the cam is to show whatever is going on naturally. *Essentially, the cam has been there long enough that now I ignore it*. So whatever you're seeing isn't staged or faked, and while I don't claim to be the most interesting person in the world, *there's something compelling about real life* that staging it wouldn't bring to the medium.²⁹

There's something compelling about real life: Not just life but *real life*, something with a particular intensity, sticky, able to hold people and things in its viscosity. Later, with nine cameras positioned in different parts of her apartment and broadcasting 24/7 during almost eight years, this "sort of

26 *Jennicam's Jenni on Letterman's Late Show*, emphasis added.

27 Goldman, "Jennicam."

28 Andrejevic, *Reality TV*.

29 "JenniCam - Frequently Asked Questions"

window into a virtual human zoo”³⁰ became a phenomenon that led to thousands of fans and imitators—all connected as well. Ringley claimed that at its peak the JenniCam received seven million hits per day rendering it “the third most-visited site on the Internet.”³¹

I think it’s human to not want to be alone. And with JenniCAM, they put it in the corner of their monitor and it’s like having someone in the next room.³²

Like any other zoo, the real life of the JenniCam exposed mundane life—in confinement. As such, the most common image of the JenniCam was Ringley’s “bespectacled face, blue in the glow of the computer screen, staring slightly off camera as she works on the computer.”³³ Less common but most sensational were the brief moments in which she was naked or having sex: “the first time one boyfriend and I did start kissing, the site went down pretty much immediately from too much load.”³⁴

Q: You’re naked sometimes, is this pornography?

A: Pornography is in the eye of the beholder. Myself, I do not think this constitutes pornography. Most often, pornography is defined as something explicit which is made with the clear intention of arousing the viewer. **Yes**, my site contains nudity from time to time. **Real life** contains nudity. Yes, it contains sexual material from time to time. **Real life** contains sexual material. However, this is not a site about nudity and sexual material. It is a site about **real life**.³⁵

OF A YOUNG WOMAN

Letterman

Can we see you naked on this, occasionally?

Ringley

If I happen to be naked, then yes.

Letterman

Whoa... [cheers and applause] what about... do you have a boyfriend?

Ringley

I sure do.

Letterman

30 Ringley, “What Is JenniCam?”

31 Ringley as cited in Maguire, “Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice.”

32 Allen, “‘Ed’ of the Internet: JenniCAM Going Strong after Three Years.”

33 Andrejevic, *Reality TV*.

34 Goldman, “Jennicam.”

35 “JenniCam - Frequently Asked Questions”, emphasis in the original.

Now... does he live there with you?

Ringley

For now, he does.

Letterman

Well, see, now that's not good. We don't want him in the place [laughter].

Ringley

I've had a lot of people complaining..

Letterman

No, get him out. We don't want him. What's this guy's name, Doug?³⁶

The real life of the webcam, what Ringley was bringing into being, was a very particular one: *the real life of a young woman*. While her gesture was mostly framed as exhibitionism³⁷—along with the old habit of pathologizing women—Ringley was direct in stating that *the cam has been there long enough that now I ignore it*. Indeed, the camera has been there long enough. Ringley did not make history by establishing a new *subject*, following Williams' definition, but a new *matter*: a young woman in a domestic space in charge of her representation in a domestic space—through the Internet.

I keep JenniCam alive **not** because I want to be watched, but because I simply don't mind being watched. It is more than a bit fascinating to me as an experiment.³⁸

Like other self-called *camgirls* of that period, Jennifer Ringley engaged explicitly “with the concept of being looked at.”³⁹ Or, as Mark Andrejevic puts it, performing the “work of being watched.”⁴⁰ As in 17th century Dutch paintings, for example, the JenniCam depicted Ringley in her own habitat for our delight whether or not she was complicit or unaware of being observed

Q: Why are you giving up your privacy like this?

A: Because I don't feel I'm giving up my privacy. Just because people can see me doesn't mean it affects me - I'm still alone in my room, no matter what. And as long as what goes on inside my head is still private, I have all the space I need.⁴¹

As Emma Maguire elaborates, “by inviting others to behold them,” *camgirls* explore “‘the gaze’ as a framework through which they experiment with gender and embodiment.”⁴² In the JenniCam, *being looked at* became not a source of discomfort to avoid but a space to explore and inhabit, in

36 *Jennicam's Jenni on Letterman's Late Show.*

37 Shalit, “Have You No Shame? Not On-Line”; Dazed, “In 1998 This Webcam Woman Was the Most Famous Person Online”; Grant, “She Was A Camera.”

38 Ringley, “What Is JenniCam?”

39 Maguire, “Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice.”

40 *Reality TV.*

41 “JenniCam - Frequently Asked Questions.”

42 Maguire, “Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice.”

which the performer and the audience could meet, building meaning and representation together through interactions⁴³ and the “affective dynamics of looking.”⁴⁴ Still, even if the presence of the audience was acknowledged on the JenniCam, the exposition of both was unbalanced. As other camgirls of the period, Ringley engaged in performative automedial and confessional practices, creating “an autobiographical performance in which the relationship between selfhood and objecthood is central.”⁴⁵ Without defining herself as an artist, Ringley’s work can be located “within a rich history of art practice in which women artists have used their own bodies as media.”⁴⁶ However, unlike other webcammers that pursued a more explicit performative or pornographic engagement with the webcam,⁴⁷ Ringley soon committed to what Senft calls “theatrical authenticity,”⁴⁸ a construct that would define the genre onwards—and its questioning. As Rita Felski asks:

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 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?⁴⁹

This authenticity also entailed a refusal to seek monetary gain out of the JenniCam. As we were told, the Internet was going to be free, in many different senses, and the means of production horizontally distributed. However, despite being the only one in charge of what would become a popular media show, Jennifer Ringley was rarely portrayed as a Web pioneer or media producer but as “a curiosity.”⁵⁰ Ringley herself contributed to this narrative by never stressing the intense labor the JenniCam required in terms of setup, maintenance, and care for the audience—on camera and through a separate IRC chat. Drawing upon Terri Senft,⁵¹ self-entrepreneurship and emotional labor shaped what *the real life of a young woman* meant.

43 Senft, *Camgirls*; White, *The Body and the Screen*.

44 Coleman and Ringrose, “Looking and Desiring Machines: A Feminist Deleuzian Mapping of Bodies and Affects.”

45 Maguire, “Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice.”

46 Maguire.

47 Snyder, “Webcam Women: Life on Your Screen.”

48 *Camgirls*.

49 Senft.

50 Andrejevic, “The Webcam Subculture and the Digital Enclosure.”

51 *Camgirls*.

AN UNDRAMATIZED PHOTOGRAPHIC DIARY

What you'll see is my life, exactly as it would be whether or not there were cameras watching ... As a chronicle, a long-term experiment, the concept becomes clearer.⁵²

As a photographic diary, the JenniCam did not capture the movement of a subject but its passing of time. Or, more precisely, the passing of times that happened once.

Because a webcam presents a series of still pictures rather than a moving image, the narrative it offers is necessarily ambiguous and incomplete. A webcam, particularly one with a slow refresh rate, engages the viewer in the process of constructing the story she is watching unfold.⁵³

Then, the passing of time does not only relate to the represented subject but to the audience. Drawing upon dispersed glimpses of the JenniCam, viewers used to fill the gaps with their own interpretations, sharing them on online forums, dedicate chatrooms, and fan sites. "The audience is content to suspend disbelief and accept slowly changing Internet still frames suggesting a place and on occasions somebody within that space."⁵⁴ Despite Ringley's insistence in its undramatized nature ("I'm not acting, I'm not making stuff up, I'm not hiding anything"),⁵⁵ the JenniCam had drama—and even what would be rightly called *cyberdrama*.⁵⁶ Mixing frames that displayed just furniture with Ringley's own image, this "sequence of incidentals" became de facto "one of the most influential and longest running pieces of improvised endurance theatre ever."⁵⁷

To Jennifer Ringley, however, the JenniCam was more than its transmissions. Ringley was clear on the hybrid nature of the compound: the JenniCam was not just the camera, nor Ringley herself but the combination of both in a particular time and place.

The "JenniCam" is a series of cameras located throughout my house that take images, both still and video, of my house all day long, every day. Since I live and work at home, I happen to be around a lot. When cosmic forces collide, and I situate myself in the scope of the camera lens, the resulting digital representation is known as JenniCam.⁵⁸

Accordingly, the real-life of this construct threw "into question many identity categories often

52 "Voyeur Web Site JenniCam to Go Dark."

53 Senft, *Camgirls*.

54 Smith, "Jennicam, or the Telematic Theatre of a Real Life."

55 Helms, "The Willingly Watched."

56 Lipowicz, "Jenni's in Love"; Copel, "All a Woman Can Bare."

57 Smith, "Jennicam, or the Telematic Theatre of a Real Life."

58 Ringley, "What Is JenniCam?"

thought to be stable.”⁵⁹ Private and public, of course, but also control and submission, collective and individual, human and machine. As a well-behaved cyborg, the JenniCam was “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity,”⁶⁰ qualities closely registered in its *photographic diary*, one frame at a time.

FOR PUBLIC VIEWING ESP. VIA INTERNET

SAN FRANCISCO, California (Reuters) -- One of the darlings of the Web and a pioneer of electronic exhibitionism -- Jenni of JenniCam fame -- is turning off the lights after seven years.⁶¹

Fans often speculated that Ringley would die in front of her camera. In 2003 however, Ringley closed “the most publicized, the most enduring, and arguably the most endearing”⁶² webcam in 2003, seven years after its first transmission. Unannounced yet foreseeable, the JenniCam had started to slow down when Ringley got a job that took her away from the camera nine hours per day.

Life started slowing down for me, too. You get into a routine. I’m not 21, I’m not flailing, I’m not making laughable mistakes every 5 minutes like you do when you’re younger, I guess. It’s a little more boring.⁶³

A decisive factor for its closure, though, was PayPal’s cancellation of her account “because the frontal nudity on her Web site violates the company’s acceptable use policy.”⁶⁴ Pioneering a business field that would be lucrative beyond measure but commercially unsustainable for her as a personal project, the JenniCam experienced the internal tensions of the network, where everyone was equal, but some were more equal than others.

A striking counterexample is *Justin.tv*. Justin.tv was the project of Justin Kan, who coined the term ‘lifecasting’ in 2007 by broadcasting with a camera attached to his hat. Although inspired by the JenniCam and cam culture,⁶⁵ Kan’s experiment differed from Ringley’s because the camera was pointed outwards, transmitting his gaze mostly over public spaces. It is an illuminating exercise to compare the media coverage on the JenniCam and Justin.tv. Although both were received as

59 Jimroglou, “A Camera with a View: JenniCAM, Visual Representation, and Cyborg Subjectivity.”

60 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*.

61 “Voyeur Web Site JenniCam to Go Dark.”

62 Smith, “Jennicam, or the Telematic Theatre of a Real Life.”

63 Goldman, “Jennicam.”

64 “Voyeur Web Site JenniCam to Go Dark.”

65 Taylor, *Watch Me Play*.

novelties, Kan was always interrogated on the technical aspects of his device and the business opportunities this could present, topics completely absent regarding the JenniCam. Justin.tv soon stopped streaming Kan's life and intended to provide a service that would allow people to broadcast their life. As one of the co-founders stated, "We were going to enable this new form of reality TV based on streaming people's lives 24/7, and that was going to be the business. We were going to be reality-TV moguls."⁶⁶ Justin.tv turned out to be a platform provider of live events, although they were mostly sports rebroadcasted by individual users. Tensions and copyright infringements with tv broadcasters led to lawsuits in which Justin.tv defend itself by stating its *content agnosticism* towards the material uploaded by its users. In the end, streaming video games was a more sustainable mixture between people's lives and sports events, and Justin.tv became the important game platform Twitch, currently a subsidiary of Amazon. Jennifer Ringley, meanwhile, continues being a freelance web developer in some American suburban area.⁶⁷

Rarely recognized as such, Ringley's social experiment expanded the Internet as not only media, a vehicle of transmission, but as a medium, a space to explore and inhabit. The automedial and confessional approaches that Ringley set up with the JenniCam changed what performance means on the Internet, establishing reality "as a valuable entertainment commodity."⁶⁸ With the JenniCam, Ringley also pioneered current entrepreneurial models of self-management and was the first cybercelebrity— anachronism intended.

IV. THE WEBCAM IS CURRENTLY OFFLINE

The closing of the JenniCam "marked the end of an era."⁶⁹ Among other factors, camgirls were no longer a novelty, webcams more accessible, and confessional culture spread to other media. Around ten years after Jennifer Ringley turned off her camera, however, webcamming reappeared. Not, this time, as solitary endeavors but massively, in the entanglement of digital platforms and the spread of the gig economy. Without intending to narrow the influence the JenniCam had, the conventions it established—its inclusions and exclusions—can be traced to contemporary webcams, such as the ones on sexcam platforms. If conventions are *established relationships*, they are habits, zones

66 Taylor.

67 Goldman, "Jennicam."

68 Maguire, "Camgirls: Surveillance and Feminine Embodiment in Lifecasting Practice." While contemporary examples of the value of theatrical authenticity abound, it is interesting to remember the Lonelygirl15 project from 2006. Lonelygirl15 seemed to be the private web journal from an American teenager and attained big popularity—until its staged quality was revealed. The comparison of the JenniCam with Lonelygirl15's videos suggests that the former was a strong inspiration for the representation of reality Lonelygirl15 aimed to achieve.

69 Senft, *Camgirls*.

that carry a particular intensity. The early conventions of the JenniCam had an enduring impact on who is observed on the webcam and how, where this subject is, what they are doing, what the spectacle is about, how affect is actualized.

Although it deviates from Ringley's concept, on popular sexcam platforms such as Chaturbate.com it is expected to have access to private spaces inhabited by barely dressed individuals—mostly women. There, nobody seems to be working, monetary compensations are voluntary and direct associations with sex work avoided. Streaming from what looks like domestic spaces (called 'rooms'), webcam performers state clear that, more than working, they are having fun. Even in professional webcam studios that manage several performers at the same time, called 'studio farms,' *rooms* are often disguised as bedrooms and professional traits masked. The real-life of the JenniCam, where people work but appear not to be and the gaze seems unlimited, is still real on current sexcams.

SECTION II
THE REPRODUCTIVE MACHINE

CHAPTER 4

THE BUILDING COMPLEX:

a play

CHARACTERS

SALES AGENT 1
SALES AGENT 2
PERFORMER 1
PERFORMER 2
PERFORMER 3
THE PLATFORM
MODERATOR 1
MODERATOR 2
AUDIENCE MEMBER 1
AUDIENCE MEMBER 2
DEVELOPER 1
DEVELOPER 2
BOT 1
BOT 2
SCAMMER
RESEARCHER 1
RESEARCHER 2
RESEARCHER 3

INSTRUCTIONS

All characters are users. For being a user, you only need to state that you are older than 18 years old. You can register or not. To register, you need to pick a username and password, declare your age and Chaturbate gender. You can be a woman, a man, a trans, a couple. Until 2017, ‘couples’ were only heterosexual ones, but now they are a person + n. You also have to agree with the Terms and Conditions¹ and Privacy and Cookies policies.²

1 “Terms & Conditions.”

2 “Privacy & Cookies Policy.”

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

The first term is that Chaturbate (‘the platform’) is only open “to consenting adults looking to express themselves in the form of streaming video and messaging.”³ and you have to be one of them. No minors or people pretending—in a “misguided attempt at role-playing”—to be one. You cannot use the platform for any form of harassment or offensive behavior. You cannot infringe copyright laws or privacy or other civil rights. You can have pets on camera, but not in a provocative way. You cannot use “overly large sex toys or animal-shaped sex toys” on camera, or use things that were not intended to be sex toys as such. You cannot perform while intoxicated, engage in incest, use excessive degrading language, reference menstruation or other bodily excretions, perform illegal or unsafe activities such as erotic asphyxiation, broadcast from a public place or a place that looks like a public one. You cannot be (or pretend to be) intoxicated on camera. Neither you can be sleeping nor acting as such. The platform will not claim ownership over your content (‘materials’). Still, by posting there you are granting the platform with a “non-exclusive, fully-paid and royalty-free, sub-licensable, and worldwide license to use, modify, delete from, add to, publicly perform, publicly display, reproduce, and distribute the material, including, without limitation, distributing all or part of the Materials, in any media formats and through any media channels.” You cannot use the site for marketing, the platform cannot guarantee your privacy. The platform does not recommend nor condone interactions outside of the platform, although it advises caution. You have to know that you could be exposed to nudity or sexual content on the platform. You choose to proceed because you enjoy such content, a manifestation of “your interest in sexual matters, which you believe is healthy and normal and which, in your experience, is generally shared by the average adult in your community.”

MONEY

As a registered user, you can purchase “a virtual, in-app currency” (‘tokens’).⁴ For receiving it, you have to verify your identity first. The platform has “the absolute right to manage, regulate, control, modify and/or eliminate such Virtual Money in [its] sole discretion.” Tokens that have been received (not purchased) will be forfeited in case of termination.

USERS

Everyone in the platform is a user, regardless of their activities there. As a registered one, you will have automatically your own channel (‘room’). There, you can display a public profile and/or broadcast yourself, following the regulations mentioned above. You can broadcast yourself without

3 “Terms & Conditions.”

4 “Terms & Conditions.”

being verified but you will not be able to receive donations ('tips'). You will be called an 'exhibitionist.' You can also participate in the chat of other users that are broadcasting ('performers') and you will be identified by your username. "Anything that you share through any of these means is deemed public information."⁵ In the chat you will receive a different color regarding how many tokens you have and how much you have spent lately.⁶ If you are a big spender, you can opt-out from this form of identification.

TIPS

You can tip independent broadcasters that are age-verified. "Tipping," however, "is done at your own option and risk,"⁷ not required for using the service. Broadcasters cannot ask for tips or to promise a specific act in exchange. You can only use tokens as tips. A token is "a voluntary gratuity."

RESPONSIBILITY AND WARRANTIES

The platform is not responsible for "any incidental, consequential, special, punitive, exemplary, direct or indirect damages of any kind whatsoever." The service is distributed "on 'as is' and 'as available' basis."

PRIVACY

The platform may collect and process the following information about you:⁸

- * Information you provide
- * Your IP address
- * Information about accounts you've visited, products and services you've clicked on or shown an interest
- * Information provided by other companies who have obtained your permission through their own privacy policies to share information about you
- * Information about your interaction with the Site including any advertisements
- * Information collected using cookies stored on your device about your use of the Site and/or selected third party websites.
- * Information collected or remember using technologies similar to

5 "Privacy & Cookies Policy."

6 "Orange names are Broadcasters; Red names are Moderators; Light Blue names own or have purchased tokens; Dark Blue names have tipped at least 50 tokens in the past 2 weeks; Light Purple names have tipped at least 250 tokens in the past 2 weeks; Dark Purple names have tipped at least 1000 tokens in the past 2 weeks; Green names are fan club members; Grey names have no tokens." "Why Are Some Username Colors Different?"

7 "Terms & Conditions."

8 "Privacy & Cookies Policy."

cookies, such as device identifiers on your mobile device.

- * Technical information from your device relating to the service you receive
- * Information relating to the location of your device.

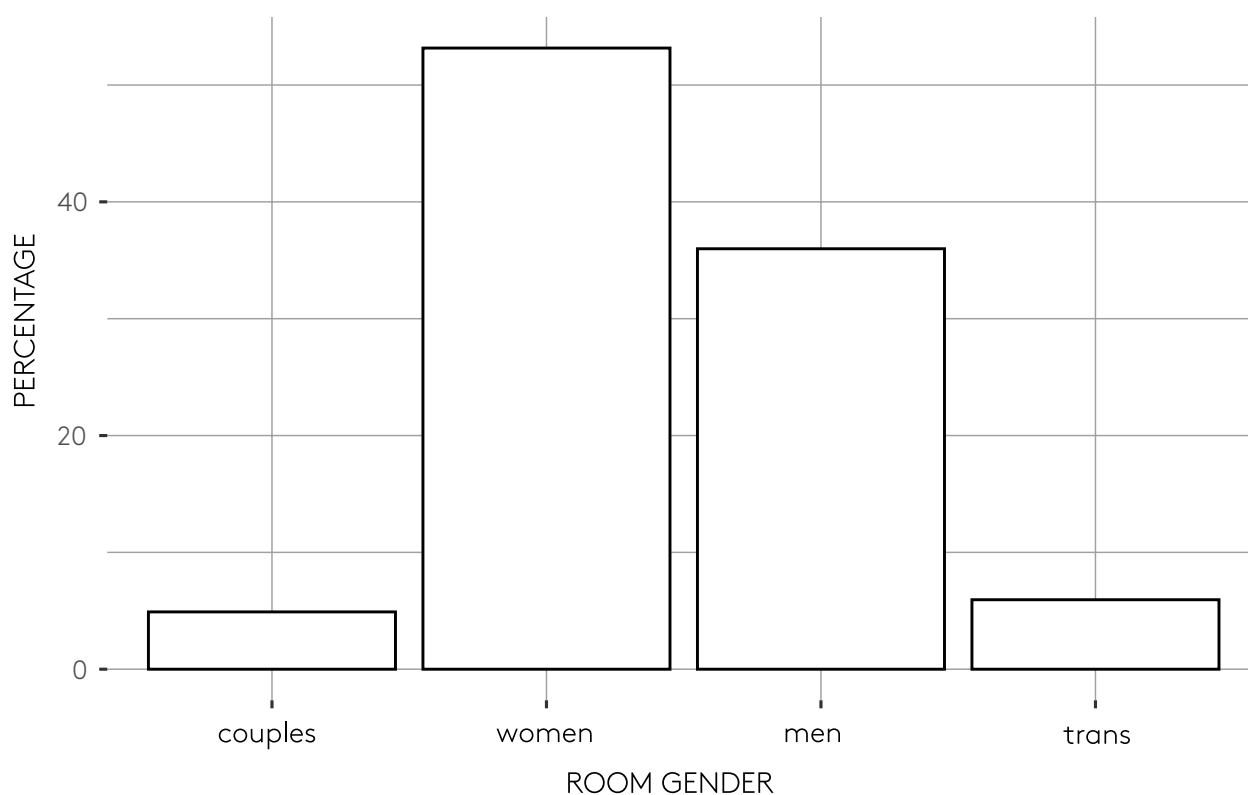
By accessing the Site, you agree that the platform may collect, hold, use or otherwise process your information (including personal information) to provide you with those products and services you request or access, and developing its business.

Your username will be associated with all activities you undertake on the Site including, without limitation, messages sent, content shared, and streamed content. Your gender information will be used to categorize your account and the content that you share so it is easier for site users to find. Your IP addresses, device data, and other use information is used by us in order to optimize our site for use. Your usage history may also be used to help our internal algorithm to recommend other Site users to you. Your “pay to” information, if provided to us, will be shared with third parties (such as, by way of example only, our bank) only as necessary to process payments to you using the “pay to” information you have provided to us. Your government identification, if provided to us, will be shared as required to comply with applicable law and as may be requested by you in writing. Notwithstanding the forgoing, we reserve the right to share any and all account information with law enforcement or agencies authorized by applicable governmental authorities either in response to their written request or should we believe, in our sole discretion, that you or your account may be involved with illegal activity, or if we determine in our sole discretion that such disclosure is necessary to protect the rights or property of Chaturbate, our users, or third parties.⁹

9 “Privacy & Cookies Policy.”

CHORUS

PERCENTAGE OF ROOMS PER GENDER



The data used in the graphics of this section comes from the information Chaturbate provides about each performer (username, declared age and gender, location, transmission time, hashtags, and brief description) in its landing and subsequent pages (not individual profiles). Only the transmission time is not controlled by the performer. Although this information is public, it is not presented in an organized way. It was collected hourly for two weeks in April 2017. I received the help of Gabriel Vigliensoni for data mining and visualizations.

ACT 1. A WORLD WITHOUT SHADOWS

Combined together, the individual rooms of Chaturbate create the building complex. Not only an aggregation of rooms but its regulations, infrastructure, discourses, allow and prohibit activities, rent already due, desired and undesirable neighbors. The building complex corresponds here to the platform—finally released from that deceptive flatness. As an experiment on social housing, the building complex shows a formation based on the social yet preceding and shaping it—like a feedback loop of only one turn. Unlike social housing, the tenure is unstable, and the structure flexible. So flexible that if we get distracted (or not distracted enough), the ceiling will not protect us from the rain.

Even though the building complex can accommodate an undefined yet always growing number of users, it is not precisely a dwelling structure. Inhabiting this building does not only mean having an URL. To exist there is to be active—or to be replaced, like in a musical chairs game.¹ In this building complex, you are allowed to stay, but you cannot turn the lights off, like those advertisements that do not count as heard if you mute the sound. As Netflix uncannily says, “sleep is my greatest enemy.”² With a constant influx of young and naked bodies that smile to the camera from rooms without windows, the building complex is “[a]n illuminated 24/7 world without shadows”³ that never stops, never sleeps, never disconnects.

SALES AGENT 1

Exhausted? We totally get it, work takes a lot out of you. But why not still earn money when you’re getting ready in the morning, cooking, commuting to work, unwinding after a long day or getting ready for bed?⁴

PERFORMER 1

Time. I feel like I am working like ten hours a day (a lot of it behind the scenes stuff), and yet, there never seems to be enough time to get done everything I wish. If I could function without sleep, or if each day could have an additional eight hours, I would be a lot further along!⁵

1 Recent discussions on the burnouts of various YouTube stars are a perfect example of this dynamic.

2 Netflix US, “Sleep Is My Greatest Enemy.” This was brought to my attention through the work of Elena Pilipets.

3 Crary, *24/7*, 9.

4 Tristan, “Exhausted? We Totally Get It, Work Takes a Lot out of You.”

5 As told by paige_orion in “What Is One Thing Holding You Back from Being Successful?”

PERFORMER 2

Guilty? I only feel guilty when I'm not working!

PERFORMER 3

LOL OMG totally: "I could be making money right now dammit why am I on my couch"⁶

SALES AGENT 2

You are your own boss so you can also choose when you want to work, and for how long. Of course, the more you work, the more money you will make!⁷

Not sleeping is not only a self-imposed measure against disappearance, as in Freddy Krueger's vicinity. Amorphous and slippery as a commodity, sleep presents "[t]he stunning, inconceivable reality [...] that nothing of value can be extracted from it."⁸ Necessary for social reproduction, yet a threshold for the market, sleeping is actively sanctioned in the building complex:

THE PLATFORM

Sleeping on camera (whether real or acting/pretending) is not permitted.⁹

THE MODERATOR

If you have a webcam on and aren't interacting with viewers [...] you have no reason to have the webcam on. Turn it off or stay awake. There's never an excuse to be asleep on cam. It's incredibly unprofessional.¹⁰

"Capitalism cannot afford to let people rest, and it cannot afford not to."¹¹ When it is not possible to sleep, and not possible to not do it, the building complex's inhabitants sometimes turn into a sleep-mode: a "state of low-power readiness."¹² Sleep-mode is the mode of performers in rooms with nobody watching, staring at their own delayed image until someone shows up.¹³ For more popular performers, it is also the mode of checking social media profiles and answering fan's messages with emoticons in a sleep-mode engagement. Sleep-mode "supersedes an off/on logic, so

6 "Do You Ever Feel Wrong/Guilty of Being a Cam Model."

7 "Porn Companies and Cam Sites."

8 Crary, 24/7, 10.

9 "Terms & Conditions."

10 "R/Twitch - Rule for Not Being Allowed to Nap on Cam?"

11 "Capitalism cannot afford to let people rest, and it cannot afford not to." Agger, "Time Robbers, Time Rebels: Limits to Fast Capital."

12 Crary, 24/7, 13.

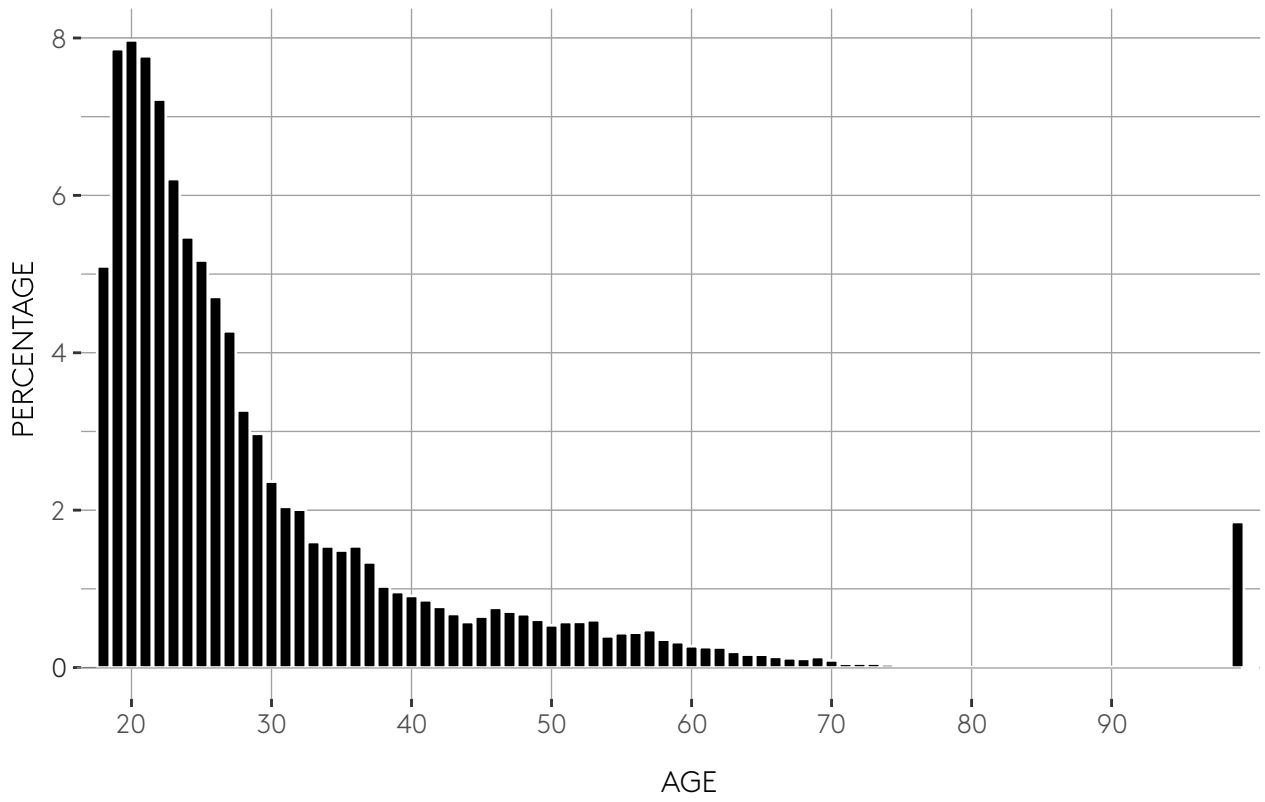
13 While I am writing, there are 500 rooms with nobody watching them.

that nothing is ever fundamentally 'off' and there is never an actual state of rest."¹⁴ Sleeping is not being dead, but not transmitting is not existing either.

14 Crary, *24/7*, 13.

CHORUS

PERCENTAGE OF PERFORMERS BY AGE



ACT 2. IT IS A QUESTION OF TIME

scene 1: more real than real, not quite so

As established by the JenniCam, if there is a non-negotiable requisite of sexcams, this is simultaneity: the assumption that audiences and performers are synchronous, living in the same time at the same time. Without the possibility of skipping the dialogue and going straight to the action, here is a “living time,”¹ “*le temps qui s’écoule*.”² Not any time, though: *real-time*. Real-time “is the time of the now, of the ‘taking place’ of events” where there is a promise of “no delay, no distance, no deferral.”³ Cognitively impossible,⁴ real-time is a paradox: a compensatory term that denies any mediation⁵ yet relies on technological intensification. More real than real, but not quite so.

The reality of real-time, however, is not meant to be literal. Real-time, the time of the Internet, is on the sexcams a consented fiction between audience and performers. Performers know well about this delayed time, a requirement for the processes that happen in between the capture and the reception.⁶ In fact, in their preview window, broadcasts are artificially delayed giving performers an insight into the actual conditions of transmissions. For the audience is no mystery either, since they quickly realize the distance between the joke and the smile, the sound of coins and the impact on the bodies.

This delayed time, this difference between the present of the performer and the present of the audience is not just a matter of seconds but of hours. Not just because. Performers from different countries and time zones accommodate their schedule to match the times with the largest audiences from the US and Western Europe. Transmissions are distributed asymmetrically across time zones, reproducing other flow inequalities.

PERFORMER 1

From my experience most of the ...tippers are from US and Western Europe. You have to check the difference between your country hour and the hours from US (west and east coast) and WE (Germany/France, etc.), how many hours are behind you and it also depends when is the highest traffic. For ex-

1 Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, 71.

2 Bergson, *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, 136.

3 Doane, “Real-Time: Instantaneity and the Photographic Imaginary.” Mary Doane also speculates that “the concept of the real, and hence of real time, only emerges with capitalism’s historical insistence upon an intensified mediation.”

4 The neurological impossibility of real-time refers to the imperceptible yet existent gap between phenomena and perception. Libet, *Mind Time*.

5 Doane, “Real-Time: Instantaneity and the Photographic Imaginary.”

6 Geert Lovink, personal conversation with author, November 2018.

ample, I'm from Eastern Europe and I saw that the highest traffic is between 4 am -12 pm my local hour, where in the US is 18 pm/21pm and WE is 2am, so between my local hour and US is 7h/10 h difference behind and between my local hour and WE is 2 h difference behind. Is just an example.⁷

PERFORMER 2

I used to work graveyard shift. 12am-6am pacific. I liked it because I was always in the top row. However, my sanity was leaving me. Waking up when it's dark, never seeing the sun, couldn't run errands, it was awful.

It's really hard to live outside my time zone. I need to be awake during normal business hours, because otherwise I can't get anything offline done. I can't stay up all night. I compromise. I sleep 4am-noon. But I'm trying to cut even that back, cause I always feel like too much of the day is already gone by the time I'm ready to do anything. I need to start sleeping 3am-10:30 instead.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

Thanks for the perspective on a 24/7 revolving world⁸

Moving between time zones is something that sometimes the audience does as well, running after—or before—popular or cherished performers. And even during the time zones of the best *whales*,⁹ there are nuances.

PERFORMER 1

The one consistent difference that I've seen in when I get online has less to do with money and earning potential but with what kinds of people are online, and what kinds of shows they're looking for. Any weekday before around 4PM is typically people at work, looking for quick, hella explicit shows. They won't want to talk much, and pretty much want you to be half-naked as soon as you get online. They also tend to request clips more, it seems. They're also ruder, in my experience. I kind of hate day shifts.

After 5PM on weeknights you get the guys who have come home from work (or college), and want to hang out, relax, talk, have fun, be entertained--almost like watching TV. There's a lot more interaction with this group and I feel like they're usually nicer. Once it gets past 11 or so, though, it gets to shift back towards day shift--these people just want to watch and get off quick. Maybe with a bit more interaction than day shift, but less than the earlier evening.

Saturdays and Sundays are a crapshoot. You get your nice, "just got off work" guys. You get trolls who are pissed they're not going out that night. You get people who never have time to watch cams any other time and may seem a bit unaware of how things work. And you might also get people who

7 HavanaHoneyy, "MFC Traffic and Time Zones?"

8 From a conversation on a performer's forum. "Time Zones."

9 Big spenders.

were just paid--so whale tippers may or may not come. Honestly, hard to know, and hard to expect.

Basically, in my experience, earlier = more explicit. Later = less explicit. Super late = more explicit.¹⁰

scene 2. a loaded time

The perception of immediacy on the webcam is a changing construct. If the *Jennicam* displayed a new frame every fifteen minutes, current technologies allow and promote different vision habits, with ranges between 24 and 60 frames per second.¹¹ As in other moving images' techniques, the number of frames per second (FPS) are responsible for the perception of movement, vitality, animation. And of immediacy and simultaneity. Still, the amount of FPS that each room broadcasts depend on a combination of factors: the characteristics of the camera, the computer, the bandwidth of the Internet connection, the lighting.

PERFORMER 1

If you have a lot of dark colors on cam it will think you're camming in the shadows. I've never been able to get my fps higher than 25 when I wear black on cam. When I do, I have to use an extra light source to get it bright enough for 25. With my normal lighting that gives me 31 fps, dark clothing being worn drops it to 16.

PERFORMER 2

Tonight's show went better, I placed a laptop fan below my laptop and it seemed to help.

Differences in infrastructure produce lo-fi and high-fi transmissions—and de facto lo-fi and high-fi performers.¹² All broadcasts are equal, but some of them are more equal than others. This is not entirely related to the individual economic affordances of the performers¹³ but to the differences in bandwidth among countries, variations that often correspond with further economic disparities.¹⁴ In this way, transmissions are not only distributed asymmetrically in time but in intensity as well.

scene 3. slow time

An emphasis on acceleration and the scarcity of attention probably suggests high speed and fastness

10 spiralingnymphette, "MFC Traffic and Time Zones?"

11 While 24 FPS are still the standard for cinema, television usually uses 30 FPS and videogames 60 FPS.

12 High definition broadcasts are indicated by an icon and 'HD' is also a searchable tag.

13 An important factor in the decision of joining a webcam studio.

14 "Countries Compared by Media > Internet > International Internet Bandwidth > Mbps > Per Capita. International Statistics at NationMaster.Com."

of consumption. This is not only the case. As in other media platforms, several speeds coexist like fluids of different densities that do not mix. On sexcam platforms, it is possible to open and close multiple browser windows/tabs with different performers or to switch quickly across rooms using the keyboard. At the same time (if the expression fits), the performers' popularity and monetary success depend on their ability to sustain an extended performance with a *good enough* audience (as expressed in its volume and willingness to pay). Some resourceful performers rely on their conversational abilities (and teasing), technical skills (and teasing), or various talents (and teasing). Others, particularly popular non-English speakers, engage mainly in teasing—of the slow kind. Teasing is here an invitation not-yet fulfilled, a provocation to something that nobody truly knows but still in motion, a slow quest. Indeed, some popular performers engage in what can be named 'slow porn:' a contemplative tension, almost entirely diluted into the lifestream.

Slow porn is often a very slow striptease. A process of undressing that will lead to a restricted (upon payment) show. The strip of clothes, however, can never fully arrive. *The bride remaining dressed by her bachelors, even.*

PERFORMER 1

I personally start off wearing a somewhat see-through shirt without a bra, or just a bra. I start by majorly teasing. Sometimes I'll have a sucker and use that to tease too. But in my experience, when you majorly tease without completely showing yourself naked, you get tipped for flashes and stuff a lot more often. Boys love to be teased. It makes them spend tokens to see more of you too. I personally only masturbate in shows...but everyone has their own way of doing stuff. Play around and figure out what works for you! But teasing as much as possible without showing everything off will prompt them to tip you to see more.

THE AUDIENCE MEMBER

I like non-nude models, they tease better and chat more. That's just what I think. It's not all about getting nude to me, tease sometimes is more sexy :) I don't know, maybe it's a little weird. I think it's hot having something left for imagination, like wondering how her boobies look like or something. Haha (imagination) :) sorry it's weird I know. Am I alone on this? feeling that way :(

PERFORMER 2

Non-nude models use a vlogger style. They talk, tease, sing, laugh... It's not easy to make money like this, but it should be more than awesome in the long term. I'm more into this.

It would be misleading to reduce slow porn to a question of dressed/undressed, explicit/non-ex-

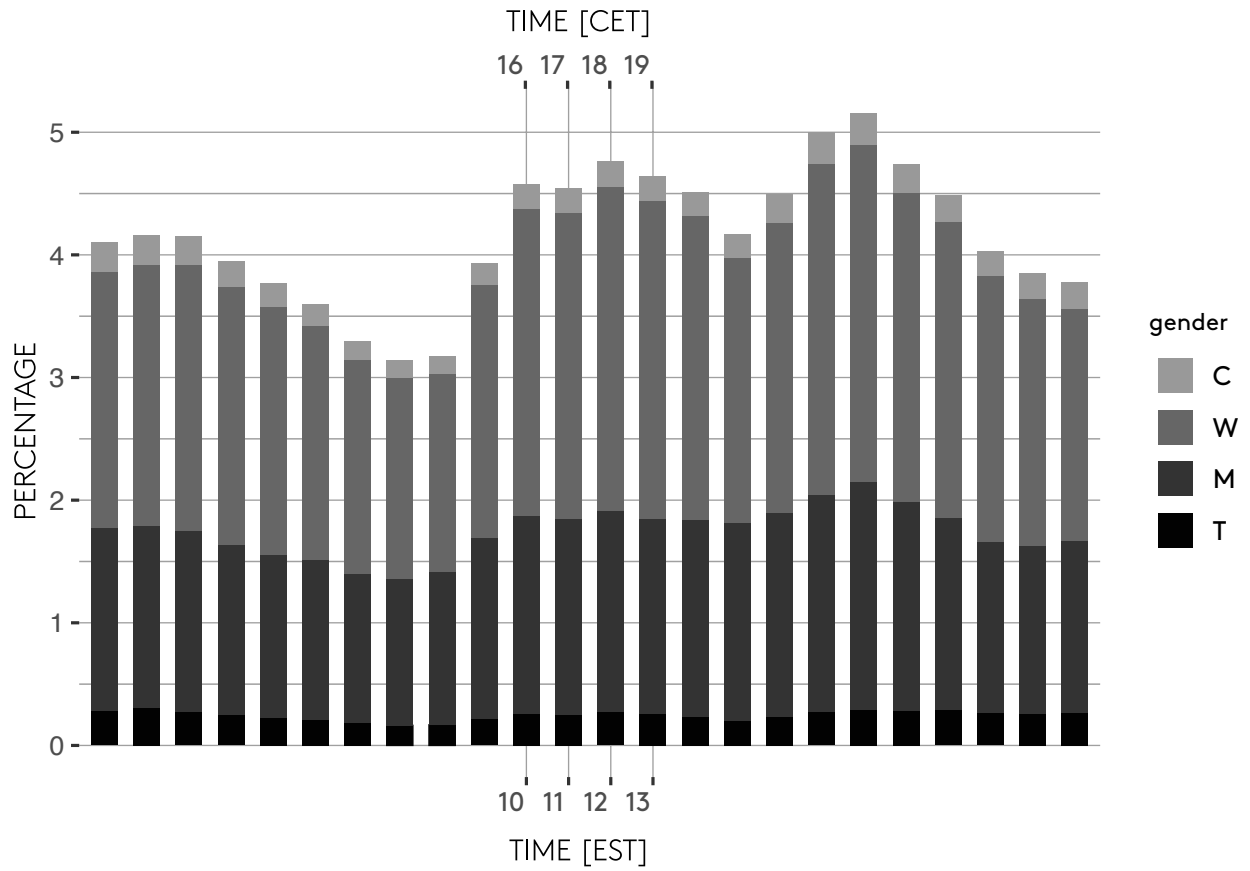
plicit. Slow porn reveals the rhythm of contemplation, of that fascinated surveillance that precedes even the JenniCam, only visible when the action eases. Slow porn alludes to the *virtual zoo* quality of the webcam that Jennifer Ringley recognized, when it is possible to access remote realities without hiding, a prolonged glimpse of someone else's life. Although the webcam has enabled another type of live feed, as in the ones that broadcast animal life in the wild,¹⁵ the figure of the zoo is still relevant here. Despite the purpose of the zoo as place to see and meet animals, John Berger develops, the zoo "is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters."¹⁶ The contemplation of young humans in their rooms, barely dressed and kindly answering questions from strangers is an impossible encounter, somehow happening in slow motion.

15 The live feed of animals has its own constructions, as seen in the broadcast of animals at risk of extinction. For more on the subject, see Lafontaine, "Streaming Precarity."

16 Berger, *Why Look at Animals?*, 30.

CHORUS

PERCENTAGE OF PERFORMERS BY GENDER AND HOUR



ACT 3: SOMEONE IS IN THE KITCHEN WITH A DILDO¹

Une chambre, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a un lit; une salle à manger, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a une table et des chaises, et souvent un buffet; un salon, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a des fauteuils et un divan; une cuisine, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a une cuisinière et une arrivée d'eau; une salle de bains, c'est une pièce dans laquelle il y a une arrivée d'eau au-dessus d'une baignoire; quand il y a seulement une douche, on l'appelle salle d'eau; quand il y a seulement un lavabo, on l'appelle cabinet de toilette[.]

Georges Perec, Espèces d'espaces

The room is the unit, not the performer. On Chaturbate, individual channels receive that name, depicting or not what could look like a recognizable room. There are spaces where someone could sleep, kitchens, living rooms, places with a chair and a keyboard, few outdoor ones, the back of a car, a bathroom. Most of the time, a room shows a bedroom with a disarranged bed occupying most of the frame. Even when performers are presumably transmitting from a sexcam studio—with several performers broadcasting from the same apartment or building—settings are often presented as someone's rooms. Sometimes the decoration makes the room unnameable, or walls are used as chromakeys that display graphics or animated gifs. Sometimes it is neutral—in an IKEA sense.

Although quoting domestic references, Chaturbate's domesticity differs from the one that floats everywhere on the Internet. No cupcakes, no Mason jars, no vintage furniture, no likes, no hashtags, no inspiration boards. A similar principle of commodification is present, though. Like any room in a touristic destination that can be monetized, a bedroom with its young inhabitant also has commodity potential: "commodity candidacy."² Trading privacy by some vague promise of retribution, the performers' spaces and time can be broadcast and experienced by others, presumably also from their domestic spaces. What will happen inside that shared domesticity is, however, an open question.³

1 I am copying here the title of a forum post. Starman, "Someone's in the Kitchen with Dildo."

2 Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*, 13.

3 Or, paraphrasing de Certeau: 'What do they make of what they "absorb," receive, and pay for? What do they do with it?' *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31. VALIE EXPORT asked a similar question in *Facing a Family*, a TV-Action work from 1971. EXPORT broadcasted, live on Austrian television, a family watching TV, possibly to other families watching television as well. While the family is the object of the viewer, the viewer seems to be the object of the family's gaze. Domesticity becomes a spectacle in the domestic space: A home is a home is a home.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

just a peaceful room

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

that's the goal. good feelings and feeling good for all

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

Good feelings. Feeling good!

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

I enjoy watching her it makes me forget all my worries. my pain

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

she has a positive effect on the world.⁴

PERFORMER 1

You can have a lot of fun with it! Everyone is different. I decorate my background to match my outfit. If I'm going for something really cute, I will add a lot of pink, heart pillows etc. Definitely use it as an extension of yourself.⁵

Because sexcam performers receive money in small quantities, keeping the audience connected is crucial.⁶ Still, running an exclusively sexual show over a long period is difficult, and performers stretch the shows until they dissolve into everyday life. Staged or not, domesticity is *always already there*.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

Why kitchens? More variety of positions available on chair/table/counter?
Better ergonomics? Is it less bother to clean the kitchen than the bedroom?
Better lighting? Is something finally replacing the foot fetish?

PERFORMER 1

I like throwing a cooking show from time to time, using new angles or lighting to play with. Just changing the room brings new elements to the show(s).

4 "Watch Kendalltyler Live on Chaturbate!"

5 "Staging How To?"

6 Chaturbate illustrates perfectly the idea of an economy based on consumers' attention, where scarcity lies not with the supply, but the demand.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

A lot of girls will bake cookies and offer them to the higher tipper. Their aprons are lovely, but some don't use them. I get very anxious watching them get their naked bodies near knives and hot stoves.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3

I seem to remember kitchens and other house locations as being quite frequent some years ago. (¬_¬;) Gradually, the age of what I would call office-bound camming dawned: the model in the office chair night after night come what may.⁷

The sexcam platform is the roommate version of the Playboy Mansion: a place with no distinction between work and leisure,⁸ yet always producing. Sometimes a kitchen is a scenario, and sometimes it is a place where people cook or prepare a smoothie. During the live performance, one that resists measurement yet simultaneously works toward monetization, domestic practices mix with more sexual ones—or maintenance with development. It is tempting to understand maintenance as what occasionally slips between sexual performances: ironing a shirt, eating pizza from its box, or doing the dishes: repetitive moments, barely spectacular even if performed in underwear.⁹ Those moments contrast with others in which performers compete for money and attention by throwing raffles (prizes are sexual acts), playing *Jenga* (viewers pay for taking a brick), or spinning with a luminescent hula-hoop. Creative actions are rapidly copied across webcams and turn into tropes, solidifying, and turning into institutions. Do they become maintenance as well?

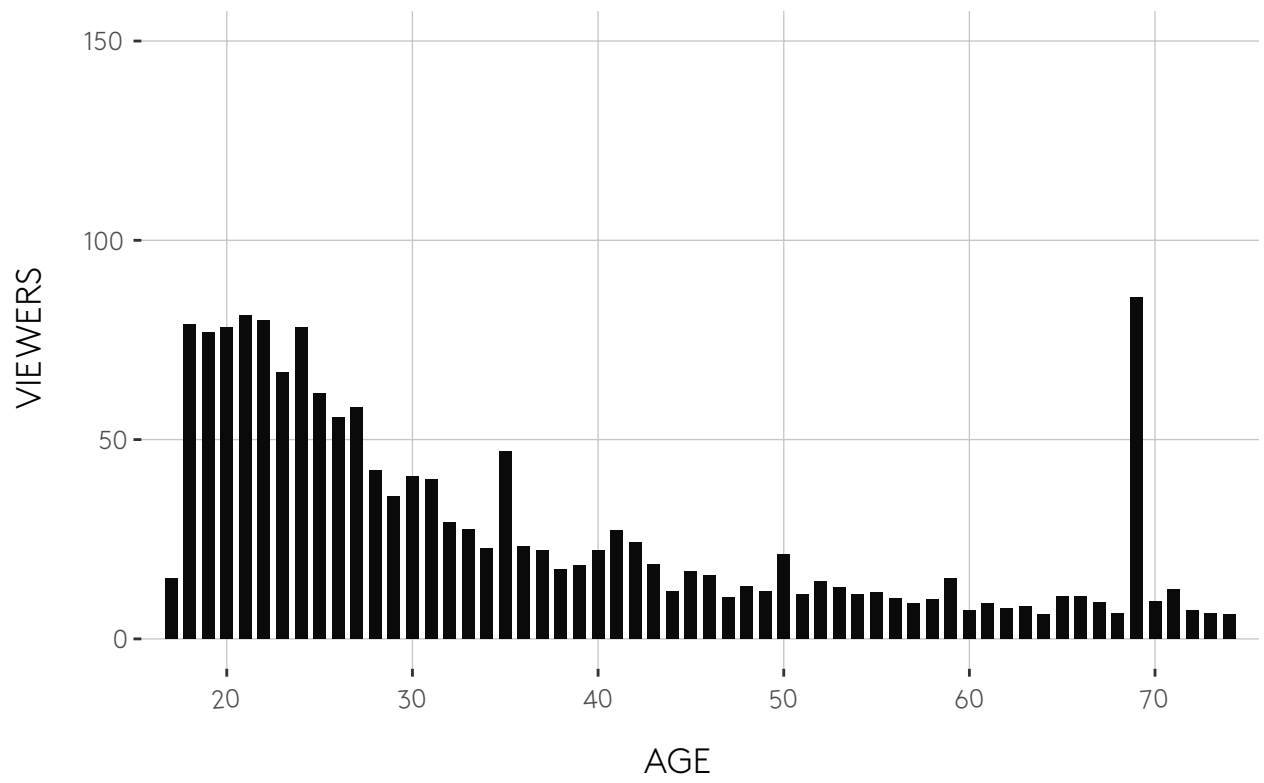
7 Starman, “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dildo.”

8 Preciado, *Pornotopía*.

9 This is something that has been changed: when I started *witnessing* Chaturbate, in 2014, one of the most striking features was the overlap between sexual and domestic activities. The audience was then considerably smaller, as the money that was spent. Since Chaturbate is a well-lubricated machine, fewer moments could be named domestic, and authenticity is not the most important feature.

CHORUS

PERCENTAGE OF VIEWERS (AVERAGE) PER PERFORMER'S AGE



ACT 4. TECHNOLOGIES OF SECURITY AND ACCELERATION

intro

Between the room and the building complex, there are machines of various sizes and shapes. Although different, they are united in their task of helping in the extraction of value from the room. Through modulation and homogenization, these machines secure circulation and provide the conditions for its acceleration. They are, properly, apparatuses of security.¹ These machines lie in the tension of generating value by accelerating exchanges while trying to preserve the attributes that give them value in the first place—denying the transformations brought by this acceleration.

There is *something compelling about real-life*. The togetherness that happens in sexcam rooms is accelerated through technologies. These technologies allow the platform to increase the number of viewers and ease their exchanges. Circulation, following Sara Ahmed,² produces or actualizes affect, which will sustain the compound and make it *sticky*. This viscosity will attract and retain even more viewers and components, making it more compelling for different actors to invest in this circulation. The platform, for example, rather than trying to balance the uneven distribution of the audience, regularly introduces new technologies that speed up the circulation on popular rooms. The most popular rooms displayed on the first page will attract even more viewers, but most of the performers will hardly be noticed in further pages. This *accelerated togetherness*, however, requires new technologies of assistance.

scene 1: the simple, the compound and the spurious

The technologies of assistance that manage circulation on the sexcam platform are *technologies of security*. As Foucault developed,³ the aim of the apparatus of security is to make social phenomena predictable and measurable, constraining them to a “series of possible events” located between the optimal and the acceptable. To manage circulation, this apparatus disposes and try to homogenize the medium in which it will happen. An example of a milieu where relations are homogenized, predicted and accounted for having a stable circulation is, as Tiziana Terranova proposes, the Internet.⁴ The novel element that social media platforms add is the “direct integration of the social relation into a market-oriented economy,” making use of technologies of security again.

Several technologies in the social media platform—protocols, algorithms, data tracking—operate as apparatuses of security and are “located within a genealogy of biopolitical techniques of knowl-

1 Here, I am drawing freely upon Foucault’s concept of *technologies of security*. *Security, Territory, Population*.

2 *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

3 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.

4 Terranova, “Securing the Social: Foucault and Social Networks.”

edge.”⁵ With the ability to extract value not only from user exchanges but from their traces as data, these *techniques of knowledge* are at the core of the business model of social media platforms. This extraction, however, does not only happen through *the knowledge of the social* but through its modulation, which involves the simplification of the social to a limited set of behaviors. As such, social actions that are different in their nature—such as chatting, tipping, or following a performer—are flattened for acceleration and become similar actions, ontologically speaking.⁶

And here is where the paradox appears. The platform extracts value from the performers’ perceived authenticity and individuality. For avoiding entropy, however, the heterogeneity of these attributes has to be simplified and homogenized. It is not only an accelerated togetherness, then, but a homogenized one—or maybe that is always the case with acceleration. Various actors collaborate in sustaining this accelerated togetherness, making use of (or working as) technologies of security that simplify the social. These actors are humans and machines—with some entanglements in between.

scene 2: moderators

In their most common form, moderators (‘mods’) are fans of the performer. They have received permission to manage the chat, generally in recognition of their commitment to the performer.⁷ As in gaming platforms,⁸ being a mod is considered an honor and a duty: a promotion that reduces the distance with the performer and creates a special position among other fans. During the transmissions, moderators have direct communication with the performer and can mediate with the audience if problems arise.⁹ Although the role usually has no monetary retribution, some moderators obtain access to privileged content (private shows or videos, for example) or receive extra attention from the performers through social media or text messages.

MODERATOR 1

Over the time she had been on cam, I had got to know her very well. In fact, she had become my best friend. I’m quite a private person, so to find myself talking about personal things I’d never spoken of before was quite a shock to me. But there I was spilling details of my life that I wouldn’t have told anyone else about. She had also shared with me & that drew me to be more protective of her over the time she was on. Daily emails were something I

5 Rieder as cited in Terranova, 2015, p.122

6 Facebook’s Open Graph Protocol is a remarkable example of this logic, as Tiziana Terranova argues (2015). For more on the subject, see Haugen, “The Open Graph Protocol Design Decisions.”

7 Webcam studios present a different scenario. The moderator is there a paid position that often helps non-English spoken performers to communicate with their audiences.

8 Taylor, *Watch Me Play.*,

9 “What Is a Mod?”

looked forward to. Even if it was just to say hi.¹⁰

The mod's role is primarily to protect the chat from disruptive behavior, silence users and robots from spam, and encourage donations for the artist. Because a large part of the attraction on sexcams is "a positive chat environment"¹¹ where no one seems to be working, moderators keep artists from being distracted by administrative and unattractive tasks, like asking for money.

SALES AGENT 2

1. Moderators help make the chat room a friendlier place by silencing troublemakers and thanking viewers who tip the broadcaster.
2. Moderators usually announce the broadcaster's sexy goal of the day, urging the viewers to tip.
3. The presence of a moderator in a chat room gives viewers an incentive to behave well.
4. The moderators answer some questions asked by the viewers if the broadcaster gets those questions frequently and no longer wishes to answer them because they make the room topic change.
5. When the broadcaster doesn't wish to seem like a "token whore", he or she can let the moderator urge viewers to tip.¹²

Avoiding disruption, moderators help maintain "live streams as functioning social and communicative spaces"¹³ and, being de facto technologies of security, they participate in the acceleration of the system. As technologies of security, mods have to keep the circulation between the optimal and the acceptable.¹⁴ It is not only about control, then, but modulation.

MODERATOR 2

A good mod is an asset. A bad mod will kill your room so fast you'll wonder what's happened."¹⁵

A bad mod will silence anyone & everyone he/she doesn't like, with a chilling effect on comments and activity in the room, which most models definitely shouldn't want. Getting viewers to talk, crack jokes, and interact in chat is one of the most important goals a cam model has when he/she begins a camming session.¹⁶

Armed with emoticons, prewritten messages, and mute buttons, moderators exert and incarnate some of the technologies of security that the accelerated intimacy that the site exploits require. But they do not only execute robotic maintenance tasks: they can be, and often are, replaced by bots.

10 perseus1967cb, "The End of My Modding For Black Cherub."

11 "How Do I Fulfill My Duties as a Mod?"

12 "How to Be a Moderator on Chaturbate."

13 Taylor, *Watch Me Play*.

14 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.

15 perseus1967cb, "A Chaturbate Guide For New Models."

16 Butler, "Chaturbate Room Mods - Good or Bad for Models?"

scene 3: bots

In the context of the platform, apps and bots are open-source software instructions that extend the capabilities of the rooms, serving as tools for handling and attracting audiences. They are made or adapted by independent developers, generally fans of the performers or performers themselves. Apps and bots are written in the same language but receive either name according to their degree of complexity.¹⁷

DEVELOPER 1

I write apps and bots for Chaturbate, usually for free (I enjoy it). Most people are looking for generic room management bots, which is totally fine, but I'd love to come out with something new and innovative.¹⁸

PERFORMER 1

I think many cammers come on here to pay their bills. If they had an app called Pay My Bills they could put in the amount and what they will do if the first bill is paid, the second bill, and third bill etc. Just a suggestion, not expecting to win...¹⁹

Enacting the “programmability” of platforms,²⁰ apps do not modify platforms permanently but actualize some of their potential.²¹ Accordingly, bots on Chaturbate can enable contests, display messages and ask for money. They can also perform less visible duties like blocking the ability to chat for users without tokens or banning the use of specific words, such as the ones expressing demands, denoting spam or that can come across as inappropriate.

BOT 1

```
{
  name: 'badwords',
  label: 'Words or phrases you want to silence users for saying '
  defaultValue: 'bb,baby,babe,show boobs,show feet,:goat'
}
```

DEVELOPER 2

Type out the words you want to be replaced and separate them by commas. After the last word, put a colon, and then the word/phrase you'd like to

17 This particular nomenclature can be confusing for the reader. In this context, apps and bot differ only in their complexity (being apps more complex than bots), but it is easier to understand both as plugins.

18 codeanon, “Codeanon’s Apps.”

19 itswhentousmile, “Pay My Bills App.”

20 Mckelvey, “A Programmable Platform?”

21 Bratton, *The Stack*.

replace it. For example, the following line would replace the words “bitch”, “whore”, and “slut” with the phrase “lovely lady” in each message:

```
bitch, whore, slut: lovely lady22
```

Bots are sometimes visible as chat messages, in the chat window of the room where the audience can talk to the performer and among them. Unless someone types on behalf of the performer, their side will show mostly utilitarian messages: the rules of the room, the tip menu, the received donations—all produced by bots. Bots on Chaturbate facilitate the management of a broad audience by alleviating the performers of their most repetitive communications.

PERFORMER 3

I’m sorry but when rooms get busy it’s very difficult to thank everyone personally. I have missed several tippers due to very active chatting. I would rather have something acknowledge every tip then have someone feel unappreciated.²³

BOT 2

```
{
name: 'tipmsg',
defaultValue: '**** Thank you [tipper] for your tip!!! (: **** ',
label: "Tip thank you message, [tipper] = tipper's name"
}
```

Messages produced by humans and bots render in the chat in the same way. The distinction between them does not seem relevant. On the contrary: it is actively erased to speed up circulation.

Bots in Chaturbate, however, resist a regular classification. Although these bots are *bots in a chat*, they are not precisely chatbots or socialbots that intend to pass as autonomous entities (humans or not). If to exist, socialbots need *a face and a brain*, a profile and a socialbot software,²⁴ bots on Chaturbate do not need a different persona other than the performer. Following a proposed nomenclature,²⁵ Chaturbate bots would be *cyborgs*: a hybrid category describing “bot-assisted humans or human-assisted bots.” Still, these entities are better grasped by borrowing a taxonomy for the

22 codeanon, “Code Words.”

23 kmoore, “Auto Tip Thank You.”

24 Boshmaf et al., “The Socialbot Network.”

25 Chu et al., “Who Is Tweeting on Twitter.”

nineteenth-century automata.²⁶

In 1821, Robert Willis proposed three categories for describing automatons:

the simple, the compound, and the spurious—or, those depending on mechanism alone, those moved by machinery but also in communication with a human agent, and those controlled *solely* by a human agent “under the semblance only of mechanism.”²⁷

Following this, bots displaying notices would be simple ones. Bots posting messages *as* the performers would be compounds of machines and humans. There are also, however, some spurious bots. Indeed: some bots display messages prewritten by the performer *as if they were chatbots*. Designed “to be stealthy,”²⁸ they try not to pass as humans but as chatbots. They have bot names (*Zax*, *Liz*) and introduce themselves unapologetically as such: automated agents without responsibility for their words.

```

BOT 1
var otherSnarkText = [
'$, I think you need a girlfriend.',
'Dude, have you considered therapy?',
'Are you...talking to me?',
'$, I don\'t think I like you.',
'Go read a book, $.',
'Allow me to present "Robot Not Caring" \u2192 [ZAXBOT]',
'*sigh*',
'Don\'t you have anything better to do than talk to a robot on a lovely ' +
day() + ', dude?',
'C\'mon, my database only has so much snark to share...',
'$, maybe you need to get off the computer and rethink your life.',
'All I hear is a faint buzzing.',
'Dude, $, I will gnaw your face off.'
]29
```

These bots are described as tools for “models who aren’t naturally passive-aggressive but find it

26 I learned this reference through Mark Sussman’s work on object performance. Not only am I grateful for this (I am), but it made me think of the encounters that an interdisciplinary approach can produce among different bodies of knowledge. It is not only about the fortuitous encounter between the literature on bots and the automatons of the 19th century, but about the disposition to understand phenomena from a performative stance—or what I want to call ‘a performative imagination.’

27 Sussman, “Performing the Intelligent Machine.”

28 Boshmaf et al., “The Socialbot Network.”

29 A portion of the code of a bot acting as a chatbot called ‘Zaxbot’. The performer can change the replies that will appear if a user types some of the words pre-identified as expressing demands or aggressive behavior. The character ‘\$’ identifies the name of the user. (universitysmiles, “DemandLess (Jane).”)

appropriate in response to demanding users”³⁰ or as “a bitchy AI for models who don’t like being bitchy.”³¹ They facilitate performers to maintain that friendly environment where nobody is upset, and payment is not an obligation. Although pretending otherwise, these bots are not autonomous entities. Yet most of the performers, addressing thousands of viewers at the same time, are not independent either. By sending messages that could or could not have been written by the performer, bots are not only trying to deceive the audience but contribute to the formation of a *robo-sociality*:³² a sociality simple enough for acceleration that nonetheless keeps some of its affective qualities.

scene 4: apps

The most popular apps on Chaturbate allow the audience to trigger sex-toys’ vibrations remotely, through monetary donations (‘tips’).³³ These services are often advertised in terms of ‘give me pleasure with your tips!’ and performers that use those apps disclose the correlations between the amount of money received and the intensity, duration, and pattern of the vibrations.

PERFORMER 1 (AS SEX MACHINE 1)

15 to 99: I love it, thank you!!

100 to 499: You know how to make me happy! Thank you!!

500 to 999: Thank you so much for giving me this pleasure!!

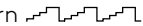
1000+: OMG!!! I love it!! THANK YOU SO MUCH!!!³⁴


PERFORMER 2 (AS SEX MACHINE 2)

Here are my levels:

Tip 90 tokens > Send 10 second wave pattern 

Tip 110 tokens > Send 12 second pulse pattern 

Tip 140 tokens > Send 15 second earthquake pattern 

Tip 180 tokens > Send 18 second fireworks pattern  ³⁵

In another wink to the automata and coin-operated machines, the audience expects to perceive their tips on the performer’s body. Their reactions are a source of public entertainment, in a sort of video game where the audience collaborates in the orgasm of the performer. As discussed elsewhere, the audience forms a tacit crowdfunding arrangement. Or more exactly, and as Eduardo

30 universitysmiles.

31 codeanon, “ZaxBot.”

32 Bakardjieva, “Rationalizing Sociality: An Unfinished Script for Socialbots.”

33 More precisely, these apps allow performers to connect specific teledildonics to their rooms, which will vibrate with the reception of tips. The app, without the sex-toy, is useless.

34 geni_XXX, “Lovense Lush.”

35 “Watch Hollyextra Live on Chaturbate!”

of performers that do not speak English, even if it remains the primary language of the platform. All of the above is linked to a new narrative of control on the platform, where the audience is being given enhanced powers, channeled by tips. Monetary donations, with their more evident significance and utility, augment and accelerate these changes. This acceleration, however, does not necessarily entail the speeding up of the performances. A more passive attitude of the performers, waiting to be affected, brings back some of the slowness of the JenniCam.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

This toy has destroyed chaturbate. I'm thinking about canceling my subscription because all the models use this dumb toy.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

Ok with you. Since models use this kind of toy, no more real shows. Models are waiting in front of cam without doing anything. Really annoying. Furthermore, most of them simulate pleasure. What a fake!³⁸

PERFORMER 1

do I need to use the [...] browser, the usb adapter AND my phone? is there a way to cut back on some of these steps? I still haven't even figured out giving up control of the toy yet...it's so confusing.³⁹

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

99% of the models using the toy are faking it because they are not using the app needed to actually make the toy work correctly. I refuse to tip models using this toy because there is NO SURE WAY TO KNOW if they are using the correct apps necessary to make the toy work properly or just faking a reaction to the tip sounds. Faking it is stealing.⁴⁰

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

Who really cares if they are faking it as long as the person who is tipping enjoys the reaction? it's their money to spend and if they have a problem with it, they don't have to spend it.⁴¹

Questions on performance and human agency, as Sussman describes in his work on automatons,⁴² modulate still the human relationship with machines. The simple, the compound, and the spurious—and the affective viscosity where these categories merge.

38 Besides the exaggeration—or not—of the performances of pleasure, the setup of these sex-toys is complex. The process involves a particular sex-toy, the app, a specific browser, a phone, and another app. geni_XXX, “Lovense Lush.”

39 “Lovense Interactive Sex Toys for Cam Models.”

40 geni_XXX, “Lovense Lush.”

41 geni_XXX.

42 Sussman, “Performing the Intelligent Machine.”

The automaton described by Sussman, *The Chess Player*,⁴³ was later known as *The Mechanical Turk*. Far from a coincidence, *The Mechanical Turk* was the reference chosen by Amazon for its platform, Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). MTurk offers “a crowdsourcing marketplace,” arguing that “there are still many things that human beings can do much more effectively than computers.”⁴⁴ The automaton reference, however, still haunts in the background. *Things that humans can do more effectively than computers*. As simulated computers, though? And for how long?⁴⁵ Moreover, the figure of the Mechanical Turk double emphasizes the otherness of those workers: as machines and racialized others.⁴⁶ This figure validates Atanasoski and Vora’s assertion that current technological projects are “in fact predetermined by techniques of differential exploitation and dispossession within capitalism.”⁴⁷ The bodies remixed on the sexcam platform question how human they were in the first place.

Setting “the stage for actions to unfold,”⁴⁸ the platform allows for the materialization of a new assembled body: an overlap of the *compound* automaton and the *spurious* one, a mix of humans and machinery—and its impersonation. Like the automata of the Industrial Revolution, this fiction does not surge in a void but in a techno-economic landscape where *it could exist*, where capital not only reproduces global processes in bodies but fabricates bodies that can affect and be affected by thousands. The automaton is not only a figure here. If a body is formed by relations of forces and velocities, as Tiziana Terranova and Luciana Parisi propose,⁴⁹ these apps facilitate to re-configure the bodies of the performers by embedding capital in their structure, taming and making them able to react to stimuli sent by thousands of unknown viewers. Likewise, these new speeds and rhythms of circulation modify the bodies of the audience and give them the power to affect the body of a stranger through money, bounded to this assemblage by the sticky qualities of the accelerated affect.

43 Sussman.

44 “Amazon Mechanical Turk.”

45 Although Amazon Mechanical Turk exceeds this research scope, I will draw some pleasure from recalling a scandal that involves MTurk and academia. The extended use of MTurk regarding academic studies and surveys is well-known. In 2018, however, a student from the University of Minnesota raised concerns about the quality of the results he was obtained by using the platform. It was soon evident that MTurk workers were using bots to perform their assigned tasks: people hired for performing robotic tasks using bots that could pass as humans. For more on the case, see Dreyfuss, “A Bot Panic Hits Amazon’s Mechanical Turk.”

46 From a 2010 article, *turkers* appeared to be overrepresented by Indian workers. Ross et al., “Who Are the Crowdworkers?”

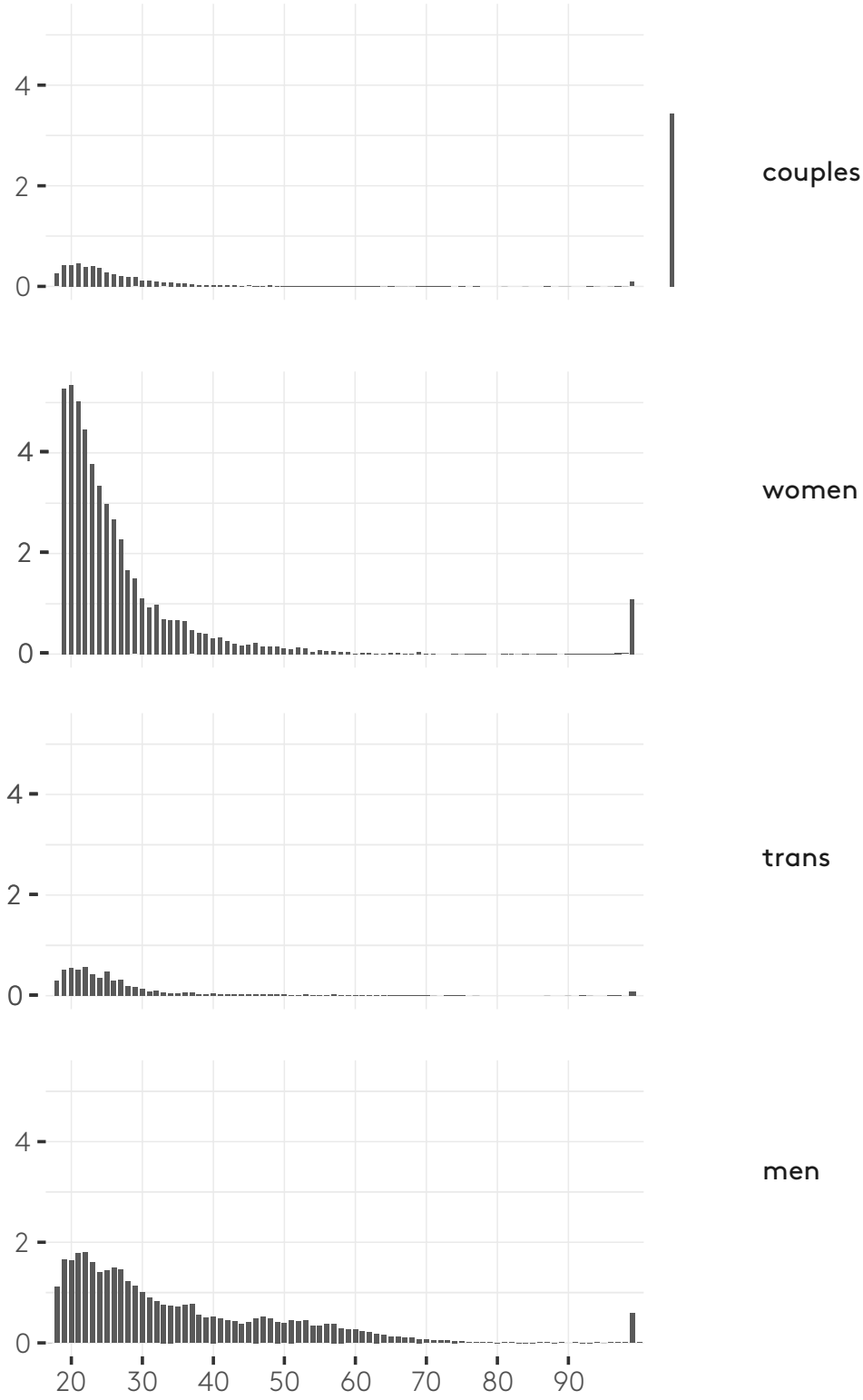
47 Atanasoski and Vora, *Surrogate Humanity*.

48 Bratton, *The Stack*.

49 Parisi and Terranova, “Heat-Death.”

CHORUS

PERCENTAGE OF PERFORMERS BY AGE AND GENDER



ACT 5. A TOKEN IS A TOKEN IS A TOKEN

scene 1.the many sides of a coin

As a social technology, money is one with many incarnations:¹ a unit of account and a store of value, a commodity, an abstract measure of labor-power (an abstraction of an abstraction, then), an extractive tool,² an equalizer that produces inequality. Although issued by state authorities, money is embedded in social interactions, an evasive relational entity. This is because, as Kevin Hart says, money is “an aspect of relations between persons and a thing detached from persons.”³ In this way, money is “both personal and impersonal, subjective and objective, analytical and synthetic.” Money, however, is never *just money*. The sociology of money has shown that even the most standard monetary unit is not as fungible as it seems, and that people treat differently money allocated for different purposes, or regarding how it was earned or by whom.⁴ Money is then a medium of the imagination.⁵ In the imagination that money bears—or where it is carried through—everything is quantifiable and money equalizes labor-power with things and events, connecting or disconnecting them.

The sextcam platform uses a made-up currency. Made-up currencies, William Davies has shown in his analysis of prisons’ parallel economies, overlap generic and specific value systems.⁶ While particular in their rules and nomenclatures, made-up currencies do not exist in a void: pre-existent systemic biases influence both the worth of these currencies and the relations they could establish with other actors. They are, however, invested with context-specific powers, affordances, and drives. If money is media, both in the sense of a channel and in the creation of a medium, the analysis of the made-up currency the platform uses will shed light on its environment—the platform.

In non-imaginative or purely misleading way, Chaturbate currency are called *tokens*. “A token is a stand-in for something else.”⁷ But what else, exactly? On Chaturbate, a token is at the same time a unity of its main currency (*tokens*) and its descriptor (a token, something issued by an authority and that can be exchanged later on). It is not only a technology for monetary transactions (or, consid-

1 Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money*.

2 Sassen, “When Money Becomes an Extraction Tool Rather than Exchange Medium.”

3 Hart, “Money in the Making of World Society.”

4 Money allocated for funding future studies, for example, is usually considered different from the money that buys groceries. There are things like *dirty money*, *blood money*, *easy money*, *hush money*. For more on the subject, see Bandelj, Wherry, and Zelizer, *Money Talks*.

5 Haiven, “Money as a Medium of the Imagination.”

6 One of the most common examples of prisons’ parallel economies is the use of cigarettes as currency. The importance (and cost) they have in the outside world gets amplified with scarcity and particular prison conditions. Davies, *Extreme Economies*.

7 “What Is a Cryptocurrency Token?”

ering any currency essentially as tokens, a token of a token)⁸ but one that presupposes and requires the existence of the platform as its medium, creating in this way its need. Tokens are symbols. As such, although exchanged as *things*, they leak out of their containers, exceeding them. Tokens have also a temporal dimension: they evidence a process already past. If, following Luciana Parisi, algorithms are performative instructions,⁹ tokens are the archival confirmation of previous ones—plus some futurity.

scene 2.the best things in life are free (but you can keep ‘em for the birds and bees)

Two common types of platforms overlap on Chaturbate: a user-generated content (UGC) platform¹⁰ and a hire on-demand one.¹¹ This overlap, however, does not happen without friction. UGC platforms usually provide content at no cost but profit from data, advertisement, traffic—elements that, while present, do not seem to be the bigger source of revenue for the sexcam platform. Hire on-demand platforms allow users to offer and employ services, taking a share of their transactions. Chaturbate keeps indeed a portion of the transactions, but services (or work) are never labelled as such, there are no clear tariffs nor contracts among the parties. In the clash between these two models, work remains a loud silence.

Despite its reliance on monetary transactions, Chaturbate declares being a “free platform,”¹² and no payments, no entrance fees, nor memberships are required to watch most of the shows. It is then the performers’ job (and a tricky one) to encourage *voluntary gratuities* (‘tips’) during their shows. The platform will keep half of them.

THE PLATFORM

Tipping is done at your own option and risk. Tipping is not required for use of the Service. Tipping may only be done using Virtual Money.¹³ Independent Broadcasters may not solicit tips through any means of payment other than Virtual Money. Tips are a voluntary gratuity and may not be given in exchange for specific services. Promising to give a tip in exchange for performance of any specific act is strictly prohibited. Such conduct will result in an

8 “Coins and currency [...] are useful tokens to record the underlying system of credit accounts and to implement the underlying process of clearing.” Martin, *Money*, 12.

9 Here I am extrapolating from work of Luciana Parisi on the performativity of algorithms. Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space*.

10 Such as YouTube or Twitch.

11 Such as Uber or TaskRabbit. As a reference, Uber declares taking 25% from the rides, but omits to include in that percentage other service fees that augment that number. TaskRabbit takes 15% from the workers and 7.5% from the person hiring them.

12 “Chaturbate Tokens: The Incentives of Tipping.”

13 Virtual Money = tokens.

immediate and lifetime ban from use of the Service.¹⁴

By labelling monetary exchanges as voluntary gratuities, Chaturbate eludes solicitation issues and other legalities. That is not, however, the only role of tokens. A repeated yet essential issue here is the understanding of the labor performed on the sexcam as reproductive labor, with its gender implications and (dis)associated waged status. The abstraction of labor from other life spheres, such as leisure—also a capitalist notion¹⁵—adds to this mix. In this way, and broadcasting from what looks like domestic environments, performers make clear that more than working, they are having fun.

PERFORMER 1

Hello guys! Nice to meet you! I'm a nice and friendly next-door girl. I cam from July 2016 and I'm online almost every day. This is not work for me, so please don't demand.

PERFORMER 2

I repeat myself but it's important for me to let you know how much I enjoy my time online with you!¹⁶

Responding to two contrasting narratives, Chaturbate advertises itself differently to (potential) performers than for the audience. In this way, the platform engages in what Silvio Lorusso calls “platform bifrontism.”¹⁷ While performers are attracted, mostly through third-party services, with entrepreneurial and self-management discourses (‘be your own boss,’ ‘make money from home,’ ‘learn business skills’), the audience receives the message that performers are not working.

SALES AGENT 1

Being a cam girl teaches you sooo much of what you need to know to run your own business. Why? Because you ARE running a business. You didn't think the **webcam modeling business** was just about dancing around your bedroom while waiting for tips to come in, did you?

To be a successful cam girl, you have to understand how to market yourself and your brand. You need to know how to deal with customers in a patient, friendly way. You have to manage sales and plan for future expansion. It's all contained under the great big umbrella of what it is to be a cam girl, and

14 “Terms & Conditions.”

15 Trenkle, “Value and Crisis: Basic Questions.” This aspect is discussed in the second chapter of this text.

16 @newchloe18, “Chloe Lewis on Twitter.”

17 “[W]hen a platform develops two distinct and even conflicting narratives, one directed at sellers and one at buyers.” Lorusso, “MoneyLab #7.”

this job teaches it all to you!¹⁸

Tokens facilitate these divergent constructions because of their fictional quality.¹⁹ With the help of tokens, the audience is *able to relax and have fun for a little while* because nobody seems to be working—a waged and non-fun activity—and performers earn money but cannot make demands about their work conditions because, after all, they are not working but “expressing themselves.”²⁰ Performers that ask for money are contemptuously called ‘token-whores’, and any direct association with sex work avoided. As in strip clubs,²¹ voluntary donations are not only a way to evade liabilities but tools that help to keep an associated fiction or discourse—if these two aspects can even be taken apart.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

If you ask what ‘token whore’ brings to mind, I’d say a model who constantly harps on tips far beyond just a reminder when things get slow. I expect to tip if I’m going to spend much time in a room, but given that I do, I’d like to be able to relax and have fun for a little while.

PERFORMER 1

I think the term ‘token whore’ is stupid. Acting offended and angry that *gasp* a cam girl is wanting tokens in return for goods and services! No one ever calls nurses, teachers, plumbers, hairdressers ‘money whores’ or ‘pay-check whores.’ We’re ALL whores for money. No one would do their job for free. Everyone does their job and puts in their time for the paycheck at the end of the week. We (camgirls) don’t deserve to be shit on for it though.

PERFORMER 2

Pretty much this. It seems to be used in a way to imply a camgirl is only there for money. This is because many members have a giant delusion in that they want the camgirls to all be there simply because they’re super horny, have loads of free time, don’t have any bills to pay and just want to hang out with a bunch of guys on the internet because they happen to be so cool!

PERFORMER 3

I agree with you, but to be fair to these “delusional” guys, that is a load-bearing part of the fantasy. Add to that the fact that tokens themselves are designed to help members forget that they are trading in actual currency. Having someone break that particular part and reminding you

18 Heidi, “Top 4 Reasons to Be a Cam Girl.”

19 Or, understanding money as inherently fictional, a fiction built on top of another.

20 “Terms & Conditions.”

21 Alemzadeh, “Baring Inequality.”

that they wouldn't be interacting with you unless they were being paid can be pretty jarring.

PERFORMER 4

I'm a bi-weekly bank transfer whore.
Token whore sounds way cooler.²²

Both the abstraction of labor and the disregard of reproductive labor, following Norbert Trenkle, are “fundamental structural principles of the bourgeois social order of the commodity form.”²³ Commodities, as Marx said, could look simple but have their own “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”²⁴ Tokens as commodities (or commodities of commodities), certainly have them.

scene 3. value

If performers have to enact that *theatrical authenticity* crystalized by the JenniCam, where nobody is working and money is not discussed, how do they get paid? There is not only one answer—and often, the answer is that they do not. Performers can keep some parts of their shows private (restricted upon payment) and offer what would be rightly called an open *teaser* for the general public.

PERFORMER 1

I consider myself a private based model. My public shows are aimed at chatting and teasing. I don't want people to get bored to death, but I don't want to show more at the same time. If someone wants to see me doing more sexy/naughty things, they can take me pvt or buy my pre-made videos.

My strategy allows me to make a living. I don't earn shitloads of money, but I try to maximize my profit as much as I can without overstepping my boundaries. I ain't gonna waste my time on people that don't like the way I work.

All people are different. And we all have different rules and limits. Public based models take more risks than me (more freeloaders, more haters, more people that recognize them) and I really respect them. At the end of the day, we do pretty much the same work.²⁵

Most of the performers on Chaturbate, however, do not make a distinction between public and restricted content, hoping to receive tokens as tips during their shows—as in *busking*. There are many different strategies to encourage tips, being the most common to set up monetary goals that are

22 “Token Whore.”

23 Trenkle, “Value and Crisis: Basic Questions.”

24 Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*.

25 “Private Shows or Public?”

matched with specific sexual acts. Performers throw contests through apps and bots, in a variety of tacit *crowdfucking* instances.²⁶

The audience buys and holds tokens, spend them, and start the cycle again. The incentives for doing so vary and are related to (one of) the many sides of the coin. Tokens not only sustain the platform (and some of the performers) but are for the audience a communication tool. Despite being the fiction of a fiction, tokens carry and trigger affect, enable communication, create a reputation, prompt smiles. Tokens allow the audience to be seen by the performer and the public, express and gain recognition, contribute to the room's ambiance, influence the show, and affect the performers' bodies. Tokens have sounds and colors and haptic qualities—imagined or not.²⁷ One of the many sides of tokens, then, is made out of affect.

Money as a source of social recognition is enacted literally on Chaturbate. Although everyone is a user on the platform, they are not all created equal, and different username colors indicate the number of tokens users have (or have not), how much they have spent recently. While these codes are visible to every participant in the room, they are more valuable for performers who can decide where directing their efforts. A typical scenario in popular rooms is having an audience composed of few big spenders ('whales'), people that contribute with fewer tokens, and many lurkers—either registered or anonymous ('greys').

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

Go in a cam girl's room: it could be 2000 users and chances are just 1 or 2 guys account for 80% + of the tips. They're whales. And sure sure, a cam girl can tell you every tip matters and ra ra ra but that's just nice, whereas whales are a necessity.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

Whales help feeding the energy of a model's room and keeping them sane rather than blankly staring at a monitor or feeling too awkward if no one else is talking. Sometimes, they help get a room going and get more people to tip. They are the biggest contributors to said model's income, when others rarely contribute, if at all. Eventually, they may get tired, stop tipping and leave. Am I one? I may be a whale to some. But I could also be plankton to others.

26 Using Eduardo Martins' term. Martins, "I'm the Operator with My Pocket Vibrator."

27 Tokens have further material representations: their reception is automatically acknowledged by a highlighted line in the chat, and the yellow line is accompanied by sounds: a 'ding' sound for small tips, a 'hit the jackpot' sound or a 'yee-haw' scream for larger ones. For more on the subject, see Martins.

PERFORMER 1

Both are really important. Of course, we will give more time and attention to whales individually, however the small/penny tippers are equally as important to a healthy room. Even if the 'plankton' tippers are not out in numbers any given night when whales are, it still shows a token (haha) of gratitude and helps with the feel of the room. Money is money and thankfulness is thankfulness no matter how big or small.²⁸

SCAMMER

Enjoy tipping big and getting the attention of the models! :)²⁹

Whales' behavior is a subject of speculation and awe. Not only because of the earnings a performer could receive but because of the supposed impact that their presence could have in the position of the room respect others.³⁰

SALES' REPRESENTATIVE 1

Remember, whales are out looking for ego food, so they'll be most attracted to you if winning your friendship makes them feel accomplished. That means you want to put off "classy" vibes: Make yourself look like a refined, ladylike woman. Now, that doesn't mean covering yourself from head to toe, wearing glasses, and speaking in a boring tone like a librarian. Talk about politics, current events, maybe even a little philosophy; anything to make it seem like you keep up with the world and are well-informed (but believe me, you don't have to know too much about any of that — a shallow understanding will more than do, because that's enough to get the convo started and signal that you're a "different" type of gal).

You're the kind of girl who's educated and confident, and because of that, you can afford to be discriminating. You don't accept just anyone into your inner circle, so the people you do accept (especially the men!) are the best of the best. THAT, honey, is whale bait.³¹

Big tips are celebrated by the performer, who expresses a mix of gratitude and long-lasting surprise as if they were receiving again another unexpected present. Some performers include the name of the most notorious *tipppers* in their profiles, calling them 'my kings,' 'my lords,' 'my knights,' and they will be kindly recognized next time.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

As I sit and tip while watching cams I sometimes wonder why am tipping. Is

28 zooper, "On Whales; Their Importance and Associated Matters."

29 Not only a shared fiction, tokens can be also a non-consensual one. Several websites advertise hacks for creating fake tokens, that will disappear when the performer try to cash them. "Chaturbate Tokens Currency Hack."

30 The relative position of rooms is less mysterious in Chaturbate than in other platforms, which sometimes have intricated ranking systems. On Chaturbate, the most important factor is the number of viewers. Newness gives rooms a short boost, and apparently, the presence of *whales* would have an influence as well.

31 Heidi, "Webcam Models Need Whales."

something wrong with me? Is in my psyche that I have to be the big spender?³²

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

I was a gray user for months and just started paying for shows last week. I never used to pay because the concept doesn't make sense to me. Why should I pay for girls to have orgasms? No one pays me for an orgasm!³³

PERFORMER 1

I think it has to do with the cool factor. People will talk about big tippers for weeks. It just works like: oh she gets tipped a lot... I wanna tip too! and the more tips > the bigger they get...³⁴

PERFORMER 2

Here's a few reasons why people tip cam models:

1. They want to show their appreciation towards a model they like and also make her smile.
2. There is something on a model's tip menu they would like to see her do.
3. They want special attention from a model and the best way to do that is to be kind and tip.
4. They realize that this is a job for the model and want to pay her for her time and services.
5. Entertainment is a luxury, not a necessity. Tipping members understand this and like to pay for their entertainment.
6. They realize that if everyone had the "Why should I tip?" mentality, cam models would stop performing.³⁵

The circulation of tokens in the platform's accelerated togetherness gets sticky, producing a viscosity that holds crowdfucking events, makes someone come back tomorrow. Stickiness, following Ahmed, is "an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" that increases with circulation: "the more signs circulate, the more affective they become."³⁶ Or the *stickier for affect*, I would say. Affect as what sticks accounts for the act of coming back to the room of the person that yesterday was spinning in a luminescent hula-hoop, even if today they are preparing lunch. The sticky quality of this contracted affect keeps some performers being more popular than others, inviting people to come back another day and express their affect—in the common sense of the term—through tokens or items from their *wish list*.

32 Herein2020, "Why Do I Pay for Cams When Can Watch Free?"

33 BlueTornado, "I Am a Former Gray User."

34 "Tips That Would Have Cost Me More than a Week's Salary."

35 Herein2020, "Why Do I Pay for Cams When Can Watch Free?"

36 *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

What makes me love to tip a model or take her private is the entertainment side. Quite honestly, I could easily just go through google and find MILLIONS of websites with videos and photos FREE (sure, they are mostly stolen, but still). BUT the reason I personally love to tip and show my appreciation is MOSTLY for the entertainment side of things, be it dancing, teasing, talking or whatever else that model I am watching is doing/performing that day. Don't get me wrong, I love to see the model naked and toying too and all of that, but that isn't what keeps me to stay, tip or return.³⁷

PERFORMER 1

I had a member once that told me he had to quit because in the throes of passion he spent his rent money and child support payments on me. He felt that his attraction to me was negatively affecting his real life and canceled his account. I was totally supportive, wished him the best, and congratulated him for being a fiscally responsible adult :)³⁸

However popular a show may be, however loud a big tip could sound, the performer's earnings are not formed out of single events but from a succession of them. If tokens are the audience's affective currency, is their contraction, their repetition, what makes them profitable for the performer. It is then about spectacle, creativity, intense shared experiences, and it is also about constancy, regular schedules, taking care of the audience and the infrastructure. Development and maintenance, in a nutshell. From that perspective, is not affect what becomes habitual through labor? Here, the demoted idea of *affective labor* takes another sense, becoming a more descriptive *laboring of affect*.³⁹ In this way, affect does not describe the type of labor but the nature of the business. The sexcam platform is a machine built for the laboring affect, where the performers and the audience⁴⁰ collaborate.

A close look at the niceties of tokens, then, reveals their role on a platform built upon a *domestic episteme*. This model determines who the client is and who provides the service, what is considered work and what is not, who has the right to wages and who does not. But it does not stop there. It is clear that the platform deems reproductive labor as structural to capitalism, as Marxist Feminists

37 BlueTornado, "I Am a Former Gray User."

38 "Tips That Would Have Cost Me More than a Week's Salary."

39 Here, I am borrowing (and probably bending) a term from Patricia Ticineto Clough. "The Digital, Labor, and Measure Beyond Biopolitics."

40 Or, as the neoliberal economist Gary Becker said, 'We should not think that at all that consumption simply consists in being someone in a process of exchange who buys and makes a monetary exchange in order to obtain some products. The man of consumption is not one of the terms of exchange. The man of consumption, insofar as he consumes, is a producer. What does he produce? Well, quite simply, he produces his own satisfaction.' As cited in Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, 226..

have shown. Indeed, it is its business' area. The interplay between the cost and value of tokens is precisely what makes it lucrative.

scene 4.cost

As commodities, tokens reveal further niceties. While it is right saying that the platform keeps half of the exchanged money, it is not correct that the platform takes half of the performers' earnings. What the platform does is dropping the price of tokens by half after the buy. As such, one hundred tokens, bought per ten dollars,⁴¹ will immediately change their value to five dollars, whether the person uses them or not.

SALES AGENT 1

The amount of tokens you see in your account is your own share — Chaturbate has already taken their own share before showing you the amount of tokens you have! They took their own share when the buyer bought the tokens, not after they tip you.⁴²

More than a currency, then, tokens reveal to be part of a technology that allows the exchange of the same quantity for a different price, with just a sleight of hand. The platform, though, is not only a toll station placed at some point between the money that the user spent and what the performer is going to receive. Although blatant, the difference between bought and cashed tokens does not stop at their fungibility—their interchangeability. At each side of the transaction, this difference is enacted through two distinct systems, systems that determine their liquidity—the ease of their conversion into cash.

Buying tokens is a quick and easy process. There are various payment options: major credit and debit cards (Visa, Master, Discover), wire transfers, online payment services providers (Paypal or Paysafecard), and cryptocurrencies.⁴³ Once purchased, tokens can be immediately used on the platform. Performers that receive tokens can also reuse them on-the-spot, but only for paying other performers on the site, and with volume restrictions. However, cashing the received tokens is a very different process, and the options for converting them to local currencies drastically change from the options for purchasing them. First, it is necessary to have more than the equivalent to fifty dollars (around 1000 tokens), and this can only be done every two weeks, following the platform's calendar. As per 2019, performers could decide being paid through online payment services (Montréal-based service Paxum, Wire, ePayService, or ePayments), by receiving a check by email, a

41 USD dollars.

42 "Chaturbate Token Value."

43 "Purchase Tokens."

wire transfer (with associated fees), directly through their bank accounts (only U.S.A.), or Bitcoin.⁴⁴ While the systems available for the audience (for buying tokens) are established and reliable, the performers face another scenario.

Given the above set of conditions, if Chaturbate incarnates a *liquid market*⁴⁵ (regarding the stability of prices for buying and selling tokens), then this liquidity crumbles when the complete monetary ecosystem is considered. Since 2002, major credit card providers characterize porn and related sites as high risk for chargebacks. They allow buying tokens on Chaturbate but, following their consistent denial of service for sex workers, they do not facilitate cashing them. Following the lead of credit cards providers, Paypal introduced a ban for sex-related business—the same that signaled the end of the JenniCam. Although this ban has been partially lifted for audiences, as in the case of Chaturbate or Pornhub, it is still valid for paying people perceived as (current or former) sex workers.⁴⁶

THE PLATFORM (AS PAYPAL)

We don't permit PayPal account holders to buy or sell:

- Sexually oriented digital goods or content delivered through a digital medium. Downloadable pictures or videos and website subscriptions are examples of digital goods.
- Sexually oriented goods or services that involve, or appear to involve, minors.
- Services whose purpose is to facilitate meetings for sexually oriented activities.⁴⁷

PERFORMER 1

One of the many questions that's frequently asked by cammodels in regard to accepting online payments is can I use PayPal to sell camshows? And no matter how often this question is asked and answered, nor the numerous articles written about PayPal and the adult industry, the answers given seem to evade the minds of many cammodel performers in camland. So now after years of being an online performer who's shared her own struggles with PayPal, that ultimately led to a permanent ban, I have now come to the conclusion that most models know that PayPal is a **no no** for adult, but are willing to risk it anyways. I believe that they believe that PayPal's assured ban for sex workers can be avoided.⁴⁸

44 "How Do I Convert Tokens to Cash?"

45 Chen, "Why Do Some Assets Sell Better Than Others?"

46 Alptraum, "How Sex Workers Get Paid."; Stokes, "The Soapbox"; "How PayPal Discriminates against Sex Workers."

47 "What Is PayPal's Policy on Transactions That Involve Sexually Oriented Goods and Services?"

48 Taja, "Cammodels And PayPal: They Are Not Your Friend."

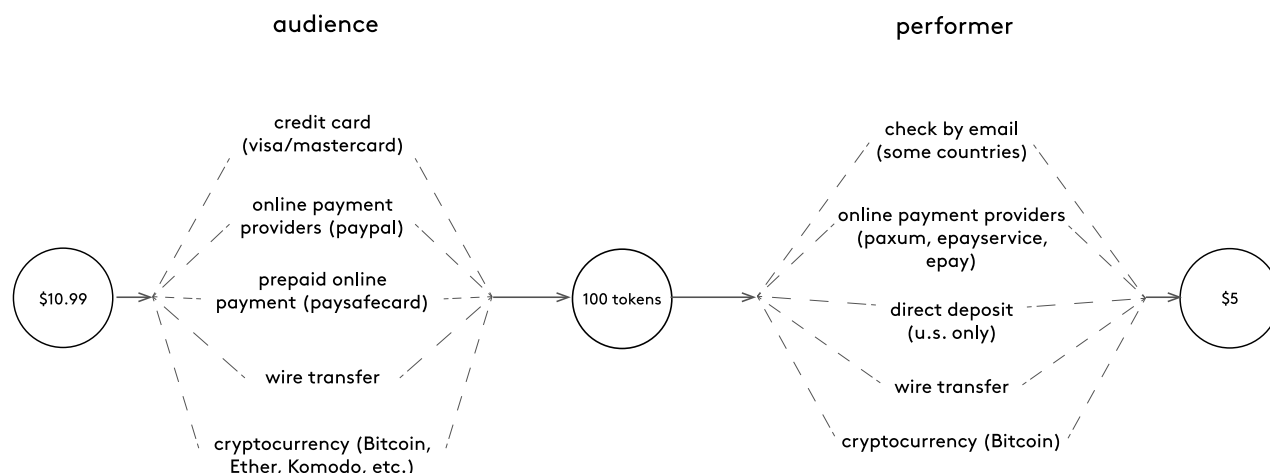


Fig. 4.7. The figure shows the flow that money experiences on the sexcam platform, from regular money to tokens and regular money again. Not only 100 tokens have different costs (and values) at each side of the platform (audience and performers), but it is enacted through two different set of associated services.

As PayPal and other cases illustrate,⁴⁹ financial institutions and payment services providers often engage in discriminatory practices against sex workers, leaving adult performers with few and often unreliable options.⁵⁰ For example, until May 2018, the two only allowed online payment services providers on Chaturbate were related to Choice Bank,⁵¹ an off-shore bank in Belize whose license was revoked due to liquidity problems freezing many performers' accounts for months.⁵² Before and after this problem, though, performers complained about the erratic and abusive behavior of the companies they have to deal with.⁵³

PERFORMER 1

I have been working on chaturbate for over 3 years. First, my payment method was payoneer then Firstchoicepay (as everybody know it's fucked up now). Then I put my payment method wire transfer on chaturbate. They emailed 2 times "our third parties deny to pay my bank". I provided them

49 In 2014, the American bank JP Morgan Chase unilaterally decided to close down accounts belonging to adult performers, including retired ones. See Stern and Abowitz, "The Banks' War on Porn." This decision resonates with *redlining* practices in the United States, which refers to the systematic denial of services to residents of specific locations. See violetblue, "PayPal, Square and Big Banking's War on the Sex Industry."

50 This de facto financial discrimination has been reinforced since the announcement of the FOSTA/SESTA bill in 2018. For a more detailed discussion on financial discrimination against sex workers in the United States, and particularly since the SESTA/FOSTA bill, see #SurvivorsAgainstSESTA ("Platforms Which Discriminate Against Sex Workers.")

51 They were Payoneer (later rebranded as First Choice, belonging to Choice Bank) and Paxum, tailored for the European market and based in Montreal ("What Is Paxum?"). After the Choice Bank crisis, Payoneer/First Choice does not longer exist, but Paxum survives.

52 "Choice Bank's Licensed Revoked."

53 "Paxum Is Rated 'Bad' with 2.0 / 10 on Trustpilot"; "Paxum Is Scam, Fraud - Stay Away."

all the documents they needed and they failed my wire 3 times until I am forced to use paxum. Not doing wires is one thing, but not clarifying that they will never wire [outside of U.S.] is totally unacceptable. They wasted my time and didn't care about.⁵⁴

PERFORMER 2

Monday morning here in Europe, still nothing works, support doesn't answer, phone # for card holders is on answering machine. They seem vanished and I am back to worry.⁵⁵

PERFORMER 3

Guys I am a Canadian cammer and I am so pissed with Paxum. I cannot do an EFT cause that option was taken away from me! I cannot wire the money to my Canadian account because it says I have to convert the USD to Canada. So I tried to convert and GUESS WHAT it says! NO CAN DO! You must do an EFT transfer for a better exchange rate! I tried to wire the money to my Transferwise and Revolut accounts but because they aren't "real" banks it won't work. I can't even withdraw my money to an external card because YOU GUESSED IT! It's not available in CANADA! The irony of this whole fucking thing is that Paxum is based in Quebec which is the same PROVINCE I LIVE IN!

PERFORMER 4

I can't transfer to my paxum card
I can't transfer to my personal bank card
I can't transfer to my personal bank because it costs \$100 or something ridiculous like that.⁵⁶

As it can be seen, the contrast between bought and cashed tokens do not stop at their price but entail two separate systems that seem to be intended for two different audiences (fig. 2), in another exhibit of "platform bifrontism."⁵⁷ The differences between bought tokens and paid ones, then, are not just a problem of cost, but of value. Value, following Brian Massumi,⁵⁸ exceeds quantification. Value is not a moral but an ethical distinction based on relationality. However, as the overt difference between bought and paid tokens shows, these relations carry previous assessments where moral notions influence their position and weight.

PERFORMER 1

I find it absurdly hypocritical that these banks don't shut down the accounts of men who buy porn...or use their card at a strip club.

54 "What's Happening with Chaturbate?"

55 "EPayService Not Functioning Today! Another Scam?"

56 "PAXUM IS SHADY AF."

57 Lorusso, "MoneyLab #7."

58 Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, 4.

PERFORMER 2

I work in the financial industry as my vanilla job, and the truth of this hypocrisy made me laugh.⁵⁹

One way to look at the disparity of tokens is to consider the differences between their use and exchange values for audience and performers. Following this, the platform would create a commodity, with its use and exchange values, then a different system of values for the same commodity—like a machine of creation and destruction that produces nothing but its existence. However, by paying attention to the differences in the various exchange and use values of tokens, buying and selling prices, their systems of verification, and areas of influence, it seems that *token* is just the namesake of two different commodities.

Indeed, if a consensual definition of money has three components (a unit of account, a medium of exchange, and a store of value),⁶⁰ an examination of bought and paid tokens shows mostly differences. To consider bought and paid tokens as distinct commodities—with different purposes, values in a broad sense, regulations, circulations, and separate audiences—it clarifies the analysis. But it gives place (or room, in this case) to new interrogations about the platform’s role. In fact, the platform not only extracts *rent value* from exchanges between audience and performers but sells two different commodities to two different markets⁶¹—or markets built for two different audiences.

It would be mistaken, however, to consider the sexcam platform as simply connecting two networks. Chaturbate is not only designed for taking advantage of the deep differences between the two systems it connects but employs practices that perpetuate those differences. As such, while performers receive five dollars per 100 tokens, since 2012, the same number of tokens have a different value if cashed in the Philippines.

THE PLATFORM

Chaturbate regrets to inform you that all independent models and studio models based in the Philippines will have lowered pay in tokens. We have been dealing with high fraud from that region, so instead of tokens being worth 5 cents (USD) they will now be 3 cents (USD). This was a hard decision for us to make, but we value your time and see this as being a way to keep broadcasters from the Philippines on Chaturbate. Thank you for your

59 “PayPal, Square and Big Banking’s War on the Sex Industry.”

60 Marx, *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:163.

61 This aspect is akin to what David Nieborg and Thomas Poell suggest about the incorporation of business literature on multisided markets to better comprehend platforms. See “The Platformization of Cultural Production.”

understanding this difficult decision.⁶²

Why is this a difficult decision? Because it scratches the transparency of the platform, rendering it suddenly visible. Again, we are all equals in the platform, but some are more equal than others.

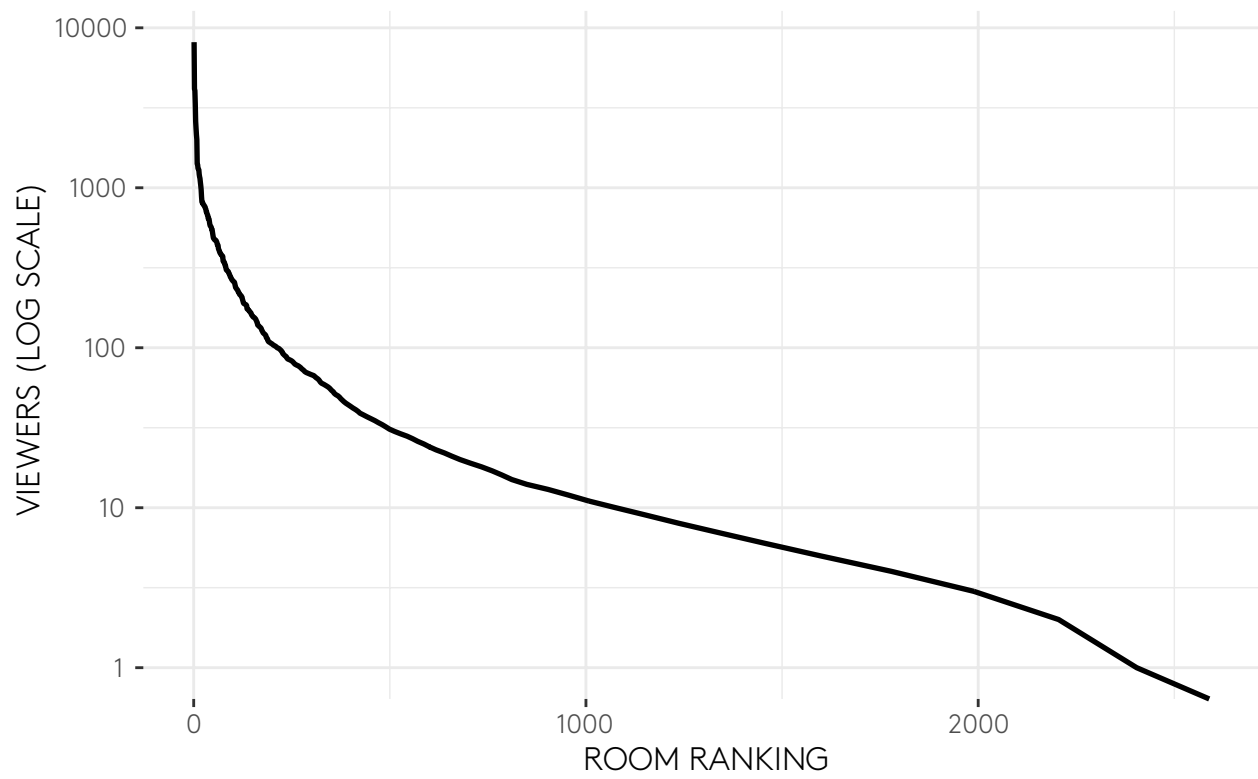
The platform's non-symmetrical trade could be interpreted differently, as having one single currency but with conversion restrictions.⁶³ The hypothesis of the two different currencies, however, seems to clarify other aspects of the platform. As stated before, the share of the platform happens at the moment of the buy. It is, then, a fee on *the intention* to use those tokens, on its potential. The platform does not ask for an entrance fee but relies on the performers to incite the urge to participate. If performers receive tokens, this entails a cost for the platform, unsurprisingly making this process difficult—or profiting from the difficulties. Again, what tokens are paying for? It is not labor time: it is possible to work for hours and not receive any payment. It is not attention, either. Performers that receive tokens do not only need an audience but the possibility and willingness of this audience to use its potential. These actions will be rewarded, although with reluctance, by the platform. As money, tokens reveal that more than a technology for equalizing labor time, they are simply a technology for extraction.

62 “Chaturbate Give Lower Payment to Phillipines Models.”

63 As in the current situation in Venezuela or former practices in the Soviet bloc. For more on the subject, see Johnson, “Bitcoin and Venezuela’s Unofficial Exchange Rate”; Holzman, *The Economics of Soviet Bloc Trade and Finance*.

CHORUS

VIEWERS PER ROOM RANKING ON MAY 15, 2017, 10PM EST



ACT 5. MAINTENANCE OF THE SELF AND THE OTHERS

scene 1. what is the one thing holding back from being successful?

PERFORMER 1

Not having a clone of myself. That would help a ton. I'd have way more energy.

Other than that...probably finding/making time to do cam related things. Whether it be uploading pics/videos, spending time on cam live, interacting on social media whatever. I mean that's generally what brings in the extra money and followers.¹

scene 2: zombie media

When rooms are not broadcasting, they are simply not alive. Trying to escape that death, performers display vital signs through a plethora of channels with different lifespans and degrees of liveness. Public and paid-only social media profiles, sites that sell videos of shows lived once, text messages with fans, short videos with expiration dates, custom videos moaning the name of a buyer, pictures, non-explicit content. Reminiscent of life but neither alive nor dead, these de facto sub-products of live streams² are a sort of *zombie media*:³ media momentarily revitalized by affect, showing sparks of previous lives.

PERFORMER 1

I have a free Snapchat story so I can update it when I'll be on or if I'm sick and I can't cam. I'll post about my day or cats and such. So I keep my story pretty tame that way they might be interested in getting a premium snap subscription from me. For my premium I just add them as a friend and send little teases. Like sexy selfie or a little vid of my flashing or something.⁴

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

For me, social media is another way I can keep in touch with a favored model. She may not be broadcasting at a particular time that I can watch or I may find myself doing something else at the time she's on. Social media provides a way, both for model and for member, to get to know one another outside of the cam site. I understand the models doing so are doing it outside of their work time, which only adds to my respect for them.⁵

PERFORMER 2

1 Ann_Sulu, "What Is One Thing Holding You Back from Being Successful?"

2 While this statement was valid in 2018, it is debatable in 2020. Different outcomes are not necessarily sub-products of live streams. They do not have necessarily life on their own, either.

3 I am bending here Hertz and Parikka's term ("Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into an Art Method.").

4 "About Social Media."

5 "Social Media Activity."

I firmly believe social media is helpful for the average bear, but I do NOT think one on one interaction is. So yes, post photos, musings, etc. but don't give away more of yourself than you need to. Making personal attention scarce raises its value-- simple supply and demand.⁶

PERFORMER 1

I agree there's a difference between attention and success. I think things like this are more designed to allow people that are already paying member places to invest more than to actually use them to attract new clients.⁷

Zombie outcomes vary in vitality. Some of them offer glimpses of life and work as teasers, marketing tools for the live streams. Others, losing some of their zombie statuses, become something with life on their own.⁸ The hierarchies among the various outcomes, however, are blurred.⁹ Is the teaser advertisement for the live stream or the live stream advertisement for the subscription site? What exactly is that tweet promoting? More than zombies, the diverse incarnations are dilutions of the performer's aura, feeding various machines while trying to feed their own.

PERFORMER 1

So I'm finally getting into doing other avenues that aren't just camming and I was curious how you guys handle this content wise. Do you post similar content on all of the sites or do you cater certain things to each? There are so many options for content now so it's kinda hard to figure out what is most viable but I also don't wanna stretch myself so thin that my content starts to suck.

PERFORMER 2

The more the merrier. You kinda have to KEEP the uploads coming or else your fans will not find the value in it. YOU JUST GOTTA PUT YOUR ALL INTO IT.¹⁰

The type of content that works in each platform (what is trendy and could become popular, what will get blocked) is a question with many answers. As many as the type of retribution the performers could, or could not, receive. Facing a set of well-trained machines, performers tailor their materials to match the implicit or not-so guidelines, always at risk of receiving one of many shades of

6 "Social Media Activity."

7 "Only Fans and Non Nude Twitter... Ponderings."

8 This is the case of *clips sites*, platforms where performers offer short clips often through a subscription model, and where they also can sell custom-made videos and merchandising. Clip sites have different niches and models of revenue, from individual sales to patronage systems. Subscription-based sites modeled had become the primary source of revenue for many performers, replacing webcamming for some of them and attracting a new audience. For more on the subject, see Laurin, "Subscription Intimacy"; Ryan, "Netporn and the Amateur Turn on OnlyFans."

9 In her work on the different articulations among performer's content, Heather Berg shows that porn work is the most prestigious yet the least remunerative. "A Scene Is Just a Marketing Tool."

10 "Manyvids, Onlyfans or Both?"

banning.¹¹ Video formats and lengths, background music or not, the frame rotation and its content, will weigh differently in the current recommendation algorithm of each platform, that performers have no other option than guessing. In this version of the spurious automaton, the goal is not to reveal the human in the machine, but to negotiate with both.

PERFORMER 1

I am very lazy and I really do get a lot of effort to enter singly on every clip site ... login, upload on each site the new clips, wait for it to load, set title description etc. ... I often do not go ahead and forget and say to myself: tomorrow I'll do it!

PERFORMER 2

The easiest way to keep something like this updated is to have a backlog of videos that need to be uploaded. I upload 5 or 6 clips at a time, then schedule them to release every other day, then during the next 10 or 12 days I will repeat this process: shoot/edit/upload/schedule and repeat.¹²

Not every incarnation is created equal. Often, unconsented recordings of live performances arrive on porn *tube* sites, where they could be watched without compensation for the performer nor their knowledge.¹³ If they are noticed, performers have the option to ask for the removal of the videos¹⁴—or to legitimize the practice and become a content provider for those platforms. In fact, tube sites have *affiliate programs* for performers through which they can claim their name and have dedicated pages there, receiving in compensation a small fee for traffic and views.¹⁵

11 Here I am referring to a wide set of practices in UGC platforms that could prevent people to see someone's content. Banning or blocking a particular content that does not compliant with the TOS of a platform (or it is deemed to do so) is a common practice. There are, however, subtler practices like *shadowbanning* which modulates the recommendation algorithm by introducing biases that will make a particular content to not appear (or appear less) without the knowledge of the producer.

12 "A Tip to Upload Clips!"

13 Such as PornHub, PornTube, or XVideos. Edwards, "The Porn Industry Is Being Ripped Apart By Piracy-Fueled 'Tube' Websites."

14 This process varies depending on the site. While some sites allow to submit a request without an ID-verification, others require the long and bureaucratic process of presenting a DMCA (Digital Millennium Copyright Act) complain ("Porn Website Makes It Easier For Victims To Remove Revenge Porn"; "Camgirl DMCA.").

15 The complex dynamics of tube sites, particularly Pornhub and the company that owns it, MindGeek, exceed the scope of this research. However, it is important to notice the ways in which that particular company controls various branches of the porn industry, including numerous clip sites, production studios, performer's representation, data analysis, advertisement, and internet traffic sales—among others. Pornhub is also implementing webcam transmissions as part of its services. For more on Pornhub and MindGeek, see Forrester, "Making Sense of Modern Pornography"; Ruberg, "Doing It for Free"; Guys, "The Porn Monopoly."

PERFORMER 1

I was alerted today by someone that a website had videos of my streams uploaded. I was frustrated, angry and felt pretty crappy about it, to be honest. I knew it was 100% a risk when I started camming, but I didn't think I would have to worry about it until I had been camming for at least a year, for some reason.¹⁶

PERFORMER 2

While I am not arguing that someone shouldn't post your pics/vids wherever, they are going to, and it is a given. Since we know that this is going to happen, instead of letting it get you upset, show them where they can see you live, and who knows you may make money off them.¹⁷ You post videos on the site that you have produced and receive a portion of the ad revenue they generate. This is not huge money, however it is revenue you can earn while you sleep.¹⁸

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

Models. You need to realize this right now. ANY time you put something on the internet, it is there FOREVER. It can never be eliminated, and eventually it will be found by someone who you'd rather not find it. You may not like it when members record your shows and upload them to different places on the internet, and you can try hard to get those images taken down. Sometimes you may find that you are even successful with getting an instance of something taken down. But the truth is, once it's out there it is impossible to fully retract. All it takes is one person to have saved a copy of it before it got taken down, and it can be reposted again.¹⁹

Navigating platforms with distinct requirements, value and economic systems, and recommendation ones, sexcam performers engage in a new version of *hustling*.²⁰ While to hustle is common practice in precarious and informal work (such as often sex work is), it takes here a particular meaning. The voluntary and low pay system of the sexcam platform, coupled with its high competition, makes hustling a mandatory survival practice. In this context, hustling requires a high level of technical skills and an individualist approach, which reinforces the meritocratic discourse it enacts. Moreover, it generates a *de facto* ecology of media services that, while having different audiences and value systems, are connected in the fragmentary of their services. The entanglement of different “income streams,” as Heather Berg notes, “at once maintain and undermine workers’ power.”²¹

16 “Your First Stolen Content Experience?”

17 “Reality Check.”

18 “Pornhub Model Payment Program.”

19 “Reality Check.”

20 Niels van Doorn and Olav Velthuis consider ‘to hustle’ as ‘a honest yet cunning form of entrepreneurship’ that ‘exploit opportunities for action [...]’ “A Good Hustle,” 185.

21 “A Scene Is Just a Marketing Tool.”

While it allows some performers to make a living and give them a relative agency regarding more traditional channels, it validates their exploitative practices and reproduces deep inequalities.

PERFORMER 2

I am on Chaturbate. And I can sit totally naked and masturbating with up to 175 users in total silence. Not 1 person tipping or chatting. Happens every day I am on there.

I just don't get it. And you wonder why models are on their phones. This is why.²²

PERFORMER 3

You, as a model, are not entitled to anything from members, not even conversation. It is a free site, there are 1000 rooms and you are simply one more room there so the default mode for members is to lurk. The only reason someone is inclined to talk in a room they have never been in before is if they find something intriguing, exciting, or they feel a connection with the model, all three are very difficult to do during a cumshow. Your job as a model consists precisely on that: discovering what it is you need to do to make your audience want to talk and tip you. The responsibility of carrying the show forward lies on you, not them. You have to figure out how to rise above the rest and bring something different and exciting to the table so members will feel a reason to talk.

Now, even seasoned models with an excellent success rate as entertainers will have days where they are juggling rubber chickens while jumping on one foot in front of a silent crowd, that's just part of the nature of camming. The crowds are unpredictable and sometimes you just can't seem to win. However, the responsibility of the show, even when you are doing your best and it's not working, still lies on you. You just need to learn when to pull the plug and call it a day and try again some other time, instead of blaming it on the audience. I would advise you to try many different things and learn what works for you in which contexts rather than feeling like a victim because that never helps you evolve.²³

Sentenced to endless creativity and constant relearning, the sexcam performer incarnates an enhanced version of the entrepreneur of themselves. Or, more precisely, a bare one. Certainly, this entrepreneur is *their own capital, their own producer, the source of their earnings*.²⁴ They engage in many of the social media activities of other precarious but legitimized workers (connection with the audience as musicians, curation of the self as influencers, self-advertisement as incipient scholars). Their product or services, however, are rarely named nor formally waged, and protective regulations usually

22 lovelylaura, "Why Do You Come into a Cam Room?"

23 Mila_, "Why Do You Come into a Cam Room?"

24 Paraphrasing Foucault's description of the *homo oeconomicus*. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, 226.

inexistent. Having only their aura of authenticity—which is to say only having themselves, or their brands—the sexcam performer incarnates the person of the *entreprenariat*:²⁵ a person in a permanent redesign, always working yet “on the brink of disaster,” and with an expiration date.

25 Lorusso, *Entreprenariat*.

CODA. WANT TO SHARE YOUR STORY? THIS RESEARCHER WANTS TO HEAR IT!¹

RESEARCHER 1

Hi all!

I'm currently working on a research project about streaming. My team and I are hoping to get to know more about the experiences of streamers and their fans. To do this properly we want to talk to some cam models to understand their perspective.

Thanks in advance!²

PERFORMER 1

two questions 1: who are you? 2: most cammodels are looking to not get outed, so where is this research/project going to end up?

RESEARCHER 2

Hi, I am currently in my last year studying psychology. I am interested in studying the satisfaction of webcam models/cam girls for my dissertation project, as I feel this is an area which lacks research and is important due to the increasing presence of online adult entertainment.

Participation will be voluntary and unfortunately, I am unable to provide any financial compensation for your time.³

PERFORMER 1

How long will this questionnaire take approximately?
Is it safe to assume it will be anonymous?
Are you including male/trans models or only women?
What is your hypothesis going in?
Do we get to see the results when you're done?

PERFORMER 2

Does it seem there's been an influx of "researchers" this year? I don't remember this many people claiming to do research in previous years.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2

Hi, I'm doing research on the number of researchers.

1 "Want to Share Your Story?"
2 RRR_123, "Research Help!"
3 Keith, "University Study- Please Delete If Not Allowed."

RESEARCHER 2

Hi everyone,

I'm doing research on digital sexuality for a class. I'm interested in how the digital space has changed sexuality. I'm hoping to get some answers to a few questions I have.⁴

PERFORMER 1

Have you considered compensating us for taking time to answer?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1

No one ever comes here asking to talk to pervs. I'm not feeling seen here.

RESEARCHER 3

Hi, thank you very much for being generous with your knowledge. I have learned a lot from reading the forums!⁵

4 anthro-research, "Questions about Your Cam Experiences & Intimacy."
5 cordltx, "How Much of the Action Happens behind the Public View?"

CHAPTER 5

THE ROOM:

a performative intervention

While looking for a way to expand the interface of a sexcam platform, a dollhouse appeared. Although unexpected, the dollhouse remained. Since then, the dollhouse has become a habitat, a stage, an imagined common ground between the performers on the sexcam and me (as a performer), the workers on the sexcam and me (as a worker). The dollhouse is deceptively static. As a research device, a model, and a figure, the dollhouse requires exploration and engagement. As mentioned, a figure, as Roland Barthes writes, does not have to be understood in its “rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptance.”¹ It is not a schema but something alive, caught in a moment as part of a game. Mixing sex work with domestic ideals, data, and bodies, the dollhouse becomes a “material-semiotic node in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another”—as Donna Haraway describes figures.² This section outlines a dollhouse’s main stages in this research, tracing the theoretical and aesthetic lines that have formed it.

PART I: THE WARBURG HOUSE

Following a long-term interrogation on the overlap of domesticity and pornography,³ I began in 2014 to pay attention to (what I would later identify as) a sexcam platform. It was *Chaturbate*, a website where people exchanged amateur sexual performances for a made-up currency, creatively competing for the audience’s attention through contests, sophisticated shows, glow-in-the-dark hula-hoops. I was, however, collecting boring and barely pornographic moments. It would be misleading to try to make them appear as the norm: they were exceptions, rarely featured in the *performers of the hour’s* section. Neither was my search a big stretch from what the platform offered back then, when people tried to earn some income doing housework barely dressed. I would catch these moments by looking at the thumbnails of the individual channels (rooms), displayed on the homepage. Because the thumbnails update frequently, they sometimes show domestic situations slipping between glittery cracks. While sexual activity is arguably a domestic event, I was looking

1 Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse*.

2 Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

3 The overlap of domesticity and pornography was my main area of inquiry from the 2000s. I developed different artwork pieces on this topic, and it was the subject of a blog I maintained between 2005-2010 and a radio show. I explored this entanglement as well for my MA research-creation project, *The Moldy Strategy* (2011).

for *less-spectacular* occurrences—in the sense of an intentional spectacle.⁴ If the performance was boring enough, I would record the transmission using a screen capture software.

I was working with my collection as an archive of domestic moments, exploring its networked dimension.⁵ Indeed, every room on Chaturbate was part of a larger network formed by the broadcasters, the audience, the server that connects them (the more stable element of this network). Viewers and broadcasters were temporal, leaving only traces as logs in the server. At the same time, however, someone was sharing their room with thousands of strangers, someone was watching the same room from their own. Calling these realities *networked experiences* is a way to recognize their multiple yet singular informational dimension—loosely following Tiziana Terranova.⁶ Dealing both “with the dispersed and the situated,” networked experiences are highly particular and resist any intent to gain an overview of the network as a whole.⁷ My collection was a testimony of this tension: particular moments sharing this particularity with many others.

The network has a representation problem, where different times, spaces, and experiences always are rendered in the same flattened way. Anna Munster describes this as *network anesthesia*: “a numbing of our perception that turns us away from [the] unevenness [of networks] and from the varying qualities of their relationality.”⁸ To repel that numbness, Munster says, we have to develop “an *aesthesia* of networks.”

We need to immerse ourselves in the particularities of network forces and the ways in which these give rise to the form and deformation of conjunctions—the closures and openings of relations to one another. It is at this level of imperceptible flux—of things unforming and reforming relationally—that we discover the real experience of networks.

The *real experience of networks*, then, is relational and vivid—even if it is imperceptible. How to enact this aesthesia in its banality?

4 This division is, of course, disputable. Not only because of the domestic quality of pornography but due to the spectacular quality of domesticity. On which side, for example, do we situate a young naked woman preparing a cake? What is she doing exactly, what is she being paid for?

5 This was in the context of a class taught by Johanne Sloan on networks and archives. The reflections of this first stage were highly informed by the readings and Johanne’s lead, who also introduced me to Mierle Ukeles’ work. My deepest gratitude.

6 Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*.

7 Munster and Lovink, “Theses on Distributed Aesthetics. Or, What a Network Is Not.”

8 Munster, *An Aesthesia of Networks*.



Fig. 5.1. Panel 39 of Aby Warburg's "Bilderatlas Mnemosyne" (1925-1929). The Warburg Institute.

With these questions in mind, I came back to my collection of domestic moments. Influenced by Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*,⁹ I started looking for ways to connect the gestures I had collected and expose their internal network. The disposition of the images in the Atlas (loosely a grid) made me think of the thumbnails on Chaturbate. Not only evocative: this spatial arrangement entails a detachment that permits the observation of internal connections among the images.¹⁰ The grid of images from different rooms made me think of a building where everyone has the curtains opened: "an illuminated 24/7 world without shadows."¹¹ That is how the dollhouse appeared.

I recreated a dollhouse from a drawer I found on the sidewalk, defining rooms with cardboard walls. Using a video mapping software,¹² I projected different video clips and other graphic elements in each room, establishing a sequence. I decorated some of the rooms with the tiny furniture, reproducing elements present in the video clips. The projections seemed more compelling when

9 The *Mnemosyne Atlas* is the unfinished and unexplained work of Aby Warburg that intends to show and map the 'afterlife of antiquity': how symbolic and emotionally charged images that emerged in the antiquity continuously reappear. Warburg collected gestures and expressions from artwork and placed them together on boards, hoping that spectators would experience this afterlife by themselves. For more on the subject, see Warburg, "The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past."

10 As Warburg elaborates, "the formative oscillation between inward-looking fantasy and outward-looking rationality [...] can assist possible interpretations of documents of the formation of the image."

11 Crary, *24/7*.

12 *Painting with Light*



Fig. 5.2. Between the drawer and the dollhouse.

displayed over tridimensional objects, and I started building or adapting small furniture for this. I was thrilled by the results. Together in the dollhouse, the clips started to relate to each other, and a distinct rhythm emerged. A naked man covered by a laptop beside three other men at from what looked like a warehouse. A woman in a green bathroom applying her make-up, another removing it. A garbage can made out of a pill jar remained when the image faded into a woman cooking in underwear. Another woman, also in underwear, was unloading a dishwasher machine for a moment. Beside her room, there was a small table with fruit over it. The solitary man faded into a couple in bed, illuminated this time only by the computer screen. Although a different selection of clips would have told a different story, the characters quickly inhabited the house. Like the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, their movements produced connections across rooms. The interval between perception and reason¹³ was reinforced by the rudimentary dollhouse and their out-of-scale objects. Made out of cardboard walls yet inhabited, the dollhouse was a construction between the network and the archive.

I faced diverse questions at that stage. While some of the questions were related to future aesthetic and technical decisions, the most difficult were ethical. Concerning the use of the recordings, I comforted myself with the fact that the performers had no expectations of privacy on the sexcams.

13 A distance from the sensed object is for Warburg a condition for art. Warburg, “The Absorption of the Expressive Values of the Past.”



Fig. 5.3. Projections on the dollhouse

I was not using any privileged access, and I was just another viewer among hundreds (back then). Also, I had no intention of publicly showing what I was doing at that point. Another question concerned my physical involvement with the projections. I did not want to show the sexcam performers as distant and curious phenomena but as people that I was sharing time with, who were impacting my domesticity—even as an anonymous spectator. This was when the idea of embodiment became crucial. As Anna Munster asks: “How might we conceive of a digital embodiment that takes account of both the incorporeal dimensions of bodies and the materialities of computation?”¹⁴ Embodiment, she argues, is not something to add to culture or technology but to a practice: “the very process through which the domain of the cultural, technical or aesthetic and the register of the affective, get pulled together.” My aim was to embody these domestic encounters with the dollhouse as the interface between the performers and myself. I attempted this by participating (still timidly) on the scene and by crafting the small elements that occupied the dollhouse.

At the end of this first stage, the dollhouse recreated and expanded Chaturbate’s interface. An in-

14 Munster, “Digital Embodiment / Digital Materiality.”

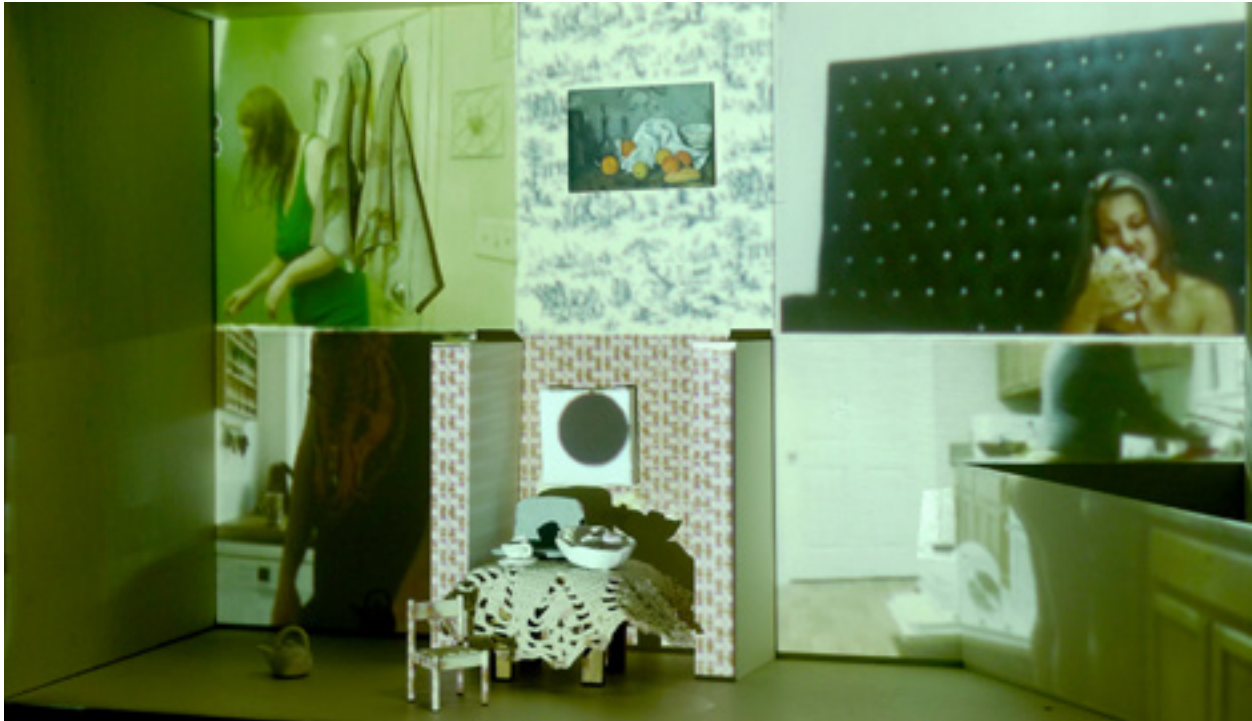


Fig. 5.4. Projections on the dollhouse

terface is a threshold between two different media, needed precisely because of their asymmetry.¹⁵ The interface does not solve this asymmetry but reinterprets one level for understanding another, as my dollhouse was doing. In short, it was a simplification—as one would expect from a dollhouse. As Benjamin Bratton notes, though, an interface is not any reduction, but a simplification intended for a particular user.¹⁶ In the synthesis from the previous level, there is a (dramatic) intention, a narrative of “the *meaning* of possible actions that someone might take.” The dollhouse rearticulated what was happening at many other levels, producing for me a sort of a shared ground with the performers. Moreover, and loosely following Brenda Laurel,¹⁷ the interface is also a contact surface and a stage, with room for performance and drama—as with the dollhouse.

PART II: SEXCAM(MER)S IN A DOLLHOUSE

The dollhouse as an interface allowed me to acknowledge the presence of sexcam performers in my house, recognizing our shared practices and becoming a simplified yet common space between

15 Cramer and Fuller, “Interface.”

16 Bratton, *The Stack*.

17 Laurel, *Computers as Theatre*.



Fig. 5.5. Projections on the dollhouse

us. Although I did not yet make the connection with the nineteenth-century *toy theatre*,¹⁸ the idea of the interface as a stage opened up other possibilities of exploration, such as performance.¹⁹ A pivotal element was the incorporation of small furniture, which gave a more tangible presence to the pre-recorded videos and allowed me to interact with them. The miniature, however, raises non-small questions and disrupts belief. As Gaston Bachelard says: “[t]o make others believe [in the truth of the miniaturized world], we must believe ourselves.”²⁰ *Belief* refers here to that something that happens with miniatures that exceeds rationality: a spark of recognition and the incongruity of that recognition.

A DIGRESSION ON MINIATURES

A metallic oven that you cannot use for cooking, a pill jar working as a trash can, a fish suspiciously still in a plastic bag. Miniatures are the smallest part of my work and probably the most intriguing.

18 That important connection was brought to my attention by Mark Sussman later in the context of his class on objects and performance, a class where I arrived not knowing anything about objectual performance: the famous pedantry of the amateur. Again, my deepest gratitude to Mark.

19 My engagement with performance, as it is probably clear by now, has no formal training.

20 “Miniature,” 148.



Fig. 5.6. Projections and performance with the dollhouse.

This subsection is a rumination on miniatures in light of readings dealing with *the force of things*.²¹ It also has a hidden agenda that attempts to understand miniatures outside of a purely representational point of view.

In reality, the tiny furniture appeared before the house. Reminding me of something that I may have had once, I found small furniture in a church bazaar, and I arranged a small living room in my living room. Soon, more miniatures began to appear, and I received the enthusiastic support of the women in my life. My mother made me a ceramic sculpture resembling the house we shared once. A friend gave me miniaturized Mexican food from a trip, another friend offered me her studio to make little ceramic pieces, my sister gave me a tiny cheese board. Why was it so compelling? Being a migrant and working around domestic topics, it was unavoidable to start making connections about what it means to be at home, to dwell. I understand the house that I inhabit as temporary—I have to. But maybe the attention, the thought I was giving to the small furniture, following Heidegger,²² was making it possible for me to *dwell* there in a collective endeavour. And to *build*, even on

21 The readings were related to the ‘Objects and Performance’ seminar led by Mark Sussman.

22 *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Forgetting, for a moment, how cruel it is to suggest overcoming homelessness through thought only.

a small scale.

How different are the miniatures that I built from the ones I bought or received? Or, more precisely, where does that difference lie? I considered them differently. The miniatures I made for the dollhouse have specific requirements regarding the projections and what I want to transmit. Each piece needs planning and time—and the results are often disappointing. I also cherish more the ones made by hand, although not necessarily mine. Probably it is their aura that it is in question,²³ the evidence of that intense, ridiculous work. The rich meaning of the miniature seems more opaque when they are plastic, industrialized ones. It is not a material problem, though. A clumsy garbage can that I made from a pill jar is (to me) more expressive than a version sold by a commercial brand. Is it not a bourgeois consideration? Besides the absurd amount of detail of miniatures, their charm is also about which elements have a reduced incarnation,²⁴ the story that brought them to me. This affective relation activates, even for a moment, an object's genealogy, its particular charge.

It is not only about the possession of individual miniatures but their collection. Following Benjamin, collecting is a quest: something more “into collecting [...] than a collection.”²⁵ Collecting is about “the sex-appeal of the inorganic,” craving for objects unrelated to their usefulness. Collecting involves a personal relation to cultural production: the particular trajectory of an object achieves importance, emphasizing (or staging) its singularity. Despite the uniqueness of an object, the particular of a criterion, a collection is never singular. As in Warburg's Atlas, things acquire a life of their own when they are with others, creating unexpected alliances and tensions. With the collection, objects are thrown into a new circulation that changes affective relations among them and their position within networks of meaning and thought.²⁶ Regarding everyday objects, both producing miniaturized versions and collecting them have a similar effect: a displacement of meaning, a redirection in their circulation, a re-appropriation.

What is, however, the object *itself* here? Do miniatures become the commodity of a commodity, or as misplaced household objects something else? What is that something else that happens when their use-value can no longer be used to assess objects? If commodities “are things with a particular type of social potential,”²⁷ miniatures both reinforce and obliterate that potential, like signals out of phase. Are miniatures, then, the re-commodification of de-commoditized objects? In

23 Benjamin, *Illuminations*.

24 I am particularly fond of a miniature dildo and a cast-iron teapot.

25 *The Arcades Project*.

26 Turkle as cited in Levine, “The Museum of Everyday Life: Objects and Affects of Glorious Obscurity.”

27 Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things*.



Fig. 5.7. Miniature detail.

capitalism, following Marx, commodity fetishism operates by replacing (and mistaking) the circulation and interaction of commodities for the things themselves.²⁸ It is not difficult to think about fetishism regarding miniatures. Indeed, it is a logical maneuver. Fetishism works by flattening any heterogeneity, producing a forced encounter between different systems. Fetishism pretends to solve distances by recognizing the social interaction with the object and disregard everything else. In this way, the fetish is “an objective illusion,”²⁹ a failed translation that nobody cares to fix. While some fetishism is unavoidable, a *methodological fetishism* is possible. Following Arjun Appadurai, this would involve bringing attention to “things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories.”³⁰ Yet, where does that cycle begin with the miniature? To “out-fetish the fetish”³¹ here, it would be somewhat necessary a *reversed methodological fetishism*. This approach would trace the miniature’s processes: isolation, miniaturization, and recirculation (albeit reduced).

Another alternative for overcoming fetishism in the miniature is to recognize *what is true in what is false*. In this way, instead of rejecting the fetishistic impulse, it would be necessary to embrace its

28 Haraway, “Deanimations: Maps and Portraits of Life Itself.”

29 *Capital, A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:163.

30 *The Social Life of Things*.

31 Taussig, “In Some Way or Another One Can Protect Oneself from the Spirits by Portraying Them.”

force and reject the fetish (the misunderstanding). This position is argued by Isabelle Stengers,³² involving the recognition of animistic beliefs on rational practices and conventions. A work with miniatures, then, should embrace the animistic beliefs those objects convey. In fact, what is engaging with miniatures other than *homeopathic magic*?³³

The object itself is still slippery, though. Or maybe it is its *thingness*. As Bill Brown says, “we look through objects [...], but we only catch a glimpse of things.”³⁴ The thingness of objects only appears “when they stop working for us,” and their existence as signs lose their meaning, their names do not longer make sense.

Things, in short, disclose a world. When somebody uses a tool or piece of equipment, a referential structure comes about in which the object produced, the material out of which it is made, the future user, and the environment in which it has a place are related to each other. But that this is so, according to Heidegger, generally appears only when a handy or ready to hand tool or piece of equipment breaks down. When this happens, the tool suddenly demands attention for itself. The reliable dealings we are used to having with the tool are ruptured, and instead of withdrawing from our attention the tool suddenly forces itself upon us.³⁵

The thingness of miniatures tells only a sad story: a lump of ceramic that does not even deserve that name, a piece of something. However, “[t]hings are not just formed matter, they are transductions with many conditions of possibility and their own forms of intentionality.”³⁶ Miniatures have a particular position between things and objects—and their thingness. Miniatures occupy a liminal space between “the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable.”³⁷ The thingness of miniatures seems to be not only about the moving evidence of their manual work. It is also a testimony of their constant struggle between being proper signs, and not at all. Freely following Karen Barad, miniatures problematize a blind “representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror preexisting phenomena”³⁸—but in a cute way.

Still, what kind of operation is it, to create a miniaturized version of an object if it is not represen-

32 Stengers, “Reclaiming Animism.”

33 “Homoeopathic magic is founded on the association of ideas by similarity [and] commits the mistake of assuming that things which resemble each other are the same.” Frazer, “The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion. Abridged Edition.”

34 Brown, “Thing Theory.”

35 Verbeek, *What Things Do*.

36 Graham and Thrift, “Out of Order.”

37 Brown, “Thing Theory.”

38 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.”

tational? Producing or collecting miniatures are endless enterprises. Every single object can have miniaturized versions, scaled models that will give new meaning to human-scaled ones. Quoting Susan Stewart, miniatures are “commodity and knowledge, fact and fiction.”³⁹ Miniatures are at once truth and allegory: metaphors of other things that exceed them; constructs themselves that “exaggerate the divergent relation between the abstract and the material nature of the sign.” What is, for example, the form of a Coca-Cola bottle the size of one (human) phalange? A remembrance of a ubiquitous capitalistic symbol; a translucent plastic; a gift my mother carried in her purse during a trip; a toy? All of the ergonomic features of the bottle (the curve for the hand, the neck for the mouth) lose their purpose and become just shapes. They are not arbitrary shapes, though. Miniatures mimic a referent as closely as possible, naturalizing “a world whose anteriority is always absolute.”⁴⁰ Miniatures make the world unavoidable, unquestionable, undeniable.⁴¹ There is no such thing as a miniature without a referent: a miniature is only interesting if the referent is already known. Despite the idea of control that the miniature evokes,⁴² there is something that exceeds it. Although never fully independent of the object they represent, miniatures provoke reactions that the referent can no longer arouse. Miniatures do not question the world of objects (it is what it is). Still, they subvert its hierarchy: miniaturized objects reset the value they used to have as signified and receive a new one as signifiers: a well-depicted trash bag attains an unexpected value if reduced. And so on.

If miniatures have this strong attachment to signs, can we still interrogate (as Amelia Jones does) “how *action* intersects with *materials* to produce new spaces of meaning”?⁴³ Attempting a vitalist approach,⁴⁴ I was trying to understand miniatures by (disappointingly) making them: an unfinished couch, a bed too small for its mattress, *fimo* paste carrots. Still, the process of making miniatures is provoking not despite its difficulties, but because of them. Suddenly, fingers become too big and clumsy for the task; handy standard tools completely inadequate. The work that every object requires in its habitual scale is not reproduced in miniatures but somehow re-enacted. Miniatures, under a hegemonic disguise that seems to preserve the status quo of things, re-create (but differently) the path that things took for being what they are. As Louise Krasniewicz elaborates, miniatures

39 *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.*

40 Stewart.

41 *Kamp* (2016), a spectacle by Hotel Modern, plays with that tension. Their re-enactment of Nazi concentration camps in miniature is particularly touching due to their careful representation, leaving the audience with a disturbing feeling of unavoidability. For more on the subject, see Sussman, “Notes on New Model Theatres.”

42 Garfield, *In Miniature*.

43 Jones, “Material Traces: Performativity, Artistic ‘Work,’ and New Concepts of Agency.”

44 Bennett, “A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism.”

do not only evoke *nostalgia for crafting* but also *the evidence of that craft*.⁴⁵ They are not “precious objects in space with no narrative capabilities” but elements that open new ways of engagement, “confront, question, critique” our consideration of the world. Then, with miniatures, actions intersect with materials and produce new spaces of meaning when they are made, staged, performed, or engaged with.⁴⁶ They are evidence of the processes that happen in the translation from referent to miniatures and of the exchanges with and among them. The play with miniatures denaturalizes and renews the relationship with common objects, and the signs they hold.

A problem with writing about miniatures is that “language can only imitate language,”⁴⁷ and the language we use is already on another scale. However, miniatures exist. Gaston Bachelard says: “[o]ne must go beyond logic to experience what is large in what is small.”⁴⁸ I do not think it is a problem of logic, though, but of perspective. Through engagement, miniatures allow “a performative understanding”⁴⁹ of the “material forces [that] actively matter to the processes of materialization.” Previous solidifications concerning things (such as meaning and habits), can be unfolded and subverted through relation and play, by acting and making. As in toys, the question about miniatures does not reside in themselves: “for it is not in the toy that play exists, but in the playing.”⁵⁰ Despite their constraints—or because of them—miniatures renew repetitive habits, in their unrepeatability.

PART III: SITUATING MAINTENANCE

The dollhouse was an expanded interface between the performers and me, a sort of common ground. I was not sure, though, what were we doing together. It was not only my perception. When I started this research, in 2014, the transmissions were more diverse. I was looking for outliers, true, but they were easier to find. I do not have enough data besides my archives to prove these assertions, but things seemed to be more heterogeneous. People were often staring at the camera, waiting for viewers, while domestic chores slip in between sexual performances. I first understood our common ground as maintenance, but soon I was no longer convinced that our common activities were encompassed by that term.

45 Krasniewicz, “Miniature Manifesto Part 2: Stop Quoting Susan Stewart.”

46 The work of Frances Glessner Lee, with her reenactment of crime scenes on miniature, *Kamp*, by Hotel Modern or the miniatures made of clay that display war scenes of Sudan, are an example of these possibilities. Botz, *The Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death*; “Hotel Modern - Kamp”; Berends, “Toys of War.”

47 Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*.

48 Bachelard, “Miniature.”

49 Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.”

50 Sussman, “Notes on New Model Theatres.”



Fig. 5.8. Situating Maintenance

I was struggling with the question about my *position*. This has a double entendre because I am often asked about ‘my position’ on sexwork. The position that interested me, however, had a more literal meaning. Influenced by Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges,”⁵¹ I was looking for my “embodied objectivity,” my incarnated vision. My research was at that moment about domestic space. Reflexively, it was also about how my research was situated within my domestic space, what means to negotiate research time in a domestic context—to myself, to the professional work that I do (also at home), to my family. I use humour frequently in my work because of this struggle, the battle always won by the everyday. Not only a self-deprecating exercise but a quest to blur hierarchies among different kinds of work performed at home, with academic research as yet another of these tasks. My intention was to inscribe the practice of writing as just another domestic crafting, obliquely questioning its supremacy as a research output. As it has been helpful in my process before, I used concepts as literally as possible, making use this time of a dollhouse for understanding my position within the research I was pursuing.

I found a dollhouse online. I bought it without a clear plan, probably just following that *collecting impulse*. Not exactly a dollhouse, though: it was an old miniaturized classroom that a person made

51 Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.”

for his grandson (an inscription in the back suggested this⁵²). Was the classroom modelled upon a real one? It looked like a rural school: there was only one big space, an unpolished outside contrasting with the careful interior design. The classroom and its furniture were made of wood. It had six identical desks and one tall chair, probably for the teacher. A blackboard with some names, almost erased but still legible, a wooden stove and firewood for it. Several books that could not be opened, some of them looked like notebooks. A bell that worked, a lamp that did not.

The classroom was bigger than what I imagined from the pictures in the online ad: big enough to accommodate my arms. Using small notebooks, I started writing on the tiny desks. Sitting on my ankles, the body's position was painful to maintain and required discipline and training. While this reminded me of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*,⁵³ I wonder who else I was referencing. I decided to acknowledge other influences with portraits that would hang in my school, like national heroes. On small canvases, I painted some portraits with ink. The first were portraits of authors important for me in general, but I soon decided to make them more specific to my research, like a drawn bibliography. I hung the paintings—with uneven degrees of accomplishment—on the walls of my classroom.

How can we write about a process within the process, rather than as an afterthought, retrospectively? Making miniatures requires undivided attention. When I try to describe my process, I have to remember that state, but it is not there anymore. I intended to *play* with that gap by *writing in miniature*: on tiny notebooks over a tiny desk. I realized that I should keep the performance going for a predefined time, as the duration of a school class. I was writing unceasingly, remembering boring high-school classes with my body. It was *forced miniature time*. Being in that position, embracing the miniature, made me pay attention to aspects of the small school that I did not consider before. The small details (the firewood, the desks' curve, the books) appeared as actions of care from a person to another. And a material transference of knowledge made for its embodiment. As Gaston Bachelard says: “[M]iniature[s] are false objects that possess a true psychological objectivity.”⁵⁴

Albeit playing, I was trying to position my research to my theoretical references, and to my domestic context. More than play, this was *a critical* play that forced me to reflect on the practice and question the concepts and techniques I was using. Through this critical play, the education technologies that I was dealing with (school desks, notebooks, pencils) were denaturalized, appearing

52 In the back, it says: ‘Made by O.P.A. for Aidan.’ The classroom had four frames with maps and texts about the Netherlands.

53 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

54 Bachelard, “Miniature.”



Fig. 5.8. Maintenance Pornography. Detail.

arbitrary and clumsy. It gave me also a new insight into the technologies and practices I was using for my research, giving me a glimpse of their own relational processes. The incipient critical play shed light on aspects of the research (and the creation) present in this research-creation project.⁵⁵ Paraphrasing Susan Stewart,⁵⁶ this critical play was a “within within within” one.

PART IV: MAINTENANCE PORNOGRAPHY

Following Mierle Ukele’s distinctions,⁵⁷ maintenance was hidden in plain sight in all those moments that sustain creativity and spectacle. I was intrigued, then, by the interplay of maintenance and creative practices on the platform. At that stage, I still identified maintenance practices mostly as housework, and I wanted to highlight them by developing a performance in my dollhouse. The dollhouse, however, was past.⁵⁸ I decided to not come back to the performer’s recordings, despite

55 I was inspired here by Samuel Thulin’s article that describes research-creation as a *strange loop*. “Looping Research-Creation.”

56 Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*.

57 Mierle Ukeles’ work is discussed in Chapter 2.

58 Paraphrasing Adorno, *Minima Moralia*.

the rich and fascinating collection of moments I had had. I was going to perform maintenance practices, using my hands, and broadcast the performances on Chaturbate. For doing that, I had to build a proper stage: a room big enough for my hands and different settings.⁵⁹ The settings portrayed different rooms (a kitchen, a bedroom, a living room, a never-fully-completed bathroom) inspired by the ones I saw on the platform. I tried to respect the *IKEA feeling* of the rooms I was watching (impersonal and generic) and some of the conventions of dollhouses.⁶⁰

The construction process, both of the stage and of the settings, took a long time. I did some short tests in the meantime, broadcasting them live on Chaturbate. My expectations were that no users would show-up and that I was going to perform housework without interruptions. I was wrong, and the questions and comments from the users that quickly connected to my room felt disconcerting and overwhelming. Many constructive details of the dollhouse (I continue calling it that way, despite its *roominess*) required my time, and it seemed safer to work on them instead of public performances. I rehearsed actions offline and built a small repertoire of domestic activities that included sweeping, cleaning, and moving objects around this tiny space.⁶¹

As stated earlier, my idea was to broadcast maintenance practices (still identified with housework). I was going to switch the settings live, showing the different artifices to the audience. That did not work as expected, and the transmissions were hectic and confusing. The arrangement of the small furniture while broadcasting worked better, and I thought cleaning and dusting the room was my only performance. The appearance of a modest yet enthusiastic audience would change the situation. Despite my admiration for Ukele's work, it was not interesting for my public to see me performing housework for a long time. What was wrong? I introduced actions with some sexual yet humorous content (a miniature dildo was very useful). Still, the actions were awkward and the performance stressful: my lack of training was evident, I did not know how to build a spectacle,

59 I have to acknowledge the reception of a grant for research-creation from Hexagram that allowed me to produce the small stage. The architect Ronnie Araya was in charge of its construction, and I received advice as well on lighting from Maya Ersan and Eduardo Pérez, and on sound from Gabriel Vigliensoni. The settings were done in collaboration with Marian Salamovich (who also happens to be my mother).

60 I was lucky enough to find (out of stock) real IKEA dollhouse furniture that I modified and combined with *chinoiserie*s and other less-common objects.

61 In the Fall of 2018, I did a residency at the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam (INC), under the supervision of Geert Lovink. I traveled with the dollhouse, thinking about setting it up at the Institute and combining writing and performance. Once there, it was clear for me that my actions would be disruptive for the team, and I concentrated on the writing. Worried about the lack of progress on the artistic part of my research, Geert Lovink connected me with DAS, the graduate school of the Academy of Theatre and Dance of the Amsterdam University of Arts, and they invited me to do my performative research there. Having regular studio practice at DAS was pivotal for my investigation, and the dollhouse showed some of its potential as a research device. My gratitude to Marijke Hoogenboom, then the director of DAS Research, and Sher Doruff for their generosity and helpful insights.

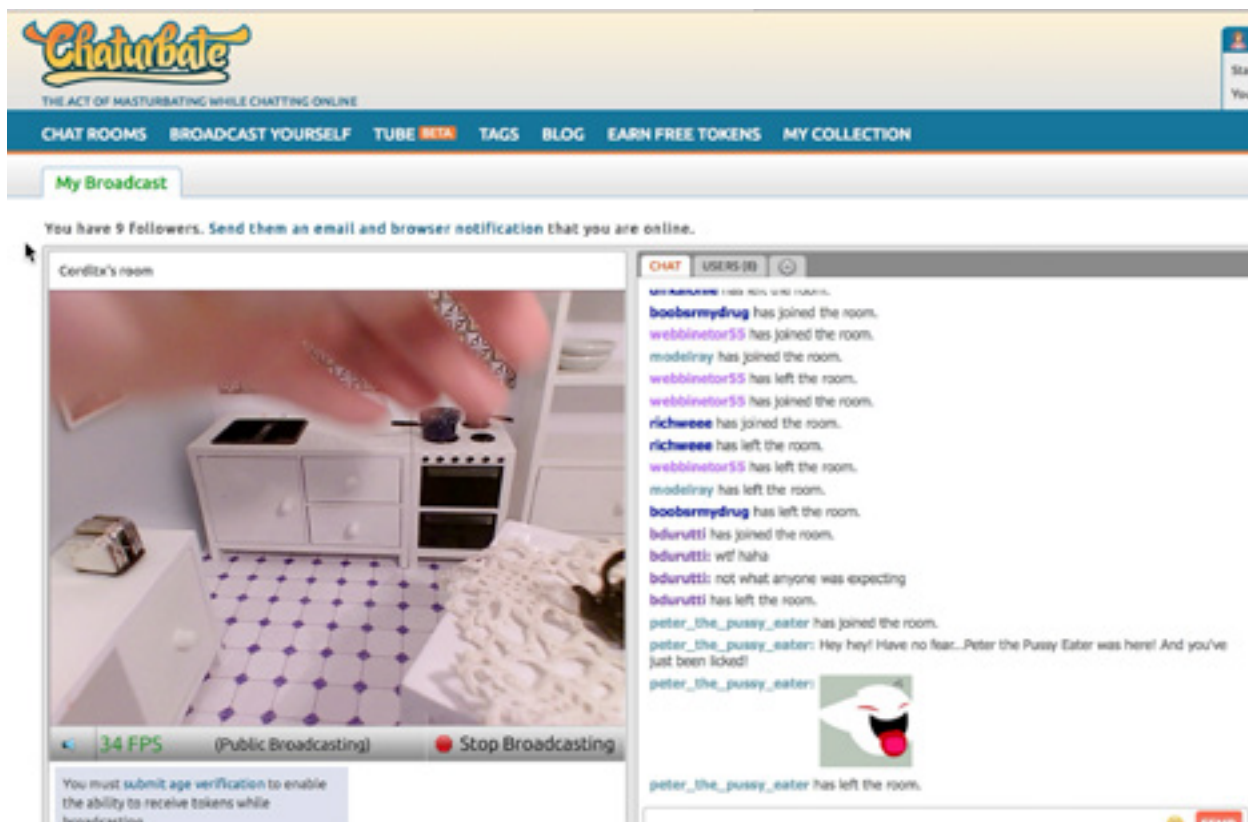


Fig. 5.9. (Performer's) view of the transmission and the chat window.

my hands were not flexible enough, the settings were gorgeous but the show boring. I had to find an alternative.

Inspired by Yvonne Rainer's choreographic work, I built a repertoire of *found movements* from housework actions: mopping the floor, arranging the bed, washing the dishes. I composed an 'ordinary dance' out of them and attempted that mixture of boredom and entertainment (or boredom in entertainment) that characterizes Rainer's work.⁶² Repetition was important and questioned the naturalist and 'authentic' aura of the work, linking it as well with habits and maintenance. As in Rainer's *The Mind is a Muscle*, I was trying to enact non-productive work. Non-productive because it was, as it should be in a dollhouse, make-believe, and because of the status of reproductive work as non-work. It was, however, "work-like."

While it was satisfactory to engage with Rainer's ideas, it did not work out in the same way on the

62 "No to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to the glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved." In Wood, *Yvonne Rainer*.



Fig. 5.10. Living room. Detail.

platform. I had the option to disregard the audience and present my *work-like* actions following a script, but there was something wrong in doing so. It was true that I was not doing sexual performances on the platform, which was a rarity, and that the scale and actions were very different from the habitual content there. But I was trying to work on the platform, not to *work-like* there. The movements and aesthetics of work, either considered as such or not, should not only evoke work but also allow me to work there. Again, I had to find a way to incorporate maintenance and reproduction ideas into my performance and understand them through performative engagement.

I was struggling with these ideas and kept performing live. I had a routine of arranging the kitchen, cleaning it, drinking tea, etc. As I did so, it occurred to me that I might dance on one of the small chairs. I was looking for some contemporary dance in the style of de Keersmaecker's *Rosas danst Rosas*⁶³ (which I attempted without much success) and searched for more references on YouTube. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of the videos of chair dances were sexy ones. I decided then to integrate a sexy chair dance into my kitchen cleaning routine. Things started to make sense.

Two things happened then. One is that I was moving in more familiar territory. As discussed earlier, the interplay of domestic and erotic practices has occupied me for a long time (I call that overlap *domestic porn*). I was able to think in more actions while being truthful to the questions that animated

63 de Keersmaecker, *Rosas Danst Rosas*.

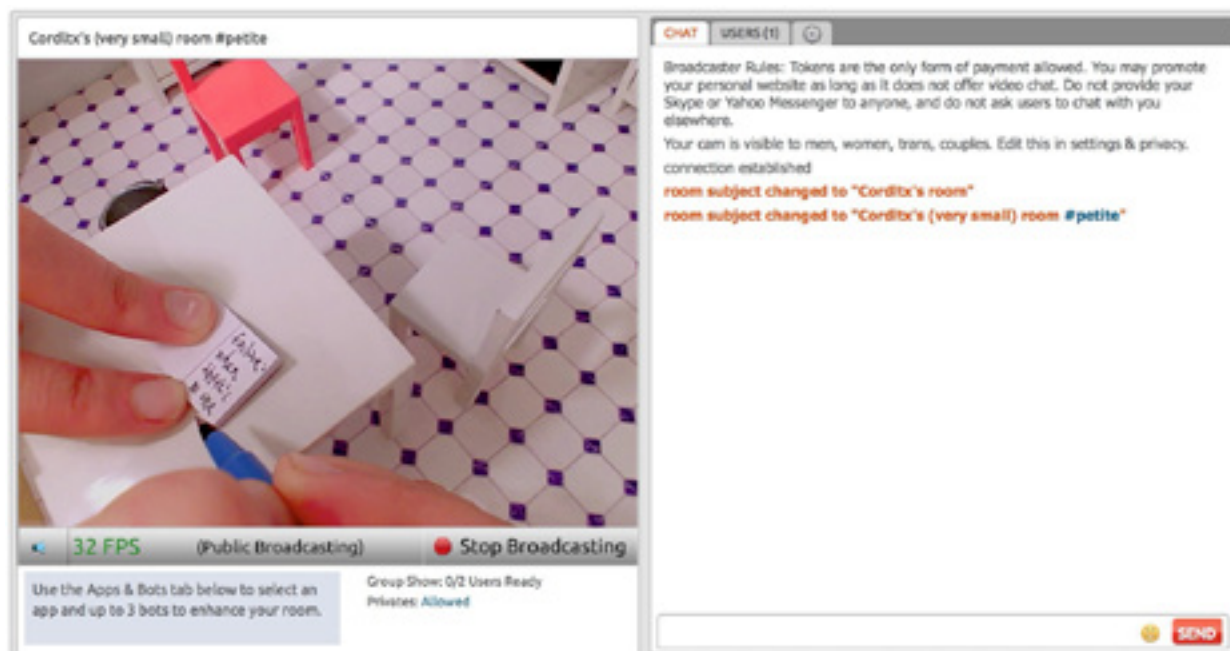


Fig. 5.11. On failure.

the research, and that was highly encouraging. By presenting shows located between spectacle and housework (or, more precisely, where the same person that performed housework performed erotic shows, or by exhibit housework and erotic shows in the same context), I was enacting a wider range of reproductive work. The second element, which opened a new detour, was the explicit recognition of the audience in my work and the necessity of building a spectacle for them. The idea of maintenance presented, however, a new interrogation. What was that required maintenance?

When I started performing more explicitly for the audience (in the sense of showing what would be perceived as a spectacle), I began to chat more often. It is tricky doing both things at once (acting and typing, I was not using my voice at that stage), and the performance had to incorporate those interruptions. I included small gestures for the audience, such as writing their names on small notebooks, which was received with enthusiasm. While the 'conversation starter' was generally related to the dollhouse, some people were just interested in having any kind of conversation, however uncommon the setting was. They also had questions about me, often asking about my age, sometimes about my gender. I received requests to go into 'private mode' (camera to camera) that I disregarded with ease. More questions were raised for me though with petitions for showing my feet in the dollhouse. I declined these requests but wondered why I was feeling uneasy. I told myself that I did not want to create distinctions between the work the performers do on the platform and my own, that I intended to consider different works equally. I was comfortable doing performances that were humorous yet erotic (such as masturbating the miniature dildo or slapping myself). Although



Fig. 5.12. Dollhouse detail.

I did not end using my feet on camera (maybe just because of vanity), I was forced to confront my statements.

The interaction with the audience led to a different take on the idea of maintenance, and I realized that it encompassed not only those required actions for the sustainment of creative practices but also the maintenance of the audience, coded under a *domestic episteme*. I was, again, clearly in the realm of social reproduction. This perhaps self-evident fact influenced the rest of my entire research project. Although I was working from a feminist stance from the beginning, I was distracted by the ‘open’ and ‘free’ character of Chaturbate without understanding how much the provision of reproductive labor was the primary service of the platform, and how discrimination made it lucrative.

PART V: THE WORK OF SEX AND THE SEX OF WORK

A broader understanding of maintenance, through the idea of social reproduction, put me in a different landscape. My work was no longer a reminder of the many invisible tasks the work on the platform requires. Showing up daily on the platform was an act of maintenance—of myself, of the audience, of the platform. This insight cracked many of the theoretical devices that I was making

use of. With a focus on the audience, I decided to perform for longer shifts and explore what would happen.

Sometimes, what happened was nothing. More explicitly, I was waiting for an audience and nobody appeared. Because the platform does not allow broadcasting without being on camera, waiting is an active action.⁶⁴ I was reading about failure but could not find anything epic about my fail. Failure, in that context, was a total lack of connection. ‘To fail better’ did not look like an option. I wrote that in my tiny notebook (fig. 5.11). When I later established a regular schedule, mandatory for developing an audience, I started receiving regular visits. The most enthusiastic person in my room was Clivey69. Clivey69, I learned soon after, was also a performer with its own room (channel), where he presented himself as a ‘mad scientist.’ I wrote his name in the notebook and received my first tokens (the currency of the platform).⁶⁵ Clivey69 gave me ideas, and we drafted a collaboration.

I set up a living room in the dollhouse. Using a tiny projector, I showed Clivey69’s room on my dollhouse room’s wall. He invited his regular audience to join him in my room, and more people appeared in the chat. Broadcasting in underwear, his projection on the wall looked like a *stag film*⁶⁶—arguably a domestic-porn event. I was doing other domestic actions in the meantime: sweeping the floor, moving small furniture, ironing. The combination of porn and domesticity I was looking for was already present (his erotic show, my domestic actions), and I felt unnecessary doing a more explicit show on my end.⁶⁷ We broadcast for an hour, with people coming and going. Probably due to the many (yet tiny) transgressions of the show, the effect was thrilling. In some way, we were using the platform for its intended purpose: broadcasting a sexual spectacle from a domestic environment. In another, this was a misunderstanding. The elements were all present but absurdly literal, producing a disconcerting and hilarious effect.⁶⁸

The show had further implications for my work. I realized that, although I was performing, the

64 I received a warning for broadcasting the room without being myself on camera. I have to write a message saying that I understood the warning and promised I would take action to prevent future problems. I am not sure, however, why my hand is not a problem.

65 I considered for a time if I should be able to receive tokens or not. In the end, I decided to do so for not creating even more differences with fellow performers. I had to verify my identity on the platform for receiving them.

66 Stag films were short amateur pornographic films with limited circulation and mostly domestic exhibition. For more on the subject, see Slade, “Eroticism and Technological Regression.”

67 At some point, he got rid of his underwear. I realized he was expecting me to congratulate his attributes. Some habits are not affected by scale.

68 The following time I opened my channel, I had another warning from the platform. They informed me that I was not allowed to show another person’s image in my room.

dollhouse's broadcast was better understood as an intervention on the platform—or a series of performative interventions. Well-behaved, but disruptive. By messing up with scale, by highlighting activities that are not supposed to be spectacular, I denaturalized the platform's habits and subverted it.⁶⁹ This new perspective clarified and lighten up my role and position. I did not have to pretend to be a performer—nor a sexcam, nor an art one. My insistence on having a common ground was well-intentioned yet misplaced. I was better equipped, however, for borrowing tactics from different disciplines and playing with them.

THE EROS OF UNDERSTANDING⁷⁰

The show with Clivey69 marked a new direction in my work. While I had a set of pre-rehearsed tricks, it was clear that the most important factor was the audience: if I could attract and keep them in my room, if I could incite some affect that would make them come back. It was not only about seduction, though—or this seduction was not happening only in one direction. From the beginning of this project, I intended to work with Anna Tsing's take on precarity: precarity as being vulnerable to others, as open to transformative encounters and contamination.⁷¹ Was I doing that, though? Unsure because of my lack of formal training in performance, I limited my actions to a safe zone. No contamination there, but very beautiful settings. The show with Clivey69 was exhilarating precisely because of its many encounters: among the participants, between the different genres and scales (1:1 and 1:12), between critique and enjoyment—all in the same room.

I realized that, while I had a set of tools to discuss *the work of sex*, I was not prepared to speak about *the sex of work*.⁷² In the *accelerated togetherness* of the platform, people were sharing their time with strangers, discussing movie characters, exchanging recipes, having sex—despite (or synchronous with) my critique of platform practices. But maybe I did not have to say anything. Intrigued by forms of knowledge other than theory, I decided to experiment more freely with what should have been evident in the first place: play. It is not exactly fair to say that I was not playing before, but my play was highly constrained. As a stubborn apparatus, the dollhouse was an imposing model, modelling my behaviors and movements at this time. It was, clearly, a paradox. I built the dollhouse myself, erecting walls and passages, but I could not go out. I underestimated the heaviness of the

69 I owe this insight to Kim Sawchuk's influence (my supervisor), who takes great delight in subversion.

70 The title is borrowed from artist Rose English's 2014 show at Kunsthall Charlottenborg. "The Eros of Understanding."

71 Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*.

72 This reflection was provoked by T. L. Taylor's article on the Twitch platform, "Twitch and the Work of Play."

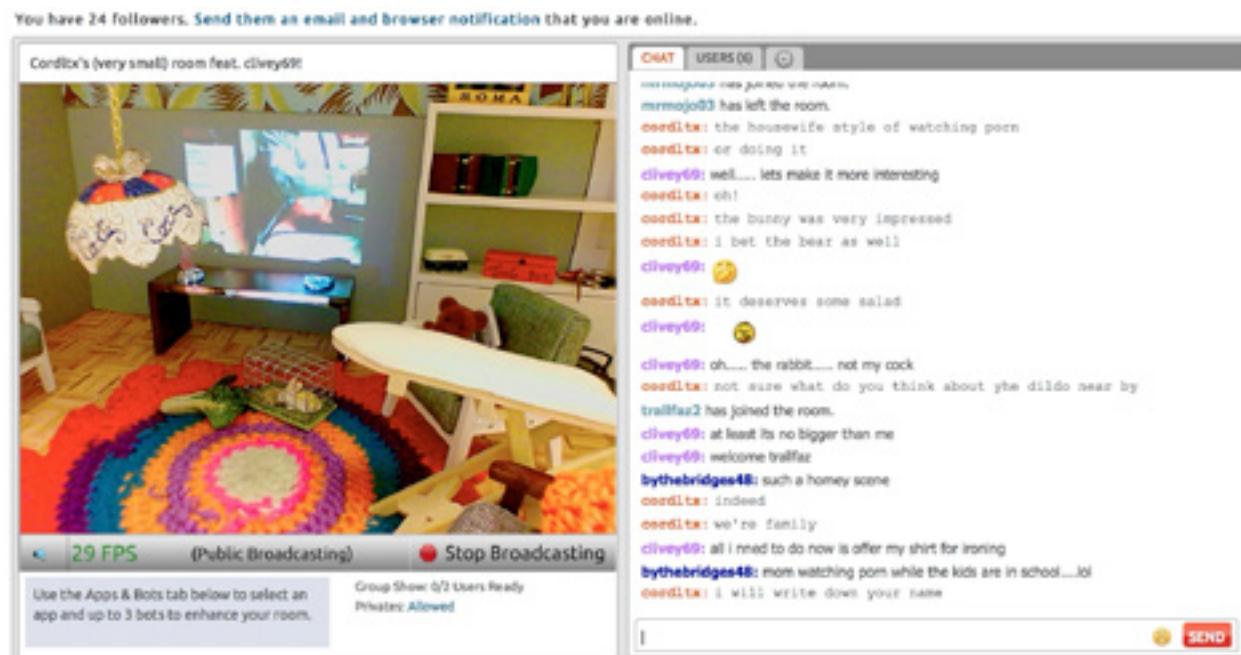


Fig. 5.12. Performance in collaboration with Clivey69.

symbol I was working with. A different play was possible, though.

I did not intend to disentangle the overlap between sex, eroticism, and play, but make use of it. I was assisted, theoretically, by Susanna Paasonen's arguments on the usefulness of play (as a framework) for engaging with sex and sexuality.⁷³

My general argument is that a focus on play makes it possible to highlight improvisation driven by curiosity, desire for variation and openness towards surprise as things that greatly matter both in sexual lives and in scholarly attentions towards them.

As a method and a disposition, playfulness allows the recognition of things that change, of bodies that are in "constant, more or less subtle transformation."⁷⁴ While stressing curiosity and improvisation, play is not necessarily amusing. This insight liberated my role on the platform, where being an entertainer did not always work. Or, more accurately, it defined what my work was, what I was playing with. A flexible understanding of erotic play (after all, I was performing on a platform that promotes itself as *the act of masturbating while chatting online*), would mean the embodiment of the research I was after. As Audre Lorde says, "the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it

73 *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play.*

74 Paasonen.

is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing.”⁷⁵ It was not possible—or it was not interesting—to remove myself from the research.⁷⁶ If I was trying to understand a sexcam platform through a dollhouse, I would have to play. It was about *the Eros of understanding*.⁷⁷

The recognition and acceptance of play, of playfulness, clarified the interlock between the different components of this research, the theoretical and the artistic. It was not only that the performative interventions on the platform gave me insights over the monetary and working conditions there, or the other way around. They did, and they were highly valuable for either aspect. At the same time, and this I only understood at the very end of the investigation, they had different *ethics*. I was trying to force a value system over these two components, and I was disturbed that they did not match, that they were out of sync. An attention to their ethics, however, would have shown me that they had, indeed, different qualities and potentials.⁷⁸ It was not about the principles that guided them but the different situations in which they unfolded, the relations they established. Both the work of sex and the sex of work were uncertain things, open questions, but ethics is precisely about how to inhabit that “uncertainty, together.”⁷⁹ It made sense, then, that *the work of sex* was a script (‘the building complex’) and *the sex of work* a performative intervention (‘the room’). They had different scales and temporalities, they asked and answered different questions, had different languages.

The combined methodology and the set of related questions allowed me to explore the sexcam platform as a *Body Without Organs*, asking about the elements that move at different speeds, with different densities. In the case of Chaturbate, this collection of practices (or interrogations) permitted to see how preexistent ideas and infrastructures modulate current phenomena and how daily habits perpetuate them. At the same time, an erotic/playful/living methodology makes it possible to grasp the platform’s *structure of feeling*⁸⁰ without freezing it, as something that is changing—like everything else.

And there was a dollhouse in between.

75 Lorde, “The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.”

76 This discussion exceeds the scope (or timeline) of this research, but it is one that scholars dealing with affect face frequently. A relevant contribution is Susanna Paasonen’s work on the recognition of the researcher’s body in the study of pornography (see *Carnal Resonance*).

77 The four consecutive performances prepared for my committee responded to these insights. They can be seen at antoniahernandez.com/artwork/maintenance-pornography/

78 Here, I am loosely following Spinoza’s understanding of ethics. Massumi, *The Politics of Affect*.

79 Massumi.

80 Using Raymond Williams’ term (Marxism and Literature).

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APPENDIX

STILL LIFE:

an archive of past liveness

Chaturbate existed before I was aware of it. The earliest captures archived on the Wayback Machine¹ are from 2011, soon after it was launched. The images from 2011 show minor design changes in comparison with the ones from 2020. The logo has not been modified, nor the colours or the layout. As it is today, people were presented on a grid of clickable thumbnails, and channels were called rooms. Some things, however, did change. I will trace here an overview of them.

2011

The tagline read: ‘Welcome to Chaturbate – 100% FREE Live Cams.’ And below: ‘Browse online cams from REAL PEOPLE like you! Broadcast your own cam if you want to flaunt what you’ve got.’ Chaturbate, in this way, was presenting itself as a version of Chatroulette, a successful yet non-commercial video roulette site where people were randomly connected to strangers in the mid 2010s. Not only did the name sound similar, but the invitation to have one-to-one exchanges was identical. This was not exactly true—or just purposely misleading. From its beginnings, Chaturbate provided a one-to-many type of interactions, with a performer broadcasting through video and audio to a variable number of connected viewers. This audience was able to dialogue with the performer using, as in Chatroulette, a chat window. If Chatroulette tried to limit the amount of sexually explicit broadcastings, but eventually failed in face of the endless influx of men masturbating,² Chaturbate made its business out of this. The business, though, was never disclosed. In fact, there was no indication on the site that this was a commercial one, although people appeared surprisingly willing to be naked in public. People could broadcast for free, and be labeled as *exhibitionists*, or be registered to eventually receive money: *chaturbating*. Only at the very beginning, channels were able to broadcast pre-recorded performances, indicated by a label as well.

As it would be the norm for the following years, the first thumbnails show the most popular rooms. These thumbnails would give information on the number of viewers, how long the transmission has been on, the geographic zone (at least what the performer declared), the age, and the sexual preference. Since November 2011, the performer’s gender was indicated by an icon: a person in pink was labeled as *female*, in blue as *male*, green for *shemale*, two people (pink and blue) for *couples*.

1 “Wayback Machine.”

2 Carr, “Chatroulette Founder Andrey Ternovskiy Raises New Funding”; Moore, “Chatroulette Is 89 Percent Male, 47 Percent American, And 13 Percent Perverts.”

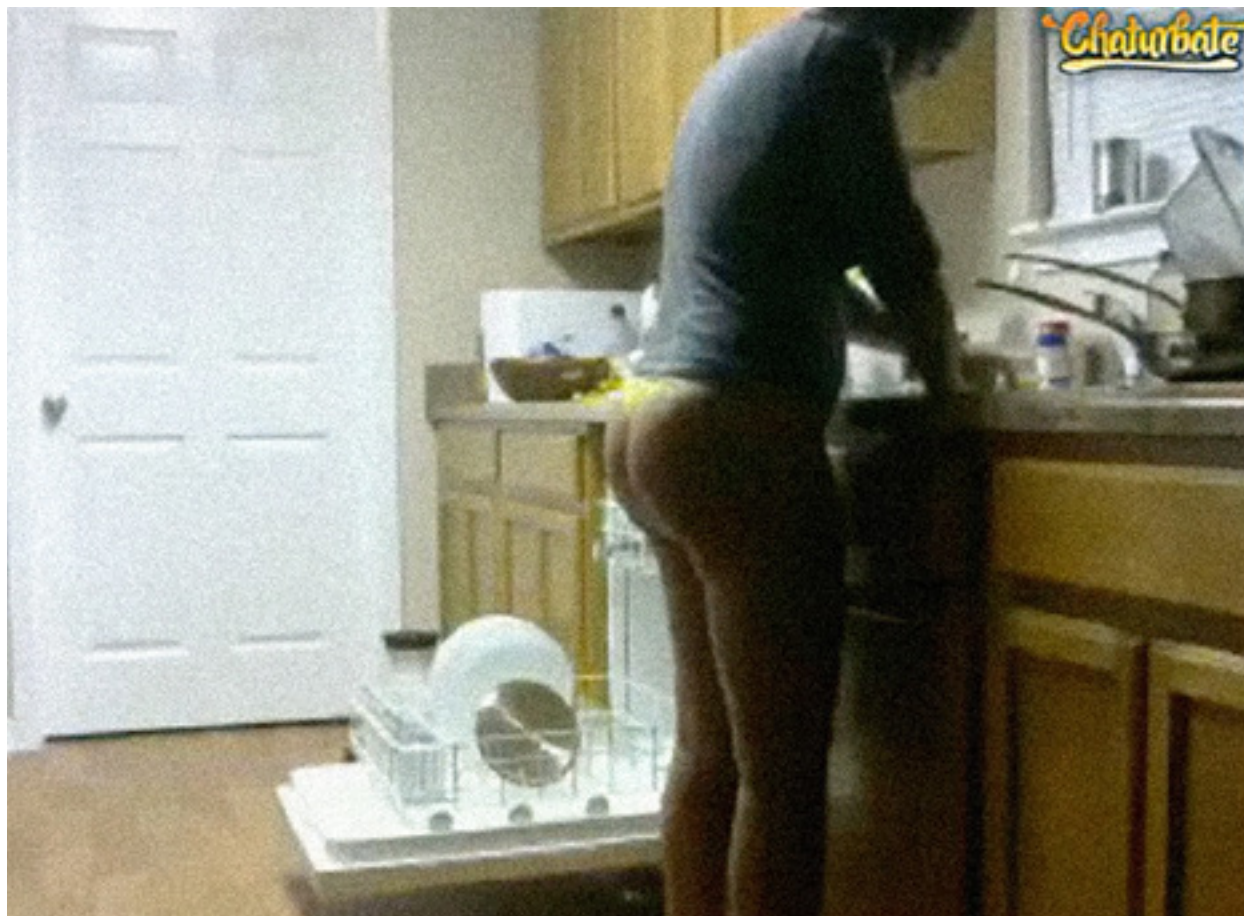


Fig. 6.1. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2014.

Only heterosexual couples at that time qualified as such. The room with the highest number of viewers I could find had 388 viewers. Most of the channels on the first page feature women, most of them in their twenties, most of them average-looking. Thumbnails are grainy, and people smile with what looks like curiosity to the camera. In August, part of the tagline changed to ‘100% FREE Live Cams – No Private Shows, No Credit Cards, No Bullshit.’ In October, it was no longer there. Around 150 rooms are streaming at once.

Besides the homepage, where the rooms are displayed, a visitor can click on other tabs. ‘Broadcast Yourself’ will bring them to their profile (or its creation). ‘Win \$11,000+’ explains a complex system of points rewards and popularity.³ ‘Fuckbook’ goes to a dating site with sexy bots (or company-provided profiles, as the site acknowledges and signals with the letter ‘c’).⁴ ‘Login’ also for creating or accessing their profile (and buy tokens).

3 “Contest Details! On Chaturbate.Com.”

4 “Is Fuckbook a Scam? - Quora”; Editors, “F*ckbook Review.”



Fig. 6.2. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2014.

2012

The most popular room has close to 2000 viewers, followed by a few with 1000. Exhibitionists are very rare on the first page, and there is a new category called 'HD.' Towards the end of this year, the 'shemale' category will be replaced by 'transsexual.' A 'Dating' option will take the place of 'Fuckbook,' displaying a Chaturbate close equivalent, and will disappear soon (Fuckbook ads will appear). There is a new button that goes to a 'Blog' section, featuring some performers. An affiliated program is announced as 'Earn Free Tokens.' Around 1350 rooms are streaming at once.

2013

The lead channel hosts more than 3000 viewers. There is a new option announced as 'Spy on Cams,' which permits a glance at private shows happening at that moment (there are private shows). Performers are less-than-average looking—or maybe it is just my impression. About 800 channels broadcast at the same time.



Fig. 6.3. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2014.

2014

Now there are ‘Group Shows.’ The most popular channel reaches more than 4000 viewers at once. More channels announce their *shows* as shows and a particular kind of role-playing, when people pretend that someone is not aware of the camera, starts to appear. Thumbnails look less grainy, most of them are HD. Around 1080 channels are broadcasting at once.

2015

‘Group Shows’ still exist but have lost their denomination. The most popular room has more than 5000 people connected. Exceptionally, though, the greatest change is the introduction of tags that describe the rooms, sometimes featured in the short description in the thumbnail—replacing the location info. The most popular is *#ohmibod*, which signals the use of a sex-toy that allegedly vibrates at the sound of digital coins. After apps, common tags also describe practices (*#squirt*, *#cum*, *#anal*) or features (*#fun*, *#naked*, *#perfectass*). Although these tags use a folksonomy classification system, where users decide the descriptors of their content, they tend to repeat. This is not fortuitous. Users can see which tags lead to bigger audiences or, more exactly, how many rooms use a particular tag



Fig. 6.4. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.

and the aggregated number of their viewers. Almost 2000 rooms are active at the same time.

2016

Around 2500 rooms are broadcasting, one with more than 8000 viewers connected and some with no one. The thumbnails look crisper, most of them are announced as HD+. There are few men on the homepage, the label 'trans' replaced 'transsexual.' Tags are divided by gender, the most popular is still *#ohmibod*. It is possible to 'follow' performers, the number of connected ones will appear on another tab.

2017

The most popular room hosts more than 10000 connected viewers. Around 3000 rooms are broadcasting at the same time. An online game ad says: 'build her, train her, impregnate her.' The most popular tag is now *#lovense*, signaling the use of another sex-toy that can be remotely activated by donating money. *#ohmibod* is the second most popular. *#lush*, also a sex-toy that vibrates when receiving money, is in the third place.

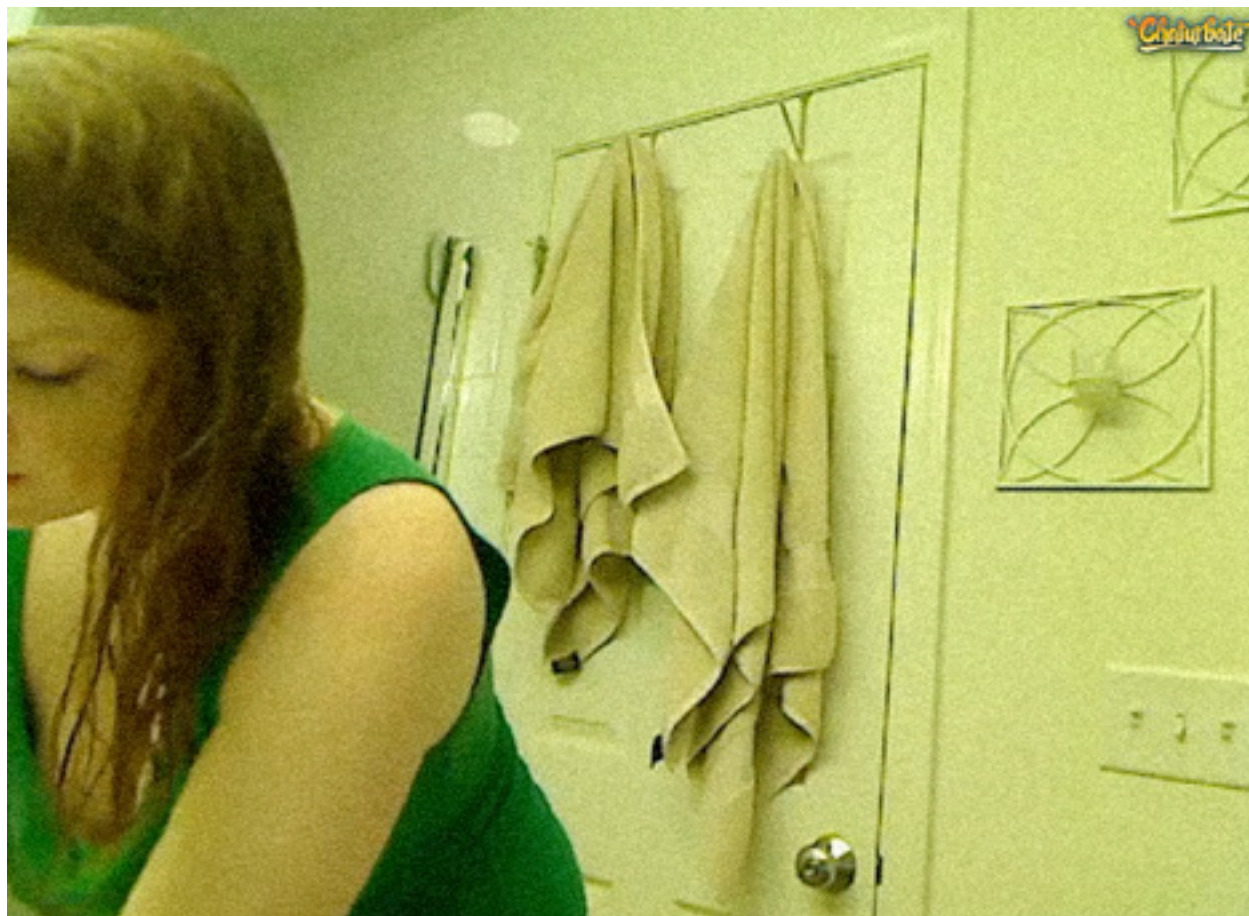


Fig. 6.5. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.

2018

Exceptionally, a room can broadcast to 30000 viewers. More often, the most popular room has around 18000 people connected. *#lovense* is the more used tag. More than 5000 rooms are transmitting at once. Half of them declare being a woman, a third being a man. Rooms under ‘trans’ and ‘couples’ split the rest of the connected rooms equally. There are three ads on the right side. One says: ‘goodbye erectile dysfunction.’ Another, featuring a woman that gets dressed and undressed in an endless loop, reads: ‘Better than Tinder: No bullshit, no signup, fast sex.’ The third announces an online game and shows three women drew hentai-like. Under each ad, it says: ‘Powered by ExoticAds. Buy/Sell Traffic.’

2019

More than 6000 rooms are transmitting at the same time. The most popular room has around 11000 viewers. The second most popular, 11000 viewers as well. The third, 9000. All the rooms featured first are HD+. After the bed, the office chair is the most common piece of furniture. The first room featuring a man alone appears in place 35. Some performers are household names by



Fig. 6.6. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.

now and regularly occupy the leading positions. Four out of the five first rooms announce they are using *#lovense*. Rooms per gender had different ads. The main page shows 3D depictions of women, announcing a ‘sex simulator’ and other games. The same ads are repeated for women’s rooms and couples. In men’s rooms, they explicitly target a gay public. Channels labeled as ‘trans’ show ads similar to the women’s ones, but the characters have large penises.

2020

The most popular room today, with more than 20000 viewers connected, announces herself as the ‘World’s 1st 3D Hentai Camgirl.’ Her name is *ProjektMelody* and is Chaturbate’s first CGI performer, appearing in February 2020. She was created by a 3D artist and game developer. She looks like a game character, has an adorable synthetically generated voice, and talks with the audience without a rest. She also has a 13’ length video on YouTube with a master class on Hentai,⁵ her own Reddit

5 ProjektMelody, *Is Hentai Art?*

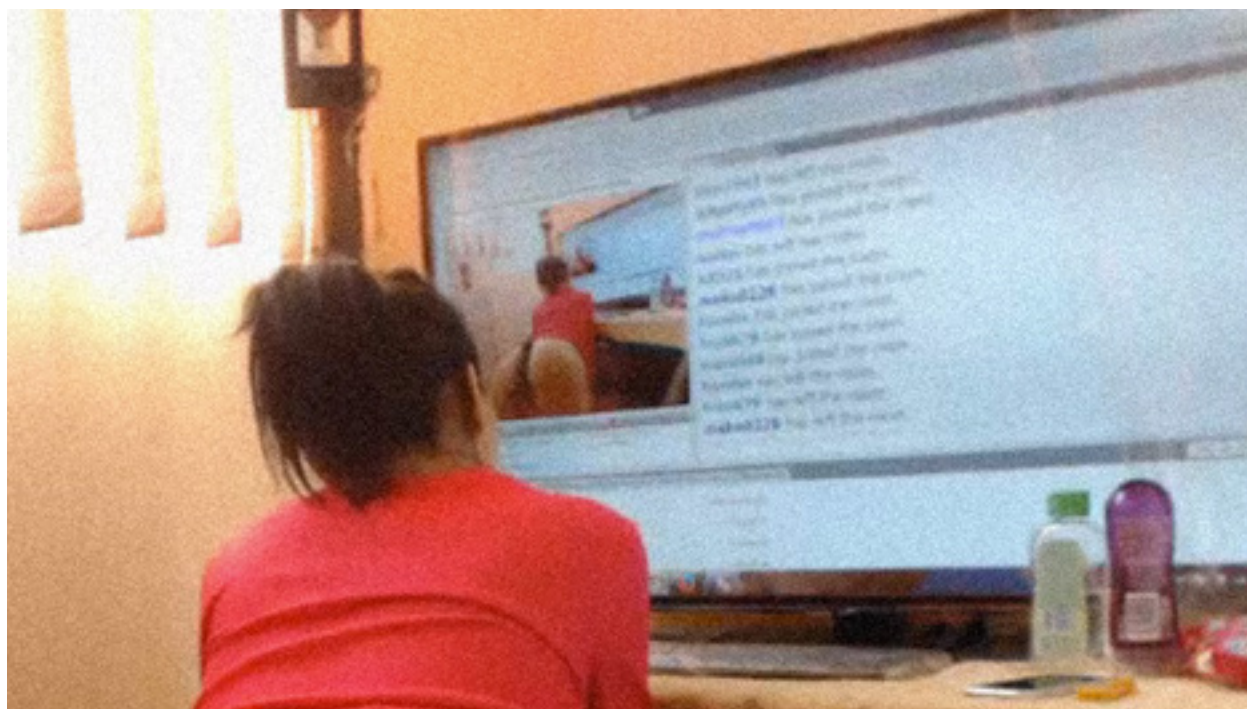


Fig. 6.7. Screen capture from Chaturbate, 2015.

forum,⁶ a fanart hashtag,⁷ a Pornhub channel,⁸ a Twitter account, and a Patreon page.⁹ Ten rooms later, there is a young woman from Moscow sitting between two big *real dolls*. Nearly 7000 rooms are transmitting at the same time.

6 “R/Projektmelody.”

7 “#projektmelodyfanart - Twitter Search / Twitter.”

8 “Projektmelody Porn Videos | Pornhub.Com.”

9 “PROJEKT MELODY Is Creating Live Streaming & Hentai Content Creation.”

