

At a Close Distance

Lotte De Jong + Antonia Hernández

exhibition proposal

Description

What happens when working from home becomes a spectacle? How is it to inhabit a platformized space? What is between the visible and the non-visible? Once peripheral phenomena on the Web, sex webcams gained social and economic relevance with the rise of online platforms, attracting millions of visitors and becoming an important source of both work and intimacy during the pandemic. Rather than an exception, the sexcam platform is in **At a Close Distance** a magnifying lens for exploring the tension between working at home and living at work in the platform economy.

At a Close Distance consists of five artworks that explore the poetics and politics of visibility on sex webcam platforms. While the platform promises to a mostly invisible audience unlimited access to the performers' private spaces, a closer look shows the fictional quality of this statement. Moreover, this asymmetric visibility also includes the sexcam platform, which provides little and misleading information about itself. Rather than unveiling what is hidden, however, **At a Close Distance** looks into the many shades of visibility that composes the sex webcam platform.

This poetic investigation on visibility considers the shifting forms it acquires and the possibilities of engagement that they offer. In particular, **At a Close Distance** addresses visible and less-visible spaces and the ways in which people inhabit or avoid them. Under these forms are also the performers' activities, with special emphasis on the overlap of maintenance actions and spectacular ones. **Liminal Connections** (2019), **BRB** (2018), and **Maintenance Pornography** (2020) are examples of this type of inquiry.

At a Close Distance is also an investigation on the politics that control visibility, asking what aspects of the sexcam platform are hypervisible/hidden, and who has the agency to take those decisions. Understanding visibility as a form of governance, **At a Close Distance** queries the different strategies and tactics that modulate what becomes visible, including the visibility of money. In a context of constant deplatforming, banning, and discrimination of sex and sex workers, **At a Close Distance** foregrounds performers' voices to explore visibility as a governance tool, as can be seen with **Tokens** (2020) and **Currently Off-Sight** (2022).

Collaboration

Antonia Hernández and **Lotte Louise de Jong** started their dialogue in November 2019 after being introduced to each other through the Institute of Network Cultures (Amsterdam) due to their similar interest in the world of camming. What started as frequent and long video conversations over transatlantic cables slowly merged into different collaborative projects that reflect their common fascination with new digital geographies and the inhabitation of online spaces. At the same time, de Jong and Hernández share a commitment to challenging sex work discrimination through artistic interrogation.



Artworks

Liminal Connections (2019)

Lotte De Jong



Liminal Connections is an experimental video documentary that examines how intimate connections forged within the private camming world relate to their associated digital and analog spaces. Those spaces—created to exist online and for a viewer yet temporarily inhabited—are best understood as liminal, as spaces of transition and threshold.

The video shows different webcam studios whilst in audio we hear extracts of interviews with different webcam performers. The performers address the crucial and demanding camming requirement of creating personal connections with the visitors. Through the combination of images and audio testimonies, we explore the liminal quality of these connections and the places where they unfold: neither real nor unreal. Contesting the stigmatization of sex workers, **Liminal Connections** questions how mediated forms of bodily representation shape us and our understanding of sexuality, intimacy, and connection.

lottelouise.nl/liminal_connections.html

BRB (2018)

Lotte De Jong



BRB is a short experimental documentary on camming where the absence of online sexual activity is the main focus. The video is composed of recorded sex-cam streams where the performer is absent. Instead, we see empty spaces, scattered teddy bears, and sex-toys. Occasionally, a cat or dog yawns and walks across the screen. Superimposed over the video, we see text from the accompanying chat where the audience talk amongst each whilst waiting for the performer to return. The recorded empty spaces show hints of human presence, like signs saying; 'Be Right Back'. With just some clues, the viewer is left to wonder who inhabits these spaces and what happened in the moments before.

Through the interplay between what is revealed and what remains hidden, **BRB** addresses how physical spaces inform the digital space and vice-versa. **BRB** is also a reflection on presence and absence in the context of being and performing online, and the resonance that this interplay has on the viewer that is left behind.

Maintenance Pornography (2020)

Antonia Hernández



Maintenance Pornography presents a series of recorded performative interventions examining work on the sexcam platform. Using a made-up dollhouse as a theatrical interface, this investigation looks into the statuses of different practices on the platform. Through a humorous yet critical play, this piece asks about social reproduction and the platform economy, the role of maintenance practices in the generation of value, the incorporation of new technological habits and infrastructures into daily life.

The dollhouse is here a figure and a research device, an expanded interface between the performers and the audience, a temporary place of reunion and a common ground for their/our maintenance practices. As a stage, it allows the exploration of a shared networked domesticity: speculated yet inhabited by bodies, data, instances of software: the domesticity of the online self. As in a feedback loop, the dollhouse holds the sexcam platform and broadcasts into it. The video is composed of four screen recordings showing live performative interventions using different settings: a bedroom, a living room, and a kitchen. While the performed actions are specific to each room, the interaction with the audience shapes the outcome and illuminates the implications of working and living on the platform.

antoniahernandez.com/artwork/maintenance-pornography

Tokens (2020)
Lotte de Jong



Tokens is a multimedia installation that explores governance on the sexcam platform through Terms of Service agreements and payment services' conditions imposed on sexcam workers. While sexcam platforms advertise themselves as free spaces, and currencies have custom-made names, a closer look reveals abusive and one-sided conditions rooted in discrimination.

Tokens scrutinizes platform governance by implementing the platform 'viewing conditions' directly into the exhibition, in the form of an installation that applies them to the different works exhibited. There are three works presented in the space: 1) a video showing cam-performers reading out different excerpts of the terms of use imposed by the webcam platforms, 2) an interactive web-sculpture showing different reviews, personal issues and other information about payment platforms linked to online sexwork through different fora and 3) a newspaper ticker showing stock-data, Alexa rankings and visitor counts of different cam websites.

Currently Off-Sight (2022)

Lotte De Jong + Antonia Hernández



Currently Off-Sight (web and video) investigates visibility on sex webcam platforms through the testimonies of webcam performers. Despite the asymmetry of power between them and the sexcam platform, **Currently Off-Sight** resists a binary understanding of what is and what is not visible in that context. In this way, the project questions the purpose of rendering things (hyper)visible at the expense of others while exploring the many shades of online perception. Foregrounding webcammers' voices, this project examines how visibility manifests on the platform, and the various degrees of agency the different actors have there.

Both in its web and video versions, the project is divided into chapters concerning the different topics addressed by the webcammers. Quoting the aesthetics used in the camming environment, these elements are placed on a simulated desktop that works as a stage and place of observation, while it also acknowledges the presence of a user in this entanglement.

currentlyoffsight.online

Statements

Lotte Louise de Jong is a multidisciplinary artist with a BA in film and an MA in lens-based media. Lotte's work ranges from interactive installations and online work to more traditional narrative forms. She draws from a mix of theoretical and practical research to create structured work that explores the implications of the intimate relationship we have with technology and the 'online' world. The way the subjects are expressed varies from websites to video to physical or interactive installations. The main themes in her work are identity, intimacy and sexuality within a digital setting. More specifically, her work explores how we, as a society, see and shape our intimate selves within mediated spaces such as the internet. She approaches her work as a free space; a place where morality gives way to nuance, humor and empathy. Within her work she explores the way we look at online culture and our own positions within it, whilst remaining critical of the social, cultural and economic structures that create inequality within and outside this sphere of online intimacy.

Lotte's work often explores subjects that are not always publicly shared or shown, like our relation with internet pornography or our expressing intimate selves. She sees the internet as an endless and interesting source to explore these hidden sides of the self. Her work tries to approach these subjects in an undogmatic way, leaving room for the public to question their own point of view. Often this is done through treating the subjects with subversive humor and reflecting on the subject itself through the media used.

Antonia Hernández is a media artist and researcher with a PhD in Communication. Both her theoretical and artistic work interrogates the ways in which technological infrastructures are inhabited, asking about their vital and relational dimension. She cultivates a practice where concepts have a potential for action, a recognition that modulates both process and outcomes. She is constantly looking for ways to convey the living experience in a living manner—using humor, play, or contemplation as methods. Formally and conceptually, she is interested in how living phenomena get digitized. With the tangible and the mundane as points of departure, she looks both for the dimensions that escape the digital and the new formations that digitization produces. She uses performance and engages with objects in novel ways, re-digitizing those experiences through video and graphic images to recombine and circulate them in a digital context.