

MOTHERBOARD

Webcam Venus’ Turned Sexcam Performers into High-Art n00dz

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Porn invented the Internet.

Fee-based subscriptions, credit card verification, internet billing systems, streaming video, Flash-embedded websites—these now-ubiquitous technologies were all pioneered by pornographers hoping to X-rate our dial-up. As soon as photography was invented, it was being used to produce pornographic images, after all, and smut has had a hand in the development of everything from the printing press to satellite television. Pornography has always exploited new technologies for profit, paving the path for mainstream adoption. The Internet, however, is its greatest work.



Addie Wagenknecht and Pablo Garcia. “Webcam Venus,” 2013

In a climate of snapchat sexts and unremitting dick-pic scandals, where sexuality is democratized and accessible to the point of being banal, how do we even define pornography? The operating assumption of US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, in 1964 (“I know it when I see it!”) is increasingly impossible to apply.

It might be a question of intent. The Venus De Milo isn’t pornographic because it wasn’t meant to titillate; Girls Gone Wild is pornographic because it means precisely that. Never mind that the Venus bears more flesh than a drunken sorority girl flashing a video camera; never mind that the girls are hardly the architects of the fantasies they’re enacting. The standards we use to delineate differences between high and lowbrow sexuality are archaic, couched in the aesthetic ideals of canonical Western art.

There are nudes, and then there are n00dz. But what’s the difference, really?

In their new project, Webcam Venus, artists Pablo Garcia and Addie Wagenknecht attempt to answer this question. They asked sexcam performers to replicate poses from iconic works of Western art, including the Mona Lisa, the Venus de Milo, and nudes by Raphael, Degas, Delacroix, and Rembrandt, to name only a few.

The images from Webcam Venus are striking: a large-breasted woman in fishnet stockings lying next to a computer keyboard and mouse pulls her shirt down and assumes the pose of Modigliani’s Reclining Nude. A performer who goes by “kimisquirtx” drapes herself across a bed and leans her head back, temporarily embodying Titian’s Venus of Urbino.

Amateur sexcam performers use webcams and chat interfaces to connect directly to their audiences. After all, we live in a world of public intimacy; every citizen of the web is a brand, an accretion of statements and publications about personal taste, friendships, meals, desires, and goods. We consume and create simultaneously; our private worlds are available for purchase and dissection.

Sex online is no different. Sexcam performers strip, pose, and perform sex acts in the moment, based on the demands of their viewers. They are both the brand, in control, and the puppets, bendable to the whims and fetishes of the paying public. “By operating in the language of sexcams,” the artists write, “we challenge the institutions which enforce false perceptions of propriety—via nudity in classical painting—as the only form of acceptable safe-for-work beauty.”

Motherboard: How did you choose the webcam performers, and what factored into your decisions to pair particular performers to particular pieces of art?

Garcia: At first, we would take anyone who would pose. We built a Dropbox folder of about 100 iconic works of art as reference. This spanned all time, mostly of the Western Canon (since we were specifically targeting that flavor of sexuality and representation we in the West have inherited), and was of males, females, couples, groupings, etc. From the ancient world classic Roman and Greek marbles and bronze, to Renaissance classics, to impressionist, and even some early modern pieces, we had a series of paintings and sculptures at the ready for when we got someone to agree to pose.

We would send them a URL or a Google search term, or we would make our profile pic the image. After a while, we started targeting certain paintings: “I am going to get an Odalisque today or bust!” We also were drawn to the variety of performers, so we would be interested in engaging different “subcultures” but not with a specific painting in mind. For example, there is no “meaning” behind having a heavysset BDSM woman portraying Delacroix or Ingres, or having a black gay man pose as Michelangelo’s David.

Sometimes it was done on the fly and live, and we got what we got. In the end, we hoped to have a good representation of the “classic art canon” and the range of gender, identities, fetishes, ages, et cetera on cam sites. Sometimes, however, it was an instant click: you see a performer and say “My god s/he LOOKS like that painting and try to get that outcome.” The “tranny Mona Lisa” was like that: Addie saw her/him and said OMG.

How responsive were the performers? Did they know they were posing for “art” as opposed to sexual gratification? Do you think that makes a difference?

Garcia: It was all very straightforward. We asked “Would you like to pose for me?” and if there was a “sure” then we said something like “Can you pose like this painting?” It was all very open, but we didn’t explain much more than that. If there was doubt, we would tell them we are artists, and that we want to pose them like art models. It seemed fairly clear that we were not asking them to pose like art because we had an “art fetish” or that we were asking this for kicks, but that we are artists and that they are posing for our artwork.

How did the differently-sexualized moment spent posing affect the performers’ ability to switch back to hardcore?

Garcia: We were amazed at how visible the switch really was. The performers are incredibly comfortable with certain displays of explicit acts that many people would find difficult to stomach. Yet when asked to merely pose, and at times fully clothed, they would get quite self-conscious. They would adjust their hair or makeup, or look for a different camera angle, all without prompting.

Some performers, mostly women, were a bit surprised we would consider them “equal to fine art.” A few said things like “I am not pretty enough for art” or something like that. We would respond “You look like a classic painting” or something somewhat flattering both to keep them motivated but also to be sincere. These are people who quite literally sell their sex for real money, and yet their ability to see themselves as “beautiful” instead of merely “sexy” sometimes was very low.

We paid virtually every performer (some would not accept money, only the gratification of doing it). Our payments would be a few dollars, but that was at times above the going rate to “flash tits or pussy” or “stroke cock” or even other more graphic acts. Some would laugh or giggle at the end of posing, partly out of self-consciousness but also a sort of “Wow, that was easy money.”

We also have raw video extending beyond the pose, and the switch back can be quite startling. We say “thank you very much”, and they say “thanks” or “you’re welcome,” and then BOOM back to grinding or spreading orifices or other “hardcore” acts. Sometimes, at least for me, it felt like a Degas got really dirty all of a sudden, or that Titian was suddenly a really dirty old man to make Venus of Urbino use a dildo.

Within the reality of the sexcam window, did your demands for poses elicit responses from other sexcam-watchers in the chat scroll?

Wagenknecht: There were some really beautiful moments in those chat rooms. One room I was in was really vulgar and everyone was wanting to see the guy take a shit to get off on. At some point I just said “Do you know this painting by Michelangelo?” Once he posed, all the energy in the room shifted in this weird new age way people joke about. It was more or less silent in the chat space, and mid-way into the pose another user typed, “...he looks so beautiful.”

Sexcam performance happens in the moment. How does that compare to the timelessness of these poses? And by taking frames of video, bringing these replicated poses out from their context and pairing them with known works of art, what are you saying/doing about the inherent ephemerality of online video?

Wagenknecht: In a way the lack of reproducibility of the internet is part of the medium. A file/image/video can be copied endlessly, without any loss of quality. It lives forever on a torrent seed even when the artist wants it dead, and the web culture of nonstop creation, sharing and remixing of files has influenced a whole generation.

Art has really shifted in the last two decades. We have been constantly and prolifically creating web-based works, and even if we are not working on the web exclusively, someone mashes it up and puts it online for us. We no longer have total control when we release something, and that is a really exciting place to be in. Your work is iterated and iterated on. This is the challenge of being an artist today. Often files are collected online and iterations happen regardless of the copyright.

I suppose the goal of an artist today isn’t to be known for a specific work but instead to be the godmother or godfather of a whole space on internet culture. To hear “This whole show is so you,” even when the gallery isn’t any of your work. You become the helicopter God. As an artist you can make a “...gif” and a minute later, someone has already iterated “...-new.gif,” but that iteration is already outdated 5 minutes later, with the arrival of “...new2.gif.” Computers and the Internet don’t require a final version, or “I still need to make some changes...” Just look at the Harlem Shake.

Webcam Venus is a work in two parts. What’s next?

Garcia: The project will be in FAT GOLD, the 5-year anniversary show of F.A.T. (Free Art and Technology) Labs at Eyebeam in New York, opening 01 April 2013.