Participation Effect: Petra Cortright's Webcam Videos, 2007–2017

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In February 2007, Cortright uploaded her first webcam video to Youtube. She titled it simply: *VVEBCAM*. Just under two minutes long, the video shows Cortright disinterestedly scrolling through the catalog of visual effects pre-programmed into her webcam, ranging from dancing pizzas to bolts of lightning. When she hosted the video online, Cortright tagged it with a range of keywords, including names of celebrities, porn search terms, and racial slurs. As a result, *VVEBCAM* inserted itself into the system of targeted circulation that was coming to define the web 2.0 era.

Between 2007 and 2017, Cortright made fifty webcam videos ranging in length from eighteen seconds to five and a half minutes. In these videos, Cortright explores the vocabulary of pre-fab effects bundled with the webcam and its software, often in tandem with popular music to which the artist sometimes lip-syncs.[1] This was the decade in which the internet ossified as its control came under the hands of a few large corporations like Amazon, Google, and Facebook. In American politics, it is loosely bookended by the social media-lite election of Barack Obama in 2008 and the viral, meme-ified Q-anon fake news of Donald Trump's 2016 campaign. It is the decade in which the promise of participation engendered by the internet gave way to disillusionment and control.

Online participation was the structuring principle of Nasty Nets, an online surf club with which Cortright had been involved since shortly after its founding. Nasty Nets was founded in August of 2006, one month before Facebook opened its ability to register to anyone with an email address, instead of only users affiliated with large universities and corporations. It allowed artists to share gifs, jpegs, and videos. Nasty Nets' surfers—which included artists such as Marisa Olsen, Guthrie Lonergan, and Joel Holmberg, among others[2]—showed a particular fondness for artifacts selected while browsing the internet. As such, Nasty Nets displayed a broad range of online user production, and an appreciation of how daily internet users experimented with the limitations of the internet in order to produce new images. Sometimes, these found things would be modified by Nasty Nets surfers. Frequently, they were displayed alongside original creations.

Instead of dwelling on the Nasty Nets aesthetic, I want to highlight its focus on structures of participation that were forming online in the late 2000s. The ability to share content, to interact with brands and public figures, and to express oneself online had almost utopian potential at the time. By 2011, network news would credit Twitter with igniting the spark of revolutions across the Middle East. Writing in 2006, Harry Jenkins recognized that, while interactivity is a technological function, participation is a cultural property: "Participatory culture is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful

new ways."[3] What Jenkins describes is not dissimilar from that of the Nasty Nets artists, whose interest in those very activities as a form of artmaking would come to define their practices in the following decade. For Jenkins, participatory culture offered an opportunity to reshape the boundaries of citizenship. In 2011, Cortright developed an algorithm to determine the financial value of her webcam videos based on their number of views—an attempt, like so many others, to translate the new viral economy into a model of financial stability.[4]

By the end of the 2010s, Cortright had largely moved on from the webcam videos, increasingly focusing on her software-based paintings.[5] Made during an era in which protocols of participatory online culture resulted in distributed artforms that operated as insertions into the internet, Cortright's webcam videos offer two distinct versions of online selfhood. One involves the use of readymade digital effects, the other, the habitation of readymade emotional affect online. Over ten years, Cortright explored nearly every possible permutation of these strategies.

As an object, the webcam has become increasingly rare as newer models of laptop and desktop computers contain built-in front-facing cameras. According to Ina Blom, video is a memory technology with an almost biological relationship to time that has, since its introduction, reformatted human memory itself. Crucial for Blom is the fact that video, like human memory, isn't really stored: it presents itself anew on the monitor each time. Because Cortright's videos are digital and not analogue, they collapse some of the distinction between recording and transmission that defined early video experiments. However, it should be noted that the primary function of the webcam is not really recording, but transmission: it allows you to turn your computer into a video chat device. In this case, Cortright's webcam videos have something in common with early experiments in video art, which also contained a dialectical relationship between acts of transmission (for which video was developed) and recording (which was an almost secondary development). Cortright's webcam videos provide the opportunity to memorialize situations and effects from an era of online technology that has now faded.

Cortright has explained that these videos have a kind of christening function. She usually makes them in new spaces—a new home, a new studio, a hotel room, a guest room—and uses their production to inaugurate new location in which she will be making art. Cortright makes art with computers, but not exclusively: she also works as a painter. The webcam videos, however, can be made with nothing but a laptop, webcam, and an empty room, they don't require any other artistic equipment. If a potted history of 20th century artistic production might include the artist's studio and post-studio practice, Cortright's webcam videos inaugurate the artist's laptop as a location for artistic production and distribution.[6]

In it's ingenious simplicity and economy, *VVEBCAM* recalls Joan Jonas' *Vertical Roll* (1972). Jonas' video is structured by a glitch common to CRT monitors of the time: a black bar that appears to roll up the screen. The glitch is caused by a miscommunication in the signal being sent to the monitor and the frequency by which it is being interpreted into an image—as such it is an error that is relatively easy to control and manipulate. Jonas uses the vertical roll to create a new space that fragments and manipulates her body on the screen—a space unique to the technology of video.

Where Jonas is interested in exploiting an error in the network of video technology, Cortright's own interest is entirely different. *VVEBCAM* relies on the use of unmanipulated presets. Cortright doesn't invent her own effects, and she doesn't situate her work in the ironic space

VVEBCAM, 2007 (1' 47")
666 Smielyz, 2008 (2' 02")
cats spirt spsit spit, 2008 (27")
moer dancing redux, 2008 (1' 51")
sad hhahahahats, 2008 (1' 31")
DRagON BALL P, 2008 (48")
DRagON BALL P2 2wice dropda bbeet, 2008 (48")
bunny banana, 2009 (1' 09")
footvball _faerie, 2009 (1' 01")
Das Hell(e) Model, 2009 (3' 49")

holy tears, 2009 (19")
when you walk through the storm, 2009 (1' 56")
:' |_ ~**~ _:' |_ ~**~ _:' |_ ~**~ _:' |_ ~**~ _:' |_ ~**~ _,
(sparkling 1), 2010 (1' 31")
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(sparkling 2), 2010 (1' 34")
sickwoof, 2011 (30")
Oh my God how we... Increase. Oh my God,
how we rise, 2010 (2' 22")
sickhair, 2011 (18")
snow2???, 2011 (34")
antipetst2, 2011 (1' 01")
911 king, 2011 (2' 34")

of technology that should work one way but doesn't. *VVEBCAM* actually manifest an interest in the tools themselves—regardless of their origin—as readymade systems that can be used towards a variety of ends.

This approach towards tools is associated with the Nasty Nets generation of artists, whose production is interested in the residue of on-line visual culture. Ed Halter has referred to this aesthetic as "sub-amateur," which he associates not necessarily with hobbyists and enthusiasts, but users who are drawn to technological functionality. "The sub-amateur," writes Halter, "Prefers a belief in content, and a disbelief in form." Finally, he concludes, "In order [to] understand the sub-amateur, we need not a vocabulary of forms, but a vocabulary of functions."[7] Artist Marisa Olsen, also a Nasty Nets user, has defined this relationship as one that confuses the distinction between technological tools and objects, focusing on what she calls soft tools, or tools that are deployed as objects. Halter and Olsen both provide crucial insight for Cortright's practice: her webcam videos deploy pre-set tools, not deconstructed and remade, nor as means to an alternative end, but usually as objects in and of themselves.

This kind of desktop aesthetics can be associated with the second wave of works by JODI, which shifted the duo's (Joan Heemskerk e Dirk Paesmas) work from the coded aesthetic of jodi.org to the chaotic readymade nature of *My%Desktop*. Cortright's ebook *HELL_TREE* (2012) takes a similar approach, collaging archeological elements from the artist's desktop into the form of an ebook. Whether we identify this aesthetic as sub-amateur, one of soft tools, or a desktop aesthetic, this is a strategy that arises from the participatory culture of web 2.0. For Seth Price, writing in *Dispersion* (2007), its impact could be critical: "Art grounded in distributed media can be seen as a political art and an art of communicative action," wrote Price, "Not least because it is a reaction to the fact that the merging of art and life has been effected most successfully by the 'consciousness industry'."[8]

In contrast to Cortright's own comments about the webcam videos, critical discussions of these works frequently fall back on the figure of the camgirl and the practice of camming, in which individuals—frequently young women—perform sex work via webcam for money, as well as other vernacular forms of online self portraiture pioneered by teenage girls.[9] This confusion places Cortright's work within a larger saga of postwar art made by women, whose work is consistently interpreted as being about themselves. Artists like Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, Hannah Wilke, and Cindy Sherman have variously been accused of making work about themselves—an implicit nod towards their supposed narcissism: Cortright's work has been approached in much the same, one-dimensional way, too. "Cortright's artwork," Bruce Sterling has mistakenly written, "Is commonly all about being Petra." The imposed interpretation of a camgirl aesthetic onto Cortright's videos is another form of this trope of critical misidentification.

However, unlike roughly contemporaneous projects like Ann Hirsch's *Scandalishious* (2008-9), Cortright doesn't appear to actually engage with the tropes of camming as a practice, or self-portraiture at all. Her videos don't directly address its viewers (though Cortright was known to respond to incendiary comments that were posted in response on Youtube), and their eroticism is more likely to be externally imposed than originate from the videos themselves. When it comes to her own self-presentation, Cortright's self is engaged more as a canvas for webcam effects than directly presented to the viewer. Cortright presents herself not as the subject of a portrait, but as a participatory actor.

antipetst1, 2011 (1' 03")
rgb,d-lay, 2011 (23")
lara practice, 2012 (3' 04")
Mainbitch.mov Spring Scrap, 2012 (5' 32")
True Life: I'm a Selfie - (Fake True's
Negativity Remix), 2013 (1' 40")
bridal shower_w_rose, 2013 (1' 37")
buggin out, 2013 (2' 04")
sssss//////^^^^^^^, 2013 (30")
††LA.christening vid.move,df †Movie on
2013-02-05 at 19.25.mov, 2013 (1' 31")
DRK PARA, 2013 (2' 08")
DOT WARP WITH DOOR 2014 (54")

CONFETTI, 2014 (35")
bora bora roses, 2014 (36")
❤•❤•❤PO(STella:)CARD FROM BORA
BORA❤•❤•❤, 2014 (37")
adidas silly, 2014 (2' 01")
VIRTUALWORLD | #adidasStellaSport,
2015 (50")
banksi unbrush ponitaeyel, 2015 (1' 08")
SNOWY, 2015 (1' 10")
DREAMY, 2015 (2' 36")
moodgoingup last november, 2015 (31")
GOOD ENERGY, 2016 (1' 08")
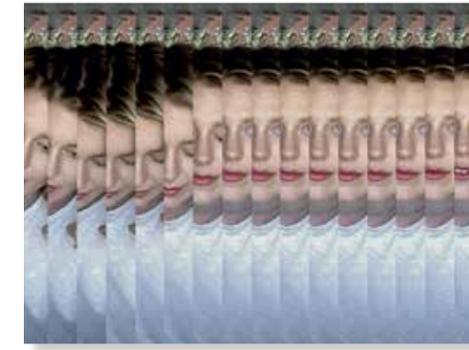
sickening chair games, 2016 (1' 50")
i thot i wuz free, 2016 (1' 22")
yellow_rose, 2016 (1' 25")
block_disassemble, 2016 (1' 50")
creep_slide, 2016 (1')
TFW UR WATCHING MAKEUP
TUTORIALS ON CONTOURING
BUT READING STEPHEN KINGS "IT"
SIMULTANEOUSLY, 2016 (1' 52")
COLOR BLOCK, 2016 (31")
FIRE (FANTASTIC PLANET), 2016 (1' 08")

In *Mainbitch.mov Spring Scrap* (2012), Cortright appears wearing a hot pink wig and matching dress. In an empty domestic space that could be either a house or an apartment, Cortright smokes and walks around while club music blares. A delay/stagger effect on the webcam causes her movements to stutter. Despite the frequency of full-body shots in this video, as well as Cortright's borderline anime/furry get up, *Mainbitch.mov* encapsulates Cortright's disinterestedness in the presence of, and her own performance for, the webcam.

Instead, she lets the tools take center stage. Smoking—not the least of this video's iconographies that could put it in range of fetish—appears here mainly to exacerbate the effects of the visual stutter. The same could be said of the long, pink wig, which provides another foil to the video's stammering. For the most part, when Cortright deploys her body in her videos, it is to engage with the effect she's utilizing—like in videos *sickhair*, *sickhands*, and *rgb,d-lay*.[10] Further, it's clear that Cortright's presence isn't necessarily required in order to produce a webcam video—as can be attested by *puparazzi* (2009), in which a dog and cat serve as the canvas for webcam effects instead of Cortright herself, or *yellow-rose* (2016), in which Cortright is clearly a secondary character to the pixelated, yellow roses that recall certain video works by Mary Lucier.

Across the videos, though, Cortright's affect changes from disinterested to enthusiastic. In *i thot i wuz free* (2016), one of the last webcam videos—it's impact is decidedly different. Cortright appears in a living space, on a sofa, one of her paintings cropped on the wall behind her. Her images fracture and multiply until only a sliver of her face is visible, repeated across the screen. They bump like a wave while Cortright lip-syncs and dances. Cortright is still when the video ends, an array of sixteen cropped smiles tilted towards the camera. Cortright's multiplied and fragmented self—as well as her more performative stance—offers a startling contrast to the first webcam video, where she is alone and disaffected versus multiplied and full of affect. Other videos that overflow with affect feature lip-syncing as a central activity.

Lip-syncing is a kind of parroted speech, and its appearance in the webcam videos recalls some of the more theatrical Warhol films (in which performers are routinely fed lines from off stage) as much as it seems to rises in tandem with a genre of lip-syncing videos that appeared on Facebook in the 2010s and now seems most popular on TikTok. That affect and lip-syncing appear in tandem in the webcam videos indicates an attempt, throughout these works, to navigate what Price, following Hans Magnus Enzensberger, called "the consciousness industry": media systems that reinforce social hierarchies by controlling human feeling, awareness, and intelligence with media hegemony. In the webcam videos, Cortright shows us how affect online is a function of what cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has termed "animatedness": an outpouring of emotional agitation combined with a lack of individual agency.[11] Whether a disinterested canvas for special effects or an overly enthusiastic participant in animated affect, all of the webcam videos offer polarized notions of how one exists online.

It is always possible that Cortright will begin making the webcam videos again. But for now her decade of webcam video production exists, in part, as a reflection of the past decade of virtual life itself: from the promise of radical communication to the prison-house of circulation that defined the internet by the end of the 2010s.[12] Cortright accompanied the webcam's possibility to record and the internet's possibility to distribute to its logical conclusion, reaching the limit of readymade effects and available affects online. Cortright's videos make the parameters of the internet's failure a little more difficult to discern—and as a result, they make the virtual space we now inhabit easier to maneuver. For that, we must all be thankful.

[1] In 2014, Cortright also made a series of webcam videos for a collection of clothing by Stella McCartney--using webcam effects to toy with the patterns and cuts of the garments.

[2] Nasty Nets surfers: Kari Altmann, Peter Baldes, Michael Bell-Smith, Kevin Bewersdorf, Brian Blomerth, John Michael Boling, Charles Broskoski, Laura Brothers, Petra Cortright, C. (chris) Coy, Paul B. Davis, Aleksandra Domanovic, Harm van den Dorpel, Constant Dullaart, Contributor Dragan Espenschied, Michael Guidetti, Britta Gustafson, Travis Hallenbeck, Ethan Hayes-Chute, Joel Holmberg, Chance Jackson, Giuseppe (Pepe) Knopf, Jan Robert Leegte, Lektrogirl, Olia Lialina, Guthrie Lonergan, Tom Moody, Javier Morales, Brenna Murphy, Marisa Olson, Summer Shiffman, Camille Paloque-Berges, Pascual Sisto, Paul Slocum, Charles Westerman, James Whipple, Robert Wodzinski, Jordan Wolfson, Damon Zucconi.

[3] http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/10/ confronting_the_challenges_of.html (accessed May 4, 2020).

[4] https://web.archive.org/web/ 20110809135326/http://www. petracortright.com/videocatalog/ (accessed May 4, 2020).

[5] That Cortright's paintings grow equally out of her participation on Nasty Nets and engage numerous other questions about image circulation, decoration, and new digital techniques, is an essay for another time.

[6] https://faa218.files.wordpress. com/2014/08/jones_caitlin.pdf (accessed May 4, 2020). It is worth noting that many of the videos use effects that would be celebrated in later, monumental works by Bruce Nauman.

[7] https://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/ apr/29/after-the-amateur-notes/ (accessed May 4, 2020).

[8] http://www.distributedhistory.com/ Dispersion2007.comp.pdf (accessed May 4, 2020).

[9] See, for example, the discussion of *vvebcam* in Rhizome's net-art anthology, which refers to *vvebcam* as "departing from the usual tropes of the camgirl genre" https://anthology.rhizome.org/vvebcam (accessed May 4, 2020). The fact that Cortright has made other works using visual representations of virtual strippers should only reinforce the distinction between her focus in the webcam videos.

[10] The main exception to this might be *Lara Practice* (2012), a more straightforward lip-syncing video.

[11] https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog. php?isbn=9780674024090 (accessed May 4, 2020).

[12] Recent works by Cory Arcangel—based on the failed utopian promise of surfing as it currently manifests on corporate websites, Instagram feeds, and games—also provide an important case for this trajectory.