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Here I Am:
Telepresent Subjecthood in the Work of Lotte Rose Kjær Skau

In 1960 the radical psychiatrist R.D. Laing published *The Divided Self* as a spirited challenge to what he believed were the egregious and inhumane tenets of psychiatric orthodoxy. Influenced by the existential phenomenology of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, Laing proposed that the language of psychiatry used to diagnose and categorise patients suffering from schizophrenia, actually exacerbated the condition and caused further fragmentation of an already split consciousness. In such circumstances aspects of schizophrenia, if not the condition itself, could be considered iatrogenic. Laing's project, then, was to instate a consideration of the patient as a socialised person within the world, not an isolated object with analysable material properties. That is to say, sufferers of schizophrenia had arrived at their current state through interactions with other persons, primarily family members, but also friends, work colleagues and acquaintances right on up to the collective manifestations of such interpersonal relations in culture and society.

As part of a comprehensive illustration of this thesis, Laing focused in on the ways individual subjects can loose a fixed grasp on who they feel they are, by swinging too much in one direction between a real and a false self or by feeling they are diminishing or ceasing to exist if they are not perceived by others. He explains in the case of one patient suffering from this 'lack of ontological autonomy'[i] that she is 'like Tinkerbell'[ii] and further that 'if she is not in the actual presence of another person who knows her, or if she cannot succeed in evoking this person's presence in his absence, her sense of identity drains away from her'[iii]. Laing later reinforces this idea with an observation about young children who, fearing disappearance through not being seen, are frightened of sleeping in the dark; he then returns to an analysis of the same ontological insecurity in adults by stating 'those people who cannot sustain from within themselves the sense of their own identity or […] have no conviction that they are alive, may feel that they are real live persons only when they are experienced as such by another'[iv]. Laing's

view that the schizophrenic can feel as if they become someone through being seen by others, or having the sensation of being seen by virtue of a seeing technology (the light bulb for the child) offers another way of thinking about our information age and telepresence – the condition of being in several different places and temporalities at once, enabled by broadcast technologies. By taking Laing's route we can see how the multiple video portraits Lotte Rose Kjær Skau assembles in *United We/I Stand etc.* (2014) are perhaps not a commentary on a decentred and fragmented postmodern self, but an investigation of self actualisation and existence in the modern information age through the aggregation of gazes collected in a camera's lens.

This process of self-actualisation through the lens comprehensively emerged with the World Wide Web. Granted, prior to the Internet one could record footage of oneself at home and imagine the gaze of some other, or take self-portraits, develop them at the local chemist and send them to whomever you liked in the post. But there existed no widely available, fast and easy way to transmit that material, no way to make that imagined viewership a reality – unless you were an internationally recognised artist like, say, Cindy Sherman. The Internet changed all of that. It was the apparatus through which you were almost guaranteed an audience of hundreds, thousands, or millions and web users quickly realised its potential. As such, through the history of online lifecasting, webcasting and videoblogging you can trace the aesthetic development that has lead to Kjær Skau's new work. The lo-fi videos in *United We/I Stand* feature Kjær Skau running through a set of dance-like movements in a domestic environment, augmented by cute, amateurish graphics that sparkle and shimmer like decorations on a tween's pencil case. But it is the overall image quality that belies the work's debt to the web. Furthermore, the way that her body is framed and her eyes tilt down into what we imagine to be the lens, reveal she is focused on a webcam attached to a computer or a camera positioned in such a way to suggest this is the case. These physical indicators show that action is being directed to a certain technological eye, not a mounted Super 8, Portapak, VHS

or HD camera. They are the hallmarks that separate *United We/I Stand* from pre-Internet, body oriented and subject oriented video art by the likes of Hannah Wilke, Joan Jonas, Vitto Acconci or Bruce Nauman. While the innovations of these high profile, pioneer video artists undoubtedly laid the foundations for Kjær Skau's work, the true precursor, the tradition of representation that *United We/I Stand* engages with, begins with a web-born subculture that emerged in the late 1990s whose members where known as Camgirls.

Before the Internet, stereotypical and regressive representations of women were largely seen to be authored by a patriarchal culture industry set up to reinforce the superiority of males and to satisfy the dominant male gaze diffused throughout mainstream media. In her classic essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey used psychoanalytical theory to interrogate this tendency as manifest in the representation of women in mainstream Hollywood film. She argued that cinema is a complex system of signification, primarily structured along two lines: 'the scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object) and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations, mechanisms, which mould the cinema's formal attributes'[v]. In other words, it is the classic psychoanalytic dichotomy of ego-formation, between that which we desire and that which we want to be. Mainstream cinema, for Mulvey, makes sure the male ego is reinforced, and castration anxiety assuaged, by producing imagery that presents females as subservient, passive, and eroticised objects for scopophilic consumption. The arrival of Camgirls problematised all of this.

Camgirls is the name used to refer to women who use webcams from home, or an environment designed to look 'like home', to broadcast live and pre-recorded footage of themselves online in exchange for money (paid subscriptions), gifts or capital ultimately accrued through monetised attention (large viewing figures that attract advertisers willing to pay for ad space). It grew out of the practice of female lifecasting - broadcasting 24hr footage of your life online - that gained notoriety in 1996 when American student Jennifer Ringly set up a desktop camera in her college dorm room and began broadcasting everything via her 'Jennicam' website. Ringley's project set the aesthetic and titling standard that others – like anacam, anabellacam and amandacam[vi] – soon followed. Today, with the exponential rise in homecamming fostered by YouTube and the like, the moniker of Camgirl is applied to a wide range of activity from hardcore pornography to pop-culture criticism featuring women in domestic environments addressing webcams. For some Camgirls, as explored in Theresa M. Senft's *Camgirls: Celebrity & Community in the Age of Social Networks*, the webcam is seen as a tool for empowerment and not subjugation. There's no patriarchal hand forcing them to engage in whatever activity they choose to do online, and in Aerlyn Weissman's 2003 documentary *Webcam Girls*, American sexologist and former Camgirl Ducky DooLittle maintains 'my audience is about half and half. Half male, half female.' Nevertheless some form of sexualised display typifies the look of a great number of Camgirls. In fact the wholesale sexualisation of women across the web, as sexually explicit pop-ups that appear on peer-to-peer sites, sexually suggestive thumbnails on YouTube and so on, suggests that passage through a filter of erotic objectification is a prerequisite for women appearing online. The idea is of course that sex sells, but the perennial question is whether the barring of flesh, or the suggestion of sexual availability implicit in the 'bored, lonely girl at home with her cam' narrative, actually empowers the Camgirl and uses the viewer she attracts. To put it another way, can the Camgirl's vision of herself as an empowered woman overcome that scopophilic vacuum of the male gaze? Which brings us back to Kjær Skau's exploration of self-actualisation.

Kjær Skau has said that *United We/I Stand* is about 'investigating socialism/egoism in 2014' and 'whether multiple videos/persons will stand stronger than one'. Clearly what constitutes this 'socialism/egoism' in 2014 is a mode of being in which one's ontological fixity is determined and cemented by being-with others through technology. There is no hint of the subject diminished by telepresence here; in fact it is quite the opposite. By looking at the various incarnations of the artist, in the same way Laing identified for Tinkerbell in Peter Pan, Kjær Skau is viewed into stable existence by the act of looking. In many ways we can take this idea of technology boosting the strength or broadcast volume of one's subjectivity as read today, but there is something else. In addition to an exploration of self-actualisation, *United We/I Stand* prompts questions about the status of female representation online, about that tension between empowerment and exploitation.

Speaking on the subject of female emancipation and self-empowerment, Virginia Woolf famously wrote that 'a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction'[vii]. It was a consideration framed to explain the necessary conditions for literary pursuits, but it is clear that the practice of writing fiction is also symbolic of general independence. Again, Camgirls seem to problematise that maxim. Here is a subculture enabled by money and a room of one's own, but rather than emancipation though literature or some other intellectual activity, the Camgirl is frequently reduced to the status of an erotic object, among many others, existing to satisfy the scopophilic gaze of a predominantly male viewership. Kjær Skau is no Camgirl, but what is translatable from that realm into the gallery-based situation, is that tension between what the subject projects and what the viewer perceives. Laing wrote 'within the context of mutual sanity there is, however, quite a wide margin for conflict, error, misconception, in short, for disjunction of one kind or another between the person one is in one's own eyes (one's being-for-oneself) and the person one is in the eyes of the other (one's being-for-the-other).' This symbiotic relationship between socialism and egoism, where the one produces and cultivates the other, functions almost like an algorithm on the web, designed to galvanise the production of subjects online. The great chasm of misunderstanding, for good or ill, comes in the disparity between what is projected out to the world and what everyone else in turn reads. 'Here I Am' is what Kjær Skau's work is saying, but what is it that you see?

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[i] Laing, R. (2010) *The Divided Self*, London: Penguin
[ii] ibid.
[iii] ibid.
[iv] ibid.
[v] Mulvey, L. (1989) 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
[vi] M. Senft, T. (2008) *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, New York: Peter Lang publishing
[vii] Woolf, V. (2000) *A Room of One's Own*, London: Penguin Classics