

Table of Contents

The Story of the Eye 1

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By Hari Kunzru

Hari Kunzru on the Jennicam

In a heavily networked world, surveillance and display are two sides of the same coin. Cheap digital cameras, videoconferencing technology and the CUSeeMe system are bringing surveillance into the sitting room.

The first-wave geek vogue of networked coke-machines and cam-sites pointing at the lab office has been superseded by ambitious projects like Neal (Snowcrash) Stephenson's dubious Global Neighbourhood Watch proposal, in which info-workers in different time zones receive cam images of each other's streets, Australian netizens watching for burglars in London while their counterparts are asleep.

Exhibitionism is one response to surveillance. American college student Jennifer Ringley has taken the cam phenomenon to one of its logical conclusions, installing a camera in her dorm room and linking it to the web. The 'Jennicam' updates every three minutes, and is never switched off. Whatever Jenny does, she does in front of a crowd. Her site, which is now hosted on a commercial server, is sophisticated and includes features such as a gallery of past Jennicam grabs, an FAQ, and a 'spot the curve' competition in which viewers are shown a scan of a small piece of skin and invited to guess what part of Jenni's body it comes from. The phenomenon of a young woman quite literally anatomising herself via the web is an extraordinary one, and Jenni's site has made her one of the web's first real stars. In June she started charging, an arrangement which further problematises her status.

Occasionally Jenni will perform for her camera, and a market has developed for explicit grabs of her choreographed strip shows. Her site is linked to numerous commercial pornographic sites, which present her as an 'amateur' porn star, in the vein of reader's wives pictures or images in contact magazines. But though Jenni occasionally uses it for sexual purposes, for the most part the cam shows an ordinary young woman's life in all its drabness. Jenni talks on the phone, washes her hair, goes to sleep for eight hours a night. All this makes her voluntary abdication of privacy (which does not seem to be motivated by any political, or artistic agenda, and only latterly by a financial one) all the more interesting. In light of the various flavours of psychoanalytic theory which link identity to vision, and especially those which describe a problematic female relationship to a diffuse, pervasive masculine gaze, what could Jennifer Ringley be doing, as she sits in her room and takes her clothes off in front of her computer?

Jennicam

Hari Kunzru <hari AT metamute.com>