

# FLAUNT



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## PETRA CORTRIGHT

*A Demonstration in Artistic Onus*

In a video she made in 2009, "Das Helle(e) Modell," artist Petra Cortright dances before a camera in mom jeans and an undershirt to Kraftwerk's "The Model," sashaying with her sweatshirt like it's a dance partner. Her body gives off a strobe-like glow, at times appearing translucent. It's mesmerizing, and almost therapeutic to watch.

Skip ahead a year to "Sparkling," where she walks around a cactus and tree-filled backyard, pink and green sparkles circling her body and falling from the flower petals she shakes from a tree.

It's Cortright's technique of becoming part of her art—which sprung from a spontaneous interaction between her and her webcam years ago—and her penchant for layering effects that plucked the 27-year-old net artist's work out of the casual arena of Internet play and dropped it where it is today:

highly regarded venues like the Venice Biennale and the New Museum.

Gifs from the nineties—falling snowflakes, a wiggling clown hat, bright yellow smiley faces, explosions of fireworks—are her coup de grâce. She puts them together during the process of filming with techniques like motion tracking and built-in-filters to create an invariably glitch-prone look she likes.

“When I make the webcam videos I’ll usually do several takes,” she says. “The first one is almost always the best one, because it feels natural. The videos where I can lose myself always come out the best.”

Her first webcam video, “vvebcam” (2007)—the aforementioned catalyst of her current work—shows the artist gazing off camera as low-tech gifs of pizzas, chickens, and lightning dance around her. She posted it to YouTube, where most of her art can still be found. In 2011, the site removed it—not for its content, which is the antithesis of obscene, but because of its accompanying description: a “really huge paragraph, like an Internet spam list...” she explains. “The list is so bizarre, it’s almost beautiful. Also, at the same time, disgusting, funny, and cute. And it has Taco Bell, KFC, Britney Spears. It’s just a good description.”

The description serves her interest in YouTube vernacular: “People speak very differently on YouTube than they do on Flickr or Vimeo. No one is talking shit on Flickr.” Despite its removal, the video lives on and is now viewable on Rhizome, an online digital art archive.

The artist recently ventured to her first residency in Troy, New York, where she is working at the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC). The new environment has freed her from any sort of interruption, and the soundproof studios suit her well: “I can listen to a Britney [Spears] song super loud a hundred times over and over while working on a video, and it’s not going to bother anyone. I just forget about any kind of distraction and movement.”

For her latest project, Cortright is addressing the YouTube debacle around “vvebcam” in a video commissioned by MOCAtv. Currently in progress, the video features a cute puppy in front of a webcam, wearing various custom tags made at Petco. “They all have a selection of words from the list [from “vvebcam”]. Some of them are really nice, and some are vulgar or pornographic—the words that got me in trouble.” Words like ‘vagina,’ ‘dragonball,’ ‘niggers,’ ‘o’reilly,’ and ‘spears.’ “It was a painfully literal thing, me being in the doghouse with YouTube, and then hiring this puppy.”

“Sickhands,” (2011). Webcam video. Edition 1 of 3 + 1 AP. 24 seconds. Courtesy the artist and Steve Turner Contemporary, Los Angeles.

**Written by Chloe Schildhause**