

David Fagan
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A black and white photograph of a person standing in an open, paved area, holding a large white sign with both hands. The sign has the text "HE SAW THE WORLD AND WAS LEFT WANTING" written in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters. The person is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and dark trousers. In the background, there is a low wall made of concrete blocks and a building with vertical columns. The ground is paved with large, light-colored tiles.

HE SAW
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AN ACHIEVABLE THING IS ACHIEVED

Emer Lynch

In 2001, a dingy old coffee pot sold on eBay for the remarkable sum of £3,350 sterling. It was a common kind of pot: well-used and well-faded; extraordinary in its ordinariness. The pot had spent its life up to this point at the University of Cambridge, where a team of enterprising computer scientists were scattered across a large floor of work stations. All of them drank from a single pour-over coffee machine. Wanting to avoid unnecessary refill trips with mug in-hand to see should the pot be full or empty, they earnestly invented a way to stream its image live to their desks. Here in Cambridge, in the Computer Lab Trojan Room in the early 1990s, the World Wide Web Cam was born. The German company who parted with their 4-figure cheque were thus less interested in The Trojan Room Coffee Pot as a household accessory, than as an object coveted, a relic of the technological past, in the role it played at a key moment in the history of the internet.

Web camera use has been on an upward-only scale since, in a culture possessed by the incessant exchange of online visual material. While images of the Trojan Pot were swapped by a small number of interested parties in a closed circuit, the advent of public webcam use has enabled glimpses of other worlds to be broadcast across the globe, promoting travel while often demonstrating the excess wealth and taste of private and public bodies. Public web camera content lacks the creative input of a photographer or film-maker. As a general rule, the installation of the public camera is likely at a height, fastened to an unused spot on a permanent structure. The position partly dictates the angle of view, with the zoom setting fixed. Under surveillance by eyes around the world, everything on the planet has the ability to become coveted, to transform from an ordinary pour-over coffee vessel to Trojan Pot and back again to the scrap heap of recycled household goods. Each live stream is thus fleeting, a one-time only event, and simultaneously a moment transformed and forever held.

In David Fagan's artworks, as in communication technologies, the lowest common denominator is repeatedly used to share information. Unadorned material is presented, with the overt possibility to multiply the content. *Work 1, Work 2* already exists in many ways all over the world, via international public web cameras, yet the artwork holds weight in the gallery of Siamsa Tíre, Tralee. Benevolently

held out from the wall, two monitors live in the space as a physical form repeated from sculpture to TV. Each blinking screen updates a live transmission of international public sculpture, one depicting *Maman* by Louise Bourgeois (located outside the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) and the other peering at *Cloud Gate* by Anish Kapoor (Millennium Park, Chicago). The lenses of the public web cameras show these sculptures as they really exist, each positioned in its own milieu with life coasting by around it. Web camera streams are grainy, forgettable, real. The limitations embedded in them, in their poor image quality and placement, are similar throughout the world, leaving us with a predictable viewing experience. All the environmental and human trappings of reality affect the live stream experience. In *Work 1, Work 2*, the daily motion of life is part and parcel of the work's aesthetic oeuvre. The composition of each depicted frame necessarily includes the quotidian activity in the artwork's hinterland, as is the public nature of the public sculpture. Beside one another in the gallery at Siamsa, these famous sculptures are parcelled into the televisions, relocated and reconsumed into a space that is dedicated to the display of artworks.

Perhaps even more noteworthy in recent times is the increased popularity of how broadcasting systems are used to our own personal, rather than public, ends. *Oh my God, maybe you saw me like ten minutes ago* is a work relayed through the artist's smartphone, in which Fagan sets himself the task to ring his friend Sara (who is living abroad) at a predetermined time. They have an unscripted conversation while Sara stands in front of a public webcam so that David can spot her online on his computer monitor in Dublin. The footage combines the recording of this voice call and the camera's video stream. Embracing the intimacy of their relationship, the work allows both parties to form a visual memory of the event as well as a sense of authorship over the public space where Sara stood while they chatted. Watching, we too earn a personal connection with a remote, unfamiliar place through the conduit of a conversation between friends. In subtle ways, this work expands upon the human motivation behind the Cambridge academics' invention thirty years ago.

In *Oh my God, maybe you saw me like ten minutes ago*, David sought visual proof that his friend existed and was functioning well; he *knew* that she got a new coat, that her hands *did* become

freezing holding the phone outside. *Alison*, on the other hand, is a work which is difficult to measure by either geographical or temporal means. A 39" flat-screen TV attached to the wall with a bracket, *Alison* is blanketed by object-hood, but she is also a living work that is committed to performing. Mostly the television is switched off, but sometimes, on the east coast of America, a button is pressed, turning the TV's channels on - turning its status from a 'thing' to a working 'art object'. *Alison* abides by digital commands that are far from the gallery, on the other side of the world. She always performs, whether or not she is turned on or off, in order to prove that she has been pressed 'on' or 'off'. Like simple pencil marks drawn on white paper, a composite of red, green and blue colours appear on the screen - or don't - and this is all the communication proof that is needed to indicate that *Alison* exists and works.

Oh my God, maybe you saw me like ten minutes ago plays at real-time tempo, and typifies a European city activated by sights, sounds, smells, taste and touch, in which each active sensation adds a layer of texture to the others. Sara participated in her cityscape by navigating to the point where David could virtually encounter her on-screen. The footage tries to capture her within the frame of David's computer monitor, yet the 'dead stare' of the public camera impresses a *stillness* upon the momentum of the meeting. The work acknowledges the detached nature of web cameras, but also signifies their worth in enabling access to people and places in the world by non-physical means. It also highlights how online exchanges of information cause a shift in how our bodies disburse and receive communication, with aural values increasingly challenging ocular experiences. David's video stream of his conversation with Sara is documented, but he's hidden from view and she is a tiny raisin onscreen. As the camera's domain remains unchanged, their voices gain the authority of the artwork.

A sensory mix is also provoked by *die Reise* in a work that uses existing footage of train rides. The recordings are made from the front of the vehicle, so that what we see in the most part are tracks that go for miles into the distance, stretched and projected onto the gallery's viewing screen. The picture's composition is often unstable. ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) is a perceptual phenomenon which uses sounds such

as hand movements, scratching or the voice as relaxing stimuli. *die Reise* uses immobility in this way to bring you into the present moment, rescaling time and geography, the feeling of moving at a skin-crawling pace, yet the scene moves forward and around in chronological time. The digital trip travels a broken loop through Germanic scapes, in the demonstration of a viable train route that the artist has stitched together digitally. With no destination in sight and at a skewed scale, the viewer is fixed in the meditative hold of the projected railroad. ASMR takes hold of the senses, and here, in the train, the viewer is pulled into the video whilst the audio reaches into the body.

At its core, an artwork is made of the same things used to construct all facets of human life. This is a fact and phenomenon that can help or hinder a personal connection to a work of art. A famous building is impressive until you visit it in person and you see it has doors with hinges, and carpets that are carpets, bricks that are bricks and glass that is glass. Observed with human eyes, ears and perceptions, the building is experienced as an assemblage of items put together in an achievable manner. The very fact that it has been proven to be assembled disproves magic and undermines mystique. In this way, and in our encounters with the world, its objects and artworks, wherein any expectation has been established, feeling 'underwhelmed' is probably more familiar to most than they'd acknowledge. When our expectations are met, do we feel satisfied? Or do we feel underwhelmed because our expectations were not exceeded?

With the essential live content of each work in *He saw the world and was left wanting* determined by the actions and experiences of other people in other settings, moments experienced in the exhibition may thus feel insufficient. And yet, David Fagan focuses this distance into knowable, tangible elements by enrolling all of these energies of expectation - energies from the works and their source locations, from the participating parties, from the gallery and its audience - to purport the rich experience of personal gain through another person, object or place. By changing any number of filters, any situation can become something of value.

¹Reference to Bill Brown's essay 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 28, The University of Chicago Press, 2001