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## THE 'STUFF' OF LIFE: MATERIAL PLAY AND PERFORMANCE IN DIGITAL VIDEO CULTURES AND CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE

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### Introduction: Video Cultures of Material Play

Crunching, crinkling, oozing, peeling, tapping, folding: play and performance with materials and objects can be seen as a trope across digital video cultures, in particular in the context of YouTube. Many popular forms, such as slime making tutorials, prank stunts, ASMR and unboxing videos employ different modes of interaction that serve to emphasise material form and sensory qualities. Addressing various different target audiences, activities can include pouring viscous glue, crushing tin cans, exploding watermelons, tapping nails on plastic or sinking them into sand. Sound, image and material are employed to create a 'haptic visuality' (Marks, 2000); where the audio-visual simulates experiences of other senses especially touch, producing a more 'realistic' embodied and affective experience.

### Affective Labour and the Consumption of Material Play

ASMR videos are made with the intention of triggering an Autonomic Sensory Meridian Response in the viewer. This prescribed physiological response is described as a pleasurable tingling sensation that spreads from the scalp down the spine, and is claimed to be therapeutic, relieving stress and anxiety through the release of biochemicals. The self-identified intention of ASMR to deliberately trigger bodily affects is instructive of the operation of the trope of material play across wider digital video cultures. There is a catharsis implied by the manipulation of material, an affect similar to that of popping bubble wrap: the satisfying yield of the material to pressure.

I aim to trace and examine material play as a trope of digital video culture obscured in the 'visual soup' of YouTube. The platforms rhetoric to 'broadcast yourself', belies the curation of ostensibly user-generated content through algorithmic instruments of corporate profit. The "affinity space" (Lange, 2014) of YouTube exemplifies how self-production, fandom and community are deployed to operate in the service of the market, with multiple forms of digital labour enabled through the platform.

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Hardt and Negri's (2000) conceptualisation of affective labour is asserted as playing a key role in the operation of digital economies in many current contemporary analyses (Gregg, 2009; Jarrett, 2016). Terranova's discussion of free and immaterial labour in digital economies can be further categorised in relation to the labour of production and consumption, such as Internet prosumer labour (Fuchs, 2010) and consumption work (Huws, 2003).

I will argue that the trope of sensory material play produces bodily affects in the viewer, and that the power of these pleasurable embodied experiences operating at a pre-conscious level, produces a form of compulsive spectatorship that drives consumption. As Patricia Clough maintains: "capital has begun to accumulate from within the very viscera of life" (Clough, 2008: p. 219). In this way, this ostensibly 'throwaway' video culture speaks to the harnessing of affect as a key driver of digital economies, and the biopolitical colonisation of bodies.

### **The 'Stuff of Life': Material Registers of Re-presentation**

The items used in material play videos are often mundane domestic or artificial, pop-tastic and iridescent objects and materials; Through a DIY culture aesthetic and the ostensibly user-generated setting of YouTube, these materials are represented as the objects to hand, part of the everyday: 'the stuff' of life. They are at once both mundane matter and desirable product. The employment of these materials is framed by a rhetoric of participatory culture that speaks of agency, disruption, and the re-appropriation of these commodities as 'life hacks' and 'pranks'.

These videos operate through the mimesis of the material, sensory experiences of life: re-presentation that triggers and replays physical and affective memories. In this paper I will employ Cowie's discussion of 'desire for the real' in order to examine the visual pleasures offered by these forms of video and to unpack the registers of representation that they operate through: in particular the mimetic representation of 'reality' and 'liveness' (Cowie, 2011; Auslander, 1999).

### **Material Play in Performance Practice**

In order to and to consider the trope of material play within wider visual culture, I will draw a parallel between these digital video cultures and art practice, especially performance. This 'queering' of the use of material and the sense of the live event unfolding speak to performance art practice, in which materials and objects, often in dialogue with the body produces the art work live or 'as if live'. For instance Fischli and Weiss' *The Way Things Go* (1987) in which a series of mundane, dis-used objects – a plank, an old tire, cans of paint – are set off in a precarious chain reaction, unfolding as a series of contingent events that may or may not work. The question might be asked what art can offer to critical discourse when such subversive modes of material play have been subsumed into the mainstream?

This is even more problematic for artists who position their work in digital contexts. The work of David Henry Nobody Jr and Jan Hakon Erikson are published within the digital

space, specifically on Instagram. Both these artists use play with domestic materials, objects and food that evokes abject, sadistic and absurd voyeuristic pleasures. Whether they identify themselves as anti-influencers or visual artists, they occupy a space between high and low culture, art practice and internet sensation. In addition to resonating with some forms of digital video culture, they can also sit within the tradition of high art. There are strong parallels to Rebecca Horn's body sculptures, as well as the self-portraiture of Cindy Sherman, especially in its later turn to the grotesque. Through an analysis of the practices of these artists, I will discuss how these works reveal, mobilise, parody and subvert the operation of digital video cultures.

## **Conclusion**

Through this discussion of play and performance within digital cultures and art practices I aim to consider how these representations operate through the mimetic production of 'realness' both as representation and bodily affect. Through discussing this obscured trope of digital culture, I aim to consider the operation and power of such forms of representation in digital economies as the covert harnessing affective labour.

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