

shrimpychip YouTube

By

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Artworks viewable online at
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCj8DLlslc8pkNGheKv7W-RA?view_as=subscriber
#covidart #ronathesis #shrimpyMFA

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

ABSTRACT

shrimpychip YouTube is a series of YouTube videos that explore the ways in which digital intimacy and capitalism intersect. The performances, designed for YouTube, strategically exploit emotional responses to the body, the home, and notions of privacy in order to highlight the counterintuitive relationships embodied in digital capitalism. The structural aesthetics of social platforms are deliberately employed in my videos to stress the strangeness of these new economic, cultural, social and personal relationships. In documenting myself using the algorithmic structures embedded in these systems, the work functions as a digital archive of actions and perceptions, providing a firsthand account of the body and thoughts as they are mediated by technology. By tirelessly following trends to the point of ridiculousness, the online persona of *shrimpychip* empathizes with the internet culture while simultaneously highlighting our vulnerability within these systems.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

#List of Images	vi
#(Shrimp) Chips with Everything	1
#Data & Power	3
#I Know You; I See You, I Hear You, You Post All the Time	10
#Neurocapitalism	16
#Poor Accelerated Images	22
#In Conclusion	31
#Bibliography	33

#LIST OF IMAGES

1. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: MANNEQUIN CHALLENGE*, posted November 24, 2019, 1:10, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEMjSgWjUbk&t=10s>>
2. Erica Scourti, *Body Scan*, 2014, 5:03, Video Still.
<<https://vimeo.com/111503640>>
3. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: How to Edit Your Selfies*, posted January 8, 2019, 3:55, Video Still.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVC8z_MXKp8&t=1s>
4. FaceApp results after repeatedly cycling artificially generated white person from thispersondoesnotexist.com through the Male, Female 1 and Female 2 modifiers, February 2020, Screen Captures.
5. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: Talking to Myself Before Bed on a Sunday Eve in Late July*, posted July 30, 2018, 1:42, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-1CAoJHQb8&t=1s>>
6. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: Talking 22 Confessions on a Saturday Night in Early July*, posted July 8, 2019, 5:48, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaOx5lcfRyo&t=116s>>
7. Jennifer Ringley, *Jennicam*, March 20, 1998, Webcam Photo.
<<http://web.archive.org/web/19980124153412/http://www.jennicam.org/index.html>>
8. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: How to Make Friends on Chatroulette*, posted November 14, 2018, 6:43, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Loaf37z9K8Y&t=3s>>
9. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: How to Find Your Doppelgänger*, posted on January 11, 2019, 4:14, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSdpyfSZw24>>
10. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: How to Find Your Doppelgänger*, posted on January 11, 2019, 4:14, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSdpyfSZw24>>
11. Constant Dullaart, *DullBrown™*, 2018, Screen Capture.
<<https://dullbrown.com/>>

12. Constant Dullaart, *DullTech™ media player*, 2015, Screen Capture.
<<http://dulltech.com/>>
13. Constant Dullaart, *High Retention, Slow Delivery*, September 2014, 10:00, Video Still.
<<https://vimeo.com/107035478>>
14. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: How to Take the Perfect Selfie*, posted on October 7, 2018, 10:32, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xGATWxZrXDo&t=211s>>
15. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: SHRIMPY REACTS!!!*, posted on October 1, 2019, 0:57, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CUsNmEbTFR4>>
16. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: ROOM TOUR 2020*, posted on December 21, 2019, 2:52, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-PTHyTuYIE&t=44s>>
17. Ryan Trecartin, *The Re'Search (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009-2019, 40:05, Video Still.
<<https://vimeo.com/24631059>>
18. Marisa Olson, *Performed Listening: Boomerang (Screencap)*, 2009, 10:39, Video Still.
<<https://vimeo.com/110214135>>
19. Marisa Olson, *Double Bind (Screencap)*, 2010, 2:02, Video Still.
<<https://vimeo.com/110213232#>>
20. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: Only Time*, posted on June 11, 2019, 3:52, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZj01qsLabY>>
21. Becca Wijshijer, *shrimpychip: Top 5 Things To Do In Berlin*, posted on July 17, 2019, 7:27, Video Still.
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9pUOxJbCcl&t=119s>>

#(SHRIMP) CHIPS WITH EVERYTHING

In the two decades since the development of web 2.0, the age of the social internet that encourages and thrives on user participation and collaboration, the online distribution of personal videos has created new dimensions in social relationships, as our interior lives are fully externalized, affected and defined by digital platforms.¹ Most of the platforms and structures I interrogate in my work are considered as post-digital, designed for a world “which no longer distinguishes between on- and offline, and which embeds and normalises digital technology in almost every personal relation, labour condition or aesthetic practice”.² While our social interactions online may feel private as we sit alone with our devices, our ‘Direct Messages’ of love and lust are connected to, mediated by, and reliant upon the entire public network of whatever platform we are using. To survive, grow, and create profit, these platforms, which are working with or are run by tech mammoths like Google and Facebook, rely on our interests, emotional labour, and willingness to share personal thoughts and experiences in order to generate and monetize data-driven insights. Google’s privacy policy states that the company collects users’ data not only to monitor their site, but also to “provide personal information to [their] affiliates and other trusted businesses or persons to process it for [them]” and “to help [Google Ads and Analytics customers] understand the performance of their ad campaigns”, which allows customers to “link informati-on about [their] activity from that site with activity

¹ Danah Boyd, "Understanding Socio-Technical Phenomena in a Web2.0 Era"(presentation, MSR New England Lab Opening, Cambridge MA, September 22, 2008), <https://danah.org/papers/talks/MSR-NE-2008.html>.

² Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendrikx, “Introduction,” in *Authenticity? Observations and Artistic Strategies in the Post-Digital Age*, ed. Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendridx (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 10.

from other sites that use [their] ad services”.³ If we consider how Google’s monopoly, which, through its parent brand, Alphabet, owns a number of the most popular websites including YouTube, and is partnered with over 2,000,000 websites and apps that use their ad services, we realize the extent of their business model.⁴ Social media is now fully ingrained into the very fabric of our society; all aspects of our social, cultural, and political lives have an online counterpart. The perceived convenience of continuous connection however, is an unequal trade-off for the policing and exploitation of our activities and our bodies. In a series of video performances for YouTube, I embody an online persona named *shrimpychip* to unpack the commodification of human interaction within virtual spaces, and to raise questions about our relationship to social platforms. By working within the platforms that I seek to interrogate, my artistic research simultaneously celebrates these digital intimacies and critically examines the authority of neoliberalism over them.

shrimpychip is a twist on ‘shrimp chips’, a prawn-flavoured snack common in Southeast Asian cuisine. The name refers to several interpretations. Shrimp themselves are extremely adaptable and different types can be found at the bottom of most seas, rivers and lakes, yet they often live in solitude. Although they are nicknamed ‘the bugs of the sea’, shrimp play an important role in aquatic life and the diets of many animals, and are regarded as a delicacy in many countries.⁵ The prevalence of shrimp, their market value depending on their modes of consumption, and the double meaning of ‘chip’ as both a snack and a computer component

³ “Google Privacy Policy”, Google, effective October 15, 2019, 5-6, https://gstatic.com/policies/privacy/pdf/20191015/9ad23b47/google_privacy_policy_en.pdf.

⁴ Ibid, 23.

⁵ “Showing Food Shrimp”, FooDB, accessed March 2020, <https://foodb.ca/foods/FOOD00533>.

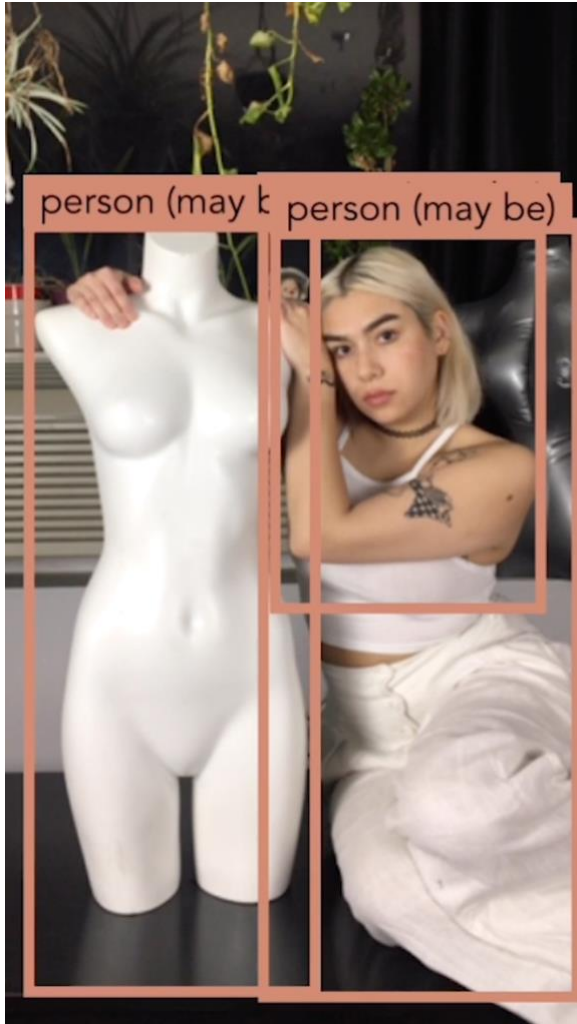
metaphorically speaks to the fragmented engagement of internet users. I decided upon the name when I was first starting to independently explore and understand my Asian identity. I had only eaten shrimp chips once while growing up, but they were the only homemade Indonesian food that I remember anyone from my father's side of the family making for me. Identifying myself with the snack is a way to assert myself as an Asian creator while also forming an online persona that is both disconnected from me and more self-assured. *shrimpychip* subverts the stereotypical aestheticization of Asian culture, marketed as cute and infantilized, to provoke dialogue about the structural systems that lie beneath the trendy, always-on world of online media.

#DATA & POWER

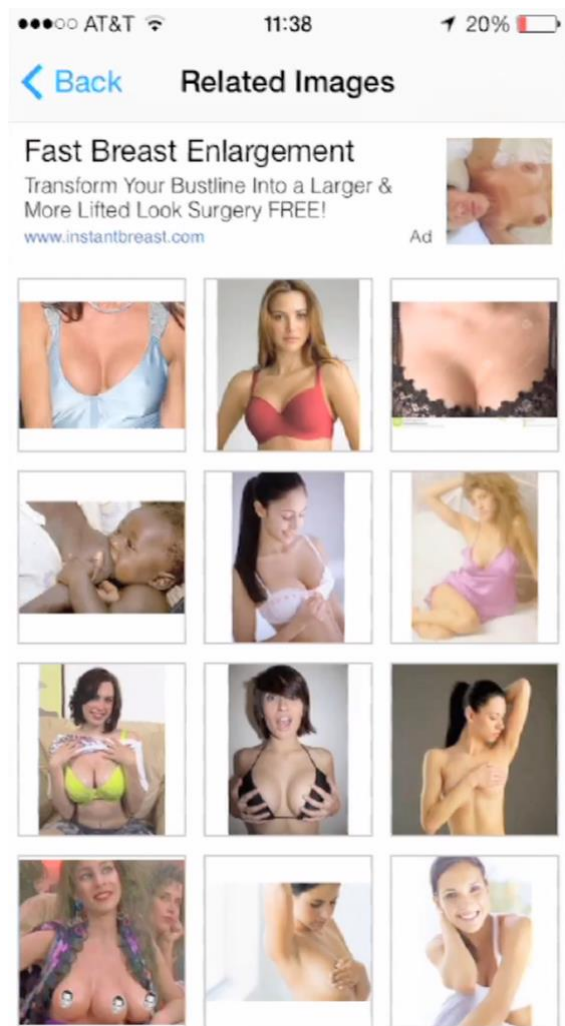
Social media platforms abstract human interaction and create an environment where everything, from public personas to intimate bonds, can be extracted, reframed and directly commodified. Data mining is more than simply acquiring information, it separates life into machine-readable datasets that can be used to profile and target users, improve products, and predict and control behaviour.⁶ Everything we type and every click we make can be tracked and converted into data that reproduces itself as companies create statistics-based products and infrastructure that in turn, generate more data.⁷ Whereas the internet was once seen as a utopian space, the platforms we use today “are commercial enterprises designed to maximize revenue, not defend political expression, preserve our collective heritage, or facilitate

⁶ Jathan Sadowski, “When Data is Capital: Datafication, Accumulation, and Extraction”, *Big Data & Society* 1, vol. 6 (January 7, 2019): 5-6, doi:10.1177/2053951718820549.

⁷ *Ibid*, 4



1. *MANNEQUIN CHALLENGE*, posted November 24, 2019, 1:10, Video Still.



2. Erica Scourti, *Body Scan*, 2014, 5:03, Video Still.

creativity, and the people who work there are private employees, not public servants”.⁸

Through *shrimpychip*, a detached and pared down version of myself, I represent this exploitation by disrupting intimate interiors. *shrimpychip* shares their home life and intimate thoughts on YouTube where it is publicized, multiplied, and fed into a system that appropriates it. Technology itself has no power in altering society’s problems, rather it is often used to emphasize what is already set in place.⁹ From its physical infrastructure (cables, networks, storage units, human capital and other physical support systems), to the content created through numerous websites and applications, to the very channels of distribution (our internet providers), networked structures are run by corporations that profit from the attention and data of its users. Our posts and searches are what fuel the internet, but this content is not its end goal – rather, the quantifiable data gained from the conditions around the act of searching and posting are what drives social media platforms. Although my work on YouTube is not monetized, my ‘Up Next’ feed is consistently littered with videos that are. YouTube channels, including *shrimpychip*, exist because their videos host, or eventually redirect to profitable in-video advertisements. Global society is increasingly reliant on virtual space but to access it, users are forced to bend to exploitative design and algorithms, losing agency over their personal data in the process.

My performances for the camera and the internet highlight the influence of technology on our lives and explore the consequences of determining emotional, affective life through

⁸ Astra Taylor, *The People’s Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), 221.

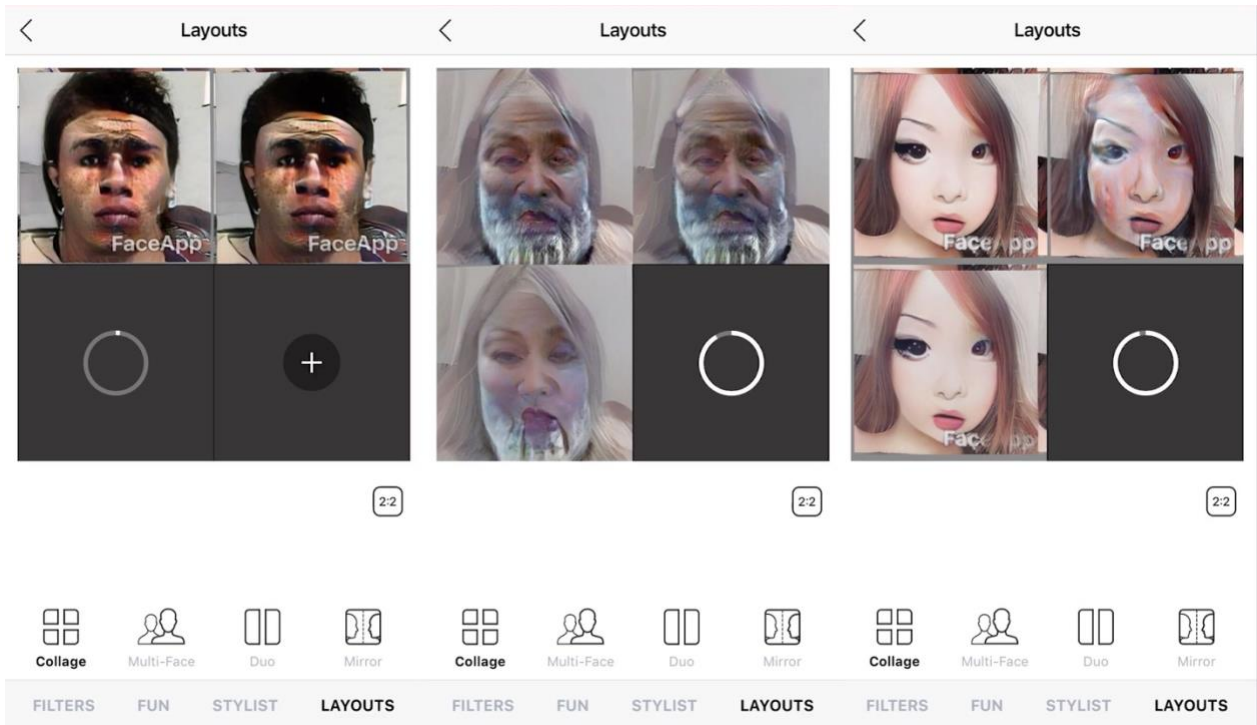
⁹ Danah Boyd, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 156.

capitalist systems. *MANNEQUIN CHALLENGE* plays off the viral internet challenge of the same name, in which participants' videos were used by Google to help train facial recognition systems.¹⁰ Mimicking this trend, *shrimpy* poses motionlessly for the camera, but strays from form by interpreting the challenge literally with a mannequin torso, and recording their performance through the aptly named Object Detection smartphone app. Through Object Detection, the body and prop are identified as if they were the same, hovering between 'person (may be)', 'person (must be)' and no identification at all. In spite of our digital labour and countless contributions to AI, the technology can deny our humanity or, in some cases, be used against us. I created this work after viewing Erica Scourti's, *Body Scan*, at La Gaîté Lyrique in July 2019.¹¹ Scourti's video pieces together screen captures showing images of her body run through the object identification app called CamFind, as she narrates the process. Although created with different apps, *Body Cam* and *MANNEQUIN CHALLENGE* conjure up similarly inaccurate and sexist results. Our experiences are not a one-off, rather they reveal algorithmic bias within the systems. Scourti and I visually explore flaws in identification technologies by providing an accessible glimpse of their problematic implications.

We lose agency online because in order to communicate, we have to work inside systems made by people with the power and privilege to define what agency looks like. This is especially challenging for people of colour, who lose agency online to begin with because

¹⁰ Zhengqi Li et al., "Learning the Depths of Moving People by Watching Frozen People", Google Research, April 25, 2019, 1-10, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1904.11111.pdf>.

¹¹ "Work of the Week: Body Scan by Erica Scourti", La Gaîté Lyrique, April 19, 2019, <https://gaite-lyrique.net/en/article/oeuvre-de-la-semaine-body-scan-derica-scourti>.



3. How to Edit Your Selfies, posted January 8, 2019, 3:55, Video Still.



4. FaceApp results after repeatedly cycling artificially generated white person from thispersondoesnotexist.com through the Male, Female 1 and Female 2 modifiers, 2020, Screen Captures.

the internet is a white space that does not consider diverse modes of engagement.¹² The internet gives marginalized bodies access; however, it also subjects them to its embedded biases and the continuous and pervasive fear of censure. The platforms we use and the algorithms that automate them are “predicated on specific values from specific kinds of people—namely, the most powerful institutions in society and those who control them”.¹³ Bias is formed because the experiences of those who lack power are not acknowledged. As a non-binary person of Southeast Asian descent, I am placing myself against algorithms that are out of my control, and confronting how they categorize, and thus, brand me. *How to Edit Your Selfies* emphasizes my submission to these algorithms as I use FaceApp to convert my face back and forth between gender binaries. As the switching between gender progresses, my face either becomes a hyper-sexualized anime character with big eyes and pouty lips, or a weathered, darker-skinned man. The subsequent off-screen tests I conducted using images of white people did not create significant changes in their skin tone, suggesting that my exception is due to my more ‘ethnically ambiguous’ appearance and the lack of such faces in the algorithm’s training data. Despite this failure in the app, the accumulated distortions result in the face being undetectable by the end of the recording, rendering its own categorization obsolete. While playful in its investigation, this video surfaces a discussion of exclusion in datasets and how biases shape our technologies. *How to Edit Your Selfies* uses glitches to demonstrate these inequities while manipulating the technology to regain autonomy. By turning technology

¹² “Google Diversity Annual Report 2019”, Google, 2019, <https://diversity.google/annual-report/>.

¹³ Safiya U. Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 90.



5. *Talking to Myself Before Bed on a Sunday Eve in Late July*, posted July 30, 2018, 1:42, Video Still.



6. *Talking 22 Confessions on a Saturday Night in Early July*, posted July 8, 2019, 5:48, Video Still



7. Jennifer Ringley, *Jennicam*, March 20, 1998, Screen Capture.

against itself, the applications and search engines utilized in my performances underline the reality that our embodied selves are in constant dialogue with invisible architectures.

#I KNOW YOU; I SEE YOU, I HEAR YOU, YOU POST ALL THE TIME

Proximity is no longer required for intimacy. While mail and long-distance phone calls predate the internet, the introduction of video chat and its substantial upgrades have broadened the horizons of simulated physical presence. Social media has become a virtual ‘third place’, where it is possible for community to be accessed outside of work and home.¹⁴ People meet to share news, discuss common interests and do much of the activities that would occur in the malls and cafés that make up physical third places; however, the consequences of time delays and the affordances of the platforms and technologies we use construct different modes of emotional intimacy than those of pre-internet communications. In her 2007 blog post, Leisa Reichelt coined the term ‘ambient intimacy’ to explain this new virtual existence as “being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn’t usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible”.¹⁵ Lacking proximity, intimacy formed in digital spaces complicates notions of privacy and boundaries. In my video channel, voyeuristic exchange is emphasized and complicated as the public is invited into each room in *shrimpy’s* house. The muted recordings of *Talking to Myself Before Bed on a Sunday Eve in Late July* and *22 Confessions on a Saturday Night in Early July*, capture *shrimpychip* confessing secrets into the camera as they lounge on a bed in a dimly light

¹⁴ Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2019), 223.

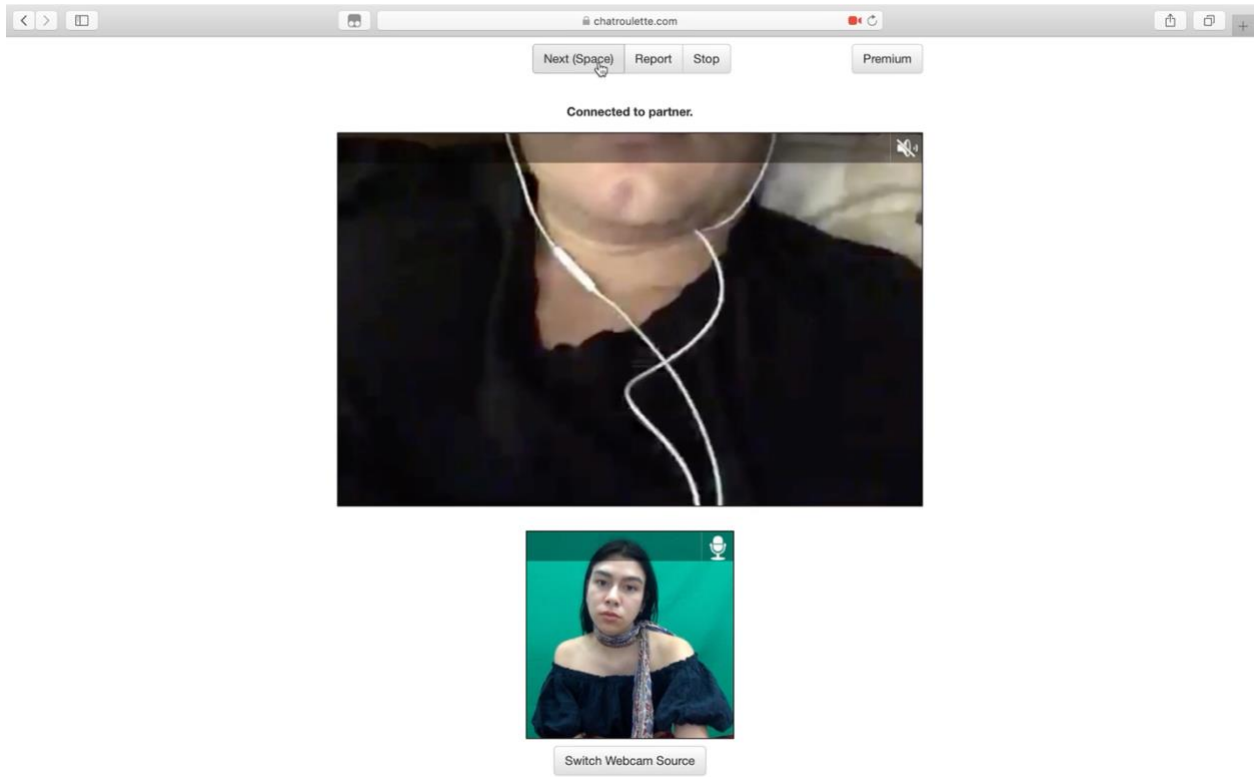
¹⁵ Leisa Reichelt, “Ambient Intimacy,” *Disambiguity*, March 1, 2007, <https://disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy>.

room while dressed in sleepwear. The lack of sound focuses attention on the body and the environment. As if peering into a window of *shrimpy's* house, the viewer is made to question the appropriateness of their actions. Digital intimacy is distinctive in that it is possible to form convincingly deep emotional bonds independent of mutual interaction, replacing our emotional responses to one-to-one conversation with a plethora of personal online posts.

Our digital accessibility to subscribers, general platform users, as well as anonymous lurkers gives rise to 'parasocial relationships', where content creators are observed more frequently than they actively participate in emotional exchanges.¹⁶ A new form of voyeurism is developed as public content is reachable at all hours, regardless of whether or not the original creators are physically at a device or even conscious of how their images are circulating. Spying is normalized and encouraged by the 'personal' public feed. The webcam first became available to the public in 1994 and just two years later, Jennifer Ringley became the first person to stream her home life on the internet via *Jennicam*, active from 1996 to 2003.¹⁷ Today, we are so accustomed to documenting and sharing our home lives via wifi-connected cameras that Ringley's photos hardly appear scandalous. Our staged, yet personal photos and videos have remodelled the off-stage home into its own aesthetic within media, exemplified with the endless feed of YouTube videos set in bedrooms and vertical Instagram 'stories' filmed in bathroom mirrors. The home is now part of the business plan, perhaps most explicitly

¹⁶ Clive Thompson, "Brave New World of Digital Intimacy," *The New York Times Magazine*, The New York Times Company, September 5, 2008, <https://nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html>.

¹⁷ Peter Ha, "ALL-TIME 100 Gadgets," *Time*, Time USA, October 25, 2010, https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2023689_2023703_2023628,00.html; PJ Vogt and Alex Goldman, "#5 Jennicam," December 14, 2014, in *Reply-All*, produced by Gimlet Media, podcast, MP3 audio, 19:08, <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/8whoja/5-jennicam>.



8. *How to Make Friends on Chatroulette*, posted November 14, 2018, 6:43, Video Still.

demonstrated with ‘influencer houses’, such as *1600 Vine*, an apartment complex housing the biggest stars from the now-defunct, short-form video sharing app, Vine, and more recently, Hype House, a mansion accommodating nineteen of the most successful TikTokers, whose videos follow a similar cropped model.¹⁸ When posted online, domestic life is reconstructed into a remote, public space with unrestricted 24-hour accessibility, and as such, it carries the same policing and regulation as physical public architectures and urban planning.

Parasocial relationships are encouraged by countless YouTubers who purposely address their viewers with friend-like familiarity. The creator is fully aware that the majority of their audience will presumably consist of strangers, but this warmth and informality helps to grow and maintain a following with the potential for career advancement. In my videos, *shrimpychip* deliberately withholds their facial expression as a form of emotional subversion, playing a sort of bored entertainer, to emphasize the relationship to the screen and reject the conventions of the platform. Contrary to its title, in *How to Make Friends on Chatroulette*, *shrimpy* maintains a blank expression while continuously starting then exiting video conversations with strangers. Chatroulette is a website that randomly pairs users together to chat, but also has the tendency to draw in sexual exhibitionists. Instead of attempting to connect with their chat partners, *shrimpychip* retains a stoic pose in front of a greenscreen background, remaining perfectly still within the square video window. The performance highlights the dialogue between voyeurism and exhibitionism that arises from posting life online, and the fast-paced, fragmented reality of online connections. Emotions are removed from the audience throughout the channel, but

¹⁸ Taylor Lorenz, “Hype House and the Los Angeles TikTok Mansion Gold Rush”, *The New York Times*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/style/hype-house-los-angeles-tik-tok.html>.

audience attention continues to be sought from the periodic public content. Allowing people into *shrimpy's* home life and performing updates on daily activities while simultaneously keeping people at an obvious distance amplifies the aspect of performance and disconnectedness that exists within social media. This separation from typical YouTube entertainers asks viewers to think more critically about the intention of the platform and its users.

I utilize the bite-sized, asynchronous format of social media as a starting point, creating disjointed narratives that suggest the intimacy of online connection while remaining unresolved, ambiguous, and shallow. My videos perform intimacy and vulnerability – sharing *shrimpy* singing, dancing, searching on their computer and participating in other activities around the home alone. Slower events are transformed into fast paced objects of entertainment that echo our fragmented image-reception online. These clips are representative of the minimized, highly selective points of our life that we share because social media is structured by fast moving images that allow more opportunities for successful advertising and data mining. In *shrimpychip's* virtual performances, they make a special effort in revealing the process of filmmaking through the use of screen recordings, exaggerated poses, and deliberately leaving in retakes to emphasize the amount of work that goes into the construction of an online persona. While social media has great potential for self-expression, it is necessary to consider how virtual spaces and objects are constructions made for quick, easily absorbable emotional responses. The influx of bite-sized posts and notifications from across the globe and from different time zones has shifted the periodical lifestyle of day and night, wakefulness and

sleep, into a state of 24/7 where we are always logged on and distracted.¹⁹ Allowing the form to dictate the content, my videos reflect the fragmented nature of social media to explore the boundaries of these relationships.

Control of the body is complicated when it is mediated by networked technologies. Although we gain more control of our representation with our ability to curate ourselves and distribute our images with great efficiency, there is a persistent unknowingness of how and when we are accessed and perceived that runs counter to the connectedness of our digital platforms. My video, *How to Find Your Doppelgänger*, investigates the appropriation and proliferation of private images on the web by pasting selfies in Google Images and recording the ‘matches’, which include stock photos, ads, and profile photos. The search results reveal how the algorithm takes images out of context, forming false narratives through their grouping. While we may make a post with the intention of showing our daily activities to people with whom we are familiar, there is a chance that our content will be re-contextualized or appropriated in a manner that one does not intend to, as is apparent from the growing fear among YouTubers of being reposted on sites such as WikiFeet and the Cringe Subreddit.²⁰ While technology offers opportunities for representation, any liberational power the internet could hold is withdrawn as the body becomes detached from its owner immediately upon being posted.

¹⁹Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 29-60.

²⁰ Sunbookishgamesx, “Reacting To My WIKI FEET FAME!?” December 14, 2019, video, 12:58, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=oBAePc1ngv0>; “r/cringe”, Reddit, Reddit Inc, created September 10, 2009, <https://reddit.com/r/cringe/>.

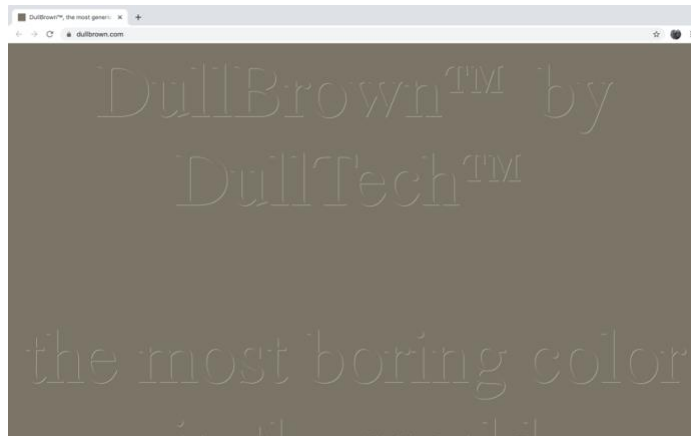
#NEUROCAPITALISM

Under neoliberal capitalism, economic exchange is heavily bureaucratized and regulated to benefit corporate interests. Every worker assumes the form of an entrepreneur and is pressured to exploit themselves as much as they are being exploited.²¹ This is unavoidable online where our experiences are profited from whether or not they are considered to be work. Tiziana Terranova, along with a few other theorists, has designated this evolved form of exploitation as neurocapitalism. According to her definition, neurocapitalism exploits our technological mediations, skillfully using digital infrastructures fed by user-generated content.²² Contemporary media companies manipulate our emotional, intellectual and mental energy to create new streams of income. This has become the predominant extractive economy of the 21st century as fandoms are created, merchandise is launched, and media reach extends beyond the performer's initial platform. While a consumer may genuinely like their new Chamberlain Steeped Coffee or JeffreexShane palette, a presiding reason people spend money on an influencer's product is the single-sided relationship they have with personas such as Emma Chamberlain, Jeffree Star and Shane Dawson.²³ The icon is promoted as less elusive than the Hollywood stars or movie characters which comprised the extent of fandom's past. The influencer's key diversion from other stars, and key marketing strategy is that their realm of

²¹ Han, Byung-Chul, *Psycho-politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 5.

²² Tiziana Terranova, foreword to *Neurocapitalism: Technological Mediation and Vanishing Lines*, by Giorgio Griziotti, trans. Jason Francis McGimsey, ed. Stephen Shukaitis (Colchester: Minor Compositions, 2019), 6; Crary, 29-60.

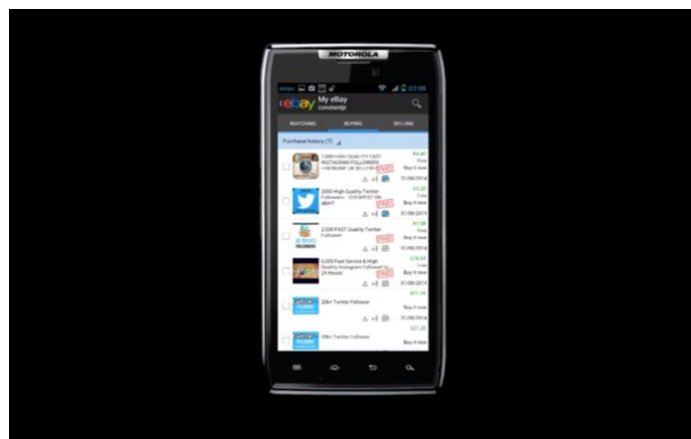
²³ "Chamberlain Coffee", Chamberlain Coffee, Bixby Coffee, 2019, <https://chamberlaincoffee.com/>; "Conspiracy Palette", Jeffree Star Cosmetics, 2020, <https://jeffreestarcosmetics.com/products/conspiracy-palette>.



11. Constant Dullaart, *DullBrown™*, 2018, Screen Capture.



12. Constant Dullaart, *DullTech™ media player*, 2015, Screen Capture.



13. Constant Dullaart, *High Retention, Slow Delivery*, posted on September 2014, 10:10, Video Still.

media and points of access are similar to those of our own. Taste has been decentralized from traditional mainstream media and into the public, creating new forms of corporate media as casual accounts grow to influencer status.

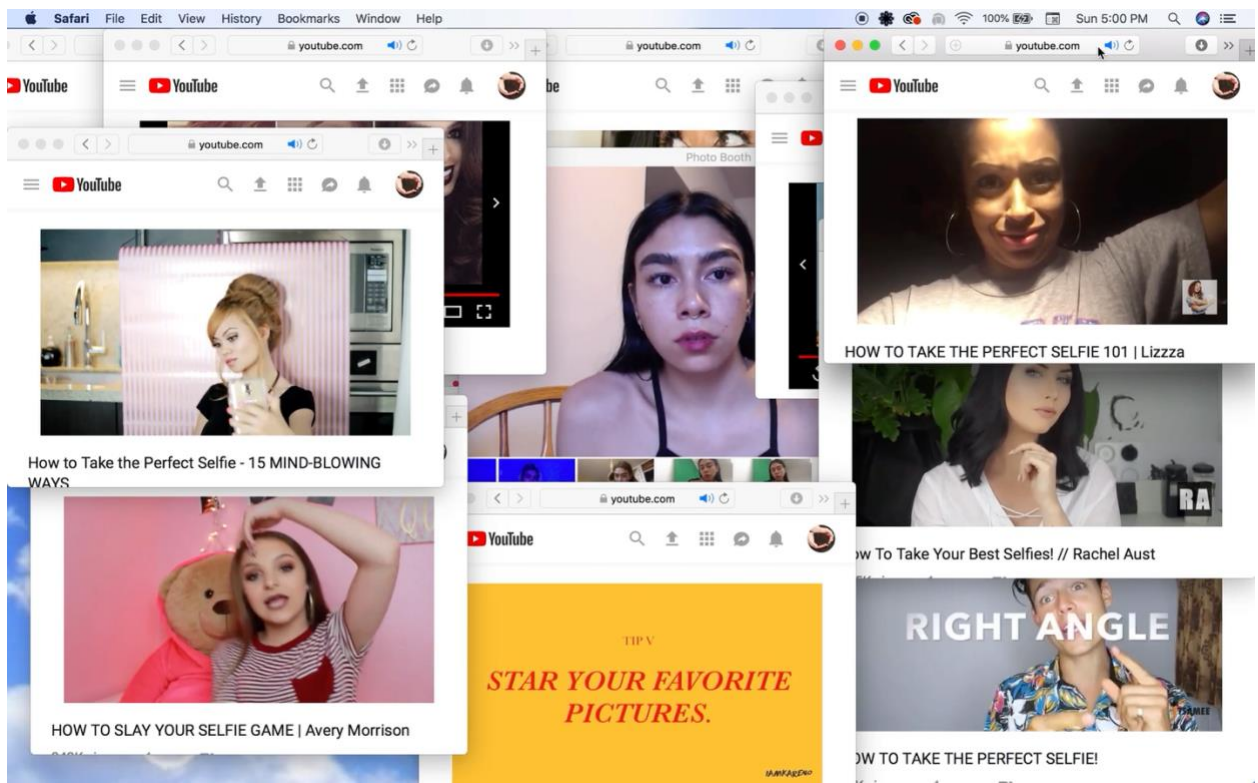
The online personality as a brand is an illusion used to facilitate a sense of belonging through consumption. At the same time, it masks the extent of commodification by claiming and feigning transparency, access, and authenticity:

Brands seem authentic when they let us feel as though we belong without blending in. We are able to feel 'normal' because of the visibility of brands we associate ourselves with. The normality has more to do with feeling oneself to be 'authentic' than the narratives of personal distinction that are often associated with authenticity marketing.²⁴

Although we may desire to use social media to create personal brands that define our place within the global community, in actuality, our profiles remain as brands of their host platforms. *shrimpychip's* social media presence is of my construction, but it supports YouTube by directing to monetized videos and representing the company's design and function preferences. My work plays with this dynamic by adapting a pseudonym and using online branding and self-promotion tactics in order to make visible strategies that are normally opaque. Despite their ties to commerce, influencers and their businesses appear friendly and welcoming because we use them to help define our individual interests with the reassurance that their popularity means our choices are already supported.²⁵ Branded personalities aspire to be relatable while evoking envy to keep consumers intrigued. Constant Dullaart, an artist who has created an

²⁴ Rob Horning, "Mass Authentic," in *Authenticity? Observations and Artistic Strategies in the Post-Digital Age*, ed. Barbara Cueto and Bas Hendridx (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 36.

²⁵ Leigh Alexander, "The New Intimacy Economy," Medium, November 9, 2015, <https://humanparts.medium.com/the-new-intimacy-economy-51c87dc4a4d6>.



14. *How to Take the Perfect Selfie*, posted on October 7, 2018, 10:32, Video Still.

entire 'Dull' brand equipped with conceptual products like *DullBrown™*, a colour made by finding the average colour of the ImageNet photo database, as well as standard, easy to use media players by *DullTech™*, cleverly uses humour throughout his work to addresses marketing. In his remote performance, *High Retention, Slow Delivery*, Dullaart investigates branding on social media by purchasing followers to equalize the follower count of thirty art professional's Instagram feeds. In doing so, the contingency of a creator's appraisal as based on online popularity is challenged while it is revealed how this mark of approval is be manipulated by monetary means. In *How to Take the Perfect Selfie*, I explore how social status can be self-engineered by mimicking popular videos in which YouTubers teach viewers how to look their best in selfies. The title of my video, and the videos I appropriate imply authority and a hierarchy in skill level, yet they all follow a format that is already set in place. 'Regular' people receive attention on social media, by appearing in ways that are 'inspirational' or 'influential' through their curated content and editing styles. Influencer status is used as social currency which generates a larger following, opening the door for brand deals.

Although *shrimpychip's* videos are not monetized or sponsored, content from popular YouTube categories, such as 'How to', 'Get to Know Me', 'Room Tour' and 'Challenge' videos reflect the age where anyone is able to be fashioned into a 'z-list celebrity' by marketing themselves as influencers. A feedback loop is created when both advertisers and their audiences mimic one another, allowing the parasitic behaviour of corporate structures to go unnoticed. My persona reveals the effort and artificiality that goes into maintaining and growing a loyal following. In *get to know me part 2*, bot-like figures carry the storyline, trailing along my head, and lining up together in a formation reminiscent of browser lag. Despite taking

the time to create virtual clones and having more of themselves to distribute, *shrimpy's* objectified copies act as a barrier that ultimately fail to convey any further depth. Similar to the way that human-like chatbots offer help on online retail sites, the piece reflects the false intimacy and superficiality that becomes inherent to online relationships. Advertising and branding are exploited in my work through the strange and counterintuitive ways in which they occur.

#POOR ACCELERATED IMAGES

The environment of the web, although relatively new, has become an authoritarian space. In the age in which psychology is tightly weaved with the political discourse, the surveillance of our digital, and in turn offline lives, is at the crux of capitalism's manipulation. It listens to us quietly, feeding back machine-picked information tailored to our search history, preferences, and personal information, while disguising the results as organic.²⁶ If capitalism has permeated free will, how do we regain autonomy? In *Acceleration Aesthetics* Steven Shaviro explains that in capitalism, transgression only allows new opportunities for investment:

[and] since there is no outside to the capitalist system, capitalism can only be overcome from within. Intensifying the horrors of contemporary capitalism does not lead them to explode; but it does offer us a kind of satisfaction and relief, by telling us that we have finally hit bottom, finally realized the worst.²⁷

'Transgressive' acts seeking to decenter capitalism have a history of being absorbed and monetized by capitalism, as exemplified by the slogans and symbols of socio-political

²⁶ Byung-Chul Han, *Psycho-politics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2017), 11.

²⁷ Steven Shaviro, "Acceleration Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption," *e-flux*, no. 46 (June 2013): 6-7, <https://e-flux.com/journal/46/60070/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption>.



15. *SHRIMPY REACTS!!!*, posted on October 1, 2019, 0:57, Video Still.



16. *ROOM TOUR 2020*, posted on December 21, 2019, 2:52, Video Still.

movements co-opted by retail brands, such as 'feminist' graphics on shirts made in sweatshops and greenwashed plastic packaging. Instead of creating yet another protest movement to be incorporated back into the body of neurocapitalism, acceleration aesthetics attempts to do something else entirely. It forces the viewer to recognize capitalism's full effects in effort to disenchant them from any hope within its system and encourage more people to express and act upon their distaste. Normcore, a fashion trend introduced in 2013 by the trend-forecasting group K-Hole, identifies similar features of acceleration aesthetics, albeit less cynical. The trend recognizes that "consumption has never been a chance for absolute self-actualization" and instead, adapts to the 'norm' of the environment, "[seeking] the freedom that comes with non-exclusivity... [finding] liberation in being nothing special, and [realizing] that adaptability leads to belonging [and ultimately] a more peaceful life".²⁸ Both acceleration aesthetics and normcore acknowledge our alienation as we are exploited and commodified within neoliberalism, and suggest accentuating our estrangement to contemporary standards will allow ourselves some leverage.

Drawing from acceleration aesthetics and normcore, my work challenges the total commodification of the web, while simultaneously accepting that it is part of the same system. I am able to call attention to the injustice of this fate by amplifying how my fake brand is absorbed into the commodity machine by dealing in excess, turning to clickbait and camp for inspiration. Clickbait, an online marketing tactic that uses scandal and urgency to generate

²⁸ K-HOLE, "Youth Mode: Normcore," *YOUTH MODE: A REPORT ON FREEDOM*, no. 4 (October 2013): 34, 36, <https://khole.net/issues/youth-mode>.

clicks, thrives in our attention economy, but has its roots in the print media tabloids.²⁹ This device is widely exploited on YouTube, where highly exaggerated video titles and cover images are favoured by the algorithm, as long as the content can maintain viewers' attention. Preview thumbnails of YouTubers with dramatic facial expressions have taken over the site as content creators maximize their clickthrough rate in hopes of attaining a high 'watch time' and subsequent promotion in search results and recommendation feeds.³⁰ In, *SHRIMPY REACTS!!!*, a video where *shrimpy* mimics YouTube 'reaction' videos by staging different expressions of surprise and outrage, the language of clickbait is co-opted to highlight how visual signifiers are used to manipulate an emotional response. Likewise, *Room Tour 2020*'s title targets an audience seeking a specific genre of video. *shrimpy* alters the typical interior decoration plot of videos with comparable labels by ignoring the viewer and instead, lounging around, checking their phone, and stretching in a virtual bedroom collaged from gifs made with images created using the open-source AI software, BigGAN. The banal and excess come together to produce absurdist and theatrical depictions of personality and home life in a way that reflects camp—an inherently queer aesthetic embodying exaggeration and artifice, and exercised by the LBGTQ+ community to connect in solidarity.³¹ *shrimpy* re-enacts the same misleading data-influenced

²⁹ Yimin Chen, Niall J. Conroy and Victoria L. Rubin. "Misleading Online Content: Recognizing Clickbait as 'False News'," *WMDD '15: Proceedings of the 2015 ACM on Workshop on Multimodal Deception Detection*, (November 13, 2015): 15, doi: 10.1145/2823465.2823467.

³⁰ Paul Covington, Jay Adams and Emre Sargin, "Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations," *Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, Google Research, 2016, 191-198, doi: 10.1145/2959100.2959190.

³¹ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," 1964, https://classes.dma.ucla.edu/Spring15/104/Susan%20Sontag_%20Notes%20On%20-Camp-.pdf.



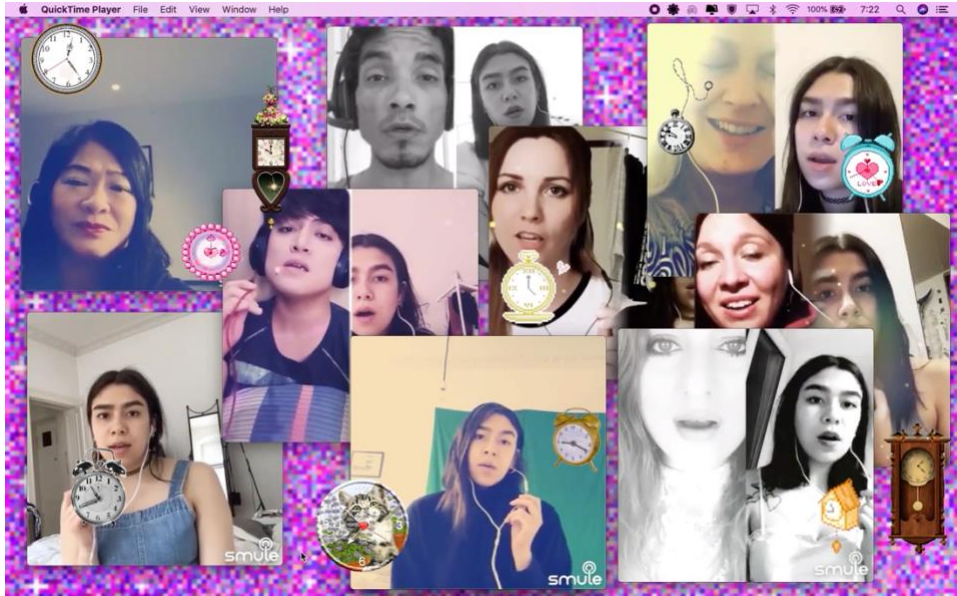
17. Ryan Trecartin, *The Re'Search (Re'Search Wait'S)*, 2009-2019, 40:05, Video Still.



18. Marisa Olson, *Performed Listening: Boomerang (Screncap)*, 2009, 10:39, Video Still.



19. Marisa Olson, *Double Bind (Screncap)*, 2010, 2:02, Video Still.



20. *Only Time*, posted on June 11, 2019, 3:52, Video Still.



21. *Top 5 Things To Do In Berlin*, posted on July 17, 2019, 7:27, Video Still.

uploads wreaking havoc on the visibility of small independent YouTubers with humour and irony to cope and empathize.

Through the deliberate use of low-quality methods to create bite-sized content, my practice explores the fragmenting effects of digital hybridization. This type of content challenges mainstream big media, as well as the amateur photos and videos created at home meant for quick sharing that appear to be outside of the capitalist machine, but reside well within it. In her text, *In Defense of the Poor Image*, Hito Steyerl writes that:

The poor image is a copy in motion. Its quality is bad, its resolution substandard. As it accelerates, it deteriorates. It is a ghost of an image, a preview, a thumbnail, an errant idea, an itinerant image distributed for free, squeezed through slow digital connections, compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed, as well as copied and pasted into other channels of distribution.³²

As 'poor images' are shared, their location and ownership history become part of their context—they reflect communication, and culture more purely than highly produced media as they survive as artefacts, not observations. Quickly snapped and shared content reflect popular trends, random subcultures, and quickly passing humor in a way that is more emulative of culture moments than highly produced media. Steyerl's interpretation of low-fi media, created and thriving among the digital proletariat, is instrumental to the development of *shrimpychip*. Using pixelated imagery, screen recordings, DIY sensibilities, and allowing my work to be freely reproduced on personal devices assists me in associating *shrimpy* with the average social media user. These techniques are also employed as metaphoric devices, alluding to a 'return to the gothic', a phenomenon within internet art which Melissa Gronlund identifies in her article of

³² Hito Steyerl, "In Defence of the Poor Image," *e-flux*, no. 10 (November 2009): 1, <https://e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.

the same name. “The Gothic”, she explains, “is a clash of the old and the new, weighted toward the former as it struggles with its own obsolescence” and its return is “a way to wrestle with daunting, ongoing questions prompted by current technological shifts: How has the internet affected our sense of self? Our interaction with others? The structures of family and kinship?”.³³ The Gothic’s melding of old and new with the addition of surrealism, creates a compelling framework for how to address and familiarize concerns. Artists working within digital media such as Marisa Olson and Ryan Trecartin, use gothic tropes to visually symbolize anxiety in the digital age.³⁴ Olson’s *Performed Listening: Boomerang and Double Blind* respond to anxieties around online participation and feedback with eerie performances that distort the senses through techniques of doubling and concealing the body.³⁵ Trecartin uses disorienting timelines and demon-like characters to amplify the distress of multi-tab, multi-account, multi-screen attention. In *shrimpychip*’s YouTube channel, the supernatural is adapted through editing styles, such as in *Top 5 Things To Do In Berlin*, where an imperfect green screen and overlapped performances give the body a ghostly appearance. The past comes forward with the watermarked background image repurposed from a Tumblr re-blog post, which according to the ‘source’, was previously appropriated from Google.³⁶ *Only Time*, a video collaging nine karaoke duets to Enya’s 2000 single *Only Time* recorded with strangers on the Smule app,

³³ Melissa Gronlund, “The Return of the Gothic,” *e-flux*, no. 51 (January 2014): 1, <https://e-flux.com/journal/51/59962/return-of-the-gothic-digital-anxiety-in-the-domestic-sphere>.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

³⁵ “Marisa Olson: Double Bind,” BAMPFA, The Regents of the University of California, 2010, <https://bampfa.org/program/marisa-olson-double-bind>.

³⁶ google finds, “#: google images,” Tumblr, September 11, 2018, 9:49 PM, <https://googlefinds.tumblr.com/post/177959660882>.

employs similar techniques. Again, the body is multiplied, but now the individual clips lag behind each other, eerily warping the familiar radio hit as pixel-gifs of analog clocks designed for Myspace float around *shrimpy* and their singing partners.³⁷ Like *Top 5 Thing To Do In Berlin*, *Only Time* alludes to features of Gothic literature by contradicting chronology through repetition and overlapping periods of time.

The features of net art that I use are more associated with feminine blogs of the early web, hand-coded by girls, women, and queer people. I am interested in early online spaces such as Geocities, Angelfire and the initial years of Tumblr that gave these groups an opportunity to foster a community and express themselves through content and web design. Instead of the gothic being a spooky element, it becomes camp when it is conveyed with gifs and glitter. The uncanny and the supernatural operate to evoke unease where “the domestic sphere is used to personify the familiar, and as such [becoming] a character in itself”.³⁸ Content creators’ homes play an antagonistic role through updates on hauntings, which echo real world concerns. The gothic has re-emerged in ‘Get Ready with Me’ tutorials, in which influencers from the YouTube beauty community tell stories of the paranormal while doing their makeup. In these videos, the fear of the unknown is often expressed as a fear of being watched by an unknown being, perhaps as a reflection of the influencer’s anxieties of visibility on the web.³⁹ I am using this approach to technology as a launchpad to express apprehensions over how my body is accessed and appropriated. At the same time, aesthetics of the gothic, as well as

³⁷ “Glitter Graphics – Frequently Asked Questions,” Glitter-Graphics.com, accessed May 15, 2019, <https://glitter-graphics.com/faq/>.

³⁸ Gronlund, 5.

³⁹ Sofya Aleynikova, “Why Youtubers See Ghosts: Beauty Vloggers’ Paranormal Storytimes as Neogothic Genre,” *Rhizome*, July 5, 2019, <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2019/jul/05/why-youtubers-see-ghosts>.

normcore and accelerationism, allow me to gain a new lexicon of motifs to aid my articulation and strengthen my assertion against capitalism's hold on digital culture.

#IN CONCLUSION

The rapid pace, availability of information, façade of privacy, and profit-driven structure of the social media platforms, breed new types of relationships that are unique to the post-digital age. These relationships are remarkable when they facilitate the creation of niche sub-cultures and communities, prevent isolation, or help users' exploration of identity; however, our virtual connections are also influenced and exploited by capitalism. With *shrimpychip*, I work to negotiate the extent to which we are able to trust our emotional relationship to content and personas online. In effect, I have created a form of empathetic satire to evoke social media influencers and emphasize the strange consequences of digital commodification. *shrimpy's* performances collaborate with algorithms and appropriated content to expose the impact of our data and the ways it mediates our experiences. The structure of the web and the availability of our personal information generates parasocial relationships where intimacy is able to form in unlikely scenarios due to the voyeur/ exhibitionist dichotomy that social media permits. My channel focuses on these power relationships, emphasizing the awkwardness and alienation that arises from navigating digital space. I am specifically interested in upholding an encounter that is partitioned by a screen through expressions, exposed pixels, and screen captures of desktop toolbars that override those of my viewers' when viewed in full screen mode. Similar to the way parasocial relationships are manipulated and commodified by advertisers and platform hosts, intimacy is distorted and manipulated throughout *shrimpychip's* archive. Emotional intimacy in the digital sphere is difficult to trust because of how entangled

the internet is with commercial interests embedded in its infrastructure. *shrimpychip's* well-planned, low-fi videos are a spoof on this notation where everything is an ad, manipulating branding techniques to disrupt the feed of YouTube videos and offer a common ground to consolidate with one another as we confront anxieties about neoliberalism's effects on human relationships.

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