

Notes on ASMR, Massumi and the Joy of Digital Painting
MICHAEL CONNOR | Wed May 8th, 2013 1:43 p.m.

When I first came across ASMR, it struck me as an Internet meme that bordered on a vast consensual hallucination, like the stories of fainting spells that sweep village schools.

ASMR stands for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response, which sounds quite scientific but was, they say, coined on Facebook by an IT specialist (to be fair, she does reportedly work in the healthcare field, at least). In most cases, ASMR is characterized as a "tingling sensation" (or, unfortunately, a "braingasm") experienced in response to various kinds of sensory triggers. These "triggers" are quite diverse, including close-ups of tactile objects and related sound effects (brushing, rubbing, especially when recorded in 3D), the depiction of tasks requiring great concentration, whispering voices and the classic television show *The Joy of Painting*. YouTube videos featuring such triggers sometimes reach huge audiences despite their seemingly mundane content; one in which a woman pretends to give the viewer a haircut has 2.4 million views.

ASMR may be a fad and a made-up word, but that doesn't mean there's not something to it. Some ASMR videos do give me something like a tingle. The scrape of Bob Ross' knife across his palette; his brush daubing oily color onto dry canvas: these generate tactile sensations that are, in fact, quite pleasurable. Not only that, they are pleasurable in a different way than the real act of painting. Similarly, watching ASMR videos of people folding towels is more pleasurable for many people than the real act of folding towels. It's almost like what is satisfying about them not the tactile sensation itself, but the fact that this tactile sensation is triggered by other sensory inputs.

What is going on here?

Watching these videos made me think of a performance work by artist Stephen Lichty which he performed for me during a 2011 studio visit and subsequently presented for my class at SVA, although no documentation currently exists. In this work, which he refers to as *Untitled O.B.E.*, a single participant dons a pair of video goggles and looks in the direction of their hand. Through the goggles, I saw a live video image of an approximately hand-sized object (a folded, colored handkerchief). Stephen performed a series of operations on my hand and the handkerchief at the same time. As I looked toward my hand, I saw Stephen pressing on the handkerchief, and I felt him pressing on my hand.

Then came the big moment. Stephen stopped manipulating my hand at all. Now, as I watched him tap on the handkerchief, I still felt the tapping sensation in my hand. I had developed an empathic link with this object, a phantom handkerchief-hand. And it was a crazy feeling.

Untitled O.B.E. strikes me as somehow similar to ASMR, in that a relatively mundane tactile sensation takes on an incredible affective charge when it is triggered through non-somatosensory inputs. I emailed Stephen to ask if he had any more information about the neurological basis for his experiment, and he pointed me to the Brian Massumi article *The Archive of Experience*. In it, Massumi quotes from the psychologist Daniel Stern's book *The Interpersonal World of the Infant*:

For instance, in trying to soothe an infant, the parent could say, 'There, there ...,' giving more stress and amplitude on the first part of the word and trailing off towards the end of the word. Alternatively, the parent could silently stroke the baby's back or head with a stroke analogous to the 'There, there' sequence, applying more pressure at the onset of the stroke and lightening or trailing off toward the end. If the duration of the contoured

stroke and the pauses between strokes were of the same absolute and relative durations as the vocalization-pause pattern, the infant would experience similar activation contours no matter which soothing technique was performed. The two soothings would feel the same (beyond their sensory specificity).

For Stern (and for Massumi), the important thing is not the individual sensory input, but the cognitive linking together of diverse sensory events. These linkages form the basis of the infant's understanding of the objective world, and they hold incredible fascination and power, but they gradually recede into the background. As Massumi writes, "the stronger that the awareness of this objective organization of the world becomes," the more these affective links "recede into the state of a trace."

Perhaps the "tingle" associated with ASMR videos and Lichty's performance work are a result of the recuperation of these traces, a renewed experience of the sensory links that we forge in infancy, when we first are coming to grips with a world that bombards us with strange new sensations.

For Massumi, this recuperation can also be experienced simply by viewing a painting, or indeed any virtual space. In the aforementioned text, he quotes from philosopher Susanne Langer's work on perspective in painting and writes that "the couching of the non-visible [that is, touch, movement, etc.] in visible form can only be achieved if the artist 'departs' from 'direct imitation.'" In other words, what satisfies us in representational imagery is not that it places us directly in another environment, but that it activates the sensory linkages that allow us to experience touch and movement through our visual sense. The appeal of virtual reality may not be in its realism, but in its virtuality.

"Combined with this is another perversity, an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one. The defect of the real one is so apt to be a lack of representation. I like things who appear. Then one is sure." - from Oliver Laric's *Versions* (2010), riffing on Henry James' *The Real Thing*.