Smear Screens and Fondled Things

PLACE: Here and now, wherever and whenever that might be

Cleaning

Before I wrote the text before you now, I took from a red cylindrical pot a cleaning wipe and wiped down the keyboard and screen of my laptop yawning, gaping up at me — another dehiscence — like a crack addict shark (all blackened cavities): a precious moment when I feel the affinity between typing and veterinary dentistry. What I removed from the computer’s surfaces with this multi-purpose wipe was mostly dust and grease, accumulations of substance we expect to find, allotropic residues of our touch, in many ways opposites — little dry, dead fragments of ourselves blown across and caught in the embarrassing clammy textures of our lifey-ness. We’re dying all the time, in flakes. Smart phones are strikingly sympathetic exhibition platforms for these little dances of finger grease; I don’t think anyone who owns one hasn’t, at some point, whiled away a few blissed-out minutes composing Zen gardens with their fingertip smears on the blackened glass.

I wiped away the grease and dust in order to get on with my work, an attempt to make the conditions for writing optimal, to
get my money’s worth of disappearance from Californian design interaction at its best. I wanted to remove obscurity and distraction from the interface with and into which this work might manage to come to life. Ironic, of course, seeing as one of these substances — the grease — is the subject of my work, a substance I habitually remove from the screen of my computer, because, it seems, writing about grease is not possible, or just much harder, when you’re also staring through it. I cleaned the grease away because it claimed more of my attention than I was prepared to give, while, at the same time, it prevented me from actually thinking about it.

The distinction we might make here is between the intended and the unintended. I didn’t intend the patterns of finger smears absentmindedly jabbed and dragged across the screen’s surface, but I do, most often, have the intention to write when I’m writing. The grease on the screen is, in contrast, unintended, unwanted, somehow wrong and therefore not, in this instance, only grease, but also a kind of dirt — matter, as Mary Douglas famously argues, that is out of place.¹ It invests the situation of writing with a sense of wrongness, a corruption of its structure; it threatens my sense of freedom, however illusory, to place my attention where I choose: the blinking cursor.

A sense of ridiculousness descends on me as I carefully remove the grease with a cloth lightly laced with benzalkonium chloride, disposing of without a trace precisely the substance I’ve sat down to absorb myself into. But maybe this wiping of grease off the screen is a dense, strangely literal emblem of the irony encountered by many who have chosen to write about anything at all. It is, for some annoying reason, very hard to write about laughter when actually laughing. It is, more to the point, nearly impossible to write about irony when right in the middle of the feeling of irony. It is necessary to redesign your environment, put yourself in some other place, a place of mourning, one attuned with, but not immersed in the matter at hand. Grease

stands as a literal encounter with the difficulty of extracting yourself in this way, the resistance the world puts up to being subject, subjected, to our words.

Grease is, in this way, similar to its companion on my screen: dust, a substance that “upsets,” as Michael Marder says, “the ideal order of the house and of the universe.”\(^2\) It conceals; dust prevents what we might consider to be the natural irradiation of things from the world into our retinas, the manifestation of things to our consciousness. It covers over, cloaks what we feel we should be able to access. But dust, as Marder continues, also reveals. It awakens us to space. Hanging suspended in a beam of light, it reveals illumination to us, a suspension which is, too, a marker of the passage of someone through that space as it swirls into turbulent salience as they walk by. Though it may be “a veil that hides from us the hard kernel of reality,” Marder wonders: can be anything “more real or truer than dust?”\(^3\)

As I wipe the grease off the screen, I let myself be transported away from wherever I am now. The grease had moved beyond its background existence, reached a point of critical mass where it is no longer the slight sense of lubricated movement between thumb and forefinger, but a disturbance to my vision. In this accumulated state it announces its material to me. The wiping is a negation of materiality, a blasting off into dreams of an immaterial cyberspace, a fantasy that has been very systematically obliterated by recent and sustained materialist critique. Luciana Parisi, for instance, in her book *Abstract Sex*, equates this vision of “blasting off” into cyberspace with a specifically male ejaculative ideology. Pornography, Parisi suggests, is the crowning achievement of male models of sexual pleasure, one defined by a drive towards a discharge of viscous matter. With online sex, a kind of historical discharge of matter is dreamt to have taken place, the “heavy meat of physical presence” has been shed and

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\(^2\) Michael Marder, *Dust* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 19.

\(^3\) Ibid.
we’re left “floating free in cyberspace.” The digital age we live in becomes, in this view, a kind of historical ejaculation, an image of modern internet culture as post-coital masculine bliss lounging luxuriously about in pixelated sweat. The grease on the screen interrupts this lounging about, adulterates the fantasy and forces my attention to the processes that take place behind or before my experience. This moment of adulterated consumer experience is something Marx notices in Das Kapital as a way of “subduing commodity fetishism.” The adulteration of useful, edible commodities like bread with grit or dust “provokes in consumer society” a huge flurry of interest in the social history of production. As Keston Sutherland says, “now that my meat has shit in it, I suddenly want to know who made it and how.” However convincing your social critique might be, it takes the direct sensual experience of adulteration, grease on the screen, dirt in bread, minute shards of glass in your instant coffee, for anyone to pay any attention.

Writing and Kneading

How might it be possible to synthesize a situation in which writing was literally synchronized with a viscous material? Might this be an alternative to this situation of mourning to which the grease has awakened me? This is something I attempted at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, in collaboration with Julieta Garcia Vazquez’s Union of Bakers and Poets, installed in the basement of the gallery for the months of July and August, 2018. Around fifteen bakers and fifteen poets were brought together in a space

5 Is it some how strangely apt that a contender for the first ever piece of moving screen media was of a man, a worker from Thomas Edison’s factory, sneezing?
7 Ibid.
where bread and poems would be baked and written through a variety of entanglings devised by the group. The bread would be infiltrate the *boulangeries* of Paris, become food. The texts would come together in a newspaper published over the course of the installation. For Julieta, this space was conceived in direct historical lineage with the political radicalism of Argentinian bakeries and their use of language, naming. It’s well known that the bakers in Argentina were the first work force in the country to unionize, and as part of the ongoing struggle, gave their produce political, anti-state, anticlerical names. The word for pastries in Argentinian Spanish is just *factura* “invoice,” while particular delicacies are called things like “nun’s sighs” and “priest balls.” The ruling classes were meant literally to eat the contempt their employees had for them.

I proposed a collective writing experiment where participants would make bread with their feet and write at the same time. People washed their feet in the sink before walking down a long plastic sheet to a circle of chairs. Once seated, they would put their feet in some plastic kneading tubs. Julieta came around and filled the tubs with yeast, water, then flour. Over the course of this, I tried to explain the concept of “asemic writing,” that is, writing that has no semantic concept. It is a practice that has a long and intriguing history, through a mysterious 15th-century manuscript, *The Voynich Manuscript*, to the works of Laurence Sterne, Emily Dickinson, the surrealists, and a number of contemporary writers and poets. It sits eagerly on the cusp of words, emerging, for me at least, from a puppyish desire to write that overcomes and persists through and despite the fact that I don’t have anything to say. It takes me back most vividly to the childhood performance of fluency. Sitting there, words flowing from my pen onto the paper, composing nonsense letters to ambassadors and the ever-elusive pen friend I never had in China. For this experiment at the Palais de Tokyo, words felt too much. We needed something more preliminary, more doughy. So we decided on asemic writing.

But, like the grease on my screen, the viscous performed its interventions. People were far too preoccupied by the sensation
of dough forming between their toes to listen to me outline a well-phrased theory of “viscous writing.” Conceptually, the experiment broke down. People wrote frenetically. But the asemic practice combined with the kneading felt like a fetishization of immediacy. “Words,” I heard someone say, “would be a liberation.”

The more we kneaded the stronger the gluten bonds became. Gluten, related as it is to “glue,” adheres fiendishly to leg hair, folds of skin, containers, toe nails, and so on. About two hours were spent scrubbing after the workshop was over. We had made monstrous quantities of dough, far more than could be baked in Julieta’s oven. Most had to be thrown away in a large bin in the basement of the gallery. A small quantity was baked. I was surprised by how hard the knowledge of the feet made it to eat. But the bakers told us the quality was not bad. The waste, however, was depressing. Julieta’s vision for the union of bakers and poets was for it to be exactly that: a union. Once you start throwing large quantities of dough away in the service of poetic experiments, all union is lost. There were serious flaws in our method. It will be attempted again.

The appropriate “writerly” response to writing the viscous, to writing the grease on my screen, the dough in the tub, might be to try, rather than to write about grease, to integrate the qualities of grease into the language itself, to try to write as grease, all its sticky, slippery, blurry obscurity, to somehow translate its form into the language you can now see crisp and black, now the screen is clean. I have decided, though, to attempt something like the opposite, to be as violently clear as possible, to lay out the cleanest possible surface for its smears and marks to come into presence.

8 I later learned that this bin’s lid was lifted off by the dough as it expanded, filling the entire container, in the warm evening air.
9 I held another slime writing workshop as part of Physarum Borax, an exhibition curated by Ella Fleck and Bryony James at Southwark Platform in London, October 2018. It was much more successful; words were used and its material will perhaps find their way into some publication one day.
Digital Goo

Via the grease, my attention turns to the material of the screen itself. Behind the glass lies a microscopically thin layer of liquid crystals that translate the charge passed through them, which corresponds to the digital information in my devices, into readable color and shape. This layer of the LCD screen is, as Esther Leslie says, a “slimy state of being,” neither solid nor liquid, viscous, a state that possesses at one and the same time “properties of liquid and of crystal.” Screens might want to repel greasiness, asking us to wipe its obscurity off them. They might, as Parisi imagines, enact an ejaculative discharge as we enter through them into their worlds. This takes place, however, on an interface that has, at the center of its technology, this semi-state of matter. In the syrupy flow of the liquid crystal there exists the technology of high definition digital image making.

The liquid crystal was discovered towards the end of the 19th century by the Austrian botanical physiologist Friedrich Reinizter when attempting to extract cholesterol from carrots. He noticed that the particular cholesterol he was dealing with — cholesterol benzoate — exhibited two melting points. At 145.5°C, the substance melted to form a cloudy viscous liquid. At 178°C, the viscous liquid turned clear and became fluid. This intermediate state of the substance became a scientific curiosity and was picked up by the German physicist Otto Lehmann, who conducted the first in-depth experiments into what he would define as the liquid crystalline state, publishing the paper Über fliessende Krystalle, “On Flowing Crystals,” in the Zeitschrift für Physikalische Chemie in 1889. In the liquid crystal, we observe, Lehmann proclaims, a “contradiction in terms”: “a rigid well-ordered system of molecules,” “our image of the crystal,” that appears to flow like a “syrup or a gum.” This apparent contradic-

tion in the substance was contained, importantly, at a molecular level, part of the stuff’s very structure.

There were objections to this theory, as one fully at odds with the laws of molecular science as they were then understood. The Berlin physicist Georg Quincke provided an explanation of this behavior on the basis of these substances being colloids, a structure of viscous matter I discuss at length in the next chapter. The substances, as far as Quincke was concerned, could only be composed of a suspension of small crystallites in the body of a liquid. An example of such a colloid is white paint, “which consists of crystallites of titanium dioxide suspended in polymer resin.”

Gustav Tammann, a distinguished German physical chemist, thought these liquid crystal substances had more in common with milk or vinaigrette, suggesting they were emulsions. But this state of matter was found not to be an imperceptible inter-dispersal of two distinct chemicals, but a gooeyness that existed at the level of the molecular.

Colloids and liquid crystals are the two main domains of viscous structure. They contain the types of thinking that find articulation in sliminess. One is an intermingled separateness, the other a sharpness that flows. They both do strange, though very familiar, things with light. Colloids disperse light within their body to create hazes, like the blue in the sky, whereas liquid crystals cause birefringence, the splitting of a ray of light into two that creates the classic psychedelic shimmering, cascading patterns, an aesthetic that I, at least, came across first on Windows Media Player.

One of the properties of liquid crystals that fascinated Lehmann was the tendency they have to move and grow as if alive. Like the early research into colloidal structures, liquid crystals were also thought to possess signs of life, incipient forms of vitality that potentially made them the bridge between


13 Ibid., 31.
the inorganic and the organic. Liquid crystals seemed to move of their own accord. They are animated matter that glistens, a cinematic substance. Appropriately enough, Lehmann made a film of his investigations in crystalline liquidity, entitled Liquid Crystals and Their Apparent Life in 1906, which is now lost. An observer of the film at the time wrote that one could see the “shooting forward and wriggling of the worm-shaped appendages so clearly, as if one were seeing the object itself.”\textsuperscript{14} Liquid crystals look like films of themselves. Between colloids and liquid crystals, the latter were always the more cinematic semi-state. From their discovery, they were involved in moving image media. Initially at least, this was in order for their animation to be witnessed, rather than what would become the case—to be the material medium of digital visualization.

There are two phases of liquid crystalline matter: smectic and nematic. Smectic refers to liquid crystal with relatively weak molecular bonds. They slip and slide, exhibiting soap-like qualities. “Smectic” derives from the ancient Greek word \textit{smēktikos}, later \textit{smecticus} in Latin, meaning to clean, wash, purge. It’s a soapy word, the root of the Greek \textit{kosmētikos}, meaning skilled in adornment and arrangement. This would, then, evolve into the 17th-century French word \textit{cosmétique} for the preparation of beauty. If liquid crystals have a soapy side, one intent on the maintenance of finely composed surface qualities, their other phase, nematic, is associated with a quality of writhing. It means “thready” or thread-like, and the molecules in the nematic phase face the same direction, but have no positional order within that arrangement. We might think of ancient mosaic techniques, specifically the one that uses very small tiles, or tesserae, for intricate details and glow and shadows, a technique called \textit{opus vermiculatum}, literally “worm-like work.” In order to make things glow with HD finesse, we must avoid lines, horizons, grids; the eye can easily spot them and the illusion is shattered. Digital visual technologies need to technologize matter that can squirm and slide, they need the viscous: the liquid crys-
tal, a kind of matter that is doubled, directs us as much toward the wormy, the chthonic, as to the cosmetic, “face practices.”

In her important work on the history of the liquid crystal, Leslie shows how this material signifies more than a scientific curiosity-turned-media technology. It is a “curious phase, in actuality and as a mode of processing existence.”15 For Leslie, the liquid crystal creeps into the thinking, art and social movements of the 19th century onwards, finding analogues in, for instance, Walter Benjamin’s concept of “petrified unrest” or the jerkiness of the proletarian revolution “which only comes haltingly, as Marx put it.”16 In Leslie’s form of sensual historical materialism, particular qualities of matter can become socially operative, historical forces in their own right, as Bruno Latour might have it, an “actant.”17 The dialectical interplay between the crystalline and the fluid is the material analogue of the struggle between revolutionary hope and reactionary thought. The liquid crystal plays out within its molecular structure the battle between progression and conservatism. But it is also the substance through which our global economy transmits images of itself “worldwide.”18 Leslie worries that the polar pull between the liquid and crystal threaten to “flatten out in the age of the flat screen.”19 She is concerned that the spectacular hypnotic power of the LCD screen is engaged in pacifying the struggles its substance enacts internally. The liquid crystal has been domesticated, forced into disappearance at the service of the ever crisper image.

One of the most intriguing moments in Leslie’s writing on the liquid crystal comes as we enter with her into a television shop, screens on all sides at every moment firing across their surfaces the demonstration show-reels designed to exhibit their finest qualities. The fluid and crystal, once the thematic matter

15 Ibid., 20.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 21.
of the Romantic sublime—the snowy peaks, the frozen cata-
racts, the gushing torrents—are now the “technical matter of […] a commodity sublime, conveyed by the digital machine.”

But in a strange material twist, she notices how this commodity sublime, the “screens of high technology,” conjure high nature to sell themselves. The images that swoop and soar on LCD screens in TV shops are ones of mountain ranges, canyons, seascapes. Adverts for GoPros display repeated images of flying off cliffs, plunging from high into lakes, snowboarding down mountain sides “the scurf of snow crystals hurtling towards the lens.” The sublime is traditionally associated with crises in our powers of representation and expression. The liquid crystal is now more part of a sublime that involves a super abundance of high definition representation.

Leslie notes how LCD technology is advertised as “close to nature,” being more efficient, longer lasting, “eco-friendly,” wanting to “keep our planet beautiful.” But then seems to want to “outbid” the “natural world”—seize its forms and disperse it throughout the shopping centers of human cities. The crystal clear image is advertised as being “sharp as a shark’s teeth” and we move fluidly between worlds: “a dolphin rises through snow into the air, in front of a mountain backdrop.” Although we are oblivious to its substance, the allure of the liquid crystal is part of the form of these demonstration show-reels: a sharpness we glide easily between.

For Leslie, the liquid crystal is, itself, a dialectic and operates dialectically with the human world. It both informs and is informed by its interactions with society. In this way materials, their texture, their sensual presence, become indexes of shifts in the social fabric. They can literally contain, and contain ways of exposing, the “contradictions of the present.”

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20 Ibid., 206.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 208.
23 Ibid.
ing about Leslie’s writing is that material states are always also imaginary ones and that imaginary states are always also material ones. But neither are, importantly, ever reducible to one or the other. We get a writing that vibrates, a “world-view” that refracts materials states — crystallinity, emulsions, vapors — into complex relation with physic states — flights of fancy, stagnations, arrogances. Most importantly, materials are things, but also abstractions that can induce in us wild excursions into fantasy. Shine, glow, crystalline, glimmer: materials can advertise themselves as transcendent realms.

Looking for Ways to Live in Things

What of the desire to look to materials not as an index, but for guidance in the liberation in mind and body we think we desire? Why might we look to the behaviors of things to find instruction on how to live? What would a life look like that was lived in total and absolute attunement with materials, without any preconceptions about how they should behave or any beliefs in a transcendence from them? If such a thing were possible, would we even want this kind of life? Why did I assume, as I wrote this (if I’m being honest), that that life would be preferable to the one I feel like I am living now? In fact, why did I assume that we don’t already live a life totally and absolutely attuned with materials, their texture? Am I caught by an anxiety about a disembodied digitized life and in response inadvertently give “texture” unwarranted, or totally hallucinated instructional power? I assumed it would be a good idea because, I think, materials already provide us with the metaphors we use to analyze our experience. Or further than this: material states are so often the way in which we experience our experience. The fog I feel in my mind right now as I try to work out what I’m writing is a material state I bring forward in order to bring forward how I’m feeling. Once I bring the fog forward, I am able, somehow, to expec-

experience what I’m experiencing more clearly, thinking “charged”
with matter.

But this is combined with a frustration, for me at least, that
we only bring forward materials like this to suit our purposes.
More often than not we call upon texture if and when it is able
to accommodate our metaphors. What if we were able to give
texture, if only for a moment, full control? Would this be a kind
of madness?

If not madness, perhaps this question is and only ever will
be an academic thought experiment, something only theorists
dream of. More than most, this question seems doomed to stay
put in the world art theory; it will be centuries, no doubt, be-
fore they start discussing texture in think tanks. Luce Irigaray
is driven by a similar impulse to find in the actual dynamics of
fluid substances blueprints of how to crush male dominated
kinds of living and knowing. In her influential writing on the
mechanics of fluids, she sees there to have been a historical lag
in elaborating a theory of “fluids” because, in part, their prop-
erties resist what patriarchal society considers to be “adequate
symbolization.”25 As is well known, fluids are Irigaray’s “real,”
they expose “the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its
writing all the characteristic features of nature.”26 Fluids are the
excess, innately feminine substances that reach beyond. And
this is, for Irigaray, the power of women and the threat they pose
to patriarchal society. They diffuse themselves in ways that don’t
conform to the solid walls of principle, as they are “spreading to
infinity.”27

If we are to follow Irigaray we must look into the “real prop-
erties” of the fluid. But what’s important for her is not so much
some notion of continuity, boundlessness, structurelessness,
but an attention to the “specific dynamics” of the fluid materi-
als, which include “internal frictions, pressures, movements,”28

25 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New
26 Ibid., 107.
27 Ibid., 106.
28 Ibid., 109.
These have been excluded from our symbolization of the substance, this is what Irigaray considered to be the “real,” something whose place is taken in society as it stands by an image of God.

Irigaray’s writing on the mechanics of fluids feels dated for a number of reasons. I don’t think it is necessary to launch another critique of its apparent essentialism, the way in which the female body feels awkwardly tied in some essential way to the physical behaviors of water. This is especially apparent when fluidity has come to mean, in more current discourses, an absolutely non-essentialist, highly constructivist approach to gender identity. Catherine Malabou, while rejecting critiques of Irigaray’s essentialism as petty and irrelevant, finds Irigaray’s writing on fluidity, this stretching to “infinity,” to be, quite simply, in danger of being useless: “what’s the point?” she asks. “Is there a viable source of action here? How do you escape the infinite fluidity or elasticity of the woman?”

Malabou is one of the major opponents to philosophies of the “fluid,” in favor of a material state she terms plasticity, which is at once the ability to mold, be molded and, most importantly, to explode. She looks to the Freudian idea of the healthy libido as viscous, able to reach out and contract without becoming fixated. This originates in amoeboid life, single-celled organisms that extend pseudopodia, false feet, out into the world, before contracting back in. Experience has a kind of kneading action to it: as we work on the world, it works on us. But Malabou’s notion of the plastic is also wrapped up in modern understandings of the word, specifically the embedding of explosives in polymers to make plastic explosives. In French, plastique has the verb plastiquer, which means to blow up. The thinking gives a role to the material, allows it to suggest futures for where the thinking goes. The role of plastiquer is, as Malabou outlines in Ontology of the Accident: An Essay in Destructive Plasticity, to be the event of sudden change that has no relation to what came before. This is

a moment when an individual identity is “breached”, “cut definitively” by something like a brain injury: a “sudden blind event [that] cannot be reintegrated retrospectively into experience.”

Between Irigaray and Malabou we move from the liquid to the plastic, from the rippling fluid to the malleable, the brain that kneads and is kneaded on. Malabou zones in on the pressures that feel contained within Irigaray’s fluid, the “frictions, pressures, movements,” and amplifies them into the explosive moment. Both, however, allow their material and its multiple properties to take an active role in what they say. The material suggests outcomes.

The Ideal Firmness of Meat

In asking what a life lived in total attunement to texture would look like, perhaps it is necessary to turn to the scientific and commercial practice of food texture and flow analysis. With the strict standardization that comes with mass production, there are labs that develop the equipment necessary to measure and test the exact sensual, tactile, properties of everything we use and/or consume. I visited the UK site of Brookfield Amatek in Roydon, Essex, to talk to Claire Freeman, the technical and marketing support co-ordinator at the company, the “world standard” manufacturer of viscometers, food texture analyzers, and flow testers.

Claire, who seemed to be the sole practitioner in what turned out to be a medium-sized room in an industrial estate (I had, if I’m honest, been imagining a huge factory full of vats of baked beans), gave me demonstrations of their equipment. We used a viscometer, a device that gently stirs viscous substances, mostly foodstuffs and cosmetics (we used a pot of tahini), and assesses the thickness over time. She showed me their texture analyzers,

equipment that allows you to standardize the resistance a sausage puts up to your bite (fig. 2), for instance, the reluctance a particular bit of pizza has to being torn apart (fig. 3), the stretch-ability of its melted cheese (fig. 4), or the effect of hair dye on the “smoothness” of hair when combed (fig. 5), to name only a few. They also have a device, something that Claire made sure I knew was very unique, that assesses the flow of powders, nuts, and beans as you tip them out of pots: the Brookfield Amatek powder flow tester. The precision is strangely both comic and breathtaking. It is breathtaking to think of the lengths cultures of mass production will go to make sure every sensual detail of your experience of their commodities has been delicately meas-
ured, tested, and curated. As she showed me the sausage bite analyzer, I asked Claire what an ideal reading for the firmness of the meat would be. She looked at me with a shocked expression, then laughed: “Oh! That’s a question for the sensory panel!” That is, the assembly of mouths, skins, noses, and fingertips that these machines sit in for and mimic.

But rather than giving us an intricate map of matter’s textures, these machines try to standardize them, get a grip on what is excessive in order to repeat what seems to work, to please, to sell. They are the tactile zone of that most elusive, almost ghostly, presence in consumerist society: quality control. What quality? And who is in control? As Keller Easterling describes,
“quality,” in the managerial sense, “has no content.” And it has no content on purpose. In fact — the less content quality has, the more useful it is to the companies ascribing to its standards. The ISO, or the international standards organization, is the body that ensure that commodities traded globally meet certain requirements. We must thank them, for instance, for the fact that all credit cards and ATM slots are the same size around the world.

34 Maybe all religious buildings should be converted into places where we can express our gratitude for this.
They also ensure that food products are of a certain “quality.” But this idea of quality was not developed to assess technical performance, or durability, or efficiency. The companies themselves determined the quality of their product:

Successful engagement with the standard is measured by evaluating whether an organization has addressed the objectives it set for itself.\(^{35}\)

“Quality,” then, is the power to standardize, to be able to set objectives and then meet them, repeatedly. These machines at Brookfield Amatek are the condition for the possibility for McDonalds food production, the texture of its experience, approaching the perfectly repeatable. Imagine a world where every bite you ever took of any food was absolutely identical, both in texture and in taste. These machines are the machines that make food texture and flow aspire towards the digital. The journey is short between the perfect crisp and perfectly crisp, repeatable image that liquid crystalline flow has now made possible.

Virtual Putrescence

The video work of artist Ed Atkins is intent on exposing not so much the so-called “materiality of the screen,” but lunging out into the material excesses that smooth HD images secretly carry within themselves. His show *Olde Food* at Cabinet Gallery, Spring 2018, unfolds like a demented period drama, or perhaps a rehearsal for a historical re-enactment based on some crude “horrible history-style” imaginary of medieval England. A time, that is, as a text explains, where you “toil in filth,” your teeth are rotting out of your skull, “children learn about sex from watching animals” and no-one has ever seen “anyone write a word or draw a picture.” You’re asked to see, however, the LCD screens that surround you as participating in this creep of decay, rather than standing clear of it. In fact, the digital image is able to beat putrescence at its own game, as another text, printed on what might be part of an Ikea wardrobe explains:

Watching our virtual cheeseburger putresce black goo is more difficult than the real mouldy cheese burger because the virtual one by virtue of being advertorial proxy threatens the entire order of cheeseburgers, all cheeseburgers, ours.36

37 Ibid.
The message is clear: the spread of mold across meat is quaint in comparison to the spread of the digital. Once mold is digitized, its threat is magnified infinitely to involve not only what is there at hand, but our entire definition of that foodstuff. The adversorial image is exposed as the adversarial, becoming, like an imaginary of the slime monster, an invasive force in the formation of our categories.

The exhibition as a whole imagines HD images as finding their origins not in the opus vermiculatum of the liquid crystal, but in the very particular kind of curtailed decay of the human body that occurs in the anaerobic bacterial hydrolysis of fat tissue. This is a process where the human form, instead of rotting, saponifies and becomes, essentially, soap, its image preserved, rather than dispersing out into the earth through the guts of worms. The deliciously clear images we see before us are “not just CGI.” Another text describes adiopocere, the stuff of the saponified body:

Your fat mixed with lye (usually NaOH, a common metal hydroxide, highly caustic and available) creates, famously, basic soap.

Corpse wax, adiopocere (the saponification of human fat by anaerobic bacteria) chemically restructures your jelly into a crumbly whitish material that will hold its human shape with the clarity of a nightmarish Madame Tussaud’s.38

Just as, if we follow Adorno, we might hear the screams on the Holocaust lying on a beach in California, standing in a clean gallery space in South London we’re suddenly staring into a mass grave. Through this clarity we dive into the murky pits. There is the sense of an illusion having been broken, but we’re not returned to the technologies of these illusions, the hackneyed mantra: “nothing more material than a broken computer.” No, we’re taken on another adventure, one that has as its protagonist a quivering lump of jelly. Please note: the tears of Atkins’s char-

38 Ibid.
acters resemble slugs, oozing enthusiastically from the entirety of the eye, one wonders how we know they’re tears at all. The eyes look through the slugs to our own, gingerly, hesitantly, in need, yet never quite sure how to go about talking.

Insurrection and Invasion

Upon the backdrop of digital technology, the meaning of the viscous substance has changed. If it was once a material state that threatened to engulf and ingest all, as dramatized by the “slime monster,” its powers to do this have been overshadowed by the creep of the digital. The threat of the ever expanding blob, of material indifference, has been challenged by something like digital indifference, the ability of binary code to transform into itself whatever it happens to record and repeat over as many times as we want. The fear, then, changes from a fear of being reduced to the mere matter of our bodies, to a fear of total digitized disembodiment. Something curious then takes place: what was once a state of matter that signaled dubiousness, phlegmatics, disingenuousness, becomes a site of seemingly indisputable authenticity.

The video work of London-based artist Benedict Drew is fascinated by gloops, whether they are blown into, caked on anonymous objects or, as is the case with Sludge Manifesto from 2011, feature as a central rotating point of focus, somehow the material of the coming insurrection.

This moving image has an irony to it — an amorphous form precisely structured through digital graphic design. Its aesthetic is one that refers to the liquid crystal, a shimmering neon blurri- ness that might resemble the oozes of an LCD screen once you’ve pierced its surface with a screwdriver. The work does not release the liquid crystals from their labor, though, but asks them to perform something that might resemble this release. But, the form is not entirely formless. We see as it rotates, clearest from the second of the three stills (fig. 7), the curve of the neck from the top of the back to the crown of the head. It is a face that has been scrambled into obscurity. The film revels in the powers of
an end to your value systems

iconoclasm, the erasure of representation, one that leaves the signs of this erasure in place, a spectacle of non-representation. We have, instead, text: slogans, demands, threats, predictions, that enlist the digitally generated amorphous blob as their illustration.

The film is unambiguously using this digital viscous as a sign of the proletarian, subaltern masses, existing without form, without identity or voice, living in a state of potentiality. The connection to proletarian uprising is explicit. The film in fact opens with flashing still images of workers down mines, wheeling carts of coal, before switching to the digital gloop.

Marx used the word *Gallerte*, a kind of jellied foodstuff eaten in Germany at the time, most probably by his contemporaneous readers, to evoke the indifferent mass of the workforce under capitalism, gorged on by the greedy factory owner.³⁹ Today, as the critique generally goes, this group is held in subservience by the enjoyable alternate realities channelled into their living rooms via television screens or, now, on the screens of laptops. Drew, like Marx, is looking to confront this group with their own image. This, though, is the proletariat of the information age, now no longer a jellied foodstuff, no longer *Gallerte*, but a digital goo, disembodied, locked to the crystal clear computer screens of immaterial labor.

The viscous as the material analogue for the oppressed masses of capitalist society is part of its position as a substance of authenticity. It is one that cuts through the barrage of “fake news.” It is something that is somehow true precisely because it never claims to be. The viscous is so often brought forward symbolically as a way of affirming the absolutely unquestionable materiality of experience, its mere stuff. Paradoxically, the viscous state has become the symbol of materiality in general, its presence itself a strangely digitized reminder of this “ground,” this “real,” which may or may not actually be viscous. Through this, goo

has become a trope of digital visual art anxious to undercut the dreams of an immaterial existence that its medium might encourage. The thrill of watching the ooze of liquid crystals across an LCD screen that once displayed, let’s say, the BBC, is the thrill of false consciousness having been shattered in favor of a spectacle that could not lie to us, a sense of complicity with material in a state of pure, formless, potentiality.

This is something the French video artist Elsa Philippe comes across in her film “my goo.” The image of a child sitting distressed (or maybe counting) on a giant iPhone, surrounded by “jazz hands” throwing “truth” in your face, is accompanied by various science experiment-like situations, one, for instance, of a magnet attracting some magnetic slime.

The story that the text and voice of the film narrate is about a girl looking for something exciting to do on the internet, only to have her mind taken over by some mysterious cyberforce from which she is unable to escape. The film’s best line is the girl’s thought, once trapped: “I had no clue, no clue, they were invading my goo.” The monstrous menace here is not the goo, but the internet. Unlike Sartre’s lazy evil, goo, here, has integrity, one that is threatened by the parasitic creep of cyberspace. Goo presents some place of refuge in a world of jazz hands hurling out endless truth claims.

Jellied Ghosts

The character in Philippe’s video work becomes possessed, we might say. The internet occupies her body, her goo, like a ghost. When have goo and ghostliness come together like this before?

It was once theorized that the brain, in states of hyperstimulation, would extrude itself as a viscous mass out of the various orifices of the skull into the external world. In the late 19th century, neurological activity was thought to behave like an amoeba. Neurons made contact not through electrical charge but through the pseudopodal movements of the protoplasm of the nerve cell. The brain was thought to function much like the tentacular activity of the gloopy bodies of single-celled organ-
isms. Little gooey, wormy fingers were thought to pass between the gaps in the brain, its synaptic clefts, for thinking, memory, feeling, and consciousness in general, to happen. When the brain was in a state of hyperstimulation, under supranormal conditions, this wormy action of the protoplasmic masses in the brain could start behaving in an extreme way. The normal leaps of matter within the brain, would start leaping out of it, spurting out of the mouth, the ears, the nose or the eyes. Such is the explanation given by the 19th-century scientist Charles Richet for the “phenomenon of materialization,” the ectoplasmic masses that supposedly emerged from women’s orifices during séances. The ectoplasm was never claimed to be a ghost, just the effect being in communication with a ghost had on the female subject.

Richet was drawn to the moment when the body enters a state of seizure, winning the Nobel Prize for his work on the physiology of laughter. Although he coined the term ectoplasm at the end of the 19th century, he was not involved in the completely fraudulent séances that involved its extrusion. Richet was trying to find an explanation for hoaxes.

These images are one of the rare occasions when the viscous and the spectral explicitly intersect. This might feel like a contradictory marriage — jelly being the stuff associated with a *prima materia*, material in its most basic form, before, in fact, it is something at all, and ghosts, the very definition of immaterial, of the intangible. The ectoplasmic jellied ghost is, therefore, the place where the immaterial locks back into the material, where the supernatural finds association with matter in its most amorphous, negligible form. Like the liquid crystal, it is the gloopy material that transports us though images from wherever we are “elsewhere.” Indeed, one of the powers of ectoplasm was to arrange itself into forms of photographic verisimilitude, to form pictures that were, in truth, just cut from magazines and pasted onto the substance. But nevertheless, this was claimed to be the externalization of the mind’s images and, though fakery, is also a unique moment in the history of representation: the imagination of a bodily ooze to be a technology of photographic reproduction.
Today it is hard to imagine how anybody might be persuaded to believe in images that are so obviously fraudulent. Part of the fascination of these images perhaps comes from the sense of “our” historical superiority they carry. We now know better. We would never be so fooled by the seductions of spectacle. Karl Schoonover, in his essay on ectoplasm photography, suggests that one of the reasons why the hoaxes worked was the way they responded to the changing popular perspectives of photographic technology at the start of the 20th century. In Victorian spirit photography, ghosts are caught on camera that are otherwise imperceptible. In interwar ectoplasm photography, the camera was capturing what could be seen anyway, but just happening too fast to be observed. The role of the camera was not to take us directly to the “beyond,” the invisible realm of the supernatural, but to take us right up close to this realm’s material effects on the female body. In their visual intent, these ectoplasm images share more with Eadweard Muybridge’s galloping horses than they do with Victorian pictures of ghosts. The camera was seen as an enhancement of a technology already present in human sight, rather than a mechanism for accessing the unseen. The ability of the camera to capture fleeting material contingency was what these hoaxes used to foster a sense of believability.

The hyperreal details of a viscous substance were used as a source of authenticity for a world that felt ghostly. The viscous is, then, a source of the activity of mere stuff through which we are able to access the ghost world. The viscous becomes an interface, a site where we are asked to delve into the “real” and the dream simultaneously. Something similar is happening to “goo” in a culture swamped in the digital. For it is inaccurate to say that Elsa Philippe’s “goo” is only the symbol of some “authentic earth,” the originary primordial soup from which we might imagine we emerged. No, it itself is an interfacial construction, a cohesion between senses of “base matter” and the purely syn-

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the viscos universe. This is one that corresponds both to our shit and
to our dreams, pure malleability, pure CGI.

In playing with slime toys, we are participating in an ideal of human progress. This is an ideal where shit itself has become benign, submissive to our wants and fancies, be they ambitious or vague. Where the liquid crystal might be the literal slime that sends us off into seemingly any possible form of a world, these slime toys are like digitized matter. They are the material means towards immaterial experience, actually there, but also a kind of fantasy. Their substance, pulled to the earth, is already partially imaginary, belonging, somehow, to somewhere else, their matter reaching out into the insubstantial. No toys are innocent, and these slimy ones are no exception. They enact in their tactile immediacy the loop whereby synthetic production “reprocesses the nature that produced it.” They are where the primordial and the synthetic collapse into each other, exposing the “sly solidarity” between these states.

ASMR

In trying to conceptualize this transformation, it is useful to observe the turn that has taken place on online media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram where very simple, yet intensely intimate, encounters with material things have become viral phenomena. People have started to fanatically record and distribute online videos of themselves, often only their hands, performing very simple interactions with particular things. This might be the gentle rubbing of a make-up brush on the gauze of a microphone, the tapping of long, red plastic fingernails on the surface of a fake wooden tabletop, very slowly opening the plastic wrapper of a pack of biscuits. The sound is quiet, but unnaturally amplified with immersive fidelity. If there is any speaking it is whispered so that what they’re doing becomes what we’re doing together, though somehow taboo and not to be overheard.

These films have been informally grouped together as a genre of video that seeks to excite ASMR, or “autonomous sensory meridian response,” otherwise known as the “tingles” or a “head-orgasm.”

To anyone involved in the ASMR community, the suggestion that these films are in any way erotic is taken largely as an insult. For the community, their pleasure is never quite pleasure, but a form of stress release. ASMR is most commonly referred to as a form of relaxation. In the most in-depth survey and psychological analysis of ASMR users online, conducted by researchers at the University of Swansea, 98% of them saw ASMR films as an opportunity to relax. Only 5% of those asked reported using the genre for sexual stimulation.42 The feeling is only ever necessarily subdued, never overwhelming or ecstatic, a “low-grade euphoria.” It has been speculated that the tingles of ASMR might be the result of a minor seizure.43 But role-play, performed intimacy, conceits of care-giving and subservience are laid on thick. When the woman I watched opening a pack of biscuits notes in husky tones that they might be stale, she, just before taking a bite, says, “that’s a sacrifice I’m willing to make for you.”

The recent ASMR craze is it as an intensely intimate material encounter designed to take place solely within the context of the internet. The films do not call attention to the “materiality of the screen,” but are a specific kind of material encounter that the dynamics of cyberspace has made possible. It is said that what most amazed the first people to ever use telephones was not the fact of being able to speak to your brother, say, on the other side of the world, but the fact of being able to hear him breathing. ASMR seems to be structured similarly. The transportive powers of the incidental, the fascination with the sensual properties of the absolutely mundane happening elsewhere. The effect of these films is not Parisi’s fantasy “discharge of matter,” nor do they, like the grease on my screen, bring me into direct physical

43 Ibid.
interaction with the devices that encourage this fantasy. It is the way in which the films, instead, combine the two—a blasting off into cyberspace only to settle and resettle compulsively on short films that take you into extreme sensual proximity to the specifically material behavior of the extremely familiar. The vast majority of these films take place in domestic locations, using household items. They are, in some ways, the opposite of the demonstration show-reels in TV shops, dolphins erupting out of sunsets; the viewer is transported to table tops around the world, somewhere they could, very easily, already be.

Some of the most interestingly problematic writing on the phenomenon of ASMR is by a medical practitioner Nitin K. Ahuja, a gastroenterologist at John Hopkins University Hospital in the US. Ahuja first came across ASMR in 2013 in its particular form of medical role-play. A young female nurse with no professional training looks directly into camera, examines your body, gently performs various tests and tells you everything is wonderfully “ok.” What Ahuja found enthralling about this pretend medical examination were how the formulas of his own training were being used to establish what seemed to be the potential for genuinely intimate connections between people:

The popularity of these videos signalled to me an electric potential for real connections crackling beneath the surface of my ordinary professional interactions, behind the insulating postures of cynicism, defensiveness, hurry, or greed.  

Ahuja takes the ASMR community at their word. This is not, as it may seem to many people, a cliché of kinky online sex-talk, but a thrilling awakening of some sense of authentic intimacy within the actions he performs himself everyday with total professional disinterest.

Ahuja speculates as to why ASMR has become so popular, about the science behind these tingles. For those partial to the

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evolutionary lens, the thrill of these films might stem from the social grooming habits of other animals; it might be evolutionarily beneficial for rituals of care-giving to produce excitement. Most interestingly, however, he proposes a hypersensitivity to touch in the setting of its relative deficiency. For a conjectural analogy, we might turn to the over-expression of certain receptors in basic negative feedback loops: cellular membranes becoming ever more populated with molecules meant to capture a progressively infrequent stimulus.45

I am not in a position to comment on the science of this statement. But the suggestion is that in a world where people increasingly live online, where touch dries up, the body starts to compensate for the absence of physical encounter through generating hypersensitivity to ones represented, through sound and light, on our screens. In this way ASMR is, for Ahuja, something like the redemption of the internet. It has managed to find a kind of “homeopathic paradox,” 46 a way to cure its own ills, save us from its powers of alienation and isolation. From the medical role-play, Ahuja moves in his various articles on ASMR, between its many different loosely associated modes — people taking things out of boxes, unwrapping new handbags, things fitting neatly into other things, pouring water into cups etc. As far as he is concerned, these films are in no way mildly erotic, vaguely fetishistic, wastes of time, but a means for us to reassemble our brains tangled and broken by the relentless onslaught of so-called “modern life.” If long-term exposure to pornography produces a “slow but steady corruption of our dopaminergic pathways,” ASMR is an attempt to reassemble the “fractured pieces of our psyche,” he suggests. It is a return to something

46 Ibid.
we have lost in cyberspace, provided by cyberspace; ASMR films are “artefacts of a post-pornographic age,” a desire to return to the very rudiments and origins of intimacy in a world of sexual and spectacular oversaturation and overstimulation. ASMR is the dismissal of “brute acts in favour of the their clean, abstract signifiers.”

I am wary of Ahuja’s eagerness to celebrate ASMR. His terror of overstimulation and the notion that we are being somehow damaged by the sheer quantity of stuff on the internet strikes me as dull, potentially extremely conservative and deeply limited in its imagining of how thought and pleasure might operate. Who is to say how our dopaminergic pathways are “meant to be”? On what basis can we claim our very neurology is corrupt and in need of salvation? In his perception of ASMR as a return to something, some form of originary, uncorrupted intimacy, what sorts of crypto-fascist fantasies are at play? But then again, ASMR has proven to be an extremely effective method of therapy for people suffering from chronic pain, depression, and anxiety. Not unlike the current trend for “mindfulness,” ASMR is used by people as a therapeutic method of detachment where the participant is able to achieve a state of mental “flow,” a state of being I discussed in the previous chapter. Although it might be problematic to assign ASMR some status of authenticity, the anxieties people experience are nonetheless real, as are whatever acts as their cure.

Fondling Slime Online

The viscous has found a new home in this ASMR network and one of the most popular types of this genre’s videos involves fondling slime. Online communities of mostly, but by no means only, young teenage girls make slime out of personalized ratios of PVA glue, shaving foam, and borax diluted in water, add food coloring, little plastic stars, polystyrene balls, anything

47 Ahuja, “Softer than Softcore.”
48 Barrett and Davis, “Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.”
to add textural counterpoint, and fondle it in little HD haptic documentaries. Some of these slimers, such as Instagram user slimequeens, command the attention of an online crowd of a size equivalent to a small city (733k followers) on a daily basis. Like the customs of an ancient community, the formula of these films is strictly adhered to: the hands remove the slime from a small transparent plastic pot, poke it with their tips three or four times, before folding the body of the slime over itself again and again. At this point the slime is stretched and pulled, the glitter and the stars exhumed and swept off, the sound crackles, pops, and politely squelches. The surface on which this activity plays out is usually a matte white tabletop. Although I’ve noticed that recently Instagram user slimekiingg, a young male slimer of, I would estimate, nine years, with considerably less followers than slimequeens has taken to fondling his slime on maps of the world, creating imaginary pink glittery land masses between South America and Africa. The dominion of slimekiingg; this boy has imperial ambitions.

These slime films are of course, though, reminiscent of a type of slimy toy that has been on the market since 1950, Silly Putty. This, the first of all slimes to be sold as a toy, came about, like so many things, as a failed military material. The US trade embargo with Japan during the Second World War cut off the rubber trade between East and West. An essential material for machines of war, research began into finding a synthetic rubber substitute. Silicone oil was mixed with boric acid by scientists working for General Electric and the result was a curious one: a rubber-like material that stretched if you pulled it slowly, bounced if you threw it against a wall, but broke into little pieces if you yanked it hard enough. They had synthesized a non-Newtonian viscoelastic. No practical use was ever found for Silly Putty, but its inconsistent material properties gave it a “silliness” that was commercially viable. The man who filed the patent for the material as a source of recreation, Peter Hodgson, described it in an article in the New Yorker in 1950, as “five minutes escape from [the] neurosis” of a world reeling from the effects of mechanized
war.\textsuperscript{49} Intended for use by the military, this viscoelastic became instead a material of benign nonsense that offered a momentary escape from a militarized world, rather than a tool for it.

Fondling things, we drift off, find release from the world through the comfort of repeated squeezing. It is a directionless pleasure, one that doesn’t move, like ejaculation-oriented pleasure, towards climax. It stays with itself. This is true, too, of the form of these slime films, their strikingly repetitive nature, how little desire for innovation or variation they possess. They merely are, fondling their way into cyberspace clip by clip. Nothing is being evoked, no point being made. Their sole intention is to take us into the closest possible proximity with the squelches and crackles of slime.

Rather than being a dream of an immaterial existence, the internet has become a place of extremely various material experience, a place obsessed with capturing, simply for the sake of it, the quirks and irregularities of matter. Fondling activates these quirks and is a way for us to disappear into them. The structure of the films is erotic, though, in the way that their intimacy is a kind of distancing. However close we might feel to the slime, it is still only on a screen. The sensation of the tinges happens when our senses are split like this, when we feel, in one way, contained within something and, in another, completely removed from it. Like with ectoplasm photography, it is a kind of attentiveness to sensual detail, the intricate contingencies of the matter that not only delights, but results in an entry into an elsewhere.

The act of fondling gooey objects is imagined by Gaston Bachelard to be one of transcendentally communitarian potential. Fondling calms us down through providing a reciprocity between hand and matter. It finds in the world “\textit{a suppleness in plenitude} — a suppleness that fills one’s hands, rebounding endlessly from matter to hand.”\textsuperscript{50} Suppleness is what gratifies the


hand, provides it precisely with what it desires to do, allows it to feel most perfectly like a hand. It becomes conscious, Bachelard speculates, of how fingers became fingers. Suppleness can also pacify our anger because it denies it any object on which it could unleash itself. Pliant matter quells our inner rage, relieves it little by little of “avarice and aggression,” and imbues it “sinew by sinew, with muscles of generosity.”\textsuperscript{51} The act of fondling is the origin of a particular way of being with others, for Bachelard. He chooses a moment in the great gooey novel \textit{Moby Dick} as an example of this taking place, a moment that might be considered a 19th-century instance of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response:

All morning long I squeezed that sperm until I myself almost melted into it; […] Oh! My dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humour or envy! Come let us squeeze hands all round; nay let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of kindness.\textsuperscript{52}

Melting into things is not far, it seems, from melting into others. The object sitting there waiting to be fondled is sitting there waiting to unlock utopian visions of universal “brotherly love.” There is here an imagined continuity between the activity of the hand and a kind of political consciousness. Squeezing viscous matter opens out directly onto a dream of collectivized existence. Maybe Instagram has partially realized this vision, a global network united simply by the thrill of squeezing.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{52} Herman Melville, \textit{Moby Dick} (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Modern Classics, 2002), 345.
Techniques of Domination

For Bachelard, the act of kneading imagines the world as oppositional, a “perfect synthesis of yielding and resistance, a marvelous equilibrium of the forces of acceptance and refusal.” It is out of this state of equilibrium that we’re able to determine the pejorative judgements of too hard, too soft! This moment of balance, something we instantly recognize, Bachelard thinks, is the dream of the “perfect earth,” a moment of exactitude aimed for by the baker, the moment at which water and flour come into doughy harmony. So begins the cogito of kneading, where we quietly murmur to ourselves as we work away at a lump of dough: “Everything is earthen matter to me, including myself; my own destiny is my material, action and passion my materials; I am truly primordial earth.”

But is bread dough viscous? If yes, then it is surely of some other order of the viscous than, say, glue or tar. The slime in these films is, too, not viscous in the same way that the asphalt in the asphalt lake in Binәqәdi is viscous. They stand for the viscous pacified, its maddening stickiness erased to leave an invitation to malleable playfulness. This phenomenon of the domesticated viscous is something that Bachelard locks into, unlike Sartre, whose battle between the in-itself and for-itself is ceaseless. Bachelard shows how easy it is to bring slimy things under control. Dough is an instance of this, an instance of a substance that has been dominated by the hand. If the material is too sticky, all one need to do is sprinkle some more flour! Leavening, too, caused by the addition of yeast, transforms the dough into something light and malleable, makes it fibrous, facilitating its undoing. In the battle with viscosity the hand can forge allegiances with other materials. In kneading, yeast is our “ally against viscosity!”

Bachelard’s response to Sartre’s primal dread of the sticky thing is to direct us to all the not so nightmarish, but quotidian,

54 Ibid., 60.
55 Ibid., 92
thickening and thinning outs of matter. What is most unique about Bachelard’s writing, here, is the way he seems less interested in the horror, the dread, the disgust of it all, and more interested in the potential for reverie held in more practical matters. The material imagination, he reminds us, doesn’t come from nowhere, but from a “convergence of functions, an aggregate of useful values.” He takes us to the attempts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to prevent the build up of phlegm in the body using foodstuffs that were imagined to “cut through” its viscosity. Pepperwort, for instance, was declared by Michael Ettmüller to be an “excellent stomachic, for it cuts and dissolves the viscous mucus lining the stomach walls.” Others, such as Étienne Geoffrey, hold that the flowers of hops make the viscosity of beer thinner. Though there is no scientific way of legitimizing these claims, they stand for, instead, what Bachelard calls “a conviction of images,” the way in which textures seem to contain a kind of internal logic of interaction that we might find ourselves inadvertently believing in.

For Bachelard, the viscous becomes, then, not so much an object of morbid fascination, but a source of debate, a complex of opinions about the meaning of consistencies. Just as people try to attenuate matter, there are situations where a highly viscous flow might simply be favored. Doctors in the 17th and 18th centuries would try, apparently, to thicken the body’s humors in order to mollify the organs. According to the 17th-century chemist Daniel Duncan in La Chymie naturelle, the unctuosity of the organs was a good thing. The thicker they were, the better. The more resistant their substance, the more they would retain food particles that would otherwise escape. The more viscous your internal organs, the longer you can fast. The viscous, for Duncan, is associated with a retention of nutrition, it is why, for him, resinous trees live longer than others, why snakes with “gummy” skin, can live all winter without eating. In these ac-

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 93
58 Ibid.
counts, viscosity does not induce vertigo, is not a source of joy, but something to be worked with. It “exerts instead a gentle magnetism”:

Uncious matter attracts and retains alimentary treasure, the precious and radical moisture.59

And Bachelard wants to be clear: this debate over which viscosity is preferable can potentially have no basis in scientific research. Theories about the world can be proven wrong by science, but this, Bachelard observes, has “scant effect on the power of images.”60 How we perceive textures is embedded in conviction, the passage of matter between degrees of viscosity carry subtle and acute ideals about how the world should be.

It is from this backdrop that the very particular labour of kneading emerges. Though an instance of seeming harmony, raw dough is also an “invitation to domination.”61 Despite his lyrical indulgence in the act of baking, he lets no quaint illusions of the baker to settle. In the act of kneading we find a triumph of the “powerful imperialism of the human subject.”62 Viscosity has been overwhelmed and transformed. Like with the slime we might buy in gift shops that makes shit benign, there is a sense, in making bread, of having transcended some fundamental laws. This is a triumph over “base realities” that gives rise to a figure of superexistentialism, what might be Bachelard’s versions of the Übermensch. Bachelard’s theory of bread is not as dreamy or as reverent as it might initially appear. Though bread is an essential and delicious foodstuff, it also has a spectacular presence that delights the minds of writers and philosophers who refuse to get their hands dirty, don’t understand the street, aren’t active, avoid immersion in confusion. Kneading a lump of submissive dough delights the figure who wants to remain

59 Bachelard, Earth and the Reveries of Will, 64.
60 Ibid., 93.
61 Ibid., 92.
62 Ibid.
unencumbered by the world, the philosopher who believes the universe is “out of whack if they find themselves unable to run a little finger “freely” across the smooth surface of a blank page.”\textsuperscript{63}

The Silent Zone

The artist and youth worker India Harvey holds slime workshops for children after school in a playground in an estate in South London. Her project is socially progressive, the aim to realize something of what Ishmael experiences aboard the \textit{Pequod}, new kinds of social cohesion born from the act of fondling things together. She spreads a plastic sheet over the bouncy tarmac, pushes a shopping trolley full of the borax, shaving foam, PVA glue and various colorants towards a congregation of under-tens, who then make and play with their viscous concoctions. India considers it the case, not unlike Bachelard, that intimate experiences of a viscous semi-state might reformat the ways in which we are able to be together, could break us out of prescribed social structures towards something more self-directed. The slime sessions with children are a boldly literal implementation of Leslie’s idea that liquid crystallinity might be social force in its own right. Perhaps the simple experience of the gooey object can become the blueprint of human society, one based on “malleability,” “non-linearity,” “playfulness,” to use India’s words.

Talking to India about her practice and the workshops she runs, it’s hard to get a grip on exactly how the slime-play activities will result in actual social effects. Alongside the after-school sessions, she runs sessions at the Camden Arts Centre with two other people for individuals with complex needs. She also runs sex education workshops for teachers where everyone eats mo-chis, a kind of squidgy Japanese sweet, while discussing the best way to educate kids about sexuality. The idea is simple. These viscous textures have a power to remove us ever so slightly from a brain function we might call linear or normative, removing us to a state of “mesomorphic reverie” as Bachelard might have

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 93.
This immersion in an act of fondling or chewing facilitates a kind of social openness where the ideas we have about things also enter a state that is prior to form. The idea is that we remake our assumptions, reimagine the obvious.

Conceptually, too, India’s work is unformed. When I push her on how and why, she becomes anxious and throws out names and theories that only sort of hang together. The few times I spoke to India for my research, we never managed quite to see eye to eye. My pushing felt ridiculous, my questioning impotent. That is, in part, because what she’s doing and what I’m doing are, though both about slimy substances, in many ways incompatible. She is in search of that silent zone, the silent immersion in texture that cannot be articulated without being changed entirely. She is in search of pre-sexual curiosity for which the adult world, by definition, has no words. If it tries, it becomes inappropriate, pedophilic. For Freud, the unconscious was, necessarily, silent, full of erratic, wordless urges and forces. I feel sometimes as if India is looking to externalize the unconscious, to put it in hands and let them maneuver it.

India’s defiantly political intentions are far removed from what the Instagram kids say about their own slime practice. The Instagram slime craze, and its place in ASMR, has been given some attention in the mainstream media as well as on endless blogs and forums. Publications like Vice and The Guardian have covered this current online curio, most recently due to a girl reportedly being quite severely burnt by the borax she was using. Reading the coverage, it is noticeable how many of the slimers are keen, when under the spotlight, to advertise the triviality of what they are doing, keep it at the level of no big deal. As slimer Conor Mckiernan, a 15-year-old from Pennsylvania says, “the slime community is a pretty chill and low key super popular trend that is constantly growing.”

64 Ibid.
ly I think, locked into one of the more sinister and monstrous qualities of slime’s imaginary: something low-key that constantly grows. But, for the most part, Conor is right. Slime is not like Pokémon or Grand Theft Auto, children do not stay up for days at a time, driven mad by obsession, throwing themselves out of their school windows to “re-do the level.” Far from the ecstatic global union imagined by Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, the global interest in it is consciously low-impact, disposable. And it is true, these films have the lightness of touch that all online viral phenomena tend to possess. You scroll, they start, the hands fondle the goo, you maybe feel something, maybe not, and move to the next. Slime is a craze that treads lightly.

This may be the case because, unusually, the particular slime Instagram craze currently in action is grass-roots in its structure. There are no global billion-dollar advertising campaigns hyping up the next version, the must-have card. The phenomenon is, aside from the platform provided by Instagram, entirely directed by the craze’s young participants. But, one of the major incentives behind making and filming your own slime is the possibility of selling it. The slime craze involves blurred boundaries between work and play. The films are both the innocent sensual thrill in the global playground and adverts for a child’s new slimy commodity. The craze is a globalized cottage industry, rather than a universal consciousness.

**Low-Key Euphoria**

What are the critical limits to silliness? What are the critical limits to something like this that intends so little effect on anything at all? How is it possible to talk about something’s “low-key-ness” without, just by talking about it, undermining the very reason you started talking? In Sianne Ngai’s writing on the “cute,” it is precisely this kind of “low-impact aesthetic” that became a “special issue” for 20th-century avant-garde and modernist poetry in particular. There is in the last century’s aesthetics a recurrent fascination with what Hannah Arendt calls “the charismatically irrelevant,” the modern enchantment with small, easy-to-
handle, adorable little things, William Carlos Williams’s plums, “delicious / so sweet / and so cold.”\(^\text{66}\) The cute object twists the avant-garde’s politicization of ineffectualness to aestheticize and eroticize powerlessness.\(^\text{67}\)

Latent in the comfort and pleasure that soft things provide is a knowledge that we could, if we wanted to, tear them to pieces. As we caress cute things we lovingly protect their vulnerability, but also aggressively dominate, keep them in a position of submission. Cuteness is a state of suspended agency. One of the most curious effects the cute object has on us is the way we mimic its characteristics during our experience of it, the babyish sounds and facial expressions that overcome us when we jiggle a pre-speech infant in front of us. We appear compelled to perform the signs of powerlessness the cute object emits. But the powerlessness the cute thing calls up does not throw the mind into “disarray” like the Kantian sublime. Cute objects are not in a state of retreat from us, like the unending one. They are in fact, entirely available to us. They make absolutely available the lowness of their “aesthetic impact.” They are available to buy, to touch, to handle, to take home with us, to eat. Indeed, as Ngai helps to clarify, one of the indexes of how cute something is its edibility.\(^\text{68}\) The cute thing corrupts that core principle of Kantian aesthetics, “disinterested delight,” a pleasure that is not directed, like eating, towards bodily gain. Aesthetics do not “fill you up,” for Kant. The cute is the moment the aesthetic becomes digestible.

Clearly defined features work against the cuteness of an object. Cute objects must respond to our will with a kind of “exaggerated passivity,” as Ngai says.\(^\text{69}\) They must be pliant, their contours must be soft. They must not appear to represent any-


\(^{68}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{69}\) Ibid., 3.
thing with any verisimilitude, features melting into one another, sharpness deadening our desire to pet them. “The epitome of the cute would be,” Ngai suggests, “an undifferentiated blob of soft doughy matter.” The cute involves a distinctly viscous mode of affect too — the creep of the child into the parent, the dog into its owner. Ultimately, Ngai proposes that cuteness, though lacking in any conceptual stability or consistency, is at the heart of the appeal of the commodity. The commodity: a legless, totally helpless thing, it can’t walk itself to the shop, nor off the shelves. It needs us to accompany it, its buyers, its sellers, to push it off into a state of absolute availability, fondled gently into our identities.

These slime Instagram films are not exactly cute. Although something might become cuter the blobbier it is, doughy matter is not cute. I think it’s more accurate to say that the cute object aspires to the blob, without ever actually being allowed to get there. Cute things disappear off a blobby horizon. But, all the same, these films luxuriate in exactly Ngai’s conception of this state, a hand held pliancy with soft contours, a trivial availability that advertises itself as edible. Indeed, many of the comments on the films will list potential names for the slime, these are often imaginary foodstuffs: Dirtypeach! Cheatocrumbs! Pumkinguts!

The films are not cute, but are a kind of culmination of the logics that set cuteness so firmly in 20th-century commercial aesthetics. Ngai’s theory of the cute helps us to view these films as terrifying performances of humanity’s disguised, aggressive domination of matter. Instagram slime becomes an example of the viscous in its most domesticated state, all of its transgressive qualities removed and toyed with by soft, childish, clean hands. The films provide an unsettling insight into the violence that might sit at the origin of many kinds of calmness — an ostentatious display of the world submitting to your will, reassuringly high definition evidence played out in neon and in glitter, across a wipe clean surface, of your power to dominate things. This
is one of the illusions this version of the viscous allows us to sustain.

It is important to remember that these films are intricately involved with the objects they take place within. These moving images of neatly fondled goo are designed to be watched on devices that, themselves, neatly nestle in the palm of our hand, devices that appear to bubble, glisten, and bounce at your lightest touch. These devices are often now sheathed in squidy rubber, available in all colors of the rainbow. Sometimes these sheaths sprout enormous Mickey Mouse ears, can become a piece of cartoon watermelon, or nothing but purple fur. What Ahuja fails to realize is that digital technology isn’t straightforwardly a diminishing in instances of “touch,” but a whole drama of squidy aesthetics and cute affect. In fact, how to bring a sense of “presence” to technology through haptics is one of the key areas of tech innovation.71 When you decide to delete an app on an iPhone, holding your fingertip down on one, the entire congregation turns to jelly, vibrating in fear. We’re transformed suddenly into a malign overlord with absolute power over whether our subjects live or die. I’m sure it’s an intended design feature of the iPhone, a relationality that appeals to dreams of omnipotence.

The aesthetic of these films continues beyond them into the contexts in which they appear. Media technology is slowly accruing an aesthetic of submission, the devices are adopting affects of exaggerated availability. In a world where it is increasingly urgent for us to think in ways that exceed the human, cuteness, acts as the aesthetic resistance against this imperative. Cuteness imagines the world as something that corresponds entirely to human will, it is the demand to “chill out” in the face of viral phenomena. When slime is fondled and posted on Instagram, its transgressions are tamed into the service of a momentary, highly manageable sensual thrill. When we dress our iPhones up as Pikachu, we uphold an image of ourselves as the ones that

lovingly protect a universally submissive cyberspace. This is part of what the science historian George Dyson sees as our failure to imagine the internet as an actual universe invented fifty or so years ago:

People treat the digital universe as some sort of metaphor, just a cute word for all these products [...] it’s not a metaphor. In 1945 we actually did create a new universe.72

Digital interconnectivity is thought of as cosmological simply for PR purposes, Dyson thinks, rather than as part of its material reality. We rein it in to the prosthetic. Rather than blasting off into an immaterial cyberspace through our screens, it is also possible, if you wish, to cutify the web, transform its immensity into a rubber, google-eyed moron sitting in your pocket, awaiting orders. Cute aesthetics are the recoiling from the digital sublime, the disguised containment of that which would otherwise overwhelm you. Just as a cute bundle of soft puppies we coo at is also a clustered instance of their solidarity to one another, the trace of their instinct to form packs and hunt you down in the forest. Instagram slime is a viscous experience particular to the current state of computer technology, one where we are simultaneously immersed in and removed from material contingency. But they are also performances of management, management of deviant materiality, of the sensual response to it, of technology’s threat have a life of its own.

Intimacy

The viscous has a deeply intimate relationship to the technology and experience of screens. Where we might wipe the grease smears off the LCD surface, it holds behind its glass a very fine layer of slimy substance that can manipulate the light that passes

though it into representations of almost any form imaginable. Greasiness obscures an image produced from sliminess, sliminess in a state of disappearance, wiping itself out into representation. But this is a very particular form of the viscous, the form of crystalline liquidity — a solid that flows. The viscous is something that disturbs the dream of an immaterial experience that screens encourage, but also sits at the heart of its possibility, its immersive, hypnotic clarity.

Sliminess has, then, paradoxically, become a symbol of materiality in a world that feels in danger of falling into complete disembodiment. Video artists like Benedict Drew have adopted an image of goo as a trope in their work that looks to resist the representational function of screens and to call to attention the occurrences that precede our experience. This is at once an iconoclastic and political impulse. There is a tradition stretching back to Marx of sliminess being associated with the non-differentiated workforce under capitalism. To liberate the ooze from within an LCD screen is imagined to be the iconoclastic moment of potential insurrection, the coming into presence of the unfomed mass.

Cyberspace has recently taken a turn, however, to become a place of intense and diverse material experience. The rise of ASMR exhibits a desire for a heightened experience of mundane materiality that signals, for some, a return to some kind of authentic intimacy that has been lost in lives spent in front of screens. The internet, it seems to Ahuja, is medicating its own forces of alienation. Slime plays an important role in this new form of online activity, being fondled in short ASMR clips that provide some with a means of relaxation, for others a mild sense of euphoria, in the hope that fondling viscous objects contains the possibility of greater social harmony.

But the slime we find on Instagram is also an instance of the viscous in its most domesticated, submissive state. These films, I want to suggest, are a culmination of the logics of cute aesthetics. Although not cute themselves, they encourage a view of the material world as something that submits entirely to human will. They are spectacles of domination disguised behind
an aesthetic of playfulness and triviality. They are designed to be watched, too, on devices that nestle in our hands, dressed up, at times, into submission for the occasion. Cuteness is the resistance to types of thinking that seek to de-center the human.

But what fascinates the viewers of this Instagram slime is the power of technology to enhance our intimacy with material things. This is the same thrill of material detail experienced by those who observed the ectoplasm photography of the 1920s. It is here that we find the viscous in its most radically ambivalent states of all: a bridge between the spectral and the material. The viscous as it spurts out of a woman's head during a séance, or is fondled by a child on Instagram, is not materializing the immaterial, but bridging the two within its body. Where goo is fundamental to the technology of modern screens, screens have also invented a very particular genre of goo, one of deep ambivalence. Negligible yet ethereal, pointless yet present, goo haunts our screens, something, *anything*, to hold my attention.