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CAN ASMR BE CONSIDERED ART?*

At the beginning, I must confess to one thing: as a child, during obligatory school visits to museums or art galleries, I could barely refrain from touching the exhibits (and sometimes failed to do so entirely). I knew that it was forbidden to do this — the “Do Not Touch!” signs placed on every museum display case informed about it — but the desire to satisfy my sense of touch, and, occasionally, my sense of hearing, was stronger. I wanted to know what was the texture of that golden frame of the old painting and what would it sound like when I scratched it? Is this sculpture cold or warm to the touch, and will it make any sound when I tap it with my fingers? I cared little about what a piece of art was “about;” I was more interested in how it would affect me when I caressed it and listened to it at the same time. I forgot about this strange predilection for a while, until I was reminded of it by an ASMR video I accidentally watched on YouTube a few years ago. To this day, I am a passionate viewer-listener of ASMR videos and I have always considered them art. I will try to explain why.

ASMR is an umbrella term used to describe a growing number of various media-based audiovisual works published in the online space, especially on YouTube. Nowadays, it is hard not to come across, even accidentally, a representative of one of ASMR’s flagship genres, for example, a role-play video in which the creator takes on the role of a whispering doctor conducting a vision or hearing test on a potential viewer, or a make-up artist sweeping powder brushes over the camera’s eye (i.e., by implication, the viewer’s face). ASMR is currently “at a transition point,”¹ evolving from a niche Internet curiosity, understood only

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¹ Naomi Smith and Anne-Marie Snider, “The Headphone,” in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Anthropology of Sound*, ed. Holger Schulze (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 39.

by insiders, into a mainstream product. At the same time, ASMR seems to be establishing, discovering, and strengthening a variety of connections to art.

“ASMR” is an abbreviation of “autonomous sensory meridian response”: a pseudo-scientific term used to describe “the enjoyable and relaxing tingly feeling some people experience on their scalps, heads, and rest of their bodies from time to time”² in response to various stimuli, mainly auditory and visual. It also designates a contemporary multifaceted genre of audiovisual production that aims to evoke this kind of sensation in the viewer-listener. This phenomenon, which can be considered a so-called “self-soothing device”³ offering a sensorially immersive wellness experience, is relatively new in the digital space, but its popularity is steadily growing. The first ASMR videos published on niche YouTube channels over a decade ago were purely amateur productions, similar to whispered video blogs (vlogs), shot by young women in private bedroom spaces.⁴ Nowadays, ASMR videos uploaded to channels with a global reach and an audience of millions often resemble thoroughly conceptualized and professionally crafted audiovisual works of artistic expression.

The connections of these films with art are manifold. For the well-educated media scholar, watching a randomly selected mukbang-style ASMR video in which an onscreen artist eats foods that produce crunchy sounds, such as pickles or honeycomb, might bring to mind Józef Robakowski’s on-camera performance in *The Apple (Acoustic)* (1994), in which this Polish multimedia artist peels and eats an apple. The film image is accompanied by a specially prepared soundtrack that is meant to resemble the intensified sounds associated with the actions visible on the screen—just like in ASMR videos, in which very crisp and amplified sounds almost always play a pivotal role. In other scholars, ASMR practices will perhaps evoke different artistic phenomena, ranging from Oskar Fischinger’s abstract animation film, John and James Whitney’s “cybernetic cinema”⁵ or Jordan Belson’s “cosmic cinema,”⁶ to the experiments with sound and its sources in Pierre Schaeffer’s and Pierre Henry’s *musique concrète*, and to the video

² Craig Richard, *Brain Tingles: The Secret to Triggering Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response for Improved Sleep, Stress Relief, and Head-to-Toe Euphoria* (Avon: Adams Media, 2018), 15.

³ Tasha Bjelić, “Digital Care,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, no. 26 (1) (2016): 102.

⁴ Joceline Andersen, “Now You’ve Got the Shiveries: Affect, Intimacy, and the ASMR Whisper Community,” *Television & New Media*, 16, no. 8 (2015): 7.

⁵ Zabet Patterson, “From the Gun Controller to the Mandala: The Cybernetic Cinema of John and James Whitney,” *Grey Room*, no. 36 (Summer 2009): 36–57.

⁶ Gene Youngblood, “The Cosmic Cinema of Jordan Belson,” in Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema: Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 157–178.

camera performances of Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman or Joan Jonas. To sound studies researchers, the attentiveness to the aural sphere in ASMR videos will perhaps bring to mind Pauline Oliveros's concept of "deep listening," especially her seminal argument that "listening lies deep within the body"⁷ and the related claim that the whole body is actively engaged in the act of listening.

The relationship of ASMR videos with art is multifaceted, including the use of "artful" artifacts, scenography, and filming locations. ASMR videos are increasingly migrating from the bedroom to the street; they can even be filmed in museums. Florian Bouillot, the author of the YouTube channel "PARIS ASMR," was invited by the Louvre to shoot one of his films in the deserted rooms of the museum.⁸ The soundtrack accompanying the video resulting from this collaboration, consisting of the sounds of running water, turning pages or chirping birds, is meant to recreate the atmosphere of the paintings on display and promote a sensual approach to art. By the same token, the artist Julie Rose Bower directed a series of ASMR videos for the Victoria and Albert Museum in London featuring "props and costumes from many iconic moments in the history of circus, dance, drama, film, opera, pantomime, popular music,"⁹ which are gently unwrapped from their packaging, elaborately discussed and carefully presented on screen to the audience. Another example is the project "Je te relaxe en touchant des œuvres d'art" ("I relax you by touching works of art") realized by the Pompidou Centre in Paris, which invited the author of the ASMR channel "BehindTheMoons" to touch, squeeze, stroke and scratch chosen works of art made by contemporary artists.¹⁰ My childhood self would have been entranced by these forbidden activities!

ASMR has also been the focus of museum exhibition curators and performance artists who incorporate the phenomenon into a variety of projects. In 2020, the Stockholm architecture and design museum ArkDes opened an exhibition of audiovisual works designed to evoke the feelings of ASMR associated with "softness, kindness and empathy."¹¹ Visitors to the exhibition were invited

⁷ Pauline Oliveros, "Improvising Composition: How to Listen in the Time Between," in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity*, ed. Gillian Siddall and Ellen Waterman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 75–90.

⁸ PARIS ASMR, "ASMR | SEUL dans le LOUVRE" (2019), video, https://youtu.be/8TJ_gc-Fv1U.

⁹ Victoria and Albert Museum. "ASMR at the V&A – 1 / Charlie Chaplin and Henry Irving" (2020), video, https://youtu.be/bH7Sr3_HZfk.

¹⁰ BehindTheMoons, "ASMR – A virtual art museum visit," (2021), video, <https://youtu.be/iRcSNL2z5Ys>.

¹¹ ArkDes, "Weird Sensation Feels Good: An Exhibition About ASMR" (2020), accessed February 24, 2022, <https://arkdes.se/en/utstalling/asmr-weird-sensation-feels-good/>.

to take off their shoes, put on fluffy robes and contemplate looped cinematic artworks by Swedish artist Andreas Wannerstedt, known for publishing mesmerizing animations on his Instagram account. These animations, showing mechanisms working flawlessly, such as the two halves of a brass ball clicking into place, are part of the trend of so-called “visual ASMR.” This “oddly satisfying” observation of two parts of a mechanism fitting perfectly together is meant to provide the viewer with a sense of solace in an unpredictable world full of uncertainty, and to give them the feeling that they are in control of something. These animations show the inherent beauty of banal everyday items that become “objects of aesthetic engagement”¹² through a perfect, seamless fit. They respond not only to the human longing for order in the world, but also to the desire to see aesthetics in banality and to experience pleasurable sensory stimulation in an everyday occurrence.

ASMR responds to other longings as well. No mobile phones were allowed at the New York art show “The Oddly Satisfying Spa” combining ASMR, meditation and wellness practices, such as massage. The show’s creators recognized the increasingly acute longing of digital natives for a soothing detox from social media and responded to this need by offering the experience of disconnecting from the world, if only for a few dozen minutes.¹³ Unfortunately, reality has destroyed the dreams of a digital detox: the spa is currently closed due to restrictions related to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the typical ASMR culture aficionado, which I consider myself to be, does not often visit detox spas or soothing museum exhibitions. What counts most for them are the ASMR videos they watch on their beloved YouTube channels to help them relax, unwind and fall asleep quickly, often as part of their evening routine. Can these ASMR videos be considered works of art? It seems so—and not only because ASMR content requires creativity, skill and imagination, that is, the elements inherently connected with the creation of art. Tiziana Andina provides us with a whole list of necessary conditions that must be taken into account in the context of defining art in general: “1. *an object* (i.e., a work of art); 2. *subjects* (in the dual sense of the artist and the audience); 3. *a space for possibility* (or *aboutness*, what the work is *about*); 4. *normativity* (meaning the vast set of rules, conventions, and usages that shape artistic practice [...]); 5. *institutional frameworks* [...]; 6. *a story* [...]; 7. *a market* (...)”.¹⁴ Therefore, applying the above

¹² Evan Malone, “On the Oddly Satisfying,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, no. 15 (2017), accessed August 22, 2022, https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol15/iss1/31.

¹³ Tyler Pridgen, “The Oddly Satisfying Spa” (2018), video, <https://youtu.be/IVWtGijONRQ>.

¹⁴ Tiziana Andina, *What is Art? The Question of Definition Reloaded* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017), 53.

points to the practice of ASMR, it can be argued that the objects of interest, that is, the videos published on YouTube by the author of the channel for their subscribers, always refer to certain rules and conventions, more or less precisely, and operate within the affordances of a concrete platform and cultural and/or social frameworks. They also satisfy a certain demand for works of art in a specific market of needs and fit into the narratives revolving around them (e.g., the one about the need to fit into normative sleep patterns).

The issue of the “aboutness” of ASMR content is slightly more problematic. Traditionally, “aboutness” is inextricably linked to the semantic structure of a work and to the “meaning to be conveyed.”¹⁵ However, it is often noticed that ASMR videos are actually about nothing at all: whispered messages are nonsensical, and words are intentionally unintelligible or used merely for their sound qualities. If ASMR videos are about anything, “they are about how noise (the arbitrary, the random, the indistinct or inchoate) can become moving and meaningful, as experiences of aesthetic plenitude emerge from sensory flux.”¹⁶ Once again, chaos is transformed into order, noise takes on aesthetic qualities, and reality reveals its sensual layer.

It seems that ASMR is a case of “contemporary art operating [...] at the level of percepts and affects.”¹⁷ This is because while consuming an ASMR video, we are affectively invested. The film invites us to engage on a microlevel of perception, and our bodies readily respond to the invitation by producing tingles on our skin. I, the ASMR viewer-listener, am “a somatic interface that receives, transmits, and decodes the various impulses and stimuli that arise in the situation of contact with a work of art.”¹⁸ I watch a performance on the screen and respond with my body: at first on an unconscious level, then feeling my own reaction in the form of shivers on my skin. On this primal level, it does not matter to me what the artwork is actually *about*. Similarly, the symbolic, metaphorical or common-sense meanings of the objects used in the performance are largely irrelevant, as long as I am enveloped in a tingling sensation. The plastic packaging of a make-up product is methodically tapped with the fingernails and slowly treated with “sticky fingers” before it is opened and used for its intended purpose (if at all); microphones are tapped, scratched, squeezed and stroked; bars of soap are meticulously sliced, carved, scratched and, finally, deliberately crushed. In the context

¹⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁶ Rob Gallagher, “Eliciting Euphoria Online: The Aesthetics of ‘ASMR’ Video Culture,” *Special Guest-Edited Issue: The Aesthetics of Online Videos*, no. 40 (2016): 9.

¹⁷ Agnieszka Jelewska, “Somatyczny interfejs. Zwrot afektywny w sztuce,” *Didaskalia*, no. 109–110 (2012): 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., 116.

of the traditionally understood “aboutness” of works of art, these actions make no sense, but the aesthetic qualities that emerge from them, based on the alleged balancing order and chaos, move and oddly satisfy me. They serve as “subtle bursts of cinematicity”¹⁹ in an everyday experience.

As a member of the ASMR community and an avid fan of whispered videos, I appreciate the creativity, craft and performance that characterize much of the work of ASMR artists. However, art to me is, above all, something that *moves* me — and ASMR moves me very literally, making my body tingle. “Art” has more than one name, and “ASMR” is one of them.

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¹⁹ Malone, “On the Oddly Satisfying.”

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