

## Screwtube

Considering the overwhelming success of such sites as YouTube, it is fascinating to witness the responses people create to music videos, comedy clips or even clips from horror movies. Danny Birchall describes some of the reasoning behind its introduction into the commonplace. "YouTube is built on the 'social networking' model: users can tag videos with keywords, join groups, respond to each other's videos with videos of their own, and keep journals of their lives rather like video blogs. This has thrown it into fierce competition with Bebo and Rupert Murdoch's My Space." 1 But what is it to create a network of sociability, and a profile reflective of your personality on a website? It has become a new method of communication, yet each image, each section of personality that one can edit is all placed on a visual format, a groundwork for how one chooses to represent oneself, a portrait. It encourages a glimmer of some form of attention being placed upon you – being linked to stars – having a moment where you become more than a teenager, a Goth, a customer service representative, a watercolour painter. Yet it becomes a strange platform, with low quality imagery and sound rendering some unrecognizable, and the creation of a response to a particular video making such activities meaningless, (in relation to becoming a person who creates something individual) as more and more people imitate this activity and blending back into the public recommences. Authenticity and copyright have become a major source of concern for the website and it contains stern warning of copyright infringement being breached, even introducing a ten minute limit to videos uploaded in order to prevent the posting of full length films or television programmes.

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A barometer for global popular culture, it is also a platform for innovation, or at least, if Chris Anderson editor of Wired magazine is to be believed. "If you look at the YouTube phenomenon of Chinese teenagers lip-synching to Backstreet Boys songs or skateboarding pratfalls or any sort of goofy but extremely popular video,"

says Anderson,  
"what they are creating turns out to be popular in ways we hadn't anticipated."<sup>3</sup> The fact that members of the public are given the opportunity to respond, to rate images and videos means that the platform upon which these images are judged is opened up, not just to theorists, critics, academics, advertisers, or people involved in the visual arts, but to a wider audience. Yet, in a contrasting point of view it could also be argued as a platform for propaganda, be it commercial or political. Eliza Williams suggests that advertising companies relish in the notion of their advertisements being placed as favourites upon the

website, (with musician Jay Z utilizing the site in order to promote his new single by implementing a competition where members of the public would have the opportunity to appear on his music video by uploading their response to his song onto YouTube).<sup>4</sup> In relation to the more questionable formats with which the popularity of particular videos has reflected the state of mind of a particular nation there are the hugely successful phenomena of 'war porn'. As Birchall mentions "there's a hugely popular genre of 'war porn': videos of violent operations shot, edited and mixed to music by US soldiers in Iraq. They maybe the flipside of the beheading videos available over atogrish.com, but they elicit a very positive reaction from Americans in the forums." With all of the difficulties involved in harnessing such a mass of information, and the fact that its expansiveness allows it to become almost entirely uncensored, what is the benefit of such activity?

With the process of taking Internet imagery as a basis, primarily stills from video streaming, my source imagery is crucial to this current body of work. The nature of projecting oneself online to a community of voyeurs, be it sexual, emotional, disturbing or otherwise is a curious occupation. When I stumbled upon a website where members of the public filmed themselves masturbating from the shoulders up, proclaiming

itself as an artistic statement rather than linking itself to the dribbling confines of the word pornography, immediately questions arose in my mind. Public forms of privacy have always been a fascination of mine, and by deliberately filming oneself coming to the point of climax, and in essence, having thousands witness one losing oneself for a moment. Certainly there is an element of exhibitionism, narcissism. I could be easily found guilty of both. I imagine this is the point where beautifulagony.com stemmed from, as, essentially, it is merely people repeating the same activity in the same manner, with minor alterations to remain individual. There are strict directions on the site as to how one can set up one's camera, the type of camera which should be used, the methods of editing which are authorized. This leads to a presumption of unity, a uniformity to one's publicized orgasm.

But trawling through the videos and pausing them at the moment of climax, it became glaringly obvious that these images, if taken out of the context of the erotic art web link, could easily be mistaken for images of people in pain, be it physical or emotional. Watching these images transform themselves as I painted them, gaining a titillating pleasure out of having viewed them started to eradicate. By choosing to paint these images and combining them with other images all sourced simply off internet searches, it became an exercise in examining how one views imagery now, what implications it may have on how one can view contemporary visual culture and whether the painted image is an apt format for considering this forum of thought.

1 Birchall, Danny, "All the worlds a film set", Sight & Sound ns16 no11, 2006

2 Williams, Eliza, "The Future of TV?", Creative Review 26 no 8, August 2006

3 Birchall, op.cit.

4 Williams, op.cit.

