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Atleigh Homma, *The Joy of Atleigh: Review of Gouache*

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The Joy of Atleigh is artist Atleigh Homma's YouTube channel, a platform to share her passion for art by reviewing paint mediums, related art essentials, and teaching painting techniques. Titles such as *Q&A*, *My Boyfriend Does My Portrait*, *Review of Gouache*, *What Inspires Me*, and *My Top Five Art Supplies*, reveal a familiar communicative pattern found in YouTube's vlog culture. Vlogs are an extension of personal blogging and web-cam video diaries, and similar to these formats, creators (or vloggers) select a niche subject catering to particular audiences. The success of a vlog is based on an array of factors from the technical aspects behind the camera to online self-representation. One's ability to self-brand is key to establishing a growing viewership, making casual entries into personal details an essential tactic. From parading their partners in front of the camera, responding to Q&As, and sharing quirky interests/stories, vloggers demonstrate an applied and conscious effort to balance their narrative between expectations and authenticity. Thus, the specificity in vlogging resides in its' host's delivery. Interestingly enough, Homma's channel serves as a distinct extension of her art practice, while debunking the mechanics of online self-representation, the performativity of self-marketing as an artist, and expanding the breadth of performance art. For the purpose of this essay, the focus will be on one of her most recent videos; *Review of Gouache* (2016) encompasses the aforementioned claims and offers an interesting shift in regard to the authoritative ephemerality of performance art.

Review of Gouache begins with the artist acknowledging and apologizing for the time gap between this video and the last, which is important as it hints to a palpable anxiety on material production. Homma then segues to her topic by stating: “a lot of people have been recommending gouache to me because they said: ‘oh you really like water color, you’re probably gonna love gouache.’”¹ As benign as it seems, this affirmation further suggests that vlogging is rooted within a two-way communication system engaging the vlogger and commenters. Although vlogs could be interpreted as a non-interactive platform, it is arguable that this user-created media feeds from the conversations created with their audience and other vlogs. Without subscribers and comments, a vlog becomes unanimated. Hence, scholars Jean Burgess and Joshua Green explain in their book *Youtube; Online Video and Participatory Culture* that “vlogs are frequently responses to other vlogs, carrying out discussions across Youtube and directly addressing comments left on previous vlog entries.”² Riffing off that dynamic, Homma integrated in *Review of Gouache* a caption from a previous video, *My Top Five Art Supplies* (2015), in which she talks about watercolour. This addition has a grounding effect, asserting a sense of continuity in her entries. However, what is truly noteworthy is that there are no traces of previous comments from subscribers asking about her interest in the medium. Still, by echoing an already existing communicative pattern from other art vlogs, Homma taps into a bigger Youtube conversation. Perhaps, the motivation brought by one’s viewership goes hand in hand with the labour behind maintaining an appealing vlog. One could also add that the invisible labour in vlogging sheds light on techniques of self-marketing and shaping one’s online identity. Since vloggers are public entities, a negotiation between reality and authenticity is often at play. As a platform on which the line between front stage and backstage conflates, self-editing and directing give

¹ Atleigh Homma, “Review of Gouache”. Filmed [2016]. Youtube video: 8:16 mins. Post [March 5th, 2016]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Komi68DY6o>

² Jean Burgess, Joshua Green, “Youtube’s Participatory Culture”, *Youtube; Online Video and Participatory Culture*. (Polity Press; UK, 2009), 54.

freedom to carefully curate which aspects of the self will seamlessly be unveiled or re-invented. Yet, Homma creates little disruptions furthering the conflation between the final product and behind the camera while positioning her video within an amateur aesthetical realm. Pixelated Photoshop editing and cropping as well as asymmetrical lighting are some of the few elements leading to a conversation about authenticity.

In comparison to other self-made popular art channels such as Baylee Jae, Audra Auclair, and Happy D. Artist,³ Homma delivers unpolished recordings-letting through a less calculated personhood. By keeping moments when she is snorting and zoning out in *Q&A* (2016), or choosing a bloody scene to depict in *Review of Gouache*, these editing choices allow the artist to display a multifaceted identity supporting her uniqueness. Particularly, when considering the revelation about her passion for wrestling. Being a female artist, who is also a female wrestling fan, Atleigh is positioned in the ethos of a subculture within a subculture. Via her depiction of infamous wrestlers Kane and Mankind with their manager Paul Bearer from WWE, she not only reviews gouache as a medium and gives a well-rounded tutorial about it, but also opens a channel in which art intersects with sport. Moreover, the young painter goes beyond expectations, as she elaborates on her relationship to wrestling and unravels her knowledge. Atleigh ultimately makes her work accessible for a whole other type of audience. Homma is able to demark herself from other female artist vloggers, who generally employ feminine subject matters such as Disney princesses to lead their tutorials. It is this unexpected mix, which distinguishes her brand identity. Rather than repeating the tropes of female vloggers, who tend toward a straight-forward use of ingratiation, or audience pleasing⁴ strategies, Atleigh infects the friendly script. In

³ Baylee Jae: <https://www.youtube.com/user/BayleeCreations>, Audra Auclair: <https://www.youtube.com/user/Jelopiful>, and Happy D. Artist: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL1fiPWG7OUD_PcC2w_-BOg/featured

⁴ Maggie Griffith & Zizi Papacharissi; "Looking for You: An analysis of video blogs," Volume 15, Number 1 - 4 January 2010, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2769/2430>, accessed 22 September 2016.

this case, by demonstrating the materiality of gouache, she paints a bloody scene of staged violence, rather than the expected pretty princess portrait. At the 4 minute mark, she describes the affect audiences might have in reaction to the painting.

“I love the idea that one image can be both so frightening and... visceral, and come off as being something scary and like real if you don’t understand the background. Or you can just like laugh when you look at it ‘cause you know it’s a joke.”⁵

The painting and subsequent description metaphorically reveal Atleigh’s self-awareness in her performed or branded online identity. She is gently challenging her audience to question their expectations of her as a vlogger, “...subverting femininity... .. to capture the complexity of the continuous process of negotiation and resistance with women moving between different positions at different points in their lives or in different situations.”⁶ This painting extends her brand to include an interest in wrestling, thus her persona is not fixed within the confines of expected roles as an artist, vlogger or cis-woman.

The very platform YouTube occupies is one that destabilizes and demystifies the hierarchy that art is meant to exemplify. *Review of Gouache* demonstrates Atleigh’s painting abilities, and general interest in wrestling, the former in reaction to a recommendation that she try using the paint. The inclusion of an outside recommendation as fueling the content for this video is particularly important; she is revealing the reasoning for her choices of what to include as content, and that she is subject to critical input. This subjectivity is reflective of YouTube as a platform where “...’authority’ is no longer given by some ‘Official’ site, and taken for granted by the audience, as had been and often still is the case in many institutional (education or other) sites.”⁷ It could be said that the rough

⁵ Homma 2016

⁶ Anderson, Eric, Jennifer Hargreaves, *Routledge Handbook of Sport, Gender and Sexuality*, Routledge, 2014; p246.

⁷ Bezemer, Jeff, Gunther Kress; Multimodality, Learning and Communication: A Social Semiotic Frame. London, Routledge, 2015, p85.

style, or ‘amateur aesthetic’ of Atleigh’s vlogs, reflect this disrupting affect. The unrefined Photoshop overlays of her painting around her talking head, combined with her recounting of her passion for pro-wrestling make the vlog entry feel personal. That subjectivity serves to “...unmake and remake structures of power in social relations – a seeming inversion in power...” as described by Bezemer and Kress, establishing space for vloggers to contribute to information exchanges subjectively, and for audiences to judge and question.

Used as a performative platform, *Review of Gouache* engages art viewers to another form of theatrical subjectivity. Although some would claim that the interest for performance art has nowadays deflated, as James Westcott further confirms: “the ubiquity of digital spectacles and curiosities today is of the reason performance art has had its thunder stolen”.⁸ On the contrary, it is actually more alive than ever, because of the advent of social media as it generated an alternative scene on which a diverse array of subversive interventions are possible. Whether it is through trolling or re-appropriating a social media platform as an art medium, performance is always central to those endeavors. Through an extensive research on vlogging language and textures, Homma examines the potentiality of vloggers as performers, artists as performers - painters as performers. She exposes the performative in creating works that inform the process of making, while sustaining a viable art practice adjacent and within vlog entries. Comparable to the expectations placed upon a vlogger regarding a quick rhythm of content production, aesthetics, and marketability, artists face the same challenges. Vloggers tacitly understand it is expected of them to refine their craft: to perform for the camera. Another notable facet of this new interaction with performance and the body is the archival material remaining behind. One of the valued aspects of performance art is its relationship to time. Performance is most celebrated because of its ephemeral quality. Once you have missed a performance, access to

⁸ James Westcott, “A Culture of ‘Perform Yourself’”. *New York Times* . August 8th 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/08/18/did-youtube-kill-performance-art/a-culture-of-perform-yourself>. Accessed September 17th, 2016.

a video recording barely does justice to the emotions at play when seen live. However, these emotions are not lost if the medium chosen is the Internet. This means an altered expectation is now inferred onto the vlogger-to-commenter exchange, and how that relationship extends onto other social media platforms, like Instagram and Facebook. What must now be negotiated is that artists like Atleigh “...increasingly respond and intervene in the landscape of both media creation and media consumption, they must find ways to impersonate themselves into existing systems in order to find their audience, their viewer, their fans, and their collaborators.”⁹

-Geneviève Wallen & Cameron Lee

⁹ Cook, Sarah, “The work of art in the age of ubiquitous narrowcasting? What early artist-led intervening can teach artists about putting themselves online,” *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2008. p180