

## *Bleeding binaries*

An essay by Nina Dyer

There is great irony in writing a text for this exhibition, for the shared aim of Isabelle Russell and Dayle Paley is to express and evoke ineffable mental states—that which we struggle to put into words—through the careful manipulation and juxtaposition of material properties. Too often, words feel insufficient when used to convey slippery experiential qualities, particularly those that we ourselves cannot appreciate in full. One way in which *To Dissipate* seeks to both convey and induce this kind of subjectivity is through the blurring of dichotomous relationships—between solidity and immateriality, harsh and soft tactile qualities, or static and temporal mediums.



Never mind the difficulty of explaining anxiety—an enigmatic yet common condition—to a non-sufferer; the real struggle is first coming to terms with the phenomenon through the inadequate words of others. The typical description of anxiety as excessive worry or paranoia falls short of truly capturing the way in which the feeling *seems* preconscious, as if perpetually fighting its way from the subconscious to the realm of cogent thought. Diagnostic lists that divide mental symptoms from physical side-effects can seem like an oversimplification. The lived experience of an anxiety attack is closer to a complete dissolution of reality; any clear barrier dissipates between internal and external stimulus, hyperactive imaginings and logical reason, or the rapid firing of neurons and increased heart rate. In other words, the involuntary and all-encompassing experience of anxiety attests—at least in my reckoning—to the irrelevance of rigid distinctions between the mental and physical realms.

What happens when the descriptions of experts fail to resonate? Could it be that the separation of mind and body, the leftover legacy of 17th century Cartesian dualism (the belief that consciousness exists separately from the body), continues to pervade modern pathology?<sup>1</sup> Moreover, what use does this false dichotomy serve, decades after the physical substrates of the human mind took primacy over any musings concerning an individual's 'spirit' or 'soul'? Perhaps work still needs to be done in order to break down dualism's archaic hierarchies, until rational thought no longer takes precedence over subjective feeling, and mental anguish is treated as equal to corporeal pain. The utterance "it's in your head" should not feel like a death sentence to an ongoing investigation into chronic pain. All physical pain is in the head, technically.

Imagine still the individual who watches ASMR-triggering videos to alleviate stress and depression. The tingling sensation that runs down the back of the head is easy enough to describe to others, similar as it is to the common experience of frisson (otherwise known as 'aesthetic chills', theorised by some to be elicited by 'emotional contagion').<sup>2</sup> But how to account for the automatic onset of a distinct calm that individuals with ASMR report? Currently there is scarce understanding of this apparently arbitrary connectivity between separate brain regions, particularly where 'neutral' sensory stimuli trigger consistent emotional responses (as opposed to just sensory responses, like tingling).<sup>3</sup> The blurring of perceptual input and internally produced

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Bullmore argues the case in 'The Inflamed Mind: A Radical New Approach to Depression,' (Sydney: Simon & Schuster, 2018), pp.54-55.

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, Luke and Psyche Loui. 'Thrills, chills, frissons, and skin orgasms: toward an integrative model of transcendent psychophysiological experiences in music,' *Frontiers in Psychology* 5 (2014): 790.

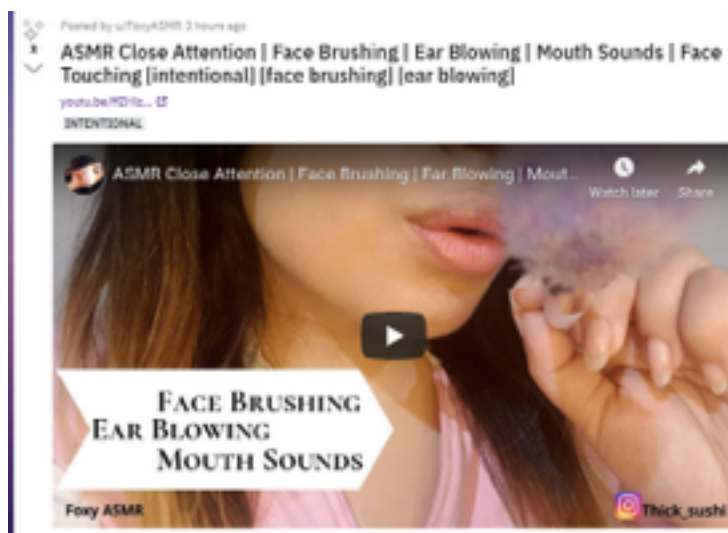
<sup>3</sup>Emma L. Barrat and Nick J.Davis, 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR): a flow-like mental state,' *PeerJ* 3 (2014), accessed January 27, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2016.1188851>.

output in most forms of synesthesia is perplexing enough—those who experience auditory-tactile synesthesia can experience a phantom touch with no apparent physical cause, triggered only by specific sounds.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike synesthesia—‘a blending of the senses’—which was first reported in the 17th century, ASMR may as well be a contemporary phenomenon.<sup>5</sup> Though subjects of all ages experience a tangible and emotional response to particular stimuli—videos of individuals whispering, offering direct attention and eye contact, tapping softly on objects as varied as a hairbrush to the interior of a Tesla—it’s only now that we have a generation active on Youtube and Reddit that a community of users has formed, self-aware and actively seeking triggers. Experts are only just catching up, with one of the first major studies exploring the neural architecture of ASMR published in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Delayed recognition can easily be put down to the gradual outgrowth of social stigma, while the rapid formation (and exponential growth) of communities on social media inspires hope still. Future generations experiencing symptoms previously thought to be uncommon will only be better equipped with information to express themselves, empowered by the solidarity of millions.

Knowing and explaining aside, another mysterious feature of ASMR is its common triggers; besides noises made with inanimate objects, the majority of these mimic intimate interactions. There is something strikingly maternal about these videos—role-play of-

ten involves the ‘ASMRtist’ taking a caregiving position in relation to the viewer, their attention and whispers directed solely at whoever is watching. Just as dimly lit, enclosed spaces have a tendency to draw human adults in and emanate a sense of relaxation and warmth, this feature of ASMR role-play leads me to think there could be a rather primordial link to our earliest and most deeply suppressed experiences: those of the womb. At 24 weeks, a foetus can hear the muffled sounds of the external world, but more importantly it experiences simultaneously the sounds *and* vibrations of its mother’s voice, heartbeat, lung intake, and blood flow.<sup>7</sup> If you ever wish to relive this experience, simply lay your head on the torso of somebody while they speak, digest, and generally continue to exist as their pulse vibrates. Perhaps there is something to be said for the transference of a mother figure or even a womb onto a Youtube video, or perhaps there isn’t much to it—we’re simply social animals who derive pleasure (or automatic reward chemicals) from intimacy...even if these interactions are one-sided and largely imaginative.



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<sup>4</sup>One study has identified a ‘blending of multiple resting-state networks’, or brain regions, in subjects capable of ASMR, suggesting that this atypical connectivity of unrelated regions could be key to our understanding of the phenomenon. See Stephen D. Smith, Beverley Katherine Fredborg & Jennifer Kornelsen, ‘An examination of the default mode network in individuals with autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR),’ *Social Neuroscience* 12, no.4 (2016), accessed January 27, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470919.2016.1188851>. However, because neuroscience assigns specific functions to different areas of the brain, it seems that these spontaneous connections across cognitive territories only render the condition more puzzling.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Jessica Timmons, ‘When Can a Fetus Hear?’ *Healthline Parenthood*, accessed 27 January 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/when-can-a-fetus-hear#Fetal-hearing-development:-A-timeline>.

Those who do not benefit from the ‘static-like’ sensations and positive affect of ASMR may similarly find comfort in art.<sup>8</sup> Art is a place where the boundaries between play and function melt away. The objectives of high capitalism are suspended—at least for the viewer. Poetry and intellectualism chase one another in circles, until either sense is made from their fraught relationship or meaning dissolves without consequence. The intangible thoughts of artists can be poured into physical vessels or left open-ended, enigmatic. Further still, material languages may be discovered through which others can relate or find a means to cope; audiences can open themselves up to sensory experience without the danger of sensory overload. This is not to say all art is comforting—that which seeks to disturb or provoke is more akin to misophonia, another auditory-emotive condition in which sufferers are inexplicably and even violently triggered by wet or eating sounds.

Spatial environments are typically thought of as having a one-directional causal relationship with our mental state, when in reality we bring our emotional load, associations, and openness (or lack thereof) to bear on space—a reciprocal transaction, then. *To Dissipate* invites audiences to be present, encouraging immersion and allowing space for highly individualised responses. The benefits of mindfulness can incidentally be felt by anyone who engages with art long enough to find themselves in a dedicated flow state; the success of most art is contingent on its viewer’s capacity for total engagement, similar to ASMR and therapeutic grounding techniques. After all, one of the purported aims of the white cube is to minimise distraction from the outside world. Here, visceral immersion is engendered by a bleeding of ambient lighting, a sound component by fellow artist Josh Carlier that shifts attention to the senses, and installation that prompts its viewers to become aware of their bodies in relation to space.

Binaries such as transience versus permanence are further dissolved in this exhibition through the inclusion of durational sculpture. This medium draws upon the legacy of Post-Minimalism—a tendency that developed in response to Minimalism whereby art objects were progressively opened outwards, enveloping the space of the gallery and engaging the sensibility of viewers (as opposed to static, emotionally inert and implicitly masculinist sculptures). The use of unpredictable organic materials such as beeswax epitomises the ethos of this tendency; not only are there existential connotations to melting objects, but a respect for natural agency is exhibited in the way the artists have yielded to the processes of decomposition. Temporality acts as a conduit for reconnection with natural processes. Slowing down, grounding. Abandoning control can be highly satisfying, even political.

We know from history that recognising the sheer force and scale of nature, *the sublime*, goes hand-in-hand with an ironic desire to conquer it. Whether through empire’s soft power of taxonomy or hard power of technological innovation, nature has been a thing to divide and manipulate until it can be bought under the reign of human control. These days, the awe-inspiring will of nature—capable of mercilessly wiping out over ten million hectares of bush and almost half a billion animals in a few months—is more likely to be met with apprehension, a sense of helplessness in the face of volatile weather systems and precarious ecosystems. That is, if its power isn’t denied altogether for peace of mind. Dividing the world into manageable territories and *knowing* every last organism intimately won’t harness life, no more than we can grasp the intangible. Yet the same rigid distinctions that permeate historic thinking can be felt today in so many areas of daily life. None of this is news, but it warrants repetition.

Instead of making attempts to capture or concretise that which is transitory and elusive by nature, *To Dissipate* channels difficult phenomena into conversations between both comforting and unexpected media. After all, when we fail to comprehend our own perceptions, it’s through conversation—literal or lyrical, bidirectional or one-sided—that we come closer to understanding the sensations that evade easy description. For art

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<sup>8</sup> Barrat and Davis, ‘(ASMR): A flow-like mental state,’ 11.

is ultimately a lateral mode of communication; though not always the most obvious choice, it is one through which we can nonetheless share in our impressions, from a fleeting mood to the strongest of inclinations.