

## Beyond Representation: Embodied Expression and Social Me-dia

Lissa Holloway-Attaway <lat\_at\_bth\_dot\_se>, Blekinge Tekniska Högskola

### Abstract

The contemporary digital media ecology is one of convergence and hybridity. As virtual and technical interfaces intersect in increasingly complex formulations, the ability to identify organic vs. technical forms has become problematic. Virtual environments predominate within “everyday” cultural practice arguably limiting “real” or unmediated human experience. The advent of social media artifacts and networks in particular — those that create fusions of personal experience and communal activity and that support and broadcast user-generated content as a foundation for media productions of real-life — have made organic bodies and personal experience difficult to discern.

Extending Mark B.N. Hansen’s model for identifying embodied experience within contemporary “mixed reality” culture, I argue that embodied expression is more, not less, present in the contemporary media age. Organic expressions, those that emanate from primal, tactile, and motile forces and that operate prior to formal mediatization, are at the core of many social media artifacts circulated within the networks of contemporary culture and operating outside the aesthetics of traditional semiotic representation. Recovering the organic body and foregrounding its presence in such media asserts the functional non-aesthetic principles at work in many social media forms, particularly in those dependant on documenting the minutiae of real-life under-represented in mainstream and traditional media. As personal and public spaces collide, situating the “me” or the embodied subject within production is problematic. I identify such embodiment within contemporary social media, particularly on YouTube, to illustrate that the human body does not operate from a position of “erasure” within social media networks and artifacts, and its expressive value is therefore central in much current user-generated me-dia.

In this age of heightened media and genre convergence, the depths and surfaces for considering the relationship between virtual and physical forms of embodiment require a nuanced perspective. The shift in media production and broadcast practices from predominantly mainstream outlets with mass audiences who consume professionally-developed content sourced from specialized technicians and technical apparatus has been radically altered. The introduction of Web 2.0 principles and practices and the development of social media networks in the late 1990s and early 21st century marked a definitive shift in the elemental foundations of digital media culture. User-generated content now circulates via internet technologies in dynamic micro-networks of equivocal exchange, bypassing industrial media methods and outlets for production, distribution, and exchange, while fusing producer and consumer into what Axel Bruns terms hybrid *producers* [Bruns 2008, 2]. As the product and the producer converge, the (in)ability to clearly discern one from the other has extended theoretical considerations about real and virtual designations within internet-based technological and media innovations. In the decade before, in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, web-based media, along with digital art and hypermedia forms and applications, underwent fast-paced revision and innovative reconstruction. The methods of inscription and the expressive and creative capabilities for computer-mediated production reconfigured not only the technologies, but the complex cultural networks that supported them. As distribution practices enabled rhizomatic content structures (and infrastructures) and as convergent media forms proliferated, the bodies (text-bodies, author/user-bodies, machine-bodies, for example) engaged by these innovative transformations became increasingly complex.

Currently, digital media *remix* culture is one where “real life” (RL) and “virtual life” (VL) structures have migrated more fully from the desktop to otherly-mediated life worlds, and they occupy all states in-between. The space one occupies,

for example, in the *twitterverse*, the term in common usage to describe the network engaged by the micro-blogging application Twitter, exemplifies such ambiguity and malleability. The term *twitterverse* itself underscores the conceptual pseudo-spatial dimensions it occupies. It evokes the materiality of planetary outer-space, as well as the universal expansiveness of the celestial bodies that orbit within the social media networks they engage, in infinite and intricate patterns, only partially discernible to the theoretician's naked eye. One's own *tweets* (messages) are able to migrate from hand-held to desktop displays, confusing or eliding the site of real vs. virtual production. I can tweet my location, thereby affirming *my* presence in both real and virtual spaces, but also as part of a collective: "I (/We) am (/are) (t)here." Twitter content too is labile and may comprise numerous forms, modes of inscription, and states of being. The twitter user serves multiple functions, as: diarist; locative documentarian; disseminator of others' content (via re-tweets); photographer or videographer; corporate mouthpiece, or pawn, circulating or advertising other media; or merely as a gateway or conduit to other equally distributed networks — to Facebook, YouTube, Flickr. Self-fashioning in social media is as fluid as the networks through which data circulates, and the possibilities for *dis-playing* one's self, for performing one's experiences, move far beyond the virtual identity crises and cyber-theatrics once reflected in the work of Sherry Turkle, Brenda Laurel and others to account for life on the screen-stage enabled by computer media. For Lawrence Lessig, the "hybrid economies" supported by the new social media networks are driven by their association with a slippery dialectic structure and ever-shifting oscillation between personal and private spaces, grassroots and corporate interests, and global vs. local community interests [Lessig 2004]. Experiences are circulated through a variety of alternate, other, and liminal states of in-between-ness, and shifting allegiance. Uncovering the embodied source(s) of such highly convergent mediations and experiences necessitates new theoretical perspectives to account for organic vs. technical structures and for RL vs. VL constructions in an age where social networking practices intersect with personal expressiveness.

To enable creative and critical expression and critique, and to address the texts and bodies supported by current emergent digital media forms, I propose the human body and its relation to technical mediation is a core site for investigation. An understanding of the human body, both as a stimulant for expressing organic forms of agency and production as well as a primal site from which to establish the dynamic dimensions of new technical interfaces, particularly the complex ones supported within socially networked media, is critical for future digital media studies. Embodiment as a state of organic (non-technical) and sensory being-ness — one that foregrounds its physicality and its tactility and serves as a necessary force for technical rendering, or representative mediation — cannot exist as a discursive abstract in contemporary media theory. Its conceptual position as a referent within representation (within traditional discourse), and therefore outside of the expressive, anti-aesthetic (social-)media politics informing emergent contemporary media forms, is not adequate to account for the primacy of the physical body. This organic reference point situates and contextualizes much of social media and its networks of exchange. Embodied expression, that is, organic communication that originates prior to pure external mediation, particularly prior to mediation through visual means, offers a provocative site from which to investigate the networks of social media. However, recognizing the embodied or internal experiences of social media is particularly challenging. Most social media and networks, on the surface, seem hyper-invested in creating overt visual displays or public performances, mediatised externalization as a means of communicating private, personal experience. One may consider, for example, the overt/covert use of visuality and internalization on YouTube. This online user-generated video platform supports predominantly visual media as a cover for circulating private experience. All manner of personal expression is rendered into video clip micro-documentaries and shared with a community of users, who may further circulate, comment, and edit it. Its communicative media power lies in the connective tissue built in the personal network of exchange that stem from *producing* private internal expression, not in the externalized aesthetics of the videos (which are often low budget and low quality). In other such social networks (Facebook, Daily Booth), personal and public spaces converge, rendering the "me," or the embodied (interiorized, organic) subject within media production, subverted. In this analysis, I track a historical context for considering the relationship between organic bodies and digital intervention and illustrate ways in which the human body currently operates as an expressive referent within social media networks. Drawing particularly on examples from YouTube, a social media network overtly dependant on visual content, I demonstrate that internal expression and pre-subject, pre-aesthetic organic value, is central in much current user-generated me-dia. The pre-aesthetic impulse is one that I identify as a primal desire towards creative production and display. Deeply connected to one's sense of embodied being-ness and need to express, it is, nevertheless, outside a model of aesthetic production bound to traditional

representative models for artistic creation — to photography, painting, cinema, theatre, and literature, for example. Social me-dia, I argue, operate and circulate with a deep connectedness to experience-production. That is after all its trademark, a proliferation of personal artifacts, radically increasing with each new iterative media type, or spontaneous desire to self-promote or to share. And yet its connection to the subject and site of production, the “me,” is one which depends on a configuration of the material body where organic (vs. technical) material is a primary element of creation. The body of social me-dia, as such, is not overwritten by the technical apparatus that seemingly mediates it. Mark B.N. Hansen, particularly in his work *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media*, offers the most radical, yet direct course to discover (recover) organic bodies and to resist such external and technically dominant models. Furthermore, he offers an intriguing perspective from which to explore the inherent organicism in contemporary social media practice and forms, particularly those that appear overtly ocularcentric, or visually-dependent and which are tied to aesthetic expression.

As we move into the embodied spaces of social media, where the call to “Broadcast Yourself” is fully embraced by a next wave of user-generating content-subjects, one may ask, what is the content of such subjects, and how do they *matter* in the new media ecologies that spa(w)n them? New hybrid virtual and physical inscription spaces, social media spaces, I argue, have become more than surfaces for writing reality and are now complex mediated life worlds where inscription is no longer a metaphoric practice but an act of (pre-)self/real-world environmental coupling, inadequate to be viewed from the perspective of discursive representation. Hansen’s models for recognizing the relationships between real and virtual bodies and worlds, and for revealing the underlying tactile and motile forces that resist abstract formulation, offer a provocative in-road to these new hybrid *spaces* of production. Furthermore, Hansen’s insistence on promoting the primacy of the body as an agent in technical ordering, on revealing “the constitutive or ontological role of the body in giving birth to the world” enables a critical perspective that foregrounds the functionalist perspective of much social media [Hansen 2006, 5]. As forms of functional documentation, as opposed to representational media practice, many social media artifacts resist the drives of traditional media that operate with clear aesthetic goals and values and with a conscious intent to produce formal and professional media objects.

As contemporary texts and representational contexts have become increasingly complex, semiotic surfaces and the inscription spaces which “contain” them have challenged theorists and media practitioners to identify, access, and engage the full spectrum of material surfaces which proliferate. Historically, embodiment and the varied forms of its discontents have been a profound focal point for critical reflection within digital media studies. This is particularly true within the late 1980’s to mid 1990’s wave of hypertext and then cyberstudies theorists. Arguably it is, in fact, *the* center-point for such critique. Responding to the “new” paradigms afforded by technology-assisted writing practices — Storyspace texts and environments, for example, followed closely by the creation of Internet-based cyberspace production — the webbed and malleable properties of hypertext, intrigued and stimulated a rich and fundamental first-wave of material-based critical reflection exploring new frontiers. Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995), a re-telling of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* through the foregrounding of the female monster and her monstrous body, is an early and overt example of how the metaphorical material of text and body may be interlinked through digital media. The creative potential of fragmented text-bodies and the ironic potentialities of the stitched-together body-text (the hyperlinked text) revealed the power of the scar, the space between body parts, to express deeply embodied creativity through otherness and other voices. And yet this embodiment was driven by a politics of difference, or deformation from the norm to probe and critique normative value. Liberation was attained through an acceptance of self as other, organicism as abject power, text as broken (until re-worked).

The shift from page to screen within digital media has been well-documented: Bolter, Lanham and Landow, for example, explored in depth the liberating and fluid properties of hyper-linked electronic texts, defined by the immaterial semantics and semiotics of digital inscription texts and technology. Shifts in authorial agency, the material reconstruction of reading-practice, and the revolutionary ideological identity reconstructions, unrestricted by organic genealogy-parables and enabled by the new digital and cyberspaces were and are foundational critical perspectives for considering (dis)embodiment. In *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, Bolter asserted the fixed nature of print text and identified hypertext production as a practice for “liberating the text” in digital space [Bolter 1991, 21]. Lanham explored the political implications of computer-mediated texts and found the interactivity of digital

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text as a basis from which to overcome the fixed authority of the literary canon and to establish a new electronic democracy [Lanham 1993, 31]. Landow unequivocally proclaimed in his analysis of the future of the book in the context of computer intervention that digital textuality, in comparison to print, was now “virtual, not physical” [Landow 1992, 216]. In his second edition of *Writing Space* in 2001 (re-subtitled *Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*), Bolter surveys the theoretical field for electronic writing in relation to the increasing influence of the Internet. He isolates debates about the materiality of digital media as central to understanding the changes brought about for inscription in the digital age, “the late age of print” [Bolter 2001, 1]. For Bolter debates about the unity (or not) of the Cartesian ego in the digital age and continuing reflections on mind-body paradigms struggle to situate media production. The impulse to explore singular vs. multiple authorship signals a revolution in material culture imagined through the communal matrix of network culture. Bolter acknowledges an irony in the claim that digitally produced texts inspire theorists to associate virtual production with materiality: “Our culture in the late age of print seems inclined to accept the materiality of writing not in spite of, but because of, our increasing use of electronic networked communication” [Bolter 2001, 202]. As is with many of the hypertext and early cyber-age theorists, such materiality, however, is clearly not associated with any pure physicality or organic singularity. It is associated with postmodern signification or mediated representation within the distributed network culture of electronic “affiliation and community” [Bolter 2001, 203]. One’s private media productions are always subservient to a more public value associated with an aesthetics of representation driven by shared consumption. For Bolter, electronic media are produced when “the private and the public, the inner self and the outer persona, are so closely connected [that] the writer is never isolated from the material and cultural matrix of her networked culture” [Bolter 2001, 202]. The singular body is literally overwritten by the mass mediations of the network and it disappears under such pressure.

Disembodiment as a response to cyberspace reconfiguration is exemplified by the idealism of Donna Haraway’s anti-body, anti-goddess cyborg in her great “manifesto”, where everything is made possible by purely organic bodily transcendence. For Haraway, cyborgs “are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness — or its simulation. They are floating signifiers moving in pickup trucks across Europe” [Haraway 1991, 153]. They are inexorably fused to technological functioning, and as such, liberated from oppressive organic identifications, a flickering convoy of signification. Like hypertext, they thrive in a new affinity culture, driven by unnatural “space stories” and characterized by technologically-assisted fragmentation [Haraway 1991, 181]. Joel Perry Barlow, in his oft-cited and significantly titled reflection on the utopian democracy of a web-based internet world, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”, suggests that flesh has become a “weary giant” of the “industrial world,” and without it, the promise of freedom awaits in a cyber-site of pure thought, “the new home of the mind.” Barlow’s new world “consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. [It is] a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live” [Barlow 1996].

Critical challenges to the innovative claims that rhizomes, lexia, and looping structures formed the definitive (im)material of new media were inevitable, and counter-debates quickly developed. Espen Aarseth’s ergodic taxonomies, outlined in detail within *Cybertext*, for example, argue for historical links to digital innovation — to the codex model, for example — that defy multi-directional paths as unique to digital models. As multimodal texts progressed in their material innovation through the end of the millennium, they moved beyond linking functions to more complex formal constructions and network structures; they comprised recombinatory database structures working in tandem with hypertexts, for example, and the ability to identify *organic agency* from, or within, *technical functioning* was further challenged. The process of reading itself as a critical practice, disrupted and revealed by digital interventions, became central to the rhetorics of a developing new media “poetics,” and in works such as Brian Kim Stefans’ “the dreamlife of letters” (1999), Stephanie Strickland’s *Vniverse* (2002), Ana Maria Uribe’s *Anipoems* (2003), language, its transformation in the reading-mind, and the spaces occupied by the digital reader-writer are all explored. Audio, image, text, and video components converged to form richly material surfaces and genre conventions also merged: cinematic models for Quicktime movies embedded on web pages and graphic design principles utilized within literary and linguistic conventions freely comingled, and such miscegenation proffered hybrid artifacts. Media production via futurist mutant manifesto reigned. Ludology gamed the narrative system, and stories became playable, programmable, and code-worthy; users and interactors *participated* in media, and reading became an applied critical practice, an integrated part of discursive representation. Jim Andrews in his poem-game *Arteroids 2.5* (2003) deftly mixes metaphors, genres, and media as well as visual, kinetic, and audio

signifiers to display language as a representational system to be played, and to be played with. Some theorists, like Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), find a comfortable allegiance between tradition and invention, between stories and games, and unite them with new genre titles, with *cyberdrama*, for example. Others, like Nick Montfort in *Twisty Little Passages: An Approach to Interactive Fiction*, suggest a more complex basis for identifying creative comingling and its offspring. For Montfort, the core components of developing hybrid genres unite simulated *world models* that are run through a computerized *parser* to create interactive fictions [Montfort 2005, viii]. Riddles are the base form for interaction in the new genre, and they lead players into a plenitude of puzzling metaphor, simulation, and abstraction. The riddle leads one away from internal bodily experience and into new digital thought-experiments, mind-games ruled by “recategorization and transformation — both of the external world, and the world of our consciousness” — far from organics [Montfort 2005, 60]. Computer code and its relationship to language, machine language and human discourse hybrids also came under scrutiny and were seen as crucial to understanding digital aesthetics and signification as linked to programming. John Cayley, digital poet and theorist, recognizes digital textuality as based on a procedural “phenomenology of language,” leading one not to real “things” but to “processes” [Cayley 2006, 309]. In the early 21st century, theoretical reflections on experimental creole languages, code-talk, unnaturally shifted the figure and ground elements of behind-the-scenes programming and on-the-screen texts. For Rita Raley, this meant that programming operations lead away from organic self-realization toward an ontology of the technical device: “Broadly, codework, makes exterior the interior working of the computer” [Raley 2002]. The notion of embodiment was complicated in the extra-inscribed surfaces and the resulting over-supplementary semiotic code-talk. The *container* challenged the *contained*, and an epic battle of anti-binary misproportions ensued, erasing organics in favor of discursive abstraction.

Currently digital media has fully traveled beyond the computer screen, encroaching into physical spaces, and corporeal liminality continues to instantiate new rules: text-bodies, user-bodies, architectural-bodies, avatar-bodies, reading-bodies, and writing-bodies overlap, recombine, devolve, and bewilder. Clearly the media ecology of the digital domain has become a fertile breeding ground for new life-forms, and developing a measuring stick for pure organicism vs. embodied representation is an overt critical challenge. As such, it is embraced by an increasingly interdisciplinary set of theorists who approach embodiment from a wide array of perspectives. Eugene Thacker in *Biomedica* is representative of a movement to recapture organic bodies through a theoretical melding of molecular biology’s “wet lab” techniques and those of computational bioinformatics, or “dry lab” considerations [Thacker 2004, 2]. Thacker presents a context for recognizing a deeply intertwined duality of virtual and physical bodies: “The biological and the digital domains are no longer rendered ontologically distinct, but instead are said to inhere in each other; the biological ‘informs’ the digital, just as the digital ‘corporealizes’ the biological” [Thacker 2004, 7]. Thus, although Thacker seemingly moves toward a more scientific method to situate *real* bodies, outside the aesthetics of pure representation and towards more scientific renderings, his approach is ultimately discursive. Biomedica bodies are not machine/human hybrids, or transcendental markers of erasure, and their mixed ontology (biological and digital) means the singular body is not expressed in the genetic/computer code hybrid. One does not ask, then, what a body is, but rather “what a body can do?” [Thacker 2004, 6]. That is, one asks what a body becomes when viewed through its discursively rendered behaviors, a step removed from its essential nature.

Since Hayles first identified the struggle to recover the Cartesian body lost to “information” in *How We Became Posthuman*, she has also remained in an iterative critical loop focused on material embodiment in digital contexts. In texts such as *Writing Machines*, she enacts the recursive impulse to reassert material metaphors as the basis for human-machine signifying practice. For Hayles, the material metaphor is the eternally changing red-yellow-green signal regulating the semiotic flow between signifiers and texts, the “traffic between words and physical artifacts,” a *technotext* control-measure for inscription, where the technically-rendered text is exposed through a foregrounding of its machinery — a distinctly un-organic enterprise [Hayles 2002, 22]. For Hayles, the *writing machines* she imagines, and the (machine-like) materiality they foreground as essential components of their inscription practices, embody meaning primarily at a level of discursive signification, or at “the imaginative realm of verbal/semiotic signifiers” [Hayles 2002, 25]. The organic body, per se, is only revealed as a component *within* systems of representation; it is “an emergent property” and one that arrives as a result of interactions “between physical properties and a work’s artistic strategies” [Hayles 2002, 33]. Materiality is mobilized, and it clearly mediates: it literally exists in a middle ground between the world of things and the world of ideas, “in between the richness of a physically robust world and human

intelligence as it crafts this physicality to create meaning” [Hayles 2002, 33]. Materiality is, thus, coextensive with meaning, with signification, or representation. Abstraction, as such, is not fully evident, and liminal bodies, sites of ambiguous non-identification, resolve into consciously registered aesthetic production-machines. The machine-body of the text encodes meanings and is itself encoded in a semiotic assembly-line where physicality is represented through a body’s strategic artistic properties. However, this material formulation does not account for media production outside of aesthetic valuation. The “metaphor” itself implies resolution, equivalency,  $x = y$ . But what of the work-production that engages bodies, mobilizes expressions, exudes tactility, and yet resists the politics of pure aesthetic production? The metaphors at the heart of Hayles’ material reflections allow little room for slippage in terms of intentionality for finding physicality or pure organic expression within production. As the physical properties of a work, the embodied content and the container, can only be seen within iterative discourse loops, the irresolute excesses remain unaccounted for, as materiality always becomes “representable” when connected to technical mediation.

Mark B. N. Hansen offers an alternate theoretical perspective from which such organic excesses — those excesses outside of exterior mediation practices, outside of semiotic visualization exercises — may be examined. His work also provides a basis for considering the embodied aesthetics at work within social media artifacts that do not always seem motivated to produce meaning, or substantive matter even, within the generative politics of discourse and artistic semiotics. When one considers, for example, what Patricia Lange calls the “personal ephemera” or the minutiae and small-life moments evident in many YouTube videos, one can recognize that traditional cinema art-house aesthetics do not apply [Lange 2009, 74]. Popular YouTube subjects range from the more familiar video-fare recognizable in home-movies and videos: birthday parties, family holiday gatherings, and graduation events; to a whole range of more unfamiliar documentations now publicly circulated: belly-fat jiggling, Lego-building, baby lemon-sucking, and bedroom web-cam dancing. Hansen’s reflections on embodiment within contemporary media forms are at an extreme end of the organic vs. technical interface spectrum and may allow then a method to account for these equally radical *ephemeral* media-modes that have emerged on sites such as YouTube.

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Hansen argues in *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media* that currently there is a “fading of the hype surrounding virtual reality 10 years ago,” and this devolution offers new opportunities to explore the “deep correlation between embodiment and virtuality” [Hansen 2006, x]. He recognized the ways in which virtual reality (VR), assisted by digital technologies, has created a rich dimension of experience where virtual being is not discrete from reality. Citing media artists and researchers Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss, he defines the new realm of virtuality:

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Central in this reimagining of VR as a mixed reality stage is a certain specification of the virtual. No longer a wholly distinct if largely amorphous realm with rules all its own, the virtual now denotes a “space full of information” that can be “activated, revealed, reorganized and recombined, added to and transformed as the user navigates...real space.” [Hansen 2006, 2]

Hansen proposes that in the realm of contemporary media culture, where one continually negotiates between the saturated information spaces of RL and VL, “all reality is mixed reality,” and the relationship between natural and virtual worlds is deeply rooted in understanding the role of embodiment in both [Hansen 2006, 6]. However, Hansen argues that the *mixed reality paradigm* — the fundamental model through which he asserts that all current embodied experience is shaped in seamless, fluid transitions between real and virtual media spaces — foregrounds the “primacy of the body as ontological access to the world”; the body offers a “functionalist perspective” where the “role of the tactility in the actualization of that access” belies traditional constructivist paradigms focused on representation of bodies only within discourse [Hansen 2006, 5]. Mixed realities assert physicality and bodily motility, emphasizing not only what a body can do, but how it operates in physical motion, rather than in mental abstraction. (One may consider then those belly fat jiggle and Lego construction ephemera videos in this context, for example.) This model moves away, then, from a critical perspective dependant on deforming, disrupting, or foregrounding representative discourse by reasserting *new* digitized versions with which one may interact (as with works like Strickland’s *Vniverse*, Andrews’ *Arteroids 2.5*, or Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl*). Although earlier digital works such as these consider the body as an integral mediator, they also ultimately mix realities only in the realm of the mind (or the intellectual sphere) and on the screen, and are highly dependent on knowledge of previous aesthetic and creative systems, of sonnet forms, novels, or games. For Hansen, “embodied human agency” is a perspective for “perceptuomotor activity,” a site of heightened perceptive and

physicalized action, where tactility and biological functioning are not merely referenced within iterative discursive leaps, or mediated with an end-goal of intellectual understanding [Hansen 2006, 3]. Instead the biological body, the organic body, overshadows and overpowers critical attempts to place it inside signification and make it a mere surface for representation. As a force of tactile activity, the body shapes experience to conform to its organizing schema and offers phenomenological evidence that it is a “primordial and active source of resistance” [Hansen 2006, 15]. Specifically, it resists representative models, including creative and aesthetic ones, that refine meaning only in discursive models, those that come *after* the body has been *overcome* by the mind, or ones materializing after the visual sense has emerged secondarily from the body sense. (Lacanian philosophy, for example, depends on the primacy of the mirror stage, when the subject sees herself in reflection, as a key movement into language, into culture.) However, alternately one may view contemporary media from the site of the organic body, as a *body in code*, a neither purely informational body, nor a disembodied reflection of “the everyday body” [Hansen 2006, 20]. It is anti-representational and is a body “submitted to and constituted by an unavoidable and empowering technical deterritorialization,” emerging only “in conjunction with technics”, with a theoretical perspective on the *originary technicity of the human* [Hansen 2006, 20]. For Hansen, technicity — the body’s relation to exteriority, to something outside of itself, and its mediation of that awareness — is key to understanding the significance of embodiment to aesthetic production. His reflections on the phenomenal body (not surprisingly extended from the work of Merleau-Ponty) allow a critical perspective where the operational mechanisms of the body (vs. the representational ones) seem suited to the varied practices and emerging forms evident in social media arenas. The phenomenal body is connected to the body schema (body map) as opposed to the body image (a specular construct), and it is an active agent filled with sensory data and not overly dependent on organized intellectual data or visual cues (Hansen 2006, 38–43). I assert that such bodily and tactile motility, recognized as agents of embodied production, offer critical models to account for the deep organism-environment coupling (for Hansen, the technical mediation of the *body schema*) one finds in the active embodied productions of social media where personal-public displays of *affection* dominate. *The body of affect*, a state of “one’s incongruity with oneself” where fixed identity is overcome through singular “excess” serves as a rich model to consider the fluid networked me/not me in social me-dia [Hansen 2006, 168]. Affect, characterized by emotional and sensory connections felt in the body and expressed through it, with it, is a defining feature of social media’s mode of anti-intellectual, experience-based production.

One may again consider, in this context, Twitter as an illustration of a mixed reality and social media *space*: This fingertip driven micro-blogging network realm is a site where the humble text message, once firmly connected to cell phone technology, has been hyper-remediated, redistributed, and repurposed into an array of technical devices and forms. It operates on computers or handheld devices (the technical device is irrelevant), and it generates a pseudo-locative life-narrative and experiential trail of communiqués that comprise many functions. It is innately personal and communal and inexorably combinatory and flexible in terms of its content, operating in ambiguous and otherly code-talk, in tweets, anti-discursive *bird-sounds*, for example: “(@ishmaelvr please don’t encourage him. RT @limabean: @indistinky and when will the #PPOP unrated version be coming out?” At its core, Twitter is a platform for documenting and mediating one’s own interests and experience, as well as a site to disseminate the experiences and interests of others. Tweets de-personalize *my body*, even while announcing *my presence*, and operate via co-evolution with *my followers*; they are driven forward through recursive re-tweeting and often operate via discursive generalization, via “trending topics,” where the # sign, ironically, erases singular reflection and joins *me* to *you*, in an anti-personal account of personal and collaborative experiential location, no matter how trivial: “I am at the grocery store buying milk (and you are with me via my twitter-feed.)” Twitter’s dependence on the circulation of *affect*, rather than the production or mediation of aesthetic meaning, is in fact central to its operation, although it may also be a container for more direct information: to advertise goods and services and to announce events. As a platform for circulation, rather than a pure medium, it can sustain multiple operations and serve a variety of purposes, as the conveyor of personal information or as an advertising forum. It operates similarly to what Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau have identified as the ambiguous power and economic flexibility of the YouTube platform; “The peculiarity of YouTube, then, lies in the way the platform has been negotiating and navigating between community and commerce. If YouTube is anything, it is both industry and user-driven” [Snickars and Vonderau 2009, 11]. It is a (re)mix of realities with no allegiance to fixed purposing or singular identity.

For Hansen’s purposes in *Bodies in Code*, second-generation virtual reality artifacts, that is, mixed reality artifacts, best exemplify the ways in which the body is articulated. This is similar to the applications of Jay D. Bolter and Diane

Gromala in *Windows and Mirrors: Interaction Design, Digital Art, and the Myth of Transparency*. In this text, Bolter and Gromala use digital art within the SIGGRAPH 2000 exhibition to exemplify radical new interfaces that engage the user in their production practice. Hansen too finds rich source material in digital art and practice. Like Bolter and Gromala, he dedicates much of his theoretical examples to exploring the operative interfaces of digital art, but ultimately moves into other virtual domains (architectural space, wearable space, narrative literary space, and Internet cyberspace, stopping short of social media). However Hansen's conclusions differ significantly from Bolter and Gromala's. They argue that digital artifacts oscillate between *transparency* and *opacity* in their interface constructions. Digital artifacts naturalize representations and reflect and foreground mediated, yet personal and embodied, experiences for those who encounter them. The interfaces they foreground depend on deeply integrated relationships with the viewer-users who *participate* in their creative production [Bolter and Gromala 2003, 3–4]. Like Hayles' middle approach, embodiment is iterative. However, Hansen's critical departure resists any kind of mutually dependent or recursive configuration and warrants further exploration and application as to the primacy of embodiment in social media.

To facilitate a discussion of the viability of Hansen's position in regards to social media practice, I provide a summary of the four primary elements which Hansen outlines to illustrate the function of digital technologies and "the sensory commons," the *me/not me* space, they afford in contemporary media culture [Hansen 2006, 20]. According to Hansen, digital technologies: 1) expand the scope of bodily (motor) activity; 2) broaden the domain of the *prepersonal*; 3) create an anonymous medium for co-belonging (a *being-with-ness*); 4) transform collective existence from self-enclosed cognitive functioning to open forms of communal motor-driven, motile participation to assert the "ongoing technogenesis of the human" [Hansen 2006, 20–21]. Such a state of technogenesis (of continual creation, of beginning again) is characterized by a body's relation to exteriority, to that outside of or in excess to, its core sense of embodied being. This state of other-awareness is not dependant on visual recognition or overt cognitive functions to produce. Therefore artistic production, as such, may be recognized as an embodied impulse within which to express one's own state of being-ness and to connect to the exterior world, indicating a relationship to communal relations, but separated from representative politics and objective consciousness. ("I do not need *you* to see *me* produce an artifact outside of *my* self.") One may, then, express aesthetics, without fully extending an awareness of otherness as something outside one's own primal experience. Extending these elements within social media offers a dynamics of expressive embodiment illustrating the ways that the body itself operates as a core agent of production and as a formal organizing aesthetic within the social medias and practices that dominate contemporary culture. Users of Facebook, for example, are not unfamiliar with the status update from the "friend" who overshares, or who offers "too-much-information," seemingly unaware of the public forum on which she or he posts, or who indulges in hyper-trivial, mundane, or too-personal updates uncharacteristic of public declaration: "I bought toilet paper today." One may also consider YouTube as an exemplary model for many other social media. Driven as it is by user-generated production means, it invites user-producers to participate in artifact making based on personal experience, but for the purpose of forming a collective network. The state of co-belonging supersedes individuation, as evidenced by tagging, commenting, reply, and rating functions, for example. Motile tactility is referenced in the hyperconscious referencing of self-mediation in the *prepersonal* domain, where pure subject-object difference is viewed under erasure and the *power of imaging* via technical means is a form of internal surveillance and an enactment of primal technics. The talking-head vlog post, now iconic in structure with its web-cam framing and domestic setting reference point, is a straw-man set-up for *my* experience, a generic device posing as subjective function. One can consider, for example, the definitive features of the well-known lonelygirl15 vlog posts. This series of posts made in 2006, although eventually (and ironically) exposed as a hoax and part of a professional film-making experiment, epitomize the private and confessional aesthetics of typical vloggers. Set in a bedroom, and focused on the emotional and impassioned outpourings of a teenage girl at war with her parents, they strive to defy the slick aesthetics of professional video-making techniques and operate at the level of hyper-privacy and social mediation. Even though falsely contrived, they circulated and affirmed a model for YouTube vlogging and pre-aesthetic rendering. They were straight-to-camera, from-my-bedroom, spontaneous diary-like musings, combined with a presumed social connection to an ideal someone (in this case to fake-vlogger Daniel, playing the love interest role). This ideal audience is always imagined to be somewhere out there, listening to or for *me*.

Lonelygirl15, with the head-shot framing and the personal confessions within private locations, epitomizes what Lange calls *videos of affinity*. These videos foreground the creation of sensory impressions and spontaneous creativity using



private and intimate communication techniques (like eating on camera) and moving, adjusting, or shaking the camera (to evade transparent media representation). They don't operate merely to showcase the vlogger, but to bring her into contact with "potential others who identify and interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the video" [Lange 2009, 71]. This was clear in the construction of lonelygirl15, for example, with the inclusion of Daniel. The producers recognized that the power of lonelygirl15's vlog posts were not in a representation of the vlogger alone, but in her eventual communication with another via the internal "monologue" she used to surveil and promote her private state of being. In this sense, lonelygirl15 was merely a front for an idealized aesthetics of affinity embraced by most vloggers, and she was never really lonely, as long as she was engaged by the social media network. The presumed interaction of vlogging is inevitable and displays of *affect* in social media networks eventually lead to bodies of *affection*. For Lange, affinity videos on YouTube operate as a form of "habeas corpus," bringing the body firmly into view to forge intimate connections with others [Lange 2009, 78]. This body of affinity, like Hansen's body-in-code, shapes the experiences it relays and deepens the mediations between pre-subject and presumed other, without exteriorizing production at a pure site of representation. Disconnected from aesthetic function, it serves as a marker of network affiliation and organic functioning within a reenactment of primordial technicity: this body performs an awareness of otherness, without separating it from the deeply personal felt within.

Offering a perspective to view organic and technical operations, many YouTube posts couple the pre-subject with digital technologies to display a primary or primal state of the body-in-code. In *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Jean Burgess and Joshua Green reflect on the complicated structure of YouTube itself as an identifiable media form. They recognize the inability to reduce theoretical considerations of YouTube to a singular phenomenon. It currently operates both as a mainstream media outlet and as critique and counter-cultural model subverting those political and aesthetic models. Burgess and Green acknowledge it as a business, but also as a form of what David Weinberger has termed a "meta-business," one that serves as a distribution platform to enhance the value of content developed elsewhere and draw attention to it [Burgess and Green 2009, 4]. In this sense, it does not assume the pure aesthetics and production qualities of other mainstream media that clearly foreground their own creations, rendering them artistic for (and before) public consumption. Similar to the claim Lange makes that homemade, anti-aesthetic ephemera dominate YouTube media content, Burgess and Green suggest that "vernacular creativity," that is, a wide range of creative practices, from scrapbooking to informal story-telling in conversational chat, is at work in many YouTube expressions. Amateur content-makers according to this model are more inclined to personal expressions "outside the cultural value systems of either high culture or commercial creative practice" and as a method to enforce social networking. Operating, as a body-in-code, they express an affiliation with technics, with a primal desire to express a relationship to exteriority and to specular rendering, without erasing a form of primordial tactility inherent to pure embodied and private states-of-being. In this site of co-belonging, one desires to be *felt* (that is, as opposed to being *seen*) in order to instantiate a form of communal ontology and sharing, one that is organic, and one that is both mine and yours. Burgess and Green support this position when they claim that when considering YouTube "it is important not to fall into the trap of simply assuming that vernacular video is organized primarily around a desire to broadcast the self"; instead it operates to promote "social networking" over modes of traditional cultural production [Burgess and Green 2009, 25–26].

Another popular YouTube genre is that of the homemade dance remix video. In fact, such videos characterize some of the earliest YouTube successes, marked by the number of hits (views by others) and by their circulation to achieve viral status via the social network. Unlike the movie theater or Broadway stage, there is no one space to find these expressions; you can come to them, or they may find you — via email inbox, twitter feed, or Facebook post. Burgess and Green cite the video dance version of the Pixies song *Hey* (identified as the *Hey Clip* on YouTube) as one of the most popular YouTube videos to date with more than 21 million views as of March 2008 [Burgess and Green 2009, 26]. Dance videos like the *Hey Clip* are generally edited remakes of mainstream music, usually in a domestic setting, like a bedroom or living room. They illustrate the strong drive to foreground embodied experience and transmit communication codes outside of traditional signifying systems, and most often outside a professional aesthetics. The amateur nature of the videos, which often appear spontaneous and unrehearsed, or rehearsed to a degree, but never to expert level, is a key component of this genre. In the dance remixes, the dancing subjects seem to be enacting a private (and somewhat universal) experience of embodied musical pleasure and fantasy reenactment: "I want to express how the music makes

me feel and materializes in my body-moves” and “I want to learn to dance like Shakira and embody her presence in me.” Although prior to social media outlets, these dances may have happened in private, now they operate at another level of private and conjoined expression. Peters and Seier in “Home Dance: Mediacy and Aesthetics of the Self on YouTube” acknowledge the mixed messages of YouTube dance videos that proffer a “specific ambivalence of self — control and forgetting, discipline and pleasure.” Here the bedroom mirror is replaced by a YouTube audience, and I am alone, yet joined to you [Peters and Seier 2004, 199]. Peters and Seier describe the popular bedroom site as one like Foucault’s heterotopia: “equally private and public, actually existing and utopian, performative and transgressive” [Peters and Seier 2004, 199]. This site, like the mixed reality sensory commons that envelops Hansen’s body-in-code correlate, is one where “motor activity — not representational verisimilitude” express the core organic agent at the heart of convergent digital culture [Hansen 2006, 2]. The motility of the body, dancing on camera with an imagined audience and equalized by the interior pleasure of just *moving to the music*, is evident in these YouTube videos. Beyoncé’s popular song “Single Ladies” has been remixed thousands of times on YouTube and performed by everyone from babies to grandfathers, dancing with wild abandon and with varying degrees of allegiance to the actual choreography. The original video, with its minimal sets, engaging choreographed moves, and impossible to forget tune, was itself seemingly created with an eye toward reproduction. It was made to be remade, and it represents a shift in production politics where the ambivalence of ownership gives way to a performance of functional expression. Watch me (or “Feel” me), watch (“feel”) my body watching (“feeling”) Beyoncé’s body, and I will watch (“feel”) you, etc....

One may recognize how all of these examples defy generic identity politics and operate at a revolutionary level to recover organic presence from transcendental cyberculture. Like the homey bedroom sets glimpsed behind the webcam-framed vlogger, bodies slyly materialize both as the backdrop for creative and critical mediated self-expression and as dynamic pre-personal text-subjects asserting a pre-aesthetic drive to mediate outside traditional spaces of representation. These contemporary forms resist the disembodied abstraction promised by early-generation cyber-theorists and traditional poststructuralist perspectives. They assert a primordial drive to overcome ocularcentric dynamics, that threaten to subvert the phenomenal body to the visually constructed one. They clearly put expressive bodies before external signification and challenge new me-dia politics grounded in the production aesthetics of tactile motility and *amateur* organics.

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