







# The Visceral Digital Image

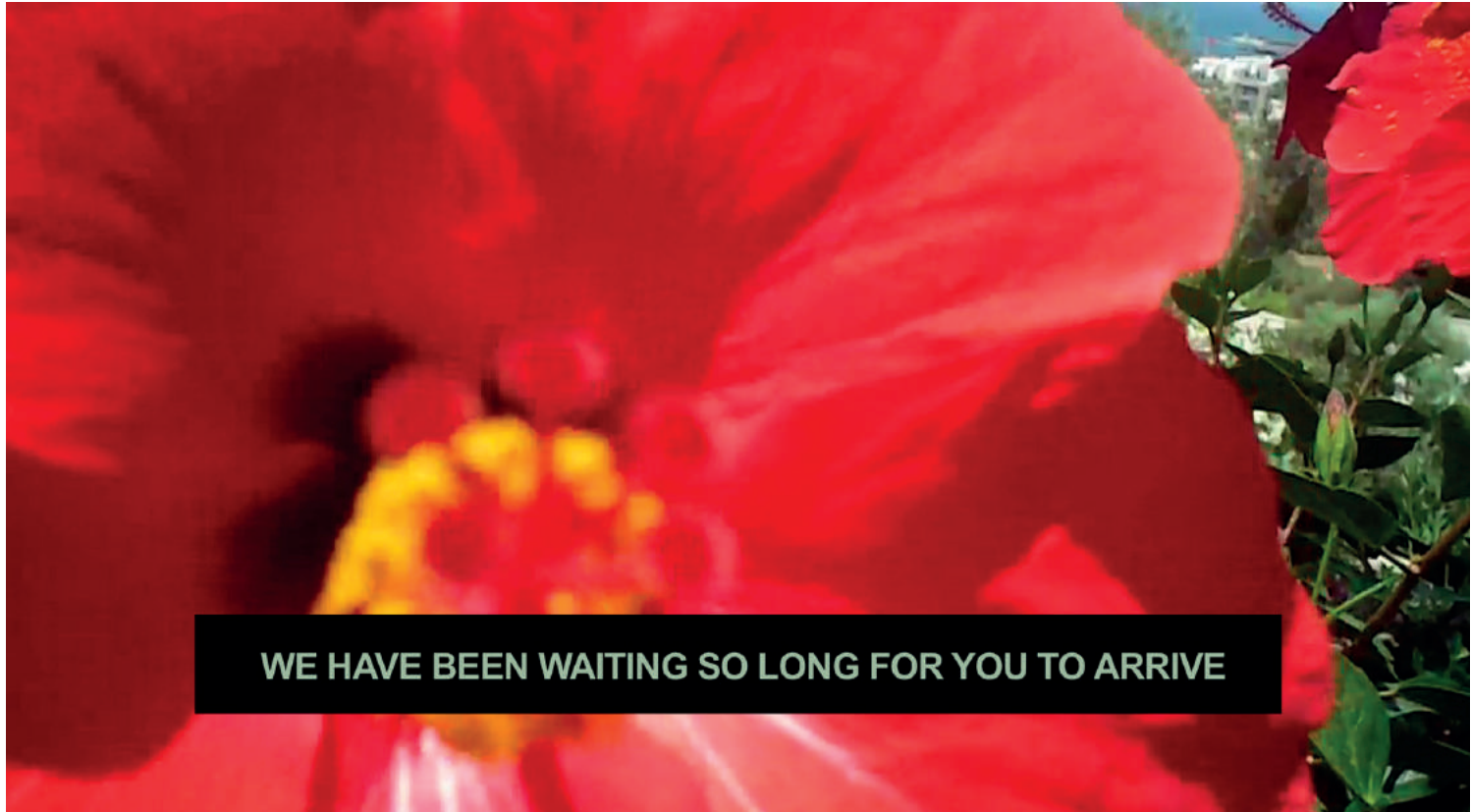
Annika Larsson  
*BLUE*, 2014,  
inkjet on recycled paper,  
21 x 30 cm  
Courtesy  
the artist and Andréhn-Schiptjenko,  
Stockholm

With global news reporting and social-media channels providing a constant stream of digital photographs and videos, we find ourselves confronting images that are disturbing, strangely agitating and provoke a physical reaction. In this themed section, we consider the impact of such images and how artists are responding to them. With contributions from **Adam Kleinman**, **Christy Lange**, **Elvia Wilk** and an interview with **Matt Mullican** by **Jörg Heiser**



# Soft Machines

**Elvia Wilk on recent video works by Annika Larsson, Laure Prouvost and Steve Reinke that address the visceral power of the digital image**



The word 'cliché' has its origins in mechanical reproduction. First cropping up at the beginning of the 19th century, it was the French name for the 'stereotype' block, a printing template made to create typographic pages using a single sheet of metal. Soon afterwards, the cliché came to mean a different kind of template: the photographic negative from which images are reproduced. This etymological connection between the cliché – which in contemporary terms is an idea, phrase or

Laure Prouvost  
*Into All That Is Here*, 2015,  
HD video still

Courtesy  
the artist and MOT International,  
London and Brussels

image so often repeated that its meaning has lost impact – and technological development foreshadows the banalizing effect of contemporary mass media, the idea that a signifier loses its ability to signify precisely through reproduction and circulation.

When speaking of digital images in relation to the cliché, the photographic negative loses primary relevance; the digital image need not have an originary template. But if clichés are forged through technologically mediated repetition, what images could *not* be said to have become clichéd through online circulation? Assuming that images of, say, violence and sex have been subject to the same (if not intensified) digital reproduction, hasn't the shocking or the visceral become entirely clichéd?

The notion that hyper-exposure to images leads to desensitization is itself a cliché, but as we enter the late-stage YouTube era, it has become abundantly clear that the proliferation of visual material – including the 'poor image', as Hito Steyerl has termed the lo-res,

endlessly copied file – has led instead to new and complex sensitivities and distinctions. Just ask someone who's paid to sift through a slush pile of porn every day to determine which pixels are okay for public consumption and which are not. Or consider the phenomenon of trypophobia: a fear of irregular holes or punctures. Trypophobia existed before images exploiting this fear surfaced in droves online but, for many, the phobia was instilled precisely as a result of looking at those images: the cliché preceded the original.

Several recent video artworks have addressed and deployed the visceral power of the digital image, not despite its clichéd repetition, but because of it. Being grossed out, titillated, terrified – these works destabilize what we take to be impulsive, uncontrollable, or 'natural' reactions. Initially, the cliché itself was not the image in reproduction but rather the originary negative. The digital image may not have a single template from which it proliferates, but these video works allow us to consider the contemporary visual cliché.



Georges Bataille wrote his novel *Blue of Noon* in 1935. It wasn't published until 1957, however, after the climax of fascism in Europe that it presaged in its depiction of the effects of authoritarian power on the psyche. Struck by the book's contemporary relevance, Swedish artist Annika Larsson spent several years working closely with the text, building a vast image archive that has been shown in various installations and used as a well-spring for her hour-long video, *BLUE* (2014). Compiled from grainy YouTube footage uploaded by countless users, *BLUE* is a meandering, unstable narrative that Larsson likens to a road-trip movie. Like Bataille's novel, the video is an exploration of liminal states: the edge of consciousness, the edge of sanity, the edge of being alive. Starting with recordings of the riots in various London boroughs in the summer of 2011, it moves between intense imagery – a close-up of an anorexic's ribcage, a man rolling on the ground in the throes of hysterical laughter, a drunken brawl – and seemingly banal shots, like a pair of trainers soaking in a bathtub or a chicken wandering across a patch of grass.

With the scenes flattened by general poor quality and strung together without demarcation, the juxtaposition between heightened and everyday imagery leads to a strange uncertainty on the part of the viewer, who is left trying to classify which images are meant to be remarkable or disturbing, and which are not. Rather than bringing shock down to a level of banality, the effect is the opposite. After watching *BLUE* twice, what I recalled most starkly was not the anorexic teenager: it was the trainers in the bathtub. I felt viscerally affected by the sight of those shoes – possibly because I had been conditioned by the other imagery to feel alert to my reactions, or possibly because the clichéd shocking images were so familiar I'd become desensitized to them. The positives illuminated the negative.

Larsson told me one of her primary interests in collecting the video material was to better understand 'what types of gestures have become normal in our late-capitalist society, and what types of gestures are again becoming seen as abnormal'. That is to say: where is

the demarcation between what is deemed horrific, provocative or confusing, and what is commonplace, comprehensible or boring? How have these categories changed over time and who gets to decide which is which? In Larsson's view, there are strong parallels between today and Bataille's time that can be seen in the way movement and gesture are once again being politically controlled – from recent border closures to violent homophobia. Determining one gesture to be a norm and another an aberration (distinguishing between signal and noise) has been a primary mechanism of societal control throughout history. Through its steady pacing and quiet transitions, *BLUE* suggests that states such as hysteria, insanity and violence are the rule rather than the exception.

All the images in *BLUE* were produced and uploaded by anonymous users whose faces are rarely shown in Larsson's edits. By collecting them, Larsson questions the intent behind their production and consumption – the desires they create and the desires they fulfill. In turn, she is testing the desires at play between an artwork and its audience. What is the responsibility of the artist? When is showing difficult subjects necessary and when is it gratuitous or exploitative? As Larsson asks: 'When do you reach another person and when does the communication stop because it becomes too much?' Bataille once claimed that the work of art can never be transformed into an 'object of aversion [...] The purpose of a scarecrow is to frighten birds from the field where it is planted, but the most terrifying painting is there to attract visitors.'<sup>1</sup>

Laure Prouvost's video *Into All That Is Here* (2015) has two narrators. One speaks in voice-over and the other appears silently via the subtitles that sit below the image, often slightly contradicting what is said in the audible narration. It's this simultaneous but deviated storytelling that implicates the viewer as an active participant working to reconcile the two levels of narration, and it is also what accounts for the funniness of the journey, through ironic discrepancies and typographic jokes.

As the film begins, we're rustling through a forest at night. A female voice is whispering,

moaning, entreating us to 'come deeper', while the subtitles are telling us things like: 'KEEP DIGGING ...', 'YOU ARE NOT FAR ...', 'YOU WILL RUBB YOURSELF ALL OVER ME.' Sighs and panting. Ominous clangs. We head into a dark tunnel, finding sculptures on the ground made of roots and resin. (When the video was shown in 2015 at earlier | gebauer in Berlin, some of these sculptures could be seen in an adjacent room.) An iPhone displays a Google Maps route that we are ostensibly following into the darkness. Then, suddenly, an explosion: a climax! Shooting fountains and puckered lips. We emerge at the other side of the tunnel into sunshine, where flowers are kissing each other and fingers are penetrating bright blossoms, babies are laughing and we are 'LOOZING' ourselves in the juicy joy of it all.

But soon the pleasure becomes too acute and the images start to exhaust themselves: 'THE IMAGES ARE NOW SWEATING. WARM AND SWEET PIXELS DRIPPING ON YOU.' Droplets slide down a printed image. We've been caught making love with the screen and the friction has caused a combustion: the images catch fire, leaving a crackling pile of burning paper. The sensation, the interaction, is so great that the pixels have alchemically materialized and turned into photographs. At the end, we're left alone with 'ALL THE PAIN AND HORROR OF THE WORLD'. This is what happens when the image dies, stops moving, loses its vitality. But wasn't the pain worth the pleasure?

The narrative arc of *Into All That Is Here* is a classic story of seduction, lined with jokes about the contrived nature of said seduction, while being no less seductive for being self-conscious. The silliness is what trick-the viewer into committing to the sensual trip. And because the signification is so obvious (tunnels and flowers are hardly subtle sexual metaphors), we're able to stop hunting for meaning and enjoy what we're seeing, becoming complicit in the manipulation, but still effectively manipulated. The pleasure of the watching experience is very real. Prouvost has steered us not around but through the clichéd image, and back to a realization of embodiment: ours – and that of the image.

The guy on top is wearing dirty white briefs. His opponent is pinned in a headlock, face berry-red, torso pallid, wrist flapping in defeat. 'Here is another drunk wrestling video. There are thousands on YouTube,'

1  
Laure Prouvost  
*Into All That Is Here*, 2015,  
HD video still

2 & 3  
Steve Reinke  
*The Natural Look*, 2014,  
video stills

4  
Annika Larsson, *BLUE*, 2014,  
video still

Courtesy  
1 the artist and MOT International,  
London and Brussels •  
2 & 3 the artist • 4 the artist  
and Andréhn-Schiptjenko,  
Stockholm





says the male narrator. After releasing his hold, the winner empties a bottle of beer on the chest of the loser, who is now grinning in what looks like total bliss. The narrator continues: 'I understand, I think, the two wrestlers, and I love the one who loses. He has a beautiful smile, and I want to fuck him and piss on him, too.' The camera pans out and we see more men standing around, trouserless, in army vests and helmets, drinking and laughing. 'What I don't understand are all the marauding watchers, in boots and underwear,' the narrator goes on. 'What are they doing? What do they get out of this?'

This is a scene from *The Natural Look* (2014), a video by Canadian artist Steve Reinke. In it, user-created content like this wrestling scene is juxtaposed with videos of nature, like snakes mating in a giant tangle in the forest, mushrooms sprouting or a camel giving birth; a human umbilical cord being ceremoniously cut is a visual refrain. During the title sequence, Reinke, as the narrator, explains the piece is 'dedicated to all things placental'.

The placental here is meant as both a stage in 'natural' reproduction and an imagined state of being – an impossible, longed-for, pre-conscious state of stasis and safety, before the eyes are opened to the (horror and joy of) the world. The embryo is the human at its least animate, the human on the edge of being a human, sustained only by 'the placenta, the real mother of us all, forgotten, inhuman, discarded, the softest machine'. Through the figure of the placenta, the video creates an uncanny distance between the viewer and what is supposed to be natural, familiar, animal. You can't help but ask: if it's natural, why is the scene of the camel giving birth so gross? And what is that sac which slides out after birth? A removable organ grown for feeding a creature alien to the body it lives inside?

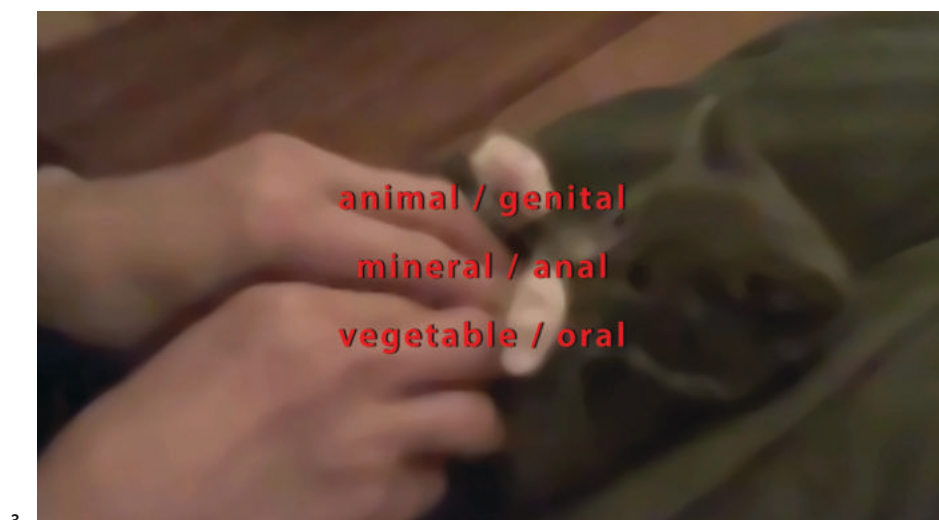
*The Natural Look* is a triple entendre. It refers to the attempt to appear natural (make-up meant to look like the absence of make-up), the way natural phenomena actually look (unnatural), and the act of looking as learned behaviour that's been naturalized. It's this last meaning that is perhaps the most complex and the most integral to what the film accomplishes. During the moment in which the two wrestlers are frozen in motion on the floor, like embracing embryonic twins, what fascinates Reinke is not the event but the 'watchers' – the army guys standing around, pointing, drinking beer and filming. In other words, it's the negative of the main image that illuminates the desire. ❖

1 Georges Bataille, 'The Cruel Practice of Art', in *Blam 1* (CD-Rom), 1993, first published as 'L'Art, exercice de la cruauté', in *Médecine de France*, June 1949

*Elvia Wilk is a writer based in Berlin, Germany. She is a contributing editor at uncube magazine and Rhizome, and publication editor for transmediale, Berlin's annual festival of media and culture.*



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**Where is the demarcation between what is deemed horrific, provocative or confusing and what is commonplace, comprehensible or boring?**



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