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### Digital Culture and Its Impact on Reality and Art

Being born in 2003, my entire life has been shaped by digital culture. The Web 2.0 age was blossoming as I entered childhood, and as such, I accessed YouTube for the first time when I was six years old. Viral videos defined the jokes my classmates and I would tell one another, my after-school activities changed from watching cartoons on TV to instead checking if *SMOSH* had uploaded a new video, and I watched what started as a democratic platform that allowed anyone to, as their slogan put it, “Broadcast [them]self” slowly trickle into mainstream media. But if digital culture has become just culture, then what does that mean for the real world existing beyond the screen, and for art which is oftentimes reflective of the culture surrounding its creation?

It might be fair to say that digital culture began with MTV. It was reflective of youth culture in a way that not many mainstream media platforms were before, and in a way that the internet would become in the decades following its creation. In Alex Bag’s video art piece, *Untitled Fall 95*, she uses the digital culture of the 90s – that is, commercial and entertainment culture largely influenced by TV – to frame a story based in reality. Made during the Web 1.0 era, the work feels almost prophetic to what the internet and digital culture would become, incorporating stylistic choices reminiscent of early YouTube vlogging and comedy videos. Bag’s work blurs the lines between art and reality through a language of media culture: commercials for phone sex operators and the mascots of consumerism, the cartoons and celebrity interviews

airing on MTV, and reality TV confessionals. The piece reflects the culture it was created in, not just in terms of socio-politics (discussing themes of capitalism, feminism, and ageism through the main character's confessional scenes), but also regarding a dominant media culture.

Unconcerned with creating a work that may become dated by incorporating references to the specific media nuances of the time, Bag ended up creating a work that is timeless through its core understanding that real life is shaped by the media around us.

In addition to kicking off the internet age, the 1990s made the creation of independent video media much more accessible with the camcorder. In fact, just four years prior to Bag's *Untitled Fall 95*, a man named George Holliday would be filming what he later claimed to be the first ever viral video, as discussed in Legacy Russell's 2024 essay, *Reality, Televised*. Russell examines how Holliday's filming of Rodney King being beaten by police in 1991 not only was included as an art piece in the 1993 Whitney Biennial, but that it also marked a trend in the way black trauma is endlessly broadcast for the entertainment of white viewers, sensationalizing media coverage that ranged from the murder of Emmett Till in the 1950s and continues into the 21st century with the murders of Trayvon Martin and George Floyd. Russell describes the television coverage of the Rodney King video as "a decorative backdrop, an aestheticized anti-blackness consumed en masse," a statement that rings true still in today's Web 3.0 landscape where videos depicted the trauma of marginalized peoples are replayed over and over, sandwiched between a light-hearted video of baby animals and a comedic sketch. The digital world's capacity for videos capturing moments of injustice to go viral obscures the difference between awareness and entertainment. This is also reflective of a flattening of "ideas and ideals, which are reduced to polarized ideological camps and knee-jerk efficiency in a media-accelerated, survivalist struggle for attention" brought up by Isadora Neves Marques'

essay, *How to be Responsible Irresponsibly: On Art Beyond Immediacy* (2025). In our current digital landscape, the speed and immediacy of the flow of content means that there is no time to sit with what we consume; it all just becomes noise, and as a result we become desensitized to this trauma. Russell's essay also brings up "Trayvoning", a trend that turned the murder of a black teenage boy into a meme on the same level of unseriousness as the planking fad. Is this what reality looks like when digital culture, entertainment, and the trauma of marginalized communities become intertwined? When art and reality are indistinguishable in the digital age?

As previously mentioned, I grew up alongside the internet, and my birth year is only two years before YouTube's. I watched digital culture become the dominant culture while I developed personhood, and looking back now, those viral videos I quoted with my peers and *SMOSH* videos I waited with baited breath for were video art pieces regardless of whether they aged poorly or not (and believe me, most of them did). I realize now that I didn't just watch digital culture and the internet develop over my lifetime, I've watched the medium of video art grow in accessibility. What started in the 1960s with works being passed around galleries and art collectives is now reachable without its viewer even realizing that what they're consuming is video art. With TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram – all platforms that prioritize video content – being some of the most popular websites in the 2020s, as well as being the source of most of our current digital culture, video art *is* digital culture. If digital culture is shaping our reality, then video art is also what is shaping our reality.

Within the digital realm there's been a concerning shift in just how "instant" instant gratification can be, and this too has been shaping our reality. The internet brought with it the ability to access to anyone, anywhere, at any time, with short form video content on aforementioned websites like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram accelerating that immediacy. In

Neves Marques' essay, she also brings up the idea that immediacy devalues mediation, which is deeply problematic when thinking about both durational art and our tolerance for boredom in our day-to-day lives. The blurring of the lines between art and reality because of digital culture, as evident in Bag's video art piece and Russell's essay, means that we as a whole need to become more conscious and critical of what we are viewing. Art can't and shouldn't be restricted by a need for immediacy, nor should it be simply passively engaging with digital culture. Or maybe the internet will evolve into Web 4.0 and be taken over by AI with no trace left of human contact, and we'll all have to find a new way to define our reality and share our art.

Works Cited

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