

Peculiarly Immaterial

Digital Labor in the ASMR Roleplay Video

Emma Bennett

ASMR, Handiwork, and Digital Labor

In the video, shot in close-up, there are hands very carefully lifting, touching, and mending a piece of candy-pink fabric embroidered with tiny, glistening beads. Tweezers move into the shot to grasp and tug gently at a loose thread. The sound, amplified, is of fibers tensing, a small delicate resistance, or the friction of strands of cotton as they move against one another. "I have to be very careful," says a voice from just offscreen, "because I don't want it to snap." The hands and voice are those of Susana Fajardo, Senior Textile Conservator at the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in London. The object of her meticulous work, shot partly through the magnifying lens required for the task, is the handmade dress worn by the British singer Sandie Shaw for her winning performance at the Eurovision Song Contest in 1967. This video, *ASMR at the Museum | Conserving a Eurovision Dress* (2021), created by artist Julie Rose Bower in collaboration with the V&A, was included in *Weird Sensation Feels Good: The World of ASMR*, an exhibition at London's Design Museum in 2022. Also on display on an identical screen was footage of a small dog having its hair professionally cut in a Korean dog-grooming salon; and on another screen nearby, a meticulous process of predigital text editing using a scalpel and tweezers. The videos were installed on plasma screens, with headphones offered beneath each screen by fingers made of silicone. Cushions folded into soft, intestine-like shapes invited viewers to recline while luxuriating in the close-up views of hair, thread, paper, etc. As Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky has argued at length in her theorization of "processual representation"—a moving image genre that "trades on the well-documented

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TDR 69:3 (T267) 2025 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749
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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 2. Installation view of WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD: The World of ASMR *at the Design Museum in London (2022), curated by James Taylor-Foster. (Photo by Ed Reeve; courtesy of the Design Museum)*

satisfactions of craftwork [...] often eliciting in the spectator analogous feelings of absorption and well-being"—skilled handicraft can be intensely pleasurable to watch (2020:221). In fact, "watch" is not quite the word: you *feel* it, the stuff, the vicarious tactility of the thread-tug, the intensified focus on the tweezer tip—you feel (or feel *as if* you feel) it all.

Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) names the intensely pleasurable affective state that audiovisual experiences like these can, in certain people, induce. Often described as *weirdly* pleasurable, the sensation is associated with an intense kind of relaxation accompanied by a physical sensation of prickling or tingling, most often in the head or neck. Usually first experienced in childhood, it often seems to arise in proximity to others, as a pleasure-response to their effortful attention, including "when other people near me are paying close attention to a task" (Guest) or "when someone is concentrating on something of mine" (SWilson80827), and also "when someone is paying direct attention to me" (tingler). These anecdotal examples are taken from the 2008 forum discussion on Steadyhealth.com headed "WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD" from which the Design Museum exhibition takes its name (Steadyhealth.com n.d.).[1] Though the term "ASMR" implies formal scientific identification, it emerged from precisely this kind of online activity; Jennifer Allen proposed the term in 2010 after stumbling upon the Steadyhealth.com forum, and social media sites like Facebook and YouTube were instrumental in the development of the online

1. The forum thread at www.steadyhealth.com/topics/weird-sensation-feels-good is undated, as are the individual comments, but discussion around the forum is generally dated as 2008–2009 (see e.g. Dr. Richard 2016).

Figure 1. (previous page) Still from ASMR at The Museum | Conserving a Eurovision Dress*, by Julie Rose Bower and the V&A Museum (2021), showing the specialized work of Susana Fajardo, Senior Textile Conservator, repairing the beaded dress worn by Sandie Shaw for the Eurovision Song Contest in 1967. (Courtesy of Julie Rose Bower and V&A / Susana Fajardo)*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subculture centered on the sensation. ASMR's emergence thus coincided with the "platformization" of the web by social media and e-commerce giants like Facebook, Amazon, and Google (which acquired YouTube in 2006 for $1.65 billion), and with the immediate aftermath of the 2007/8 financial crisis. This was a moment marked by the expansion of platforms as both computational structures and novel corporate models, marking a shift in the organizational structure of capitalism itself (Bhattacharyya 2023). Though there remains a widespread assumption, among various commentators, that the internet coinage names an "age-old biological feeling" (Maddox 2021), I frame the experience known as ASMR as an affective affordance of a data-driven online experience, an altered body-state activated from within automation.

In the early 2010s, users of YouTube began sharing footage that had been found to stimulate ASMR, even if that was not its intention (the painting tutorials of Bob Ross, which aired on US television during the 1980s, are the classic example of unintentional ASMR media). Soon, creators who would come to be called ASMRtists began creating videos to intentionally stimulate the feeling. And they did so, notably, by enacting scenes of work—scenarios in which the performer assumed the role of some sort of caring professional. Doctors were common, as were facialists, dermatologists, optometrists, audiologists, hairdressers, chiropractors, and plastic surgeons; anyone with the requisite qualification to touch the head or face in a professional capacity. In academic literature on ASMR, roles most commonly cited as typical also include receptionists, flight attendants, and shop assistants (Andersen 2015:688; Smith and Snider 2019:42; Gallagher 2016:2; Harper 2020:95; Lee 2021:394). This kind of roleplay video remains central to ASMR culture and operates according to a set of stylistic and dramaturgical conventions that can seem—as Rob Gallagher notes, "literally inexplicable on first encounter"—developed specifically for online platforms and the devices through which its users access it (Gallagher 2016). Typically, the performer, framed in medium close-up, looks and speaks to a fixed camera, which is treated as a physical stand-in for the face of the viewer. The face/camera is gazed at, dabbed, tended with specialist processes and tools (a thermometer, a Q-tip, a crinkly gloved hand). All contact sounds are closely amplified—the crinkling, tapping, and scratching of instruments and surfaces—as is the vocal delivery of the performer who, characteristically, whispers breathily, emphasizing the wet sounds of tongue, lips, teeth. Binaural sound is often deployed to intensify the perspectival illusion, which, when it works, generates not just an effect of synchronous co-presence, but also a sensory illusion too: *you feel like you are being touched*.

The perspectival roleplay presents ASMR as the effect of one kind of work pretending to be another, a techno-sensory illusion that can feel like magic. Or like nothing: "tingle immunity," symptomatic of overexposure to ASMR videos, is a common complaint among those who habitually visit the estimated 500,000 ASMR channels now active on YouTube, with most channels uploading new videos weekly, or even daily, producing a vast online database of monetized content. When the Design Museum invited visitors to "[s]tep out from behind your screen and experience the world of ASMR in a shared space," it seemed to be an effort to counteract what curator James Taylor-Foster called the "hurricane" of life online, where we spend our lives "engaging through frictionless glass surfaces." For him, ASMR's close amplification of textural sounds is an effort toward "translating sound back into tactility" (in Gale 2022). Though the museum exhibition also included YouTube roleplay videos, they were not as centrally displayed as the process videos. This might be simply because the formal conventions of this genre arise from conditions of production specific to social media: the to-camera address of a vlogger, shot relatively inexpensively, often at home. In other words, the perspectival roleplay relies on the affordances of *personalized* digital technologies; it works because you are the only one watching it. Perhaps you are in bed, connected via earphones to that device you are clutching, with its little glass screen.

To facilitate your rest, or help you to sleep, then, ASMR roleplay videos enact scenes of work. In the privacy of your bed, you imaginatively "visit" the clinic, the spa, the hotel, where you have a booking, an appointment, and are greeted accordingly. "Hi, welcome. I'm Doctor Latte, nice to meet you. So today you're here for a full body physical exam, correct?" is a typical opener from the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749 Published online by Cambridge University Press

channel of Latte ASMR, a South Korean YouTuber who performs in English. Her channel, which has 2.07 million subscribers, offers a range of roleplay scenarios from the familiar (school nurse, Botox consultant, sleep therapist, and night nurse), to the quirky (Q-tip clinician, robot cleaning lady, Christmas hotel receptionist, or backstage makeup artist ["I'm a big fan of you"]) (Latte ASMR 2021). Each is realized with a degree of detail that is unusual among ASMR roleplayers: the backdrop is not a bare wall or a digitally superimposed location shot, but a meticulously crafted set, populated by carefully color-coordinated props, many of them handmade. It's like a lovingly homespun DIY project offset by a central performance that infers professionalized, even institutionalized, care.

This kind of ASMR video enacts a convergence of occupational and theatrical roleplaying, all of it staged for the purposes of digital recording and distribution via an online platform. We might go further and propose that ASMR roleplay represents a convergence of three modes of "playing," then: the occupational, the theatrical, and the digital. This is a convergence that has been recognized in various theorizations of labor under late capitalism. In the guise of doctors, spa technicians, shop assistants, and receptionists, ASMR roleplayers pretend to be service workers offering in-person experiences of the kind that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri refer to in their definition of "immaterial labor," so named because its products are intangible, affective: "a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (Hardt and Negri 2000:292). Though their definition cites healthcare workers as exemplary, Hardt and Negri's definition of immaterial labor was modeled on the work of cultural producers, including those who labor to produce affect "virtually," via various forms of mediation in the entertainment industry.

We might also note that ASMR roleplay's most typical scenarios involve varied performances of what Arlie Hochschild, in her account of the emotional work of flight attendants, named "emotional labor" ([1983] 2012). The connection between ASMR and feminized labor associated with the production of affect has been widely noted. Settings like spas, beauty clinics, and perfume shops seem to imply not only women's work, but also women's consumption. Such workplaces are sites for the provision of "body-related services," a term used by Miliann Kang in *The Managed Hand*, her study of Korean-owned nail salons in New York. As Kang argues, the embodied dimensions of emotional labor in a global service economy are "seeped with race and class meanings" (2003:133). It is notable, therefore, that the softly spoken and gently sympathetic performance of care most typically associated with ASMR, at least in its early days, was exemplified by white women whose appearance conformed to narrow definitions of desirable femininity. Critical accounts of ASMR published in Anglophone contexts frequently highlight a predominant association between the genre and performers who are cisgender-appearing, well-groomed, young, and white (Maddox 2021; Bjelić 2016:101; Harper 2020:97). In much US mainstream media coverage, ASMR has been associated with "telegenic white (or white-passing) women" (Wong 2020). Black ASMRtists like LatreceASMR, ASMR Sharm, Batala's ASMR, or ASMR Power of Sound rarely get featured in journalistic accounts of the phenomenon, despite being well-established roleplayers (Wong 2020; see also ASMR Sharm 2020 for a communal effort to counter that marginalization). In parallel, many scholarly publications on ASMR roleplay (I include my own previous work here) refer to the "most subscribed" or "most watched" and by implication "most typical" ASMRtists (Gentlewhispering, Heatherfeather, Olivias Kissper) with reference to YouTube metrics (see e.g. Smith and Snider 2019:42; Zappavigna 2023:301; Gallagher 2016; Bennett 2016; Waldron 2017).

As of February 2025, some of the most-subscribed YouTube Channels are located in South Korea (Jane ASMR 제인 with 18M subscribers, Hongyu ASMR 홍유 with 16M), where ASMR is often combined with "mukbang" (or *meokbang*, "eating broadcast"), which involves performers talking to the camera while eating often elaborate meals (Lee 2021:381). Crossover mukbang/ASMR channels like the Great Indian ASMR (based in India) and Zach Choi (based in the USA) have huge audiences (15.7M and 32M subscribers respectively). Given it is possible to claim that ASMR is a global phenomenon, with at least the possibility of connecting people across continents and cultures, it also could be said to afford viewers the luxury of encountering difference, or otherness, at a scene of pleasured consumption. As Joceline Andersen pointed out in a 2015 article,

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Figure 3. Video thumbnail for "ASMR | Sleepy Slumber Airlines ✈ Flight Attendant Roleplay 😴✨ (Luxury Sleep Destination 🤍✨)." (Batala's ASMR 2024; screengrab by Emma Bennett)

"[f]oreignness, as performed by an accent or a different language, is a well-known ASMR trigger," which raises questions as to what kinds of pleasures might be played out by anonymized users who "visit" the spaces of ASMRtists to indulge in their services (Andersen 2015:693; see also hooks [1992] 2006).

ASMR performance can be situated on a continuum of body-related services, which includes not only the provision of beauty treatments, but also healthcare in both clinical and domestic spaces, and various kinds of sex work, including the production of pornographic content for online circulation. Indeed, similarities (and sometimes overlaps) between ASMR's to-camera performances and the work of webcam models, or "cam girls," mean that ASMRtists often engage in efforts to differentiate their videos from "adult-only content" (Lee 2022:394; Andersen 2015:692). Women employed in body-service workplaces, especially those involving close proximity and touch, have long been subject to unwanted sexualization, and have sought to professionalize and upgrade the status of their work as a result. In Kang's research on the workers in Korean immigrant–owned New York nail salons, for example, racialized sexualization associated with "Asian women" (as a problematically generalized category) stemmed from customers' imagined associations between their work and illicit sexual services including those provided by trafficking (Kang 2010:12; Kang 2013). A number of scholars have called for a critique of ASMR roleplay's imbrication in, and aestheticized reimagining of, a service industry founded on the exploitation of gendered and racialized forms of caring labor (Gallagher 2019; Bjelić 2016). ASMR roleplay reimagines its work scenes as tingly "safe" spaces that are lovingly constructed by performers who are making their living not as employees, but as digital entrepreneurs. With its PartnerProgram, introduced in 2007, enabling certain eligible users to earn money from their channels through advertising, YouTube touts the possibility of making a living from "doing what you love," even if this relies on a willingness to self-exploit, to labor without remuneration in the *hope* of being paid (Arthurs et al. 2018; Duffy 2016).

ASMR workplace roleplays might show us how service labor is being reimagined, visualized, and encountered in an age of digital content production. As online platforms remake the terms of employment and the meaning of "services" and "servers," ASMR videos might enable us to track the ways labor is rendered *differently* visible, or perhaps not visible at all, the ways it is *not* encountered. At least, not encountered in quite the same way: my ASMR viewership is less about looking at

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someone on a screen than the affective intensity of feeling as if *I* am being looked at, addressed, touched. It is an encounter with my own corporeality. As Gallagher argues, the distinctive form and aesthetic of ASMR roleplay has been shaped by "algorithmic systems designed to facilitate the valorization of our bodily capacities" (2019:273). And platform capitalism does not operate according to the standardization of consumer desire, as Gargi Bhattacharyya notes, but on its "endless differentiation," captured as monetizable data (2023:127). When shared on YouTube, ASMR roleplay covertly enlists both creators and viewers in forms of digital labor that ultimately generate profits for Google, via a platform that sorts and recommends content according to an algorithm that is commercially protected, its functions concealed behind YouTube's user-friendly interface. Safiya Umoja Noble's study of "algorithmically driven data failures" that affect people of color is a forceful reminder that the "mathematical formulations to drive automated decisions are made by human beings," and that since there is a distinct lack of racial and gender diversity within Google and other big tech companies, it is no longer tenable to separate the employment practices of these organizations from their products (Noble 2018:1).[2]

An awareness of algorithms' racial codes sharpens my sense, as a white tech user, and a white person watching and writing about ASMR, that my personalized YouTube suggestions are a monetization of a sort of consumer desire. This causes me to hesitate over the deeper implications of selecting, sampling, or taking videos as examples. There are those I know about because I have at one time or another subscribed to the channels on which they appeared; others I located after searching specific terms; others were suggested by YouTube. In each case, my user data has conditioned the selection in ways that remain opaque to me. I have of course exercised my own selective logics too. The examples I refer to in this article are all the work of women ASMRtists, they are all English-speaking, all except Latte are based in the US or UK, and they are not all white. They are all feminine-appearing in a way that suggests engagement with consumer cosmetic products and services. I do not always describe their appearance, and this is a deliberate move to decenter the aestheticized femininity of the performers as it is inscribed onscreen in favor of what it is they are doing *to* and *with* the screen—the techniques by which they activate it as a medium of faux-interactivity (Zappavigna 2023). My interest is in what it is they are doing with their hands, their fingers, their professionally manicured nails, and with their manipulation of what I identify as distinctly theatrical conventions of direct address. That is to say, I focus on their specialist and skilled labor, whether it is affective, manual, or, in the most literal sense, digital. That is not to say that these forms of labor, including the aesthetic labor involved in looking "feminine," are *not* seeped in racialized, gendered, and class meanings. Here, I have begun the work of writing through an ambivalent engagement with these aestheticized enactments of labor from the perspective of a viewer—of *this* viewer, that is, me—who experiences her body's responses as an affordance of an online experience differentiated and personalized by data. I do not present my own experience of ASMR roleplay as default or generic. I am a white British cisgender woman working in a university in the Republic of Ireland; my relations to work, institutions, affective labor, safety both on- and offline, and care are situated within those parameters. I have tried to examine my own pleasure-response and comfort-seeking online as a means of asking broader questions about what kind of deal, or bargain, ASMR roleplay might be offering, what kind of service it seems to provide, and how it is that the performances of various ASMRtists often subtly—or spectacularly—work to disrupt those terms.

The work of ASMRtists has not always been recognized *as* work. To quote an early journalistic response by Mark O'Connell, the strange new genre of ASMR roleplay consisted, on first look, of "people, mainly attractive young women, speaking directly to the camera, very softly and very, very slowly, often while pretending to do quite mundane things—giving scalp massages, performing

2. Noble refers to the "technological redlining" used in banking that leads to Black or Latinx people in the US typically paying higher interest rates (2018:1), details how reviews-based platform Yelp adversely affected the business of the only African American hair salon in a predominantly white neighborhood (173), and gives numerous instances of Google's search facility offering up deeply racist and sexist content (3–6).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749 Published online by Cambridge University Press

eye examinations, conducting one-on-one napkin folding tutorials" (O'Connell 2013). O'Connell, self-admittedly "baffled," characterizes ASMR roleplay in a manner that was customary at that time. First, it is the somewhat spectacularized performance of a distinctly feminine form of care enacted by young women who *appear* feminine, according to a narrow definition of the term. Second, the kinds of caring scenarios depicted in the videos exist on an undifferentiated spectrum that spans both unpaid and paid forms of intimate labor—the "mundane things" that women do. Domestic labor and women's work have been the focus of a number of related confusions—between home and workplace, skilled and unskilled, specialist versus just doing what comes "naturally"—confusions that digital capitalism further exploits. Does ASMR roleplay, often framed by loving declarations, muddle things still further? ASMR's association with soft speaking, whispering, or a "hushed, girlish treble" (Gallagher 2016) seems to center the "woman as naturalized caregiver" (Bjelić 2016:103), served up for the visual and auditory pleasure of the viewer by the zoomed-in, amplified capacities of personal digital equipment. More than this, they are so obviously *pretending* to work: it is a "stylized overemphasis" on actions that would otherwise be too small to be noticed (Smith and Snider 2019:42). The suspicion is that they are not really doing anything that could be identified as effortful or skilled labor; they are not really *at work*.

As Skvirsky notes, ASMR roleplay is only "vaguely processual" in that the handiwork of the performer is largely obscured. In a haircut roleplay, for example, the snipping actions are merely suggested through mime, narration, and amplified sound (2020:23). Indeed, the fictional scenario of the roleplay, as well as the "semantic content" of the performer's speech, is often taken to be secondary, subordinate—a vehicle or "plausible conceit" for the sonic and textural "triggers" of the video (see e.g. Harper 2020:96; Andersen 2015:690; Skvirsky 2020:22). But in order to construct its fictional scenario, ASMR roleplay involves a highly skilled enactment of *theatrical* labor. ASMRtists are trained (on the job, as it were) in the performance *of* ASMR, a set of demanding and specialized physical and vocal techniques. These they must incorporate into a theatrical enactment of workplace scenarios that dramatize service-oriented, client-facing, and affective labor directed toward a viewer who is addressed as if they are co-present in the scene. They work to construct a fictional institution, or workplace, with its associated conditions of employment—professional status and expertise, as well as colleagues, contracts, a working day, and a wage. If not all of these are made explicit within the roleplay, one crucial element of the fictional workplace is explicit: an implied regime of data processing and storage, against which the client's personal details must be checked.

Appointments

Whether the scene begins in the treatment room or at the reception desk, as the video fades in, the figure onscreen may appear to be engaged in some kind of ongoing work task, often administrative, such as typing, sorting through papers, or even speaking on the phone, as if to another client. Sometimes they will affect being caught mid-conversation with a colleague, as if they're just out of shot—"perfect, and we're waiting on our last patient of the evening"—before turning to the camera to acknowledge your arrival and confirm "you are right on time" (Celaine's ASMR 2024). Perhaps you have been here before, "you look very familiar, it's been a while since we've had you for a dental cleaning correct?" (Fairy Char ASMR 2014). Such expository references to appointments, timing, and to the social relationship of employment are common, though there may be some attempt to soften the disciplinary implications of an imposed schedule: perhaps you are the *last* client of the day, or a favorite customer. Or, perhaps, there is a "a very special event" that will render "all services today absolutely free" (Fairy Char ASMR 2014). The logic of personalization by which the roleplay operates involves both standardization and exception: this appointment is the same for everyone, and yet *you* are the one here.

ASMR roleplay is shaped by the affordances of digital technology. But, in its use of expository direct address, it also depends on some much older theatrical devices in order to construct a relationship between onscreen and offscreen space. "Before we begin," Latte says, near the start of her "Full Body Physical Exam" video, "I need to ask a few questions. Is that alright?" Here she pauses,

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nods, smiles a little, as if listening to your answer: "wonderful." In the background are signifiers of a clinic or surgery: a blue curtain, an eye chart, a box of "fine touch" latex gloves. But, as she checks your name and date of birth (more strategic pauses, as if you are answering, more affirmative nods and smiles), she is looking offscreen, slightly to the right. Her hands are offscreen too, and the sound of typing suggests she is interacting with some sort of computer terminal, but you don't see it. You don't need to; you know it's there, a node in the system of networked computers that manages the operations of this fictional clinic (Latte ASMR 2021).

ASMR roleplay often revels in the paraphernalia and ritual processes of bureaucracy. Clinical appointments might involve checking client details or medical records or filling out forms or prescriptions. In the frame, clipboards, notebooks, tablets, or computer keyboards are scribbled on or tapped, in an intimation of writing or typing. Often, the artifice is played up: sometimes you glimpse a page scribbled black. Or, having gone through the motions, the player admits "I'll probably never look at that again" (Whispering Willow ASMR 2020). ASMR's dramatization of data collection often operates on the unspoken assumption that you are willing and able to provide your data readily, and that this data fits predictably into the format offered, corresponding with "what we have on the system." Of course, systems of data collection and management don't play out benignly, or without consequence. As the authors of the recent "Feminist Data Manifest-No" argue, to misconstrue data as "disembodied and thereby dehumanized and departicularized" is to detach it from the risk and harm that data and surveillance practices create, differently, for different bodies (Cifor et al. 2019). Might we detect an ambivalent acknowledgment of such risks in another notable and recurring convention of the ASMR video: the verbal request for consent before "touching" the viewer? Maybe the performer reaches out towards your face, pauses, "may I?" (in Zappavigna 2023:308). Or more explicitly, as performed by Karuna Satori ASMR: "Can I... can I touch you? I understand, it's probably not a good time with what you are going through right now, but I truly suggest [*gesturing toward the camera*] a little *contact*..." (Karuna Satori ASMR 2018). Such requests are often simultaneously earnest and tongue-in-cheek. As Helle Breth Klausen observes, viewers play along knowingly—not just during their acts of spectatorial participation, but also in the comments. Under a 2018 "face touching" video on Gibi ASMR's channel, a viewer quotes the consent-request, inserting imagined responses: "Her: I'll be touching ur face if you want me to? Me: Yes please. Her: Okay! Me: YAY" (in Klausen 2021:132; see also Gibi ASMR 2018). But do these playful, self-ironic interactions (which *thematize* interactivity) point to a deeper discomfort? If "Data Manifest-No," named for refusal, calls for "a new kind of data regime that knits the 'no' into its fabric" (Cifor et al. 2019), what are we to make of a consent request to which the only answer, and precondition for participation, is yes?

In ASMR roleplay, as Joanna Łapińska notes, the simulation of writing or typing "takes the form of a performance, the aim of which is not to produce semantically meaningful content" (Łapińska 2024:7). For the ASMR viewer, is it comforting to know that the performer onscreen is *not really typing* any words, and by extension that there is no institutional database, no mainframe terminal, no system on which your details are being checked or recorded? Perhaps pleasure *is* purely sonic, having to do with the repetitive, rhythmic, lulling tap-tap-tap, and little else. But might we also consider that ASMR roleplay's scenes of writing and typing feel peculiarly significant, even tingly, because they dramatize data, and its collection, as a social relationship, an embodied thing? ASMR's tingly enactment of data collection and consent-seeking bears deep political ambivalence. Literally, saying "yes" is the only condition for participation. But at the very least, *staging* the question exposes the illusory nature of the "choice."

Google, Amazon, and Facebook, the services that monopolize the internet in the 21st century, can all be described as platforms (Wark 2019:11). As both a computational architecture and a business model, or "style of monetization," the platform is built on data, and makes money from harvesting the personal data of users (Nakamura 2020:50). Platform interfaces are designed also to obscure, or "black box," these proprietary operations, which involve the collection, aggregation,

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and processing of data. Whatever goes on in the background, "behind" the interface might seem to matter less than having our immediate need met (hence the temptation to click "agree" to whatever it is they are asking). As computational structures, platforms operate as "multi-sided," simultaneously serving not only users, but also developers and clients, businesses and workers, apparently meeting all their needs, even though these needs differ (Helmond 2015). The ordinary internet user now has very little choice but to interact with them, and the user experience is designed to be one of unthinking ease. When you log on to YouTube, perhaps by opening the app on a touchscreen smartphone, you "land" on a page customized according to your preferences. The interface is designed to be interactive and customizable, to not only respond to, but anticipate, your actions. This is what Scott Wark describes as "a dynamic computational environment shaped by the interplay between the data that users produce and its processing by platforms" (2019:71). Platform interfaces are thus designed to encourage and reward user activity: they want more, and they want you to want more.

The early years of ASMR's emergence online also coincided with a huge expansion of internet use in everyday life due to the introduction of networked smartphones sparked by the Apple iPhone's release in 2007. As Steve Jobs exclaimed at the product launch, the iPhone is "just a giant screen, a giant screen" (in Konigle 2022). The touch screen's hardware interface affords direct, fingertip interactivity with the platform's software interface, which might reward you with a haptic reward—a little tremor—when you "like" a video. Fingers are the means by which touchscreen design purports to naturalize the relationship between body and device, or rather body and software interface, by rendering the command functions more immediate-feeling, impulsive, even tender.[3] In ASMR roleplay, from the "other side" of the screen, fingers loom tenderly toward the camera/screen/face, obscuring the image of the performer to effectuate stroking, applying lotions, or combing through hair in a manner that confuses the distinctions between body, device, and screen image. Without physical buttons to impede the seamless "interplay of hardware and software," Jobs exclaimed, "it works like magic" (in Konigle 2022). The iPhone purports to *overcome* the clunky limitations of hardware, fueling a compulsive desire to reach *into* the screen, to not only grab a hold of it, but to get, somehow, *behind* it.

To get down into the layers of the digital device, as Lisa Nakamura writes, means "attending to software's procedural codes, its hardware, its infrastructures, its histories, and its racial and gender formations" (2014:936). Getting down through those layers might involve tracking the interpellations of the graphic user interface (GUI), which has, for several decades, been incorporated into the design of various computer devices. Effectuating what Wendy Chun calls "a profound screening," the GUI works to conceal the relationship between software and hardware by hiding the operations of computer code (2011:59). It does so by presenting an illusion of desktop, folders, documents—as though my work at the laptop were producing material things that I might touch and hold. I know this is not the case, but I participate in this illusion in order to be a successful and productive user of this device. GUIs operate ideologically via "user-friendly design," constructing users not just as users, or digital workers, but as computer *owners* too: "*my* MacBook" grants access to "*my* folders," containing "*my* documents." Such interpellations are arguably the forerunners of the deeper recognition I feel when my device, with personalized apps, seems to anticipate my touch, seems to *know* me. And yet, at the same time, it doesn't. It knows a *user*, a position "prefigured by computational processes" (Wark 2019:66). Inasmuch as a user position is, as Zara Dinnen suggests, "an ideological construct premised on specific capacities for use and particular kinds of users imagined prior to use," it is designed to facilitate the capture of data (2023:144). But how does data feel? More particularly, how does "*my* data" feel?

3. For more on the "grooming rituals" associated with touchscreen devices, see Plotnick (2023:538).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Figure 4. An infrared thermometer is directed "right above your forehead" in Latte ASMR's "Full Body Physical Exam." (Latte ASMR 2021; screenshot by Emma Bennett)

In Latte's "Full Body Physical Exam," an infrared thermometer is directed "right above your forehead," looming out of focus into the foreground of the frame. It is held there for a few seconds, with Latte visible behind, waiting, and in these moments, you might enjoy the sensation that this device is sensing *you*, checking your "signs," and you may feel peculiar pleasure when it ostensibly confirms this fact with a little electronic "beep" (Latte ASMR 2021). Why should this in particular feel so tingly? For me, the pleasure it offers is not dissimilar to what I feel in those sequences in which a performer purports to scrutinize my face under the auspices of a dermatological evaluation, say, when they seem to look at *my face* rather than at *me*. Is it the ontological strangeness of the thing, the way the performance onscreen seems to revolve around a material impossibility? Or is it the sense I am being registered, recognized, or scrutinized not in an embodied sense, but for the data my embodiment generates, without me having to do anything at all? And by extension, for the *value* that can be extracted "automatically" from my activities online? Is this the ultimate fantasy of platform capitalism? And, if I indulge in it, what then? Who is excluded from this pleasure, and at what cost is it indulged? Who is behind the scenes? As Seb Franklin argues, digitality frames the ordinary experience of the tech-user (the one who accesses a video via their smartphone in bed) via an illusion of frictionless connection that, in the present "both requires and invisibilizes a massive carbon footprint, vast amounts of waste, and myriad forms of disposable labor" (2021:3).

The term "immaterial labor" is not intended to suggest the total absence of materiality, but instead to describe a turn, in post-Fordist service economies, toward the production of affect rather than material goods. But it does risk suggesting that there is indeed something dematerialized, weightless, about the work itself. This may be especially the case when it is taken up to describe a new "virtual class" of digital workers, including content creators like ASMRtists, seeming to express the central promise of the digital revolution: that it might "'free' value from the spatiotemporal limitations embodied in living labor and finite material resources" (Franklin 2021:15). This promise, a kind of automation fantasy, upholds a "myth of immaterial media," whereby devices are projected as having "no history: no mines, no manufacture, no freighting, and no waste" (Cubitt 2017:13).

To counter this fantasy, Nakamura suggests we think of technoscience as an "integrated circuit," one that connects laborers and users, even as it holds us apart (2014:919). This image of interconnection is also deployed in Donna Haraway's 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto" to evoke "the

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Figure 5. Latte ASMR "taking a really close look into your eyes" in "Full Body Physical Exam." (Latte ASMR 2021; screenshot by Emma Bennett)

situation of women in a world so intimately restructured through the social relations of science and technology" (2016:37).[4] Haraway in turn attributes the integrated circuit metaphor to a number of sources including a 1980 article by Rachel Grossman reporting on the personnel management methods used to manipulate the women working in semiconductor factories in Malaysia during the 1970s (Grossman 1980). "Integrated circuit" is not only a metaphor, but a technical term for the components *inside* a microelectronic device; "integrated circuit" and "semiconductor" are both, essentially, names for a microchip. The miniaturized scale of their circuitry was key to the silicon chip revolution that in turn enabled the transition to digital technology, which was (and remains) built on cheap consumer electronics. The semiconductor industry, which became established in the 1960s (around the time that Sandie Shaw was performing at the Eurovision Song Contest in that expertly handcrafted dress), was essential to technological innovations associated with digital automation and "smart" devices: as Nakamura writes, "[i]nnovation and development are impossible without access to hardware that can be produced flexibly, cheaply, and consistently," as "software is always a response to hardware and its constraints. Chief among these constraints is, and has always been, expense" (2014:936). To overcome this material constraint, from the 1960s the semiconductor industry devised strategies for the mobilization and exploitation of cheap, expendable labor. The microscopic size of components made it possible to divide the labor of assembly between different sites, enabling transnational companies based in the US and Japan to shift production to where labor was cheapest, including in the industrial zones in Southeast Asia, to form another sort of "integrated circuit," as Grossman puts it, in "a global assembly line stretching more than halfway around the world" (1980:34). As Aihwa Ong argues, the export-industrialization and flexible labor regimes associated with a shift to a late capitalist, tech-enabled globalization depended on the "feminization of industrial work" (1991:279).

ASMR roleplay might appear to be operating at several removes from much of this labor of the 1960s and '70s, which is hidden spatially, and also "temporally hidden, within a very early period of

4. "A Cyborg Manifesto" was initially published in 1985, as "Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s." Haraway revised and expanded it for publication in her 1991 book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. It was subsequently reprinted in *Manifestly Haraway* (2016).

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computing history," as Nakamura notes (2014:937). But it is a mode of performance that evinces an unusual level of fascination with technological assemblages, especially hardware. It foregrounds, as Emma Leigh Waldron puts it, "complex configurations of specialized microphones, high-definition cameras, lighting, props, costumes, computer software, telecommunication cables, radio signals, laptops, phones, tablets, headphones, and more" (Waldron 2017). Performers physically interact with screens, lenses, and microphones using their fingers, nails, and other intermediary tools, props, and substances. They tap, caress, and stroke these things. What, then, of the imagined workplace, the clinic or spa? Why does this kind fictional conceit persist, even as—at times—it barely holds, receding into insignificance behind the amplified tapping, crinkling, gazing, and whispering? The workplace locations of these imagined "appointments" might seem to operate unusually quietly and smoothly, to welcome viewer-clients as if they are "always on time." However, ASMR roleplay has always been bound up in questions of time-pressure. And, attending to the *at-workness* of the ASMR roleplay performer—not only the fictional conceit, but also the performers' physical labor, their specialized technique—reveals difficult but necessary relations with what Haraway calls "enforced attention to the small" (2016:14).

Stress, Intensification, Zaniness

In September 2020, YouTube introduced "shorts," enabling portrait-oriented videos of up to 60 seconds to be swiped vertically. With its looped auto-play, this feature was described as a "TikTok copycat" (Spangler 2021). This posed a challenge for ASMRtists: how could they enact a relaxing service-based or clinical roleplay under such restrictions, especially in a genre noted for its slowness? Arguably, this kind of temporal dilemma was not entirely new; ASMRtists have long grappled with the challenge of capturing and holding their viewers' attention. But, while there are still slow videos that revel in the ceremonial detail of their set-up, many now do without scene-setting and get straight down, as it were, to "business." Take, for example, the videos of the ASMRtist known as "asmr august," many of which are shot unusually close-up, dominated by the face and hands of the performer, a white, British woman with a capacity for gazing intently to-camera with a very slight squint, as though assessing what she sees with a concerned kind of expertise. "Professional Head & Neck Physical Examination" (2024) is a good example of how her videos construct a fictional context of professional authorization in just a few words, as in its opening line: "Hi there, I'm the senior consultant on the ward today, one of the nurses said you're experiencing a little bit of neck pain" (asmr august 2024). This expositional address is extremely efficient in establishing the onscreen figure's imbrication in a larger system or institutional structure.

Does the intensity of the ASMRtist's unwavering stare to-camera also serve to center on an attentive consultant whose singular professionalism makes all else recede, relegating the less reassuring aspects of institutional life to a space offscreen, out of sight?[5] Is *this* why it tingles?

In an age in which it's conceivable to work from anywhere, but increasingly difficult to escape work, where an economy is defined by "services," but service could mean anything from a complex and abstract system managed computationally, to an ordinary encounter at the grocery store checkout, might there be something reassuring about the idea of a workplace, a place in which workers and customers *know* their places, their roles? I'm thinking of service businesses, or firms, in the older sense, with their front- and back-office personnel clearly divided, their customer-facing staff clearly visible, offering what Anthony Giddens, in 1990, called an "access point" to the "expert systems" of modernity. Trust in abstract systems, argued Giddens, depended on the demeanor of representatives at these points: an air of professionalism, unflappability, or

5. Including, perhaps, the specifics of location and the associated politics of healthcare provision. In the UK, for example, National Health Service (NHS) hospitals have been subject to "unbearable pressure" due to budgetary cuts introduced under governmental austerity programs since 2010, which have also restricted migrants' access to free healthcare services (Campbell 2023; Shahvisi 2019).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204325100749 Published online by Cambridge University Press

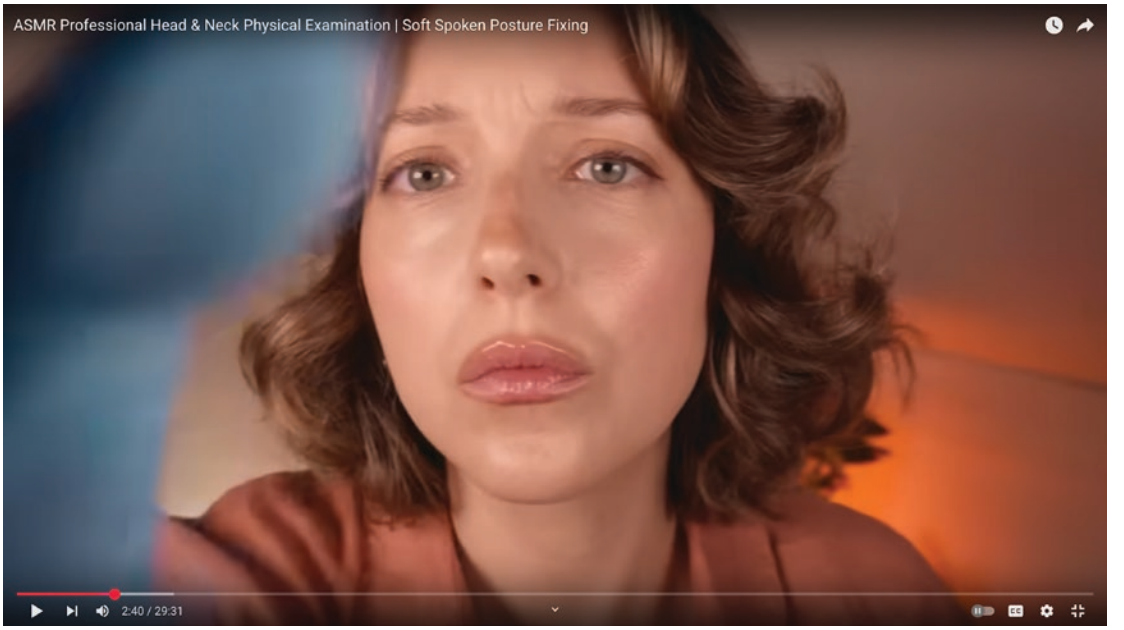


Figure 6. asmr august's look of professional concern. From "ASMR Professional Head & Neck Physical Examination | Soft Spoken Posture Fixing." (asmr august 2024; screenshot by Emma Bennett)

business-as-usual (1990:86). "Control of the threshold between the front- and backstage is part of the essence of professionalism," writes Giddens, key in managing "the areas of contingency that always remain in the workings of abstract systems" (86).

ASMR's workplace roleplays often also depend on a performance of assumed professionalism, revealing the extent to which all service interactions involve elements of stage management. Karuna Satori, a white ASMRtist based in the US, often seems to make the stage management of fictive workplaces curiously perceptible in her videos. "I apologize if it seemed a little hectic coming in," she says, for example, in a dental roleplay, "we're very short-staffed today [...] but usually everybody says that back here, in the rooms, it's very quiet and relaxed" (Karuna Satori ASMR 2018). An increasing number of roleplays are explicitly framed as "chaotic," a term that describes not only the physical comportment of the performer, but also the organization of the fictive workplace. A search for "chaotic roleplay," for example, might take you to a plastic surgery clinic staffed by a stressed-seeming young woman clicking a pen in an exaggerated and rapid staccato and tapping a small notebook. "What? What? What? What?" she blurts quickly, tapping the notebook in fitful bursts, "you're here for your plastic surgery appointment? You have a plastic surgery appointment today? Are you sure? OK let me just let me just check real quickly." Flicking the pages, her fingers a blur, "with Doctor... Doctor Angelic—OK she's very busy today but if you have an appointment with her I guess, I guess it's fine" (Angelic Lofi ASMR 2023). "Fast roleplay" might get you to an optometrist clinic offering a one-minute eye exam, its sped-up tempo necessary because "you're very late to your appointment" (Celaine's ASMR 2021). These fast or chaotic roleplays, often associated with satirical inversions of customer care, are sometimes explicitly addressed to people with ADHD, and "people who have overactive brains, or think all the time, or can't stop being anxious" (PinkPoppyASMR in Lockwood 2022). The videos usually involve an amplification and proliferation of ASMR's characteristically extraneous noises: repetitive tongue-clicking, rhythmic exhaling sounds, tapping a pen, or a nail, again and again. On the diegetic level of the roleplay fiction, these repetitive mannerisms might register as fidgeting, or as signs that behind the exterior, the worker is engaged in complex and hurried mental calculations, saying one thing but thinking about what to do next. The incessant clicking of a pen might signal the effort it takes to maintain composure. Or they might threaten to overwhelm the fictional bounds of the dramatization entirely. For some, the repetitive clicking and tapping can register as irritatingly conspicuous, artificial, and superfluous. On a thread on the r/asmr SubReddit titled "any ASMR

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videos that are more natural?" posts include: "I'm like, I know what you're doing—you're tapping on that thing *unnaturally* (a real doctor wouldn't do that) to try to trigger" (Anon 2015). Others profess preferences for "natural roleplays without extra tapping, and with natural conversational flow" (Anon 2015). Performances valued for the absence of "overly gratuitous tapping or fluttering or clicking" are sometimes named "naturalistic." The *unnatural* isolation and exaggeration of more and more refined triggers is both facilitated and encouraged by YouTube's affordances and metrics. Viewers use the comment function to identify specific vocal sounds or hand gestures they find pleasurable. Timestamps can also be added in comments, helping other viewers to navigate to exactly the moment at which, say, Batala's ASMR's flight attendant roleplay delivers "tapping, scratching and fabric sounds," "hand rubbing," or "semi inaudible whispers" (in comments under Batala's ASMR 2024). Makers can then tag videos, rendering them searchable according to the triggers they offer. As the ASMRtist's income depends on a range of metrics, including viewing time, it is in their interest to specialize their performance style and their videos' form to the triggers their subscribers most often request. Many point-of-view ASMR videos deliver *only* triggers, doing away with fictional framing altogether. If you want just the hand movements, say, search for that as a tag, and there's a video for it, for example, "Dark & Relaxing Hand Movements for Sleep | 60fps ASMR" by Gibi ASMR (2019), which is further specified, via timestamps, to "stroking gestures," "follow my finger," and more. Or, maybe you want only the *finger* movements, the blur of the manicured nails going in circles, such as in "ASMR Relaxing Face Massage, Finger Flutters, Energy Plucking, Hand Movements" by ediyasmr (2021), or just the nails, the *tips* of the nails, the sound the pointed tips of acrylic nail extensions make when they come into contact with the touchscreens of a digital device, or the uppermost points of the nails of the opposing hand. This isolation and accentuation of triggers might result in something of a miniaturized physical bombardment. In "ASMR Tapping For Sleep/Relaxation (Long Nails & Whispering)" by Tena ASMR, for example, spoken address is intermittently punctuated by tongue clicks, lens taps, and undulating "fluttery" finger movements: "hi hi [*two tongue clicks*] hello hello hello hello hello [*finger pads forward, dabbing at the lens*] "today [*dab*], today [*dab*] I'm going to [*finger flutters*] be doing some [*finger flutters*] tapping [*nails on camera lens*] on some random [*nails clicking on nails*] objects" (Tena ASMR 2020).

The ASMR viewer is thus encouraged, by the platform's affordances, to cultivate an increasingly particularized array of preferences. ASMRtists respond by isolating, exaggerating, and repeating the triggering gestures or sounds, resulting in a performance that seems ever more stylized and "unnatural" or, as Gallagher puts it, "hyperbolically amplified" (2016). We might even describe this performance style as "zany," in Sianne Ngai's sense of an "aesthetic of action pushed to physically strenuous extremes" (2012:184). Ostensibly a comic style linked to clowning, zaniness exudes a "stressed out, even desperate quality" that, Ngai proposes, is symptomatic of its enduring ties to work, and service work in particular (2012:185). Further, zany performers' "radically improvisational, even formless style of doing" is expressive of the demands of precarious workers to work flexibly, to constantly adapt (2012:194). Perhaps, then, the zany, improvisational, even slapdash quality of much ASMR roleplay can be ascribed to the fact that they have been produced quickly, often cheaply, using whatever is to hand. In videos tagged as roleplays using the "wrong props," random-seeming household objects stand in for professional tools. There are also "propless" roleplays, in which equipment, products, and processes are evoked through hand gestures and vocal sound effects alone. In Batala's ASMR's "Salad Bar Roleplay" (2019b), for example, a spectral bowl, knife, and lettuce are conjured out of thin air, with a hand-slicing gesture and "sssshhhhk sssshhhhk sssshhhhk sssshhhhk" mouth-sound to evoke the action of preparing a salad. Propless haircuts typically involve fingers making scissor-motions, and a "tssk, tssk, tssk" spray bottle sound. These videos invite the viewer to collude in the construction of the fictional scenario, to follow closely the movement of hands, fingers, and nails, as the materials and processes are inscribed, gesturally and sonically, in the empty space in front of the lens. The peculiarly immaterial effect is not only funny; it is also weirdly comforting. There *is* no lettuce, no spray bottle, no physical product; it's just an

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Figure 7. Enacting the preparation of ingredients through mime in a "propless" salad bar roleplay (Batala's ASMR 2019b; screenshot by Emma Bennett)

illusion, and will melt away into air once the video is over (no freighting, no waste). And likewise, *I* am not really there; the person onscreen only *seems* to respond to my physical presence. I catch myself, here, sliding into a dream state: as I'm *not* in a physical service environment, the person onscreen is not really serving me. She is not an employee required to repeat these actions for multiple customers, as part of a work shift filled with such repetitions; she is a digital entrepreneur, a content creator. I am receiving these attentions in the form of media signals—the operations of code and data and pixels pretending to be another kind of work—and these attentions are addressed to my "user position" rather than my physical presence. Perhaps this is my get-out, the bargain that enables me to relax.

But, something snags. Perhaps the figure onscreen refers to a working day, as in Karuna Satori's propless "Coffee Shop Roleplay" (2020): "I have been on my feet for the past eight hours." Perhaps she asks for payment, or—worse, somehow—tells me there's no charge today. Maybe she addresses the implied customer in a manner that jars, like "thank you, *sir*" (Batala's ASMR 2019). The fictional service environment never fully recedes, and neither does the question of what is being bought and sold there. It raises the question of what is being bought and sold *here*, via the platform interface that I access via my little smartphone device. Because of course, YouTube is *also* a space of encounter in which consumers make demands upon the people they expect to "serve" them. As digital content creators, ASMRtists must remain visible online, responding to viewer requests and comments, cultivating their subscribers' parasocial feelings of friendship, or even love. As a consequence, social media "microcelebrities" like YouTubers have been shown to "suffer from high degrees of burnout and feeling as if they constantly 'owe' something to their followers" (Maddox 2021). And, as Nakamura reminds us, for years "digital industries have failed to enforce their terms of service protecting their users from abuse and harassment on their platforms," making social media sites like YouTube "particularly dangerous places for women, queer people, and people of color" (Nakamura 2020:49). It is not insignificant that ASMRtists succeed in making the online encounter feel safe, tingly, and comforting under such circumstances. But the jarring moments in ASMR's service enactments are just enough to cause me some doubt about my role in the transaction, my place in the circuit, the concealed labor on which my comfort depends.

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Figure 8. Dabbing at the lens and finger fluttering in Tena ASMR's "ASMR Tapping For Sleep/Relaxation (Long Nails & Whispering)." (Tena ASMR 2021; screenshot by Emma Bennett)

Microwork and Possession

I haven't been entirely honest. When I lie in bed at night, with my phone, and watch ASMR role-play videos, I rarely watch them all the way through. The YouTube app now allows me to minimize the video I'm playing while I scroll through its recommendations. Or, when in full-screen mode, to skip forward by 10, 20, 30 seconds by tapping the screen—which often means tapping the image of the performer's face. The weird physical intensity of their performances work on me, but not in a simple way. I don't fall asleep right away; I am stimulated as much as anything. In the swirl of sensory pleasure, I can also think. Or perhaps my fingers think for me. What is a finger? A finger is a pointing device. It's a precision tool. It's a medium of biometric identification. It's a gatekeeper, an instrument of command. A finger is what Jobs in 2007 branded "the best pointing device in the world [...] a pointing device we're all born with" (in Konigle 2022). A finger is also an object of display, it can be adorned, it can wear stiletto-tipped nails. A finger can be a rhetorical tool, mobilized by commercial interests. In the longer history of the consumer electronics industry, fingers have been key rhetorical figures in racializing and gendering projects, as work by Ong, Nakamura, and others attests by tracking the recourse, in corporate and management rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s, to the small hands, more particularly the "nimble fingers," of the women and children recruited to work in semiconductor assembly plants: Ong on the factory work of women in the Kuala Langat region of Malaysia (Ong [1987] 2010:151), Nakamura on the recruitment of Navajo women to work in a Fairchild Semiconductor facility built on Navajo land in New Mexico (2014). Jefferson Cowie further locates the "nimble fingers" phrase applied to Latina women working for RCA and other electronics firms (1999). The flexibility of the identification reflects the extent to which, as Nakamura writes, "[r]ace and gender are themselves forms of flexible capital" (2014:933). In the racially and gender divided facilities located within Silicon Valley, a similar rhetoric was mobilized: one male manager said that the "relatively small size" of many Asian and Mexican women "makes it easier for them to sit quietly for long periods of time, doing small detail work that would drive a large person like me crazy" (in Hossfeld 2001:74).

As Ong's account details, during the '70s, the Malaysian factory workers were subject to new forms of state control and the removal of legal protections. The Malaysian government relaxed laws protecting women from night-shift work, and actively promoted not only the availability of reserves

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of cheap female labor, but also the physical and temperamental suitability of local women for the work. Ong documents a range of subversive tactics deployed by the Malay factory women to disrupt the discipline of the assembly line: from leaving the line due to reported "female problems" or requesting prayer time, to the more spectacular instances of spirit possession. In 1978, for example, a large American electronics plant had to be shut down for three days and a spirit-healer (*bomoh*) hired after 120 microscope operators were affected (Ong [1987] 2010:204). These well-documented instances of factory floor possessions enact what Ong calls "an idiom of protest against labor discipline," but they are not commonly understood as *conscious* tactics of resistance by the workers themselves. Grossman, for example, uses the term "subconscious wildcat strike" (1980:48). But, as Mary Keller notes, as possessions "do *work* for the persons who are possessed," we might consider that the women are also "doing work for the spirits"; it is their actions and not their total consciousness of the meaning or impact of their actions that produce "knowledge of a crisis," and "bring ritualization as a force to bear on the imposed secularized work space" (2002:105, 120, 106). Haraway is thinking of these episodes when she takes up the metaphor of the integrated circuit, suggesting such "constructed unities" may "guide us to effective oppositional strategies" (2016:14). This prompts a question, still unresolved: what is the connection between these culturally specific episodes of possession and what Haraway later refers to as the "trance state experienced by many computer users" (2016:60)? *Is* there a connection?

Already in her 1985 manifesto, Haraway was writing "the boundary between the physical and nonphysical is very imprecise for us," due to the miniaturization of microcircuitry's components (2016:12). At the time, microassembly work needed to be completed by hand, in a labor-intensive process performed with the aid of a microscope. "We have to work with those gold wires, very thin like our hair," said one worker in a Penang factory in the 1970s (Grossman 1980:42; see also Lim 1980). As microcircuitry required absolute precision, the grueling, tedious labor of assembly needed to be framed, to corporate clients, as skilled precision work. And yet, for the purposes of recruitment, contractual forms, and pay rates, it needed to be categorized as *unskilled*. How to overcome this dilemma? As Nakamura compellingly demonstrates, in the case of Fairchild's plant on the Navajo reserve, in corporate-facing literature it was done with recourse to a comparison between Fairchild's factory work and Indigenous rug weaving, which, "like all Navajo arts, is done with unique imagination and craftsmanship, and it has been done that way for centuries" (in Nakamura 2014:926). What begins to be problematically apparent, when describing the grueling and labor-intensive work processes involved in electronics assembly, is that any careful description of "tiny," "intricate" labor done with "extreme care," especially by women, and in this case by women who are racialized via recourse to "tradition," risks performing an aestheticization that effaces the exploitation and violence of the factory system, and of the capitalist organization of labor more generally. This is especially the case when the image of precision tools manipulating miniaturized components—threads, "very thin like our hair"—is invoked in proximity to ASMR, which responds to scenes of absorbed attention with pleasure and "trancelike" fascination.

Before touchscreen smartphones and ASMR roleplay videos, when microelectronic devices were not as small or portable as they are now, the stakes of miniaturization were already clear. The Penang workers reported frequent headaches and recurrent eye infections due to looking into microscopes for over seven hours per shift. The work was necessarily temporary: after a few years the workers' vision became too blurred to meet the production quota, and they were laid off (Grossman 1980:41). As Haraway writes, though the new machines seem to be "all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum," the people assembling those machines "are nowhere near so fluid, being both material and opaque" (2016:13). In the 21st century, the labor of electronics workers in China employed by Foxconn to build consumer electronics for Apple, Microsoft, and Google remains largely concealed in closed factories, visible only through illegally recorded videos (themselves recorded on phones, circulated via YouTube), the work of undercover reporters, or—as Ilinca Todorut's recent article in *TDR* detailed, via Chinese migrant workers' poetry (2024:170; see also Qin 2016).

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Back in the Design Museum's exhibition, where we stepped out, for a time, from behind our small screens (albeit to lie together on cushions below other, slightly larger screens), we may have indulged in a tingly reverie of beads and needles and threads and scalpels—this dream of creatively fulfilling labor, of intricate handiwork that fixes and conserves, and does so outside of the pressures of industrialized production, and postindustrialized facework. But, amidst our reverie, we can still think. We can think of this: ASMR's luxuriant attention, the zoomed-in, amplified access to the quotidian, the mundane, the *seemingly* unforced depends materially on a shift in global labor management when "women's enforced attention to the small" was mobilized rhetorically, and quite literally put to work (Haraway 2016:14). But neither fingers, nor their small, quotidian movements, were ever simply natural. To serve the interests of global capital, a gendered and racialized idea about digital dexterity was constructed that, if we attend closely, might still be felt in the tingly, absorbing aesthetic ideology of handiwork. If we go closer still, we might glimpse the pixels, the software's procedural codes, the data's heavy architecture, all of this "at work" to construct moving images that induce tingling, tactile responses.

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