

APOPHENIA

AN ESSAY BY
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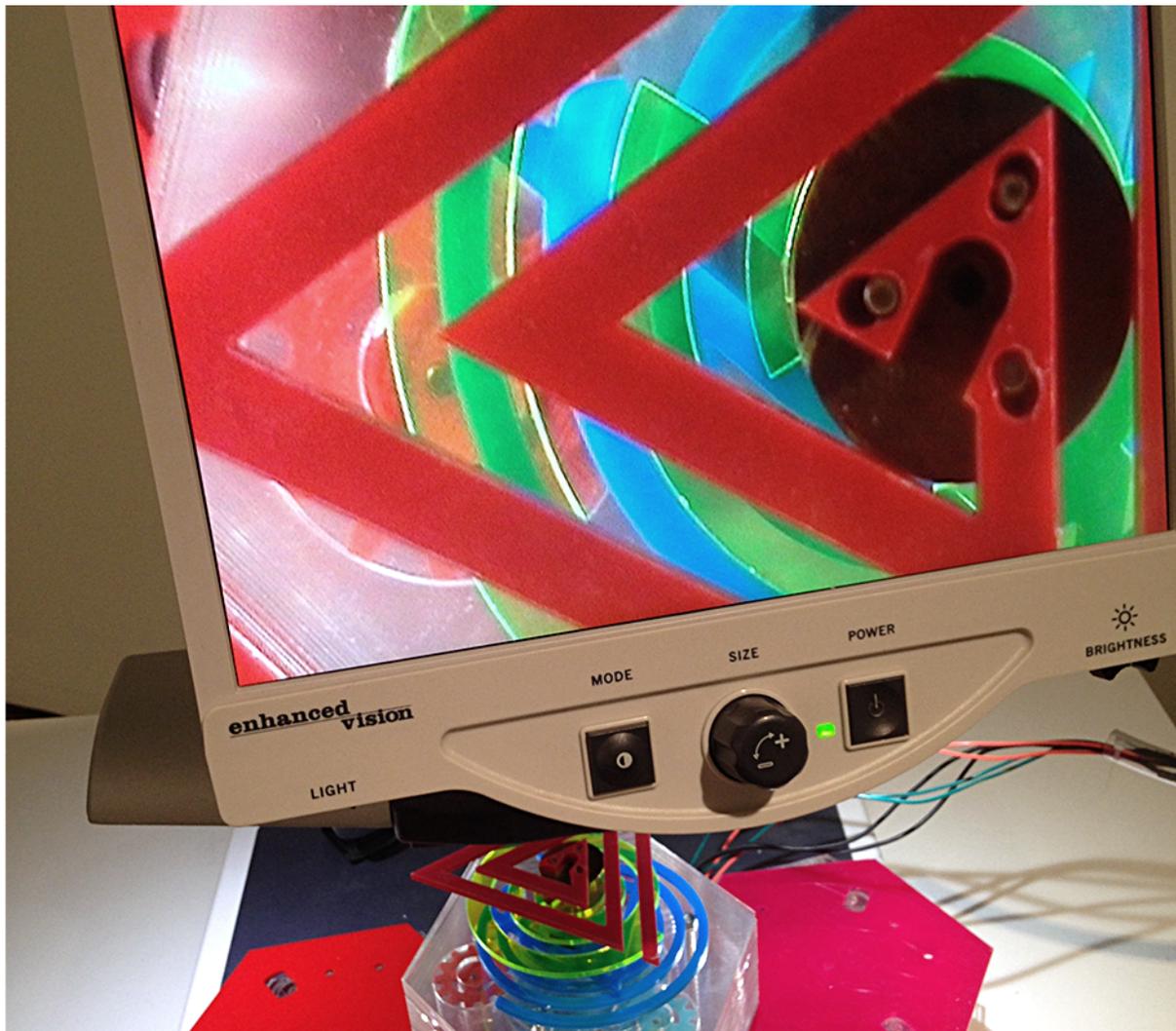
THE WORLD WIDE WEB we once bragged about ‘surfing’ now has tides so swollen that every square inch of dry land has become saturated.

Out of the eddies and the currents comes a reinvigorated drive to classify and catalogue, to order the digital detritus engulfing us. Confronting a new universe of images we are led, so argues Marisa Olson, ‘to consider the relationship between taxonomy à la the stuffed-pet metaphor and taxonomy à la the digital archive.’¹ How such descript images, contrived memories and prized pixelated discoveries tend to lose their original substance once shuffled into taxonomies. As the image collector copies and pastes another pretty trinket and carefully stows it in the wunderkammer of their Tumblr they enact the most primitive of human drives to capture and classify the messy, entropic world. Locating themselves at what Alan Bourassa terms ‘the position of masters who control a circus of unruly signs.’²

In his 2013 book *After Art*, David Joselit rings a death knell for affect, stating that, ‘what matters now is not the production of new content but its retrieval in intelligible patterns... In economies of overproduction connectivity is key. This is the Epistemology of Search.’³ A turn towards connectivity as meta-data, towards discovery as Boolean search is, it seems to me, a turn away from impact, play and serendipity. As web pioneers like Tim Berners-Lee continue to hail the coming of ‘The Semantic Web’ it is easy to forget that how images mean cannot be described by chains of formal descriptors. The language of animated GIFs in particular is enclosed in on itself, and so self-referential as to be incomprehensible to those who do not wallow daily in the play of images. From our vantage point, subsumed by the impact of a high-bandwidth internet culture, animated GIFs seem quaint, clumsy, even remedial in their capacity to transmit information. But the GIF and its ilk make-up a visual sludge that accumulates on the surface of the web, resisting the rigid taxonomies of the digital economy burgeoning beneath. Now that images can be exchanged, transmitted, copied and edited at frantic light speeds it becomes increasingly important to think about what images are in and of themselves. In turn pictures, depictions and imitations give way to motions, evocations and impressions. For the moment what images signify can be put to one side; what images do and how they go about it should be the order of the day.

Alma Alloro’s machines reel and spin in homage to the kinds of correspondences and affects images can make. In the tradition of Oskar Fischinger’s *An Optical Poem* (1938), or Hans Richter’s *Rhythmus* series (1920s) *Apophenia* is ‘about’ the preponderance of images: about what takes place

when images move, but also about the very substance of the static image – a thing we had no need to conceive of until motion had been thrust upon it. Her works are concerned with performing a net aesthetic apart from the rigidity of digital codes and databases, linking her machines through animated GIFs back to one of the principal technologies of animation: the thaumatrope. These play things of Victorian and 21st Century children alike are fiendishly simple: twirls of string woven into a two-sided slip of cardboard or wood with an illustration on each side. The fun of thaumatropes goes beyond animation, as the bird on one side and the cage on the other are fused together. Held hand in hand it was a joy to twist the strings as tight as one could, revelling in the furious whorl and whip of the cardboard until the memory of each rotation became blistered into your fingers. The machines, devices and contrivances of *Apophenia* celebrate similar instances when the coming into being of an image traces a noticeable and long-lasting mark in physical space. To be truly confronted with an image is to become aware of one's own construction as a thing – 'Here where the world touches'⁴ – something that high-bandwidth, high-resolution and optical speeds tends to camouflage in the clarity of simulation.



Alma Alloro, *Lowtelevision*, 2013

It is no coincidence that animated GIFs have become the web's primary mode of packaging and delivering visual humour. Just as a joke is the vehicle for the impact of a punchline, so a GIF encapsulates the value of the having of its experience. The perceptual immediacy of the moving image, what Vivian Sobchack calls 'the expression of experience by experience',⁵ means that its

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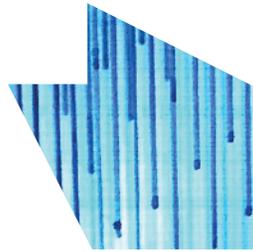
full activity is uncontainable. The train whips by on the silver screen, but the instant of each image impacting us is lost as the play of further images moves onwards through experience. As Steven Shaviro has insisted, we 'have already been touched by and altered by these sensations, even before [we] have had the chance to become conscious of them.'⁶ This situation is ironic, for in the earliest days of cinema reality itself was the uncontainable thing that each cinematic

frame was thought able to immobilise. Eadweard Muybridge sought to isolate the gallop of the horse from its particular being in time and space, so that it was forever framed for our experience. Today a million versions of Muybridge's horse career around the web as animated GIFs of questionable quality. Perhaps high resolution digital images and fast-paced CGI movies have made us so habituated to this framing that the world seems tangible only once it is caught on a tiny smartphone screen or made to meander as a kitschy, low-resolution animated GIF. Yet neither of these framing apparatus brings attention to the affect of the moving image as viscerally as Alloro's machines do. In highlighting the material conditions of moving images Alloro's work exhibits elements of parody and slapstick, reminding us of the comical characteristics of all stuttering contraptions. In each self-contained universe the coming into being of the image experience is accessible as a physical presence, turning and coiling around and around and around and around. Each reel of graph paper or luminous disc spins to its own logic, allowing the eye to dance a brand new jig each time the sequence repeats; making each scrape of a graphite nib, or squeak of a felt-tip pen palpable as visual syncopation.

As digital images prosper regardless of our ability to trawl, catalogue or define them their impact has extended beyond the browser, warping our tastes, and retuning our aesthetic acuity. In Apophenia it is not the experience of meaning, but the meaning of experience that is key. An ode to new modes of apperception, set loose by the mechanisms of jilting machines.

Notes

1. Marisa Olson, 'Lost Not Found: The Circulation of Images in Digital Visual Culture', *Words Without Pictures* (September 18, 2008): 281.
2. Alan Bourassa, 'Literature, Language and the Non-Human', in *A Shock to Thought: Expression After Deleuze and Guattari*, ed Brian Massumi (Routledge, 2002), 62.
3. David Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013), 56.
4. Vivian Carol Sobchack, *In Praise of Copying* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), 305.
5. *Ibid.*, 3.
6. Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 43.



Alma Alloro, *Apopenia*

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