

FOR LOVE'S SAKE

Adwait Singh compares the experience of viewing online art shows to the instant gratification experienced on dating apps and matrimonial sites.

What a quaint thing our love has become. Having absorbed the progressive waves of technogenic acceleration into its mortal corpse, love has quickened. To an ancient observer, surely, it must feel like a tenebrous ghost of its former self, a wan smile limned by the illumination from our phone screens. To be essayed in small, manageable doses and rationed for later. All of its convolutions and inconveniences smoothed out, its contents tabulated and reorganised into ready-made packets: Hentai, MILF, Dom-Top, Twink, Yiffy, Shibari, Cake Crush, Kaiju, Aliens, Tentacles, you name it. To say that love has become an immaterial shadow is no exaggeration for our solipsistic subsistence tethered to technology that has witnessed a steady movement of the trade and traffic of desire online. What is left of love is an apparition that roams the gloomy portals of dating apps, chat rooms, matrimonial and pornographic sites.

Indeed, the pervasive phenomenon of the datafication of desire sees a daily upload of portions of our intimate selves on to the digital cloud in the service of sundry algorithms that in turn supply our amorous needs. In this cybernetic casino of desire, our rendezvous are conducted through avatars (occasionally through headless torsos) and intimacies exchanged, for a duration. Then delink and reboot, and on and on it goes, looping into giddier

and giddier whirlpools of enticement and ecstasy. These individual trickles of desire compound into an endless stream of seeking and satiation, coursing through the integrated maze of neurons, blood vessels and fibre optic cables that constitute the post-human desire economy. At this juncture, you must be wondering as to what millennial love has to do with the changing modalities of art consumption during the lockdown. My hunch is that the technological expansions and reconfigurations of love are analogous to the transformations that a wholesale shift towards digital platforms have triggered in the terrain of art. In what follows, I will argue that a mass-subscription of digital modalities of viewing art have invariably turned our gaze pornographic.

A prime mover in our changing outlook on art has been the prevalence of private access that brings the artwork to the comfort of our intimate spaces where it can be viewed at leisure. The control over the setting promotes a certain enclosure of gaze that one would recall



Nupur Mathur. *Middle Life*. Film still. 2008.

from the peep-shows of yore. The ability to consume the work while lounging on our sofas, or lying on our beds, contributes to an altogether different kinesthetic experience than the one from a gallery or museum setting. Even the micro-movements of our digits as they scroll or slide or tap on our screens, with their incessant purposive fingering, sustains the onanistic phantasmagoria conjured by a secluded spectatorship. Gone are the days when one would be obliged to sit through a boring date, held in situ by codes of common courtesy, or even the fleeting possibility of chance felicity. Too impatient for coquetry and courting rituals, the augmented viewership of today can cut through the chase with a range of controls that abide their pleasure, allowing them to select, pause, forward, rewind and replay their favourite bits directly. Within the enclosure of home set-up, there is little that detracts from the illusion of the fourth wall and everything conserves the pleasure-gazing of the user. The specialized contemplation afforded by the blinkered arrangement, enables the viewer to momentarily close the distance between himself and his object of appreciation, consuming it in the process. The spectatorial gaze acquires a fetishistic intensity.

While the enhancement of control over viewing diminishes the distance between the user and the artwork, it denies the latter its right to opacity, context and continuity, thereby altering the balance of power between the two. In real, affective terms, the user behind the black mirror can be said to be no more closer to the artwork than a patron is to a cam model. Or rather, the closeness flows one way. The fullness of the model's / artwork's agency is side-lined by the user in the heat of the quickie. Coupled with the sheer volume of vying media (artistic or titillatory) that the user has to sift through, this has the effect of diminishing the aura of the icon – formerly the object of art or the object of affection, the erosion of intentioned commitment underlying the effort to view the artwork in person invariably contributing to its fungibility. Love loses its mythos and becomes naked attraction while art loses its mystique and becomes a divertissement. With the elimination of the romance of space, designating the range of behaviours and movements ordained by the white cube setting

as well as the ability to espy a particular work in relation to the others, not to mention the play of light and sound etc., comes a reduction of the whole sensory repertoire and the many aleatory occurrences that bestow a memorable texture upon our real-time visits to art spaces. In other words, the migration of art online commissions a certain flattening of spatial poetics, as the senses get compressed into a focalised scrutiny by the spectator. The scale of the work is replaced by the scope of its outreach. Art's digital intake limits the possibilities of disruptive encounters, of meaningful becomings, as cursory skimming replaces immersive engagement, consumption replaces collusion.

Once again, I'll turn to the changing landscape of love to draw forth an illuminating analogy. In the old school scenario of gay cruising the providence of congress was determined by a careful negotiation of the desirous gaze, as a subtle dynamic of anonymity and revealment played out between the different actors and the setting. With the dawning of online modalities such as *OnlyFans*, what one sees is a dilution of this intricate interplay and a reinforcement of unidirectionality of the gaze. The virtual enquiry, sticking to the screened safety of voyeurism, not only withholds from the object of desire its agency to govern the exchange, but also forecloses us to the vulnerability that attends any physical encounter and enables our spilling-out-of-ourselves in a co-becoming. One can make similar inferences about the domain of art consumed through the digital. When art moves online, the supervision of the white cube is swapped for the scopophilia of *Instagram* and a subtle change comes over the mechanics of our approach which loses some of its

former reverence. After the removal of all challenges that an authentic encounter demands, the interactivity that comes to the fore is quite bare in its utilitarianism and devoid of any genuine possibility of becoming-with the work. Online, our subjectivity is no longer in-formed by the specific kinesthetic awareness that results from a combination of being seen, the feeling of being enclosed by a space as well as the assailing of senses by its various correlates, the possibility of transcendental interaction and the blooming openness that results from the in-gathering of this affect. With the cancellation of intra-action of space, one registers a loss of sensuality in our interactions online which become cued to instant gratification instead.

The artwork online is reduced to an essentialized version of itself, like so many intractable parts of our personage tucked away behind a posed DP. Its new-found accessibility and circulation fuels the archive fever that follows on the heels of an overwhelming influx of media at a rate faster than its absorption. Furthermore, it whips the fever into a delirium, on account of the artwork now living an entirely archival existence, being first documented at the source for digital sharing and subsequently saved by the viewer for postponed pleasure. Directed by a cultural FOMO, the artwork online finds itself greedily requisitioned to the ever-growing cache of archival junk, to indefinitely await its recall alongside a miscellany of forgotten articles, videos and links. In this landfill of saved links and missed encounters, both love and art are encountered as a deferred possibility. Unable or unwilling to handle the full onrush of these radical forces, the post-human subject finds himself in a state of perpetual never-readiness, taking a nibble and stashing the rest against some imagined futural need. This I-will-think-about-that-tomorrow attitude ruins our appetite for the real thing when it does present itself. Withering under the cool disregard of the wired viewership, both love and art are left to walk the marooned streets of the world wide web. Donning new guises, they beckon and beguile from behind their LCD displays, momentarily withholding the flaneur from his idle surfing, before being hastily put aside and abandoned. /

Epilogue

Despite our best efforts at bridging the gap between the real object of desire and its virtual incarnation through upgrades in simulative, interactive and proprioceptive technology, the user not infrequently slips through the cracks into the uncanny valley to be picked at by the vultures of alienation and derealization. Weary of surficial dwelling, the heart aches for the entrenching fiction of love and the patterns etched by its tumultuous waves on the shores of our being. I would like to recall in closing an episode from Nupur Mathur's *Middle Life* (2008) shot in the virtual world of Second Life. In the first half of the film, the central character Spray Oceanlane played by the artist, wanders through the glitchy environs of Second Life, quite upbeat about the expanded prospects for companionship and self-transformation afforded by this virtuality. There comes a point, however, when Spray Oceanlane, feeling increasingly estranged by the barrage of sexual imagery/activity characterising this universe and her own investments to boost the allure of her avatar, suffers a breakdown. Depressed and disaffected, she withdraws into an isolated cabin to dwell upon the real-time footage of her past memories. *Middle Life* is quite prescient in that it closely predicts the trajectory of our own virtual dealings in love and art, revealing something of the illusive hopes, real misgivings and surreal dilemmas comprising our love-hate relationship with the Promethean offerings of the Internet.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Priyanka D'Souza and Tsohil Bhatia whose insights have greatly benefited this piece.