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Fear of missing out: performance art through the lens of participatory culture

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ABSTRACT

This research project set out to examine FOMO through the curation of a performance art event. Referring to the 'fear of missing out', FOMO is posited as symptomatic of the ways in which embodied subjectivities are performed through participatory cultures. With the insidious co-option of such cultures by powerful multinational companies, come new ways in which the body is commodified in late-capitalist economies. This paper examines modes of presumption emergent from digital and social media and considers strategies of performance in this context. It could be argued that performance art practices might resist or intervene in such discourses through a powerful ability to re-establish human connection through a live and affective performing or spectating experience (O'Dell 1998; Phelan 2005). However, liveness, affect and human connection are themselves enmeshed in digital cultures. This paper will consider how performance can think through the ways in which embodied subjectivities are produced through FOMO and ask whether in this context performance art practice can reclaim the affective body.

KEYWORDS

FOMO; participatory culture; performance art; liveness; affect; affective labour

Introduction

FOMO, an acronym for the fear of missing out, is a humorous, casual cyber-slang term. Its tone belies the powerful affect of fear that it references. Such language of online interaction is symptomatic of prescribed embodied ways of being in digital spaces. Posited by Joesph Reagle as a form of social anxiety, this paper will look again at FOMO as an affect produced specifically through digital interfaces. In particular, it will examine the term in its association with participatory cultures, in which the ostensibly user-generated constitutes a social field which maps the subject. This fear operates in contexts of apparent entertainment and pleasure, and the structures and audio-visual languages of digital media work to produce FOMO as a form of affective labour. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, our relationship to networked digital technologies intensified, adding further urgency to the examination of such affects. I posit FOMO not as a discrete affect, but as symptomatic and emblematic of our embodied, embroiled relationship to digital

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technologies produced through acts of prosumption. Thus, through an interrogation of the fear of missing out, I aim to layout the challenging yet urgent territory that digital cultures present for performance art practices. Liveness, affect and human connection are central to the operation of digital and social media, as well as core concerns of performance as a form. I examine this correlation, arguing that a productive problematic is posed by the shifting ground emergent from digital technologies for artists working in performance. This argument is furthered through the analysis of the event FOMO, curated for *Live-stock*, an artist-led performance platform based in Dublin, Ireland. As curator, I will employ my embodied, situated encounters with works by emerging artists Karolina Adamczak, Karmel Daly, Orla Wittke and Nathalie Slachmuylders, in order to consider how performance might think through the ways in which the body is produced in and by participatory digital cultures.

The fear of missing out: an investigation through curatorial practice

That subjectivities are now constantly produced through everyday interactions with personal devices provokes urgent questions. As technologies open up new possibilities for reimagining the body, so too do they create new opportunities for disciplining the flesh. I set out to examine the pervasive interplay of the body with personal technology—how our ‘buttons’ are pushed by ‘pushing buttons’—through a performance art event. In an open call, artists were asked to respond to the concept of FOMO. Along with LOL, OMG, and YOLO, FOMO belongs to a set of abbreviations for commonly used phrases, emergent through digital and social cultures. Like emojis, these acronyms comprise a language both of social interaction and of affective bodily experiences, that are not only communicated in digital spaces but produced through them. As with all slang, it is disarming in its casualness and humour, though heavy with social currency and prescribed ways of being. FOMO seemed to encapsulate the condition of embodied digital subjectivity: a constant state of watching and being watched, of fears, desires and self-esteem being tugged at; and the feeling of everyone else ‘living their best life’ in contrast to your own mundane, everyday existence. FOMO is thus emblematic of enmeshed affective relationships to digital technologies and forms the frame of this investigation. I will first interrogate FOMO and its operation through participatory cultures, before then considering how performance art practice might speak to and of these discourses.

Defining FOMO

The acronym FOMO entered the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2014, defined as: ‘Anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere, often aroused by posts seen on social media’ (Lexico, n.d). It is that uneasy sense, that everyone is somewhere much more interesting than you, having a much better time. The term is enmeshed in the visual and textual language of digital popular cultures. It is for instance, emblazoned in internet memes in which Ned Stark proclaims, ‘FOMO is coming’ or Yoda declares that ‘The FOMO is strong with this one’. A *Cosmopolitan* article lists *11 Kinds of FOMO Everyone Has in Their Twenties*, and like many popular accounts, refers to FOMO as a so called ‘first world problem’ (Koman 2013). Triggers such as social events, music festivals and Friday nights out are listed, as well as types of FOMO such as ‘Workout FOMO’,

'Being healthy FOMO' and 'Sex FOMO', as more on-going activities related to lifestyle, identity and body image.

FOMO however, is not as inconsequential as such accounts suggest. Empirical psychological studies found that experiences of this state are linked to 'increasing negative affect, fatigue, stress, physical symptoms and decreased sleep' (Milyavskaya et al. 2018, 725). While subjects engage in the ostensibly pleasurable activity of browsing social media, the fear of missing out works to lower mood, self-esteem and overall feelings of satisfaction (Przybylskia et al. 2013; Buglass et al. 2017). It is widely accepted that as an affect, it is associated with smart phone addiction and a compulsive desire to constantly stay connected. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, these negative impacts, marketing studies have identified FOMO as a user response that can be deliberately induced in order to promote 'excessive consumption' through 'herd behaviour' amongst consumers (Kang, Son, and Koo 2019, 270). Mobilised largely through social media, it is well recognised as the basis of powerful digital marketing strategies, with media agencies explaining *How the FOMO Phenomenon is Driving New Trends in Marketing* and offering *8 Genius FOMO Marketing Techniques to Boost Sales* (Overmyer 2016; Barker n.d.). In this context, FOMO is considered to operate through social proof, which refers to the tendency for individuals to adopt the behaviours of a group in order to conform to what is socially appropriate (Caildini 2009, 88).

In *Following the Jones: FOMO and Conspicuous Sociality* Joseph Reagle frames FOMO as an anxiety stemming from what he terms 'conspicuous sociality' (Reagle 2015). Characterised as a form of envy, he traces via Susan Matt how envy, once thought of as sinful, was employed to drive the early consumerism of American society. Linking this to de Botton's status anxiety, produced through the 'social mobility' that became possible in the twentieth century, for Reagle FOMO is a digital form of 'keeping-up with the Joneses', expressed through social emulation. His discussion usefully situates the fear of missing out in relation to a wider historical context of social anxiety, and its instrumentalisation within Western consumer capitalism. Reagle uses fear and anxiety synonymously. The term anxiety in some ways seems more applicable to a socio-cultural analysis; fear as a response to social media seems somewhat hyperbolic. Fear as an affect, and its differentiation from anxiety, however, demands to be unpacked in order to more fully understand what is at stake.

Psychologist Stanley Rachman states that fear and anxiety are used interchangeably in their everyday usage, and indeed share characteristics. Both are negative affects that lead to elevated arousal in the form of tension, apprehension and uneasiness. However, anxiety is on-going, while fear occurs in episodes, is more pointed and produces 'bodily sensations of an emergency' (Rachman 2002, 4–5). While anxiety is vague, pervasive and linked to a threat that cannot be located, fear has a directly identifiable object. Expanding Rachman's analysis in *The Cultural Politics of Fear*, Sarah Ahmed asserts that fearfulness relates to an object's potential loss. She states, 'Fear's relation to the object has an important temporal dimension' and in this sense 'involves the *anticipation* of hurt or injury. Fear projects us from the present into a future. But the feeling of fear presses us into that future as an intense bodily experience in the present (Ahmed 2004, 65, author's emphasis). This kind of temporality indeed plays a strong role in FOMO, which involves the psychic projection of the self into another time and place, to where that which is missed out on is taking place. This magnifies and makes urgent

the subject's experience of time passing, through their dislocation from the desired object. Unlike Ahmed's description of the futurity of the object, FOMO is intensely about the fear of the now, or all of the nows that the subject is not a part of, paraded before them through the live feed of social media.

If fear has an object, what object(s) produce the fear of missing out? Ahmed discusses the Other, and while Othering can be seen at play in FOMO, it is however, primarily the self that is Othered, through the fear of one's own absence, from that which others are doing or being. The urgency and fright at witnessing one's non-participation in the nowness of social media owe much to the image. As the foremost mode of describing that which is being missed out on, the image's manifestation of an intensified relationship to time points towards the object of fear. Much influential theory on the photographic image, such as Barthes' *Camera Lucida* and Sontag's *On Photography*, has established how the photograph signifies the passing of time, and ultimately death, in its perpetually increasing distance from the captured moment. Sontag states: 'All photographs are memento mori. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt' (Sontag 2005, 14). Time and its procession can be seen as the object of FOMO. Signified through the image that saturates social media, this fear is incessantly replayed at pace.

Furthermore, these significations of the image are embedded covertly in the operations of social media platforms and are pointedly utilised in their design. In *Hooked: How to Build Habit Forming Products*, Nir asserts the appeal of *Instagram* and its image filters as drawing on the subject's fear of losing the moment in time, by offering a way to enhance and cherish that disappeared moment through the photograph (Nir 2014, 48). Thus, such media operates through Metz's concept of the photograph as fetish (Metz 2014). That is, a way to possess time. Indeed, the prosumer image can be seen as a totemic response, that seeks to ward off FOMO. This demonstrates that the transmission of negative affects by social media is not incidental, but structurally and systematically produced. While the fear of missing out is not new and was proliferated in the twentieth century to drive consumer capitalism, it has become highly instrumentalised with the rise of 'big data' and the ability to trace, measure, predict and manipulate the behaviour of internet users. This operation of the image within social media, to intensify and frequently mobilise FOMO through a sense of time slipping away, is predicated on an underlying concept of social media as live. This liveness demands both the subject's attention and their distractibility and can be seen as the 'technological management of consumable forms of dissociation' (Crary 1999, 148). Jonathan Crary asserts that such 'temporal unfoldings of attentiveness', are prefigured by the nineteenth Century dissolution of the classical subject/observer. Untethered from classical perspectival vision the modern, industrialised subject is instead produced through a new 'disciplinary regime of attentiveness', underpinned by a capitalist logic (Crary 1999, 12–13). Liveness, and its relationship to both digital media and performance art, are discussed in-depth later in this paper. However, I will first examine the role that affect increasingly plays in digital contexts, and the development of the participatory aspects of media, that have enabled social platforms and consequently this effect of liveness.

FOMO, affective labour and participatory culture

With the development of *Web 2.0*, the technological change from static to editable web pages, users became 'prosumers'. That is, not only consumers but also producers of content (Jenkins, Mizuto, and Boyd 2016). The term encompasses diverse platforms such as *Wikipedia*, *YouTube*, *Facebook* and *Twitter*, the defining feature being that the content is user-generated. The term 'participatory culture' was coined by Henry Jenkins et al., articulating a rather optimistic view that the co-production and social interaction of online communities developing through Web 2.0, would lead to greater collaborative working, collective intelligence and democracy (Jenkins, Mizuto, and Boyd 2016). Digital media theorist Christian Fuchs asserts that participatory culture is not truly participatory in the political sciences understanding of the term, that refers to participatory democracy. He argues that Jenkins characterisation 'disregards questions about the ownership of platforms, collective decision making, profit, class and distribution of benefits' (Fuchs 2017, 68). Associated with fandom, in a highly capitalised digital context, such cultures become quickly co-opted in the service of the market.

The idea that the majority of participatory culture has been monetised, either directly through advertising, sponsorship or more covertly through the harvesting of personal data, has been widely critiqued in critical, and wider public discourse, most especially after the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal. The value now assigned to user data, has led to the increasing design of Internet forums as compelling, compulsive and addictive. The marketing-centric field of User Experience Design, now seen as central to the design of web interfaces, developed by cognitive and behavioural psychologist Don Norman at *Apple*, epitomises how user data and behaviour is not only collected, but predicated and manipulated in order to achieve business goals. The increasing sophistication of social media platforms, from manual user navigation to an infinite scroll of algorithmic, personally targeted feeds, means users inescapably find their online behaviours structurally controlled. The triggering of the affective body is embedded as a forceful undercurrent in digital platforms, operating in the structure and sign values of digital interfaces, as well as their content. For instance, notifications, which seek to persuade users into specific behaviours, are designed to produce a state of alert achieved through their audio-visual language, exemplified by the tropes of the bell or alarm. They are aimed to provoke a state of arousal that demands urgent action, the satiation of which speaks to users physiological reward systems.

The role of affect in digital economies surfaces in the cultures proliferated through participatory platforms. Often apparently an overwhelming and indistinguishable 'digital soup', curated for users through algorithms based on past preferences and behaviours, identifying cultural patterns enables greater understanding of what is at stake. For instance, located within *YouTube* is a set of digital video cultures that employ the sensory qualities of materials and objects, in order to produce a kind of 'haptic visibility' (Marks 2000, xi). Popular forms include prank stunts, unboxing videos and slime making tutorials in which objects are crushed or exploded, materials are poured and played with or products are slowly unboxed and constructed. They are largely, either directly monetised, or follow an Internet influencer model. Part of the appeal of these videos is their transmission of affect through the peeling, unpacking, crunching and oozing, that operates as a hook for the viewer's bodily attention.

ASMR or whisper videos can be seen as a part of this wider trend. They claim to trigger an 'Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response', described as a tingling sensation that spreads from the scalp down the spine, alternatively known as a 'braingasm' or 'brain orgasm'. This is achieved by the performer whispering to the viewer, as well as touching and stroking objects and materials. There are two main types; role play videos normally of care-based acts such as hair-cutting, shaving or mundane domestic activities such as towel folding or cooking; and hand-focused sensory interactions such as nails tapping on plastic, crinkling paper or sinking into sand. One particular form of *ASMR* interacts with the camera as if it were the viewer in order to position them as the object of care. The performer simulates interactions such as touching the viewer's hair and face, hugging, applying make-up and even blowing the viewer's nose. The *ASMR* community claim that the viewer's physiological response to these videos releases serotonin, endorphins, dopamine and oxytocin. It is claimed that this is non-sexual, and rather has a therapeutic function that can be used to aid sleep and relaxation, and to relieve stress, anxiety and depression (Richard 2018).

Regardless of the claimed therapeutic qualities, these videos fetishise the caring role normatively assigned to women. The wide range of idiosyncratic activities catered to supports the idea that this is a sphere of personal preference and sexual association. These videos are a new way for woman's image to circulate as an 'emblem of desire' in the late-capitalist economy (Schneider 1997, 66). Yet whilst fetish, these videos, drawing on primal associations with touch, in some way also speak to a human desire for connection to others. The sensory lure of these videos, and the pleasurable affects they transmit, operate at a pre-conscious level to keep spectators engaged and consuming. These cultures point to the co-option of the affective body by digital capitalism: as Patricia Clough maintains: 'capital has begun to accumulate from within the very viscera of life' (Clough 2010, 219).

Affective labour, digital labour and playbour, are critical concepts which have been employed to account for the ways in which digital technologies have elided the worlds of work and leisure. They reveal the pleasurable entertainment ideology of social and digital media, and how it works to keep users engaged in order to mine their data and patterns of behaviour, as well as urging them to consume. Affective labour refers to the largely invisible, emotional and affective work that is required to maintain society and production under capitalism. The concept has been employed in feminist discourse to make visible women's labour, which is rendered invisible or undervalued, especially as it relates to caring, social and reproductive roles (Hardt and Negri 2004, 110–11). In broader terms, affective labour is now also understood as not only prevalent within, but central to, the functioning of digital economies.

FOMO is a form of affective labour. The user's fear of missing out keeps them frenetically, anxiously and persistently engaged. That is, hooked on acts of prosumption and seeking an unattainable satiation. It produces online engagement as compulsive, and is thus a useful instrument in digital economies, as it generates value through accumulating sets of users and data. The operations of networked platforms and their structuring of digital experiences point not only to how bodies are covertly exploited to generate affects as labour but to the ways in which embodied subjectivities are produced in digital contexts. It is these subjectivities that this investigation seeks to examine,

employing performance art practice as a method to mine emergent, embodied knowledge and the ways in which subjects are produced through these affective experiences that are both intense and commonplace.

Performance art through the lens of participatory culture

Many aspects of performance art, that mark it as a form—claims to immediacy, liveness, the presentness of the performer, and an ability to affect and move bodies—are also those of internet cultures, albeit in a technologically mediated form. In *ASMR* cultures, we see these attributes heightened to the point of fetish, which makes visible their operation, within digital and social media more broadly. There are clear distinctions: visual art practice (for the most part) is not embedded in the algorithmic, monetised context of *YouTube* (though it is subject in other ways to the market); the sole purpose of *ASMR* is to trigger a gratifying affective response, ostensibly as care, but implicitly as commodity. Yet, these cultural forms seem to impinge on strategies of performance practice. It might be argued that live performance art practices in particular, might resist, intervene or provide an antidote to the embodied experiences of digital cultures; that performance has a powerful ability to re-establish human connection through a live, affective performing or spectating experience. Discussing early foundational practices such as Burden, Acconci, Pane, and Abramovic and Ulay, Kathy O'Dell asserts a 'masochistic bond' that develops between the performer and the viewer, witnessing the testing of the limits of the body (O'Dell 1998, xii). However, that liveness, affect and human connection are themselves enmeshed in digital cultures, complicates such claims. The parallels here are curious and striking, and they demand unpacking in order to consider the appeal of these digital cultures, and the challenging and yet potentially rich territory that that performance art practice might critically address.

Liveness is arguably one of the most fundamental concerns of performance art as a form, as well as being central to the operation of FOMO as affective Labour. The power of performance is often attributed to experiences of 'nowness', of being 'present' and 'in the moment', relationally and affectively connected to others, to the self and the unfolding action. The nowness and affective human connection, so prevalent within digital media, whilst mimetic, raises questions for performance art as a form. Scholars of performance studies have conceptualised many differing accounts of the ontology of liveness (Auslander 2008; Phelan 2005; Jones 1997; Bedford 2012; Heathfield 2012). In the visual arts such debates often centre on the tensions between the relationship of live performance and its record. This ranges from photography, video, oral and written accounts, artefacts used in performance and traces of actions on the artist's body or in the performance space. Of significance is the photographic image, which particularly with early performance practice, is the dominant mode through which most will experience the work, though digital technologies have made video increasingly common. Practitioners occupy different artistic and political positions in relation to the role that the image plays in their practice, from those who prohibit photographic documentation to foreground the live event, to those for which performance is itself a form of image-making, and some who incorporate the very condition of being or becoming an image within their work.

Phelan's arguments around the ontology of performance have been highly influential. She claims 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations: once it does so' she asserts, 'it becomes something other than performance' (Phelan 2005, 146). For Phelan, performance art is located only in the live moment, as an event, an unfolding over time between performer and audience. Jones argues against the privileging of the live event as the true account of the artwork, proposing rather, that different forms of knowledge are produced through performance as live event, and performance as accessed through, what she terms, its traces. The viewer of performance documentation, she argues, can read the artworks from a distance, and in historical and cultural context to situate them within broader patterns and narratives. Further, she holds: 'There is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product, including body art. While the live situation may enable the phenomenological relations of flesh-to-flesh engagement the documentary exchange (viewer/reader <—> document) is equally intersubjective' (Jones 1997, 12). Furthermore, Jones asserts that performance art is a powerful form, not only as it performs the dispersed subjectivities of late capitalism, but because it performs them in relation to re-presentation, and thus disrupts modernist concepts of subjectivity as fixed (Jones 1997, 12).

Phelan's assertion of the unrecordability of performance art, such that all subsequent accounts will fail to fully return to this original, authentic moment, is both extended and contested by Bedford. He argues that it is the 'disappearance' of performance as an art object that 'makes the work available for rewriting ... to travel through time and space, absorbing and assimilating the conditions of history' (Bedford 2012, 85). For Bedford performance is a 'myth-making medium'; its ontology is viral and performs multiplicitous meanings over time (Bedford 2012, 85). The understandings put forward by Jones and Bedford refuse the attribution of fixed meaning to performance artworks, establishing their meanings as always already contingent. Acts of viewing and reading, and the lenses through which they occur, are themselves productive of meaning. This conceptualisation foregrounds performance art as a method to critically examine the ways in which subjectivity is produced through the structures of language, culture and representation.

In his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Auslander addresses in-depth questions of liveness in relation to performance. He examines this concept across multiple contexts and cultural forms such as theatre, television, popular music, courts of law, and in the later edition, early digital contexts (Auslander 2008). He asserts that liveness is not a given, but a historically contingent concept. It 'describes a historical, rather than ontological, condition' and therefore 'must be examined not as a global, undifferentiated moment but within specific cultural and social contexts' (Auslander 2008, xii-3). Liveness, therefore, is not fixed, rigid and unchanging, but is rather shaped by its contexts. It is not the real to the representational, rather the live and the mediatized are categories that we experience as an effect of cultural forms.

Liveness plays a key role in participatory cultures, and is central to the operation of FOMO, which requires a constant signification of the moment and place in time that will never be again, that the viewer is not part of. The image as live or as if live is now a pervasive trope of digital cultures, largely as a consequence of the personal device/social media nexus. Forms of self-generated imagery such as the selfie and selfie video created 'off the cuff', 'on the go' and 'in the moment' speak to the viewer as if they are

live, producing an audio-visual and gestural language of liveness. *ASMR* pushes this language of liveness to the extreme. Performers simulate interactive exchanges, through talking and interacting with the camera, as if it were the viewer, to give the impression of touching, caresses or embracing, and positioning them as the object of care. These acts work to produce a kind of technologically mediated immediacy that Klausen terms 'telepresence' (Klausen, 2019). A type of liveness is produced through the visual and affective simulation of the presence of another human being. Breaking the fourth wall is used to create an effect of interaction, which is so bizarre and uncanny that it interrupts the fantasy that it attempts to create. Thus, this video form demonstrates liveness captured, replayed, and recirculated as a product for consumption, and fetishises both liveness and the role of the caring woman. Yet whilst these videos operate within the digital economy as fetish, at the same time, they speak to and produce a desire for care, therapy and intimate connection with another human being through touch.

Mimetic liveness is a trope of participatory cultures more broadly, produced through the audio-visual and gestural language of cultural products, as well the structures within which they sit, in particular, the live feed. This bears out Brown's assertion that 'liveness is a fetish, a tool of the capitalist system of cultural production' (Brown 2010, 61). The fear of time passing, is pressed on by social media feeds, which produce liveness as an effect, in order to drive prosumption. Furthermore, identities become performed through this cultural construct of time, both within and beyond digital media. Subjective experience is now commonly viewed through the use of digital media, becoming lived as live moments to be captured. The record regarded as more valuable than the experience itself. Drawing on Baudriallard's theorisation of simulation, Auslander asserts: 'As the mediated replaces the live within cultural economy, the live itself incorporates the mediated, both technologically and epistemologically' (Auslander 2008, 44).

Curating FOMO

Thus, as bodies are performed in and by digital cultures, the affects and embodied knowledge produced are not discretely enacted in digital spaces but pervade the language of the body itself. It is such embodiments, that I set out to interrogate, through the live performance art event FOMO that instigated this investigation. The tense and contested relationship of live performance and its documentation, particularly the image, points to performance practice as an apposite site for the interrogation of such emergent, disciplinary, bodily regimes. Whilst there is no sense that the body exists in an unmediated state, outside of representation, performance as a mode of research has an ability to mine latent, lived, embodied experiences, as well as the potential to make visible the interplay of texts that work to produce subjectivity.

FOMO was an event curated for *Livestock*, an artist-led performance platform based in Dublin, which has evolved to foster new performers and to provide a space for experimentation and interdisciplinarity. The event was hosted by *MART*, a studio provider and artist-led gallery, that particularly supports new media practices. Through an open call for submissions, artists were asked to respond to the concept of 'the fear of missing out'. The call was itself an act of bringing FOMO into discourse, as not simply a popular media phrase, but an urgent topic for critical and artistic representation. It was

a provocation to artists to consider, investigate and make visible, the ways in which we know the body through our everyday use of personal technologies. The result was an event presenting works by four emerging female performers.

I will not try here to somehow suggest that performance art can 'get out of' or act as an antidote to media saturated embodiment but will rather present a view that the body is now inexorably enmeshed with the digital, and is increasingly produced, known and spoken through technologies. As an experimental event produced through open call, neither do I claim that the works are a comprehensive catalogue of all the themes or artists at play in this field. The project was rather comprised of a set of stirrings. That is as a local, grassroots and exploratory response to FOMO that aimed to produce emergent knowledge through practice.

My approach to the analysis of the event follows that of Jones, which recognises that the viewing/reading of a performance and its documentation is itself a performative act, such that each account of the work is also an account of its reading (Jones 1997). I set out to examine FOMO as emblematic of the embodied subject's embroiled relationship with digital technologies. Here I analyse the event as an embodied viewing/reading subject, enmeshed in the very web of networked affectivity under critique. In this way, I aim to mobilise performance practice as a way to think through how the body is produced in and by digital technologies and its emergent cultures.

FOMO: the live performance art event

FOMO took place in a warehouse that has been converted into artists' studios. It is a large open space that is subdivided into blocks, making three long corridors. These corridors are unusually wide, and the white walls are graphically slashed with thick black diagonal lines. It is a distinctive setting. There are some rooms off the main space that are a legacy of the warehouse's previous functions. The performance event took place as part of an artists' open studios on a summer afternoon in Dublin, August 2019. What follows is an account of each work in turn.

Karolina Adamczak, *Will I Ever Love?*

A single bed, with white sheets, duvet and pillow sit centred in the middle isle of the warehouse. The audience encounter the out of place bed as they navigate the space. A young woman enters in her night-time shorts, t-shirt and socks, her long hair braided, and gets into bed. The sheets rustle as she moves in a continual motion of clutching and hugging the bedclothes. She crumples into them, enfolding herself within. The performance is as if a scene transplanted from another moment and place in time. The bed is both private space and public stage. She acts out a teenage fantasy, a duvet lover, their soft and gentle embrace, their brush against the cheek. Through the title, she wonders 'Will I ever love?' This is not a forcefully projected performance, nor a role play directed towards an audience; it is a crumpling inward, the outward actions a reflection of an inner imaginary.

Viewed through my curatorial lens and the supportive ethos of *Livestock*, the performance is for me tender, intimate and revealing in a way that deeply resonates with my own experience. It generously exposes a vulnerable moment and in doing so has the potential



Figure 1. (a,b) Karolina Adamczak, *Will I Ever Love?* (2019). Live Performance.

to connect others through shared experience. Yet, quite a different reading of the work emerges as I view the documentary images of the performance. Post the event, audience members' images circulate on social media, and I view and post my own. I am struck by an entirely different perspective when viewing the commissioned documentation. Produced through a collaboration with John Foley, a social documentary photographer who captures the raw and the sub-cultural, this was an apposite style to document a *Livestock* event. Adamczak's performance through this stylistic lens becomes statuesque. The softness of the duvet and pillow harden, as they take on a 'photographicness'. My initial reading of intimacy melts away and is replaced by the image of a body on display (Figure 1).

Reading across these two sites of representation, the live performance and its document reveal not only an ambivalence in the meaning of the work but how it performs an embodied state of 'imageness'. It is a body not just turned to stone and fetish as Jensen's *Gradavia*, anticipating itself as the photographic still, 'mimicking its opacity, its stillness; inscribing across the surface of [the] body, photography's 'mortification' of the flesh' (Owens 1990, 210). It is rather a body that performs fluidly as photograph, at ease with its language. The body is somehow performed as both personal, intimate and private, and staged, public and 'Instagramable'. Adamczak's work speaks of simultaneous possibilities of intimacy and dehumanisation in digital contexts, and the public-private nexus enabled through social media that can flip heavily towards either extreme. The work speaks to the complexity of lived experiences of intimacy, increasingly played out in digital spaces, its aching vulnerability is both a mode of resistance and a susceptibility to exploitation.

Karmel Daly, is there anybody there? a vocal response to the fear of missing out

Daly's practice employs a method of vocal response. She works with embodied voice; and draws her performance from being in her body, in a space, in a physical and relational environment, sending out and receiving soundings like a two-way radar. On the day of the event, a personal moment threatened to disrupt the professional, a moment of

fear, worry and stress at the lack of response. Drawing down on the body primed thus, she funnelled forward vocalisations energised by affect. Standing at the top of a stairway, positioned above the main space and studios, she shakes an electronic tablet. Bellowing out hello to a cavernous warehouse. No response, only her own echo. Shouting high above the inhabited space of the studios as an isolated spectacle, her endless hello projects onto the surfaces of the warehouse, and reverberates back, resonating within and between the spaces and bodies below. The building, permeated with these reverberations, becomes a giant echo chamber for this unanswered desire to connect. The performing body *is* the personal affective body, and the narratives of our lives are woven into and through the body, transmissible as affect. This work evokes not only a lived experience of FOMO but of ‘ghosting’. In cyber slang being ghosted involves being suddenly ignored by a loved one or acquaintance and is particularly associated with digital communications (Popescu 2019). With the instant ability to connect, and the labour of maintaining this requisite connectedness, ghosting is symptomatic not only of the often tenuous and dehumanising nature of digital connectedness but of how digital sociality constantly presses on, amplifies and proliferates fears and desires (Figure 2).

Both Daly and Adamczack’s work speaks of the desire to connect, but what do we mean when we speak of human connection? Classic theories of spectatorship, such as Mulvey’s gaze, rely on the psychoanalytic concept of identification (and a distancing, dehumanising counterpart of objectification) as the desire or wish to see the self as reflected in the eyes of others (Mulvey 1989). First established by the primary carer in a mirroring relationship, it produces and reproduces the subject’s concept of self. Susanna Paasonen suggests the concept of identification is limited in its capacity to account for many of the most powerful mechanics of spectatorship, most especially its affective qualities. She suggests the term ‘resonance’ as more fully addressing the relationship between the body of the viewer and (representations of) other bodies: ‘To



Figure 2. (a,b) Karmel Daly, *Is There Anybody There? A Vocal Response to the Fear of Missing Out* (2019). Live Performance. Image credit: John Foley.

resonate with one another, objects and people do not need to be similar, but they need to relate and connect to one another. Resonance encompasses the emotional and cognitive as well as the sensory and affective, and it points to the considerable effort involved in separating the two' (Passonen 2011, 16). The term accounts for the weight that is attached to affective experiences of attachment, as well as the materiality of affect and its transmissibility between bodies. Resonance speaks to the role of sound itself in the arousal of affect, whether through the whispering, feathered pleasures of ASMR, or the lonely rebound of one's own voice returning from the void. It evokes how sound travels through us, has waves, frequencies and intensities. However, resonance speaks to the mechanism of affective connectedness, but not the tone of the intensities. Paasonen herself goes on to use the term to discuss the carnal intimacies of online pornography spectatorship. I suggest that we might define affects of human connection in direct opposition to fear. If fear transmits between bodies but 'does not bring the bodies together', affects of connection might be defined by what fear does not do, which is to produce 'a form of shared or fellow feeling' (Ahmed 2004, 63).

My enduring memory of the work is travelling towards Daly down a long passage at the very back of the space, her call drawing me near. I hold my mobile phone, videoing as I approach and through this lens the performance becomes cinematic, defined by my movement down the corridor as if a DIY Kubrick scene, the movement swelling louder as I approach. Even this dispersing sound performance, once under the lens, does not escape a kind of imageness. Situated at the top of the stairs, Daly is ultimately unreachable. Her call is pitiful, but somehow also powerful in its projection. It resonates about the space, and within and between the bodies therein, communing them. Associations arise with the Irish folkloric tradition of keening, a ritual lamenting of the dead through women's wailing cries. The keener, who wore their hair loose and wild in order to embody a hysterical grief, bore a social role to represent the disorder and loss of control brought by death on behalf of communities (Bourke 1988, 287). Daly too is keening, her mournful cries somehow healing. They both signify and emolliate the fear so often at play in digital experiences. Daly's healing loneliness chimes and plays off Adamczack's lonely intimacy, and read together they become a set of complex, incongruous and ambiguous affective experiences, and conflicted digital subjectivities.

Orla Wittke, Syringa Memoriae

This work was situated in a small cloakroom. The audience passing by alerted to the performer's presence by the glow of a red candle and her low whispering voice. The quietness of the address draws me in and asks my body to quieten in response. From the floor, she constantly repeats the phrase 'In my mom's garden'. The tone is mantric and calm as if she is trying to summon up a 'home place'. At times she appears to speak to the viewer, and at times to the self, sliding seamlessly between the two. A video of the garden she refers to flits across her torso, and it is as if we are viewing the memories of her body. The artist refers to the images she has captured as 'dead data' that comes alive when it awakens the memory lying within her, which in turn becomes readable to the audience. The footage is filmed from the performer's point of view, as she walks through a domestic garden, examining and enjoying the plants and flowers. The point of view shot is a consistent trope of user-generated digital content, arising from the tendency to simply hold

the mobile phone and shoot one's own view. Here it is employed as a device to try to get to the inside of lived experience. The footage, moving with the body, is playful and at times appears sexualised as she handles fronds and phallic flower buds. This however is in opposition to her live performance, and the steadiness of her tone of voice and of her gaze. By this necessary counterweight, I am reminded of the difficulties of young women's self-representation: a body that always already signifies erotically has to be constantly negotiated in order to signify otherwise (Figure 3).

Dissolving into and onto her body, the floral imagery becomes abstract and intensely coloured, reminiscent of Pipilotti Rist's subversive floral, feminine aesthetic. Wittke disrupts the wholeness of the imagery through a number of devices produced through the use of her body, which she uses both to position the camera and dictate its movement, and to act as screen. Her torso provides unstable viewing of the material, causing the imagery to split and bleed between her arms, flashing onto the wall behind. Projected thus, the imagery shifts between registers. At times the body is screen, as Wittke narrates the filmic action: 'you can see me touching the flower in my mom's garden'. At others, it is as if we view into the body and its experience of 'at-homeness'. Digital flashes flit across her torso, obscured and resurfacing. They are embodied memories re-performing the self in the present, and a complex set of gazes that resonate through and between bodies, as they might across digital media. Yet this is not a harrowed or dystopian vision of the subject mapped through an interplay of surveilling digital gazes; it is rather an act of reclaiming the digital image as a way into one's own experience.

The work directly draws on the therapeutic claims of *ASMR* whisper videos. This form of digital culture is symptomatic of the increasing use of media as mood management. For instance, *YouTube* videos of white noise that are presented as an aide for insomnia, or apps such as *Calm* and *10% Happier* that support mindfulness and meditation. Traditional ways to manage mood such as going for a walk, exercising and meeting friends are increasingly being replaced by media as a much more 'efficient' mode of 'stimulus arrangement' (Reinecke 2017). However, this can be accompanied by an addictive pleasure seeking, and in this way can be seen as the replacement of one condition with another, and a way to harness the subject's affects as a form of labour. Unlike *ASMR*, Wittke's performance is not a role play to the audience that fetishises the domestic, but



Figure 3. (a,b) Orla Wittke, *Syringa Memoriae* (2019). Live Performance. Image credit: John Foley.

a mantric whispering that attempts to reperform an experience of 'at homeness'. Wittke's behaviours resist, if not always entirely counter, the sexualising gaze. Thus, the works push back against—and cause a shift in—the representational tropes of this digital form. The work reclaims the digital as therapeutic through this act of self-care, that is a kind of ritual meditation, through states of imageness.

Nathalie Slachmuylders, *Synchrony: looking for a black cat in a dark circus*

Two over-large, searching eyes on laptop screens confront the audience from the floor. They are connected by snaking wires to a woman wearing, what looks like, a virtual reality mask. The initial experience is one of being looked at by these eyes. Time spent, however, reveals truncated eye movements, and that this woman sits with the careful posture of one who cannot see the room around her. Her eyes are in fact spectacle: the headset holds two infrared cameras, live-streaming them as image. Slachmuylders' performance reclaims her experience of treatment for visually induced vertigo, a neuro-vestibular illness. Symptoms are triggered or worsened by visual noise, especially vertical lines. Common triggers include the vertical lines in skylines, in supermarket aisles as well as on screens. This is a disorder produced by bastions of late capitalism through the act of spectating. The cure for which, paradoxically involves close surveillance of the body, such that it is chopped up, fragmented and fetishised (Figure 4).

The figure of the performer appears as if from a science-fiction dystopian future, in which the body is extended or distended by giant, networked eyeballs. Enlarged to this scale, and disjointed across the space, the eyes are strange and discomfoting. Their every micro-movement magnified, they become unnatural, darting and jolting. These are eyes that cannot recognise or find recognition in another and are fearfully dehumanising to look at. I am impelled to sit down on the floor, to try to get on a level with the screens and the performer. There is a dissonance that I cannot reconcile, and yet there is also resonance. As the eyes move, they divulge their bodiliness, they are large veined spheres of fleshiness rotating in their sockets. There is a pressing



Figure 4. (a–c) Nathalie Slachmuylders, *Synchrony: Looking for a Black Cat in a Dark Circus* (2019). Live Performance. Image credit: John Foley.

of the flesh that enables these eye movements to facilitate the recognition of another human being.

Represented as images/screens, the oversized eyes easily slide towards the emblematic all-seeing eye of capitalist surveillance instrumentalised through digital cultures. Yet their shallow movements give away their containment and the curtailment of their scope of vision. These are eyes that see no further than the scope of the technology that contains them. It is an 'arrêt de mort', a suspended undecidedness, so discomfiting it inevitably becomes replaced by a powerful fetish (Owens 1990, 210). In this case, revealing the contradiction underlying the ideology of an omnipotent digital spectator. This work performs the condition of the digital subject: the gulping, greedy affect of the all-powerful vision of consumption. As well as the body subject to the effects of that consumption: physically disordered and imposingly surveilled.

Conclusion

This set of works read through my embodied subjective experience, and through the curatorial frame of FOMO, reveal their engagement with and critique of the discomfiting pleasures of digital prosumption. The works in FOMO were at times bleak, but at others unexpectedly tender and intimate: the gentle, intimate squeeze of a pillow, making uncanny the public-private of digital spaces; and the healing communal mourning at the loss of human connectedness. Whether reclaiming interfaces with the digital as self-care, or disordering the all-seeing eye of capitalism, these works make visible and resist the colonisation of the body by digital capitalism.

Adamczak's sensual crumpling of sheets and the bed as podium staged the public-private nexus at play in intimate, affective relationships with, and through, digital technologies. Daly's contemporary keening both grieves and summons the role of communal, shared resonances. These performances evoked how the intimate can so easily become fetish and how modes of physical and emotional connection to others are being not only increasingly co-opted, but are simultaneously provoked and inhibited by digital cultures. These performances reveal, mourn and reclaim embodied subjectivities embroiled in the cultural fantasy of digital connectedness.

Ostensibly entertainment, digital and social media are both the cause and apparent cure of a range of contemporary maladies. Wittke reclaims affective digital embodiment through a mantric, ritual mood management and an interplay of gazes performed on and through the body, resisting the fetishisation of care and self-care. Slachmuylders makes visible the increasing digital disordering of the body, presenting the eye as both emblematic of surveillance capitalism, and the eye as mortal flesh. These works perform two divergent experiences and fates of the body under digital capitalism, together stretching the possible between imaginaries of dystopia and hope.

Collectively this set of works performs and dismantles some of the ways in which digital selves are screened and projected, each performing a different relationship to imageness. Whether the body as disruptive screen replaying one's own embodied memories, or the double-negative of the watching eye as image itself under surveillance, the works upend some of the ways embodiment is produced through the prolific prosumption that is increasingly demanded of the subject.

These performances get under the skin of FOMO, revealing it as more than a trivial cyber-slang term that circulates in digital forums. These artworks further disclose complex and contradictory lived experiences, pleasures and pains, that work to habitually return the subject to this fear. My theoretical analysis of FOMO demonstrates it as a painful state in which intense affects are urgently mobilised – and continually pressed – through the structures and audio-visual languages of social media. As a key driver of digital economies, it is deployed to motivate prosumption and forms of affective labour. The fear of missing out is a prescribed affect, produced through digital technologies, through which we increasingly come to know embodied subjectivities. Whilst the mimetic liveness that pervades the operations of the digital would seem to impinge on strategies of performance practice, I have argued (after Jones) that the contested relationship between the live and the mediated, which performance art leans upon and opens up, makes performance a powerful tool to make visible and critique the nuanced and incongruous ways in which embodied subjectivities are performed through the digital. In this way performance art practice is uniquely equipped to make visible, resist and reimagine the ways in which the body is produced through increasingly intense, affective and embroiled, everyday interactions with technology.

Society's increased dependence on networked digital technologies during the Covid-19 global pandemic increased the sense of urgency for such critical interventions in digitised cultures. The turn to technology to maintain economic and social functions, whilst maintaining the physical isolation required to control viral infection, produced a global surge in the use of many platforms and accelerated their development. This both highlighted the ability of the digital to connect us, and also the inadequacy of that connection; its inability to facilitate the social. It revealed the flimsiness of its simulacra of being together and has underscored the power – and vital need – of human, social bodies to gather together and bear witness to each other.

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Katherine Nolan is an artist, lecturer and researcher specialising in gender and new media. With a particular focus on tensions between the experiential and the spectacular body, her research investigates gender, identity and desire in the context of digital cultures. Her artistic practice is primarily performance and lens-based media, and she has exhibited internationally in Europe, America and Asia. She regularly curates with MART Gallery and Studios and Livestock Performance Art Platform. Recent exhibitions include *The Mistress of the Mantle* solo exhibition at MART Dublin and group shows at LACE Los Angeles, Supermarket Art Fair Stockholm and *Future Histories* at Kilmainham Gaol. Recent research papers include *Reading Queer Irish Performance across Live and Digital Practices* in *Interfaces Journal* (2021); *The 'Stuff' of Life; Material Play and Performance in Digital Video Cultures and Performance Art Practice* at the Association of Internet Researchers Annual Conference (2020); and *Fictioning the Past: Performing the Self as the Mistress of the Mantle in Post-Catholic Ireland* at the Irish Society for Theatre Research Annual Conference (2019). She Lectures in Creative Digital Media in Technological University Dublin. Artist's website: www.katherine.nolan.net

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