Yasmin Morgan (33574056)

Seminar Tutor: David Batchelor

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Essay question: What is the colour of water?

To point out the glaringly obvious, water is integral to the survival of ourselves and the planet, yet it is also an elusive natural element, difficult to contain and define. Placing water in the context of art and society is a difficult task. Inevitably I must talk about blue, specifically its exploitation for profit by corporations, and the social processes informed by technology that fundamentally change the way we relate to the world. Even before the advent of modernity and the immateriality of the digital blue, our depictions of sea and sky have been in constant flux. In *How Culture Conditions the Colours We See,* Umberto Eco attempts to give a semiotic breakdown of "neither a psychological nor an aesthetic" problem but a "culture one … filtered through a linguistic system" (Eco, p.159, 1958). Eco suggests that not only did Latin not distinguish between blue and green clearly, but *flavus,* one of the many terms applicable to red, has also been described as a mixture of green and white! Similarly, the optical difference between dark blue and light blue is the same as red and pink, yet although the Russian language differentiates between the two blue shades as distinct colours (Khamsi, 2007), English has no equivalent terms.

Our subjugation of water as a commodity, as simply a resource beneficial to our ends, we see in our reflection that we have fallen out of innocence and fallen into the anthropocentric trap of narcissism and selfishness, drawing parallels with how "we have fallen out of colour and into line, writing and language" (Batchelor, p.79, 2000). Through our technological advancements and our accompanying sleek and futuristic environments, our world becomes increasingly "a land where colours and reflections disturb ontologies and deform objects." (Batchelor, p. 110, 2000). This is analogous to the hyperreal use of water imagery and blue in the digital environment, which leads to "depersonalised control, placelessnesss, and isomorphic abstraction not only represented but also amplified in the video's computer-generated graphics" (Neimanis, p. 161, 2017). In fact, the way we perceive water is under the constant influence of a "web of powerful social, political and

ecological relationships" (Linton, p.9, 2010) and is becoming ever more intertwined with its aesthetic representations.
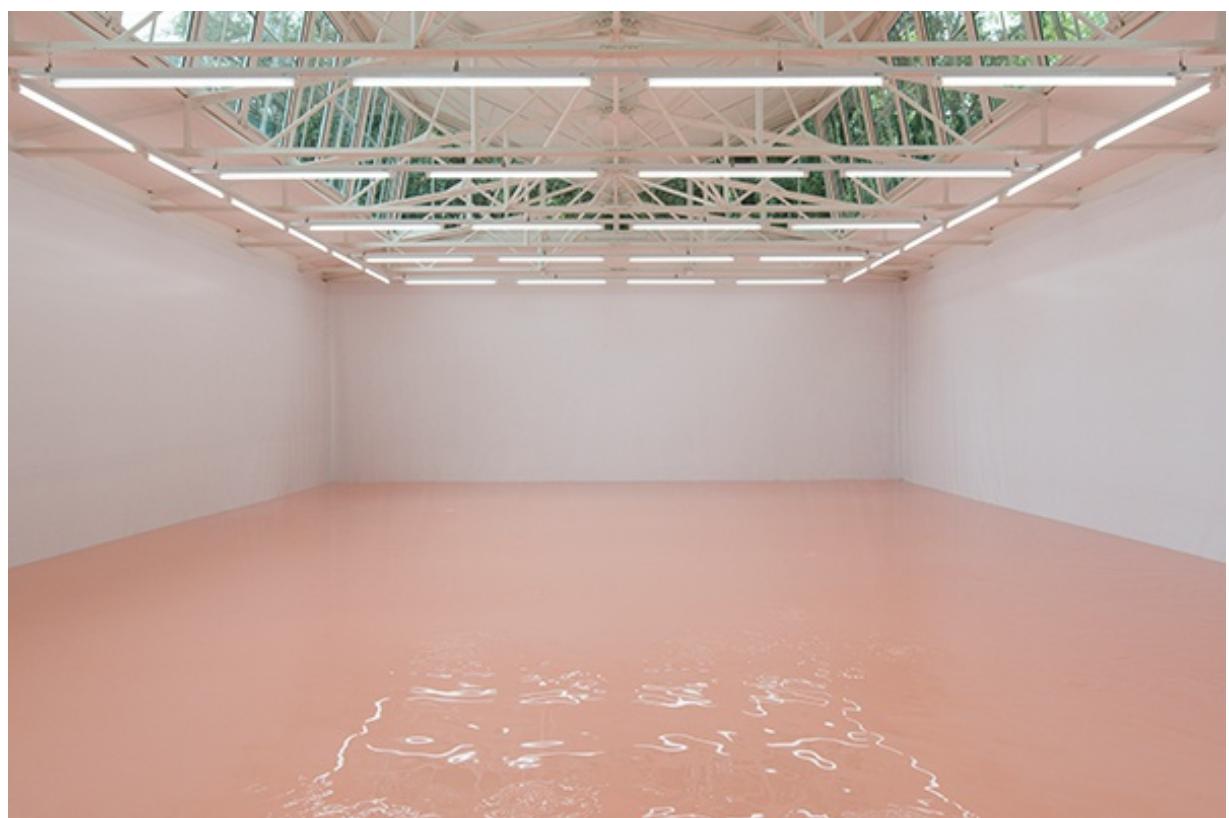
Diverting us from the environmental destruction and exponential use of energy that technology more and more requires of us, storage services are termed 'the cloud', conjuring up images of intangible fluffy masses of water, benign and harmless, yet also an inescapable and omnipresent service. This manipulation of water-like imagery, "displaces the infrastructure of labour in digital networks" (Tung-Hui, 2015), appealing to the necessity of a simulated sense of nature, distracts us from the actual physical, environmental and social repercussions of relentless technology use and consumption.

As digital media has an innate relationship with blue, two out of three of the works chosen are net-art, in the sense that they originate in online spaces and inhabit networks. Conscious of the cultural and symbolic representation of water, the artworks chosen are, in differing degrees, critical of the certain colours prescribed to this formless, shape-shifting element of nature, as well as its materialities that are deployed and manipulated for the advancement of the technological imaginary.

To begin with, blue will barely make an appearance in this first work, but it will showcase the manipulation of water's essence for the homogenisation of humanity. *Our Product* is an "immersive installation" (Pfeffer, 2015) that encompassed the entire Swiss Pavilion in the 2016 Venice Biennale. Exploring the immateriality of the material, Pamela Rosenkranz, a Swiss multimedia artist, filled a whole room with a homogenous liquid dyed to match a "standardised northern European skin-tone" (Pfeffer, 2015). The pink mass is lit up by ceiling lights that cast a luminescent glow against the white walls of the room. In a talk at the Verbier Art Summit in 2018, the artist stated that "art triggers our physiological responses" (Rosenkranz, 00:01:45 - 00:02:06), her methodical mode of practice is one of confronting us of the divide between our perceived holistic sense of self as humans, with

anthropocentric ideas of culture and society, and the now emergent and full-fleshed reductionist view of science and technology. Outside of the Swiss Pavilion, the semi-outdoor space was painted green and an "RGB green light was projected upon it" (00:03:30). Due to the effect of being subjected to the all encompassing green walls, ambient light and surrounding natural foliage, upon reaching the "500,000 litres" (00:04:57 - 00:05:01) of skin-like matter, the pink "appeared superreal with its enhanced vision for red tones" (00:05:14 - 00:05:24). At times, the disconcerting sight of ripples would appear on the surface like wrinkling skin, soft undulations breaking the illusion of an undifferentiated conglomeration of goo. Yet the fleeting moments of fluidity, paired with synthetic sounds of lapping water "generated by an algorithm in real-time" (Pfeffer 2015) and a synthesised "scent evoking the smell of fresh baby skin" (ibid. 2015) creates a disturbing, multi-sensory experience. Returning to Rosenkranz's idea of eliciting physiological responses through art, in the same way that companies can "reengineer and remix instinctive responses for pleasure and profit" (Mackay, 2017), the audience is unable

Figure 1 Pamela Rosenkranz *Our Product*

to distinguish what is 'real' among these amorphous combinations of sight, sound and smell.

Collaborating with the philosopher Robin Mackay, Rosenkranz published a booklet accompanying the work. The text begins and ends with a list, in alphabet order, of fictitious chemicals and compounds created by the artist, with descriptions of a select few. The colour palette used, defined by 3 circles in the beginning of the booklet, are: ultramarine blue, mint pastel green and this pinkish skin hue. Illustrated not with a brand logo, or a physical label on a bottle or a syringe, the compounds are instead visually accompanied with abstract variations of gradients, circles, squares, and formless colour interactions of the chosen palette, as if attempting to rework colour theory itself.

The descriptions of these pseudo-chemicals are disturbing, employing imagery of the natural world juxtaposed with techno scientific language, aimed to persuade us of the possibility of reaching an idealised, 'perfect' self. *Umbrotene* is ominously described as "nature's palette, our touch" (who's touch? Who has this ability to elevate us from the reach of mortality and nature's wrath?). *Solood* is "a dream of the milk of immemorial mothers" while *Albulis* "relieves us of the chemical burden of our existence". There are direct instances of water imagery, such as the calls to action to "dive back in" with *Isolon,* "seeping through the purest of pure and most ancient minerals, untouched by man". The Biblical description of *Bionin* proclaims an empty goal: "walk on water: no let-downs" accompanied with "it seems to sink while rising", a nonsensical misunderstanding of basic physics. Yet this lack of logic and conflict of ideologies between techno-scientific rationalism and neoliberal buzzwords, achieves one of Rosenkranz's goals: to dissociate ourselves from objects and strip us of our anthropocentric world view - stemming from the philosophical movement of Speculative Realism. Mackay tags the texts accompanying *Our*

Product with a term 'Speculative L'Orealism', playing on this idea of non-living objects having autonomous lives in relation to aesthetics.

Much of Western thought deals with binaries, such as the "moral distinction between the profound and the superficial" (Batchelor, p. 53, 2000) yet the distinction between colour and form in Rosenkranz's work is non-hierarchical. Of course, the pinkish liquid mass is a critique on the cosmetic industry and the export of this 'ideal' homogenised skin tone. However unlike most representations of the artificiality and shallowness of cosmetics as opposed to "the nobility of true beauty… found in the rigours of physical and moral discipline" (ibid.), colour as cosmetic in *Our Product* is applied for the purpose of a physiological response, as the green tinted walls of the hallway amplify the experience of "skin as aesthetic material, a symbolic stock" (Mackay, 2012).

Batchelor argues that "colour requires, or results in, a loss of focus, of identity, of self" (p. 50, 2000) and this could not be more true in regards to Rosenkanz's oeuvre. She creates works with colour and light, exploring substances at a chemical level and using synthetic materials to critique our modern day livelihoods of consumption and what it means to be human, whether through the use of dyes, chemicals, plastics or sounds. As put by philosopher Robin Mackay, "what reigns supreme today is an inconsistent ideological mixture of 'the science bit' and 'because you're worth it'" (Mackay, 2012). In the age of late capitalism, where the end goal is continuous consumption and never-ending desire (Crary, 2014), "advertising sells us an image of ourselves as powerful, spontaneous, empowered individuals at the same time as telling us that such-and-such a chemical, enzyme, or vitamin has been scientifically proven to provide this spiritual power-up" (Mackay 2012). A powerful force is the inextricable link between a concept - imbued with different dimensions of meaning - and language; semantic associations that are utilised by advertising in the hope of changing our relationships with this concept of water;

commodified, packaged and branded into a hope, offering the possibility of a supernormal transcendence to a higher, more optimal self.

As we evolved many millennia ago from sea creatures, the artist posits that our evolutionary attraction to using and seeing blue stems from "our eyes [being] shaped as creatures still under the sea so evolutionarily our eyes are still marked by rays in the water, predominantly blue and green" (Rosenkranz, 00:02:46 - 00:03:10). Moreover, our innate reflexes towards blue has been hijacked by technological interfaces, unknowingly becoming the background and palette of our digital reality.

Figure 2 Pamela Rosenkranz *Our Product*. Outside view

Kari Altmann's *Hhellblauu* - German for light blue - effectively illustrates the omnipresence of this digital light blue, imbuing notions of futuristic, upgraded cyborg life. The work is an archive of sorts of this immaterial ungraspable colour. This collection of images, hosted on a Tumblr page against a background of an impossibly iridescent ocean, brings light to how this specific shade of light blue, termed Blue.0 by the artist, eerily

encompasses how we represent technology, or how technology wants to represent itself, as a more-than-perfect environment and virtual world of seamless interactions.

Ranging from doctor scrubs to the international governing body of the United Nations or the ubiquitous brand of NIKE; from digital icons of light-blue earths to Avatar-like anthropoids and glowing brains, *Hhellblauu* is an amalgamation of the cultural associations we have with this colour.

Figure 3 Kari Altmann *Hhellblauu* installation view

In galleries, Altmann filled a light blue kiddie pool with water. Within the pool and around it are irregular slabs of broken polyurethane "like a shattered film over liquid lens" (Altmann 2010), covered with selections of images from the online archive, ranging from corporate logos like Paramount, to scenes of snowy trees and plastic water bottles. Although one may think that the Tumblr page is just a research repository for the installation, but in the catalogue for the art exhibition 'Collect the WWWorld', the

installation "represents a sort of temporary "lens" focused on the infinite and continuous manifestations of hellblau in everyday life" (WWWorld, 2011).
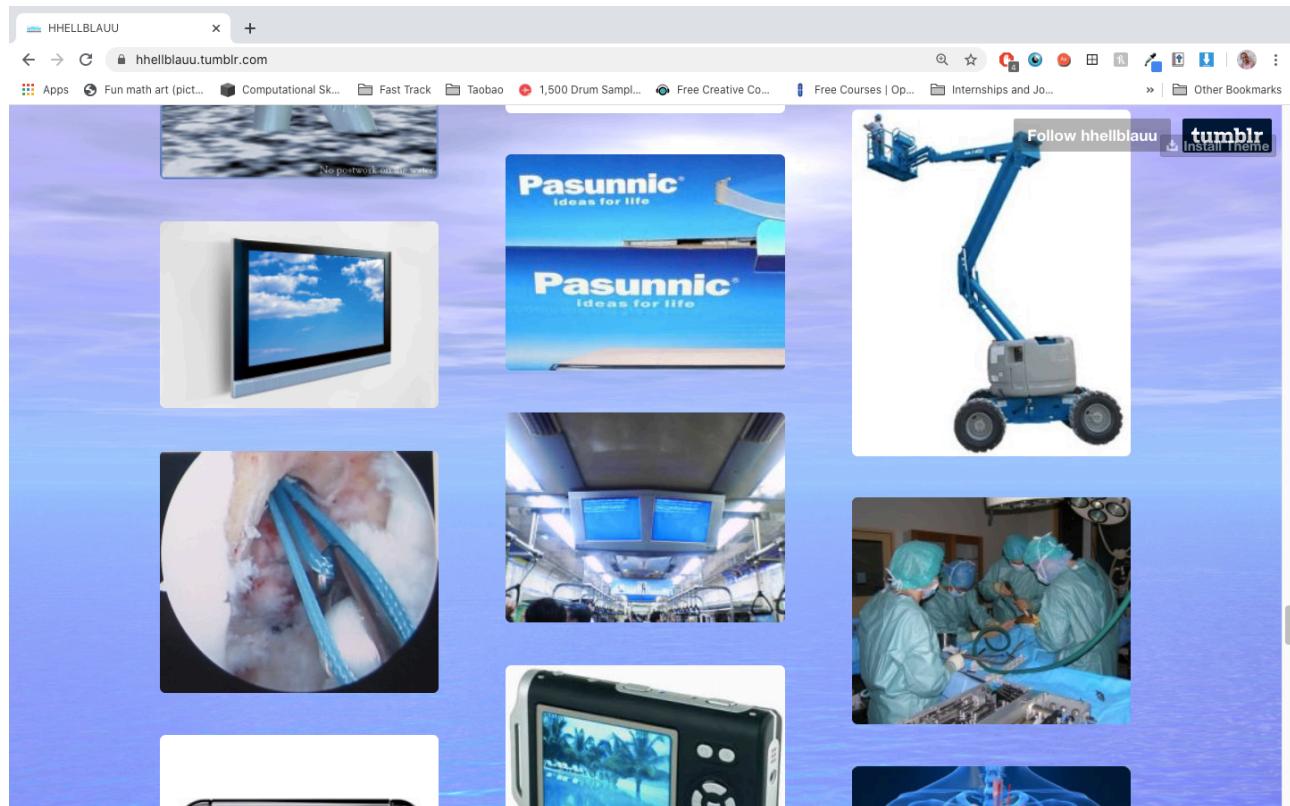
In some ways, hellblau has been permeating culture since the start of commercial computing. When an error occurs on Windows computing systems, the archetypal "Blue screen of Death" appears (Hoffman, 2018) and a multitude of online services like Outlook email, Vimeo, and Internet Explorer all use some elements of hellblau. It is no accident that the "mimicking of natural tropes" through the use of floating "icebergs" plastered with 2D representations of nature, whether digitally created or photographed, are done to "blur image ecologies" (Altmann, 2011), further disintegrating the boundary between the virtual and real. For example, the Paramount Pictures snow-capped mountain, a symbol of steadfastness and immovable power, is very unlike the immateriality of the content it creates, in this case blockbuster films.

As "digital personae start to animate wetware (people), and the network is embodied in flesh" (Bosma, 2011), this colour spills out into the world through the images of surgery and augmentation of the body shown in *Hhellblauu*. Further, the colour inhabits the skin colour of futuristic, chrome-like 3D rendered hyper-feminine bodies. Apart from the brain and hands, there are frequent images of eyes, prioritising the visual senses linked to the 'all-seeing' computational vision (Levin, 2014).

In the archive there are multiple shots of the kiddie pool installation, exemplifying that the internet pushes that "mediated experience is perceived as authentic experience" (Quaranta, p.10, 2011). One has a spotlight shining on two kiddie pools, with a seemingly ephemeral light, which could instead be perceived as the harsh, impersonal glow from within of a computer screen that encompasses these fragments. As net-art "contextualises our present state of existence" (Gens, 2017), what makes this piece interesting is that it inhabits both a virtual and physical modality.

Altman's *Hellblauu* counters the large online databases such as Google images, Flickr or Youtube that "decide what we can forget and what we must remember." (Quaranta, p.15, 2011), acting as external memory that conveniently makes no connection between these light blue cultural artefacts. The artist subverts these monolithic companies "understood as a structure of dehumanised power" (Quaranta, p.18, 2011) and brings light to this invisibly omnipresent shade through the use of "the collection, as a form of idiosyncratic, unsystematic, and human memory." (ibid.).

Figure 4 Kari Altmann *Hhellblauu.* Screenshot from Tumblr page archive, 2020
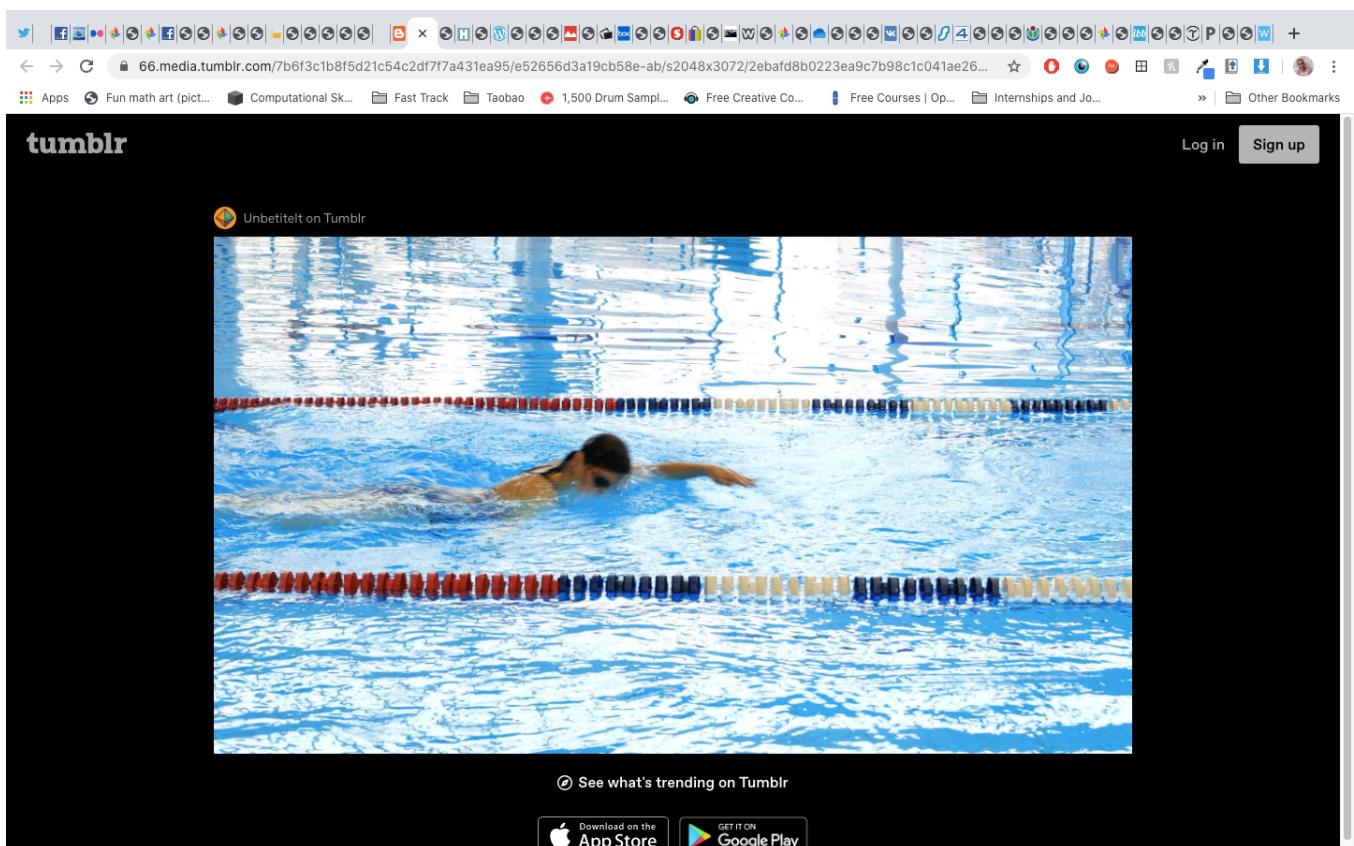
From *Hhellblauu*, we can see that there is a pattern emerging here, of natural water's hijacking by technology. The next piece of net-art implicitly utilises this digital blue, represented by the artist swimming across a light blue pool and different parts of the internet.

As part of the Olia Lialina's first solo exhibition at Arebyte Gallery in London, *Hosted* is a "a network performance for a swimmer and buckets" (Lialina 2020) that seeks to dismantle this paradigm of a sleek, invisible user experience. The work uses water as aesthetic material to explore the fragility of the internet, our dependency on different hosting sites, as well as the artist's relinquishing of control in favour of the audience performing it themselves, contingent on the unstable nature of networks.

At the forefront of net-art as a genre and the web as a medium since the 1990's, Lialina firmly believes that "web browsers are the most empowering medium that we've ever had", insisting on "making them visible" (Olson, 2020). Over time, as the internet permeates more and more of our everyday life, and as devices and interfaces continue to blur the boundaries between the digital and physical realms, we have in effect been estranged from computers (Lialina, 1:02:58 - 1:05:17). Developers and companies seek to streamline our experience so much that the computer becomes almost invisible, "subsumed within a larger framework of so-called digitalization" (Gosling, 2020) to the point that we cannot understand the basic hidden workings of them (Gosling, 2020).

**Figure 5** Olia Lialina *Hosted* Screenshot of webpage (Frame 24)
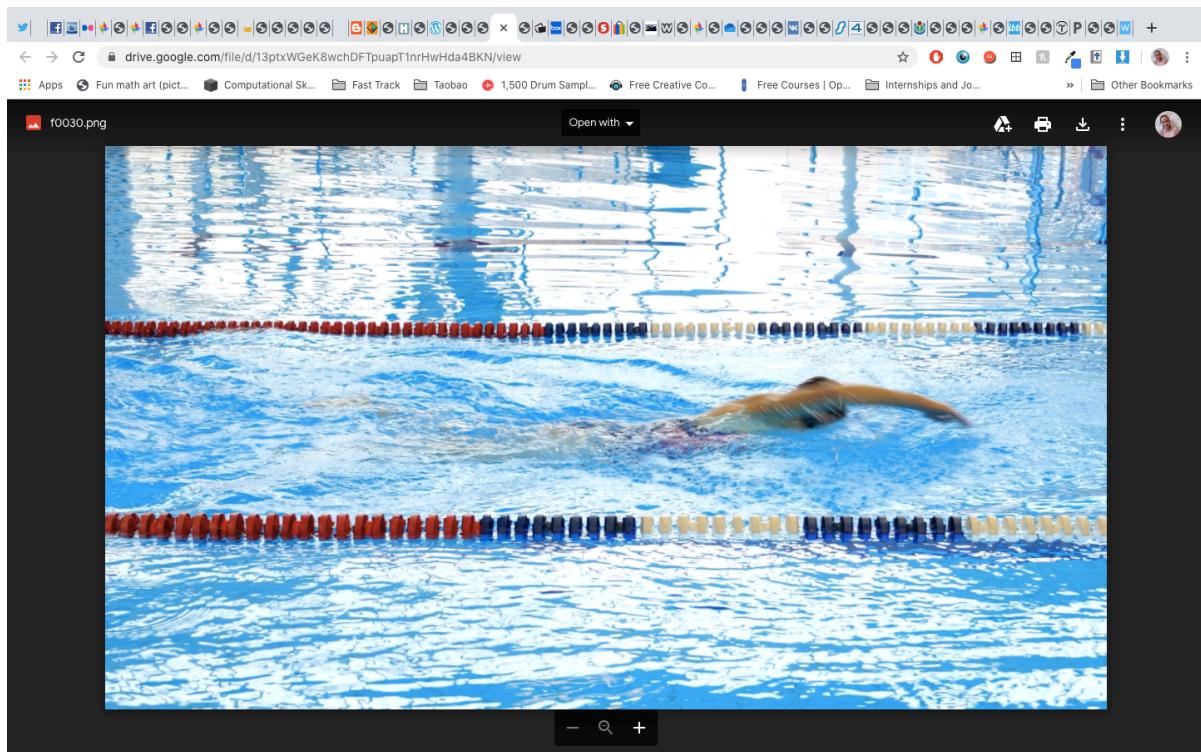
A detailed description of how to access and experience the artwork is hosted on what appears to be a suspicious URL (https://hosted.z21.web.core.windows.net/), with a set of instructions reminiscent of 1960's conceptual art. Underneath the instructions are 70 links that have to be opened up in different tabs, a mundane yet weirdly satisfying process of setting up the artwork. Once all links have been set up, the user cycles through the tabs, making a flip-book out of the browser. However, as "our experience co-depends on the performance of the network and the individual hosts" (Bosma 2020), the seamless experience of blue is jarred by inconsistencies, such as one site requiring me to perform a captcha test to prove I am human. However, these inconsistencies add another element to the experience, having to sift through each frame to check that they're all working, giving the audience an element of control and curiosity to the piece.

The images are hosted on different servers ranging from sites like Tumblr to Tinder in "containers of data" (Bosma, 2020) called buckets. The visual connection between buckets and water is interesting; in the sense that the 7000 buckets used not only hold the image's information, but also impose different unspoken constraints, effectively giving over the quality and life of the image to the web server's discretion. Lialina believes that it's important to keep elements of the net, such as the location bar, visible for as long as possible. Employing water to make a direct juxtaposition of calm, ethereal blue against the "technological spasms in the flow of images" (Bosma 2020), she uses the pair of pool safety dividers as a horizontal metaphor to bring light to the URL bar. In an online lecture titled 'Her Majesty, URL', Lialina shows how one can manipulate and regain control of an environment that is usually static and unwelcoming by treating the "location bar as a command line" (00:33:53 - 00:34:35) and directly manipulating numbers to try to retrieve her original image quality. As Lialina's focus is on connection, it is no surprise that she adopts elements of speculative realism in treating the images as objects themselves. Imbued with a life of their own, she described the "unfriendly and rude" mistreatment of her

files, "compressing them in a strange way and resizing the proportions" (00:36:20 - 00:37:01).

As we open up these tabs and become aware of all these different dependencies and realities of the internet, our alienation towards computers is suspended, even if only for a moment. We become the swimmer, accompanying Lialina as she traverses across our screen and through different parts of the internet, aware of the impermanent temporality to her piece, as we must succumb to the mercy of the network.

Figure 6 Olia Lialina *Hosted* Screenshot from webpage (Frame 31)

The multiplicity of a metaphor like water "affords art *a refracted* optical determination" (Pringle, 2019). That is to say that water, in both its metaphorical forms and visual representations, have the ability to contort and skew perceptions, and is inextricably linked to the way we view ourselves. Pamela Rosenkranz depicts 'modern water' and the accompanying "imagined sense of purity" (Neimanis, p. 180, 2017) in its relation to standardised industrial constructions of beauty norms. She does this by creating a

disconcerting environment in which the artist manipulates the audience's vision by overloading it with stimuli. Although some believe the 'unsophisticated' masses "instinctual attraction to bright hues and shiny finishes" (Batchelor, p.111, 2000) have devalued the subtleties of colour, Rosenkranz manipulates our innate reflexes towards red and green to magnify this techno-scientific homogenisation and reflect it back on ourselves.

Moreover, water has quietly been the object of fierce adoption by technology companies, as shown through Kari Altman's work. Apart from the 'cloud' that "tethers personal convenience to environmentally destructive infrastructure" (Pringle, 2019), there is more to this utilisation of hellblau in many aspects of the digital, that due to colour's "subversive potential" (Batchelor, p.66, 2000) spills out into the physical realm and is the palette of choice for the technological imaginary. Similarly, Olia Lialina draws juxtapositions between the smooth, reflective essence of water and the rough, nature of hosting services on the internet.

"Typical of prejudices to conflate the sinister and the superficial" (Batchelor, p.23, 2000), colour is deemed both arbitrary and dangerous, and that is the same for the way we approach water, simultaneously invisible and destructive. Colour often connoted as a descent into chaos and sin, it has also been deemed that colour can "indicate a rise above nature, not a fall into its lower strata" (ibid., p.54, 2000), an ascension into vast beauty and the riddance of worldly desires.

In conclusion, "water is what we make of it" (Linton, p.3, 2010), and it is currently being made into a conduit for techno-scientific ideas of modernity, dressed up in an aesthetic of seamless flow. As if it has always been this way, as water has always been and will always inhabit us and our surroundings.

Bibliography

Image List

Fig. 1 Pamela Rosenkranz *Our Product* installation view image courtesy of Marc Asekhame

Fig. 2 Pamela Rosenkranz *Our Product* installation view image courtesy of Marc Asekhame

Fig. 3 Altmann, Kari. *Hellblau*. 2010 - ongoing.

Fig. 4 Altmann, Kari. *Hellblau*. 2010 - ongoing. Screenshot of tumblr page

Fig. 5 Olia Lialina *Hosted* Screenshot of frame 24 from Google Drive

Fig. 6 Olia Lialina *Hosted* Screenshot of frame 31 from Tumblr

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