



\*On Marian Tubbs' *Vulgar Latin*: Notes\*

First of all, everything is textures, surface—snakeskin-printed silk veiling a destroyed island resort; digitally rendered spilt milk—and in this way, almost hollow, as if the textures are continuously giving way to the nothing inside them. But the surface *is* the thing: not a physical object per se, but an image-as-object, one that moves and interacts and feels.

*Vulgar Latin* suggests a movement toward the “material aspect of the image”—in artist/philosopher Hito Steyerl’s words, we have to relate to the “image as thing, not as representation” of the thing.<sup>1</sup> And the thing itself has an affective power here. Those surfaces, sheer and shimmying, *appeal* to the viewer—you want to touch them, to reach through the screen and experience them tangibly. And they want to touch you back. I’m thinking especially of the shaded rectangular forms (which appear in several of Tubbs’ works) drifting across the screen with floating text in drippy bubble letters: NAUGHTY MODEL, FEELING EVERYTHING. The whole video basically can’t stop feeling, can’t stop being *naughty*—a hyper-pixelated blinking screen seductively repeats *Hey baby*, or later, there’s the sound of heavy breathing, weirdly thriller-movie-ish and sexual at the same time. At once artificial and affective, human and not, these objects and surfaces seem to be what Mario Perniola calls *things that feel*; the video creates the possibility for things to become *things that feel*, for “a radical and extreme experience that has its cornerstone in the encounter between philosophy and sexuality.”<sup>2</sup>



But it’s not all sex and pixels. Views of the natural world appear throughout, mediated by physical or digital constraints: the video begins with a darkened landscape (Marian’s Queensland home), illuminated by flashes of lightning; an unidentifiable landscape slides across the screen, bounded by a red Youtube buffer bar and topped with a long blond wig. Later, in footage from an abandoned Greek island resort, a leafless tree, as well as views of the sea and island are framed by concrete doorways and windows edged in shattered glass. This part, especially, suggests the site of confrontation between humans (and their financial systems, here specifically Greece, 2010) and nature, and links *Vulgar Latin* to its companion video, *Open Model for an Affective Landscape, Virtual*

<sup>1</sup> Hito Steyerl, “A Thing Like You and Me”, *e-flux Journal*, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Perniola. *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*. New York: Continuum, 2004. p 1

*Becomes Real When Necessary* (2013), which focuses more pointedly on the convergence of natural and virtual ecologies.

This is the most elegiac part of the video—with those bands of sheer snakeskin-printed silk and the resort in ruins—though it's set to hotel lobby music which undermines its seriousness (and also reinforces the tragedy of it—but maybe I'm just a sap). Here, Tubbs alludes to a concern with systems of value, economic and otherwise, that's made explicit elsewhere, with some obvious signifiers of value. There are bitcoins and dogecoins and Coinyes, bouncing off-beat in a void; a digitally rendered diamond spins in the center of the screen, perpetually de- and re-constructing itself with a swipe of a Photoshop cursor—all this at a moment in which the circulation and manipulation of images mirrors, even shapes, that of capital.

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Why *Vulgar Latin*? The title derives from the term for common Latin, the form of Latin spoken by the *vulgus* or common people—as opposed to Classical Latin, which was spoken by nobility, taught in schools and used for writing—that forms the basis of contemporary romance languages. Vulgar Latin was a popular, vernacular language, much in the way that the imagery Tubbs employs in her video comes out of a visual vocabulary of the internet-based *populus*. Tubbs treats pixels as phonemes, bitcoins and Youtube screengrabs as broadly legible signifiers digital exchange. Also, because Vulgar Latin was primarily a spoken language, spreading as it broke apart into mutually unintelligible variations, little written record of it exists; in this sense as well, the language parallels the broad accessibility and immaterial record of online production.

Tubbs contends: “I am interested in emergences of difference—the lack of solidity or loss of ground of the centralized known, growing into other types of knowledge (language) is the title’s main link to the artwork.” Her pixellated forms and images, and their movements in the video—alternately titillating and intimidating, always in relation to the screen and its limits—point to the decentralizing potential of a familiar digital-visual language. These digital images-as-objects-as-currency offer alternative possibilities for conceptualizing and negotiating systems of value in an increasingly dematerialized world.

- Dana Kopel

