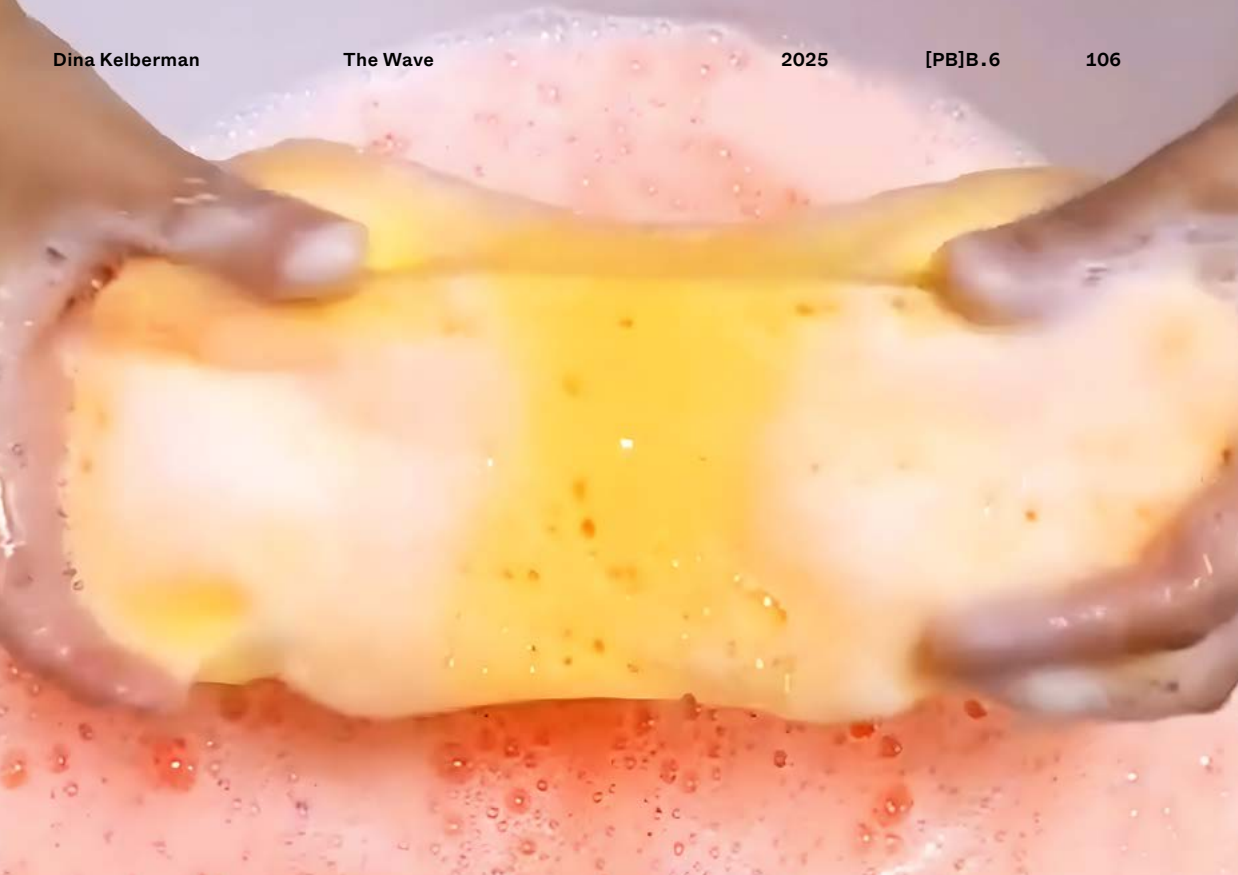




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## ASMROLOGY

james taylor-foster



One way to explain Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response – ASMR – to someone unfamiliar with the term is to describe it as the largest internet niche they’ve never heard of: a world of whispers. As recently as 2007, ASMR did not exist in the way we have come to know it today. The neologism obsessed over by a subcultural few held little cultural capital and was paid no heed by a mass of ambivalent internet bystanders. Over the last fifteen years, however, the contours of this world – born online by way of Facebook groups and video streaming platforms – has mushroomed out from its niche and into mainstream popular culture.

That’s not to say that ASMR is mainstream by any means. While some ASMRtists (those who make ASMR) have tens of millions of views to their name, the niche that they populate remains exactly that. To describe ASMR as a ‘world of whispers’ is a bit of a misnomer, too; it centres ASMR as an exercise in sound-making which, in truth, is only partly the case. Although many works of ASMR actively draw upon techniques used in the filmic art of Foley,<sup>1</sup> for instance, it isn’t just a sound practice – neither can it be siloed as purely visual culture. The early genre of whispering videos, often considered proto-ASMR and produced in the late noughties, set an important tone. Sincerity and soft-spoken personal attention were valued more than audiovisual quality. This world soon melded into something richer, more visually grounded and, by Web 2.0 metrics, far more engaging. Today, the vast majority

of ASMR works are designed to orientate attention toward sounds, movement and visual cues through the personalities (the artistic or ASMR-based practices) that produce them. They often require all four of these ingredients to resonate. ASMR is a slippery, impossibly vast world of worlds.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHtgPbfTgKc>  
This is the first whispering video uploaded to YouTube. By extension, it is the first ASMR video. *Whisper 1 – hello!* (2009) by WhisperingLife

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYA1HODBiAs>  
~\*~Russian Whisper~\*~ (2011) by Gentle Whispering ASMR

The world of ASMR has eluded concrete definition largely because it represents a feeling.<sup>2</sup> Either despite its ephemerality or as a result of it, the term has succeeded in becoming a cultural marker that describes a gamut of emotional, physiological and psychological reactions. Still, it stands for more than this: a web-based community of creators and experiencers, a slice of contemporary culture and an emergent creative field of global consequence. Although not everyone might feel the sensations that an ASMR is said to describe, anyone can understand its transcendental appeal and acknowledge its subversive summoning for respite – a moment of slowness, kindness and softness. Unlike other internet creators who usually seek to inform or entertain, the majority of ASMRtists are inviting experiencers into a wholly other space – virtual environments of familiarity, predictability and states of flow. It is, by some metrics, a gentle form of technological disobedience. Works that trigger ASMR appeal to so many because they give us permission to bask in primal human needs.

### CHILD OF THE INTERNET

Although the sensations associated with it are rooted in the reptilian brain, the world of ASMR is unequivocally a child of the internet and a product of technologies available en masse. In 2005, YouTube launched with the tagline ‘Broadcast Yourself’, offering video consumers the possibility to become video producers. When the iPhone was unveiled in 2007, the handheld smartphone and its mirrored surface quickly usurped the television set as our primary screen. We have been attentive to screens – from 480 to 720 to 1080 to 4K and beyond – since the TV entered homes in the mid-twentieth century. Recent years have seen the screen become an extension of our beings: they are in our hands, on our heads and on our wrists. We no longer just stare at screens; we touch them, too.

ASMR has grown in and alongside the screen and its underpinning technologies. It is, in part, a reaction to the ways

in which technologies frame contemporary life – a thing very difficult to discern in the moment and easier to isolate in hindsight. With some distance it is now possible to see that, through their work, and consciously or otherwise, ASMRtists have sought to subvert relentless flows of information (feeds of image and sound, notifications and durational messaging) in order to recast bits and bytes as something that can be more primally *felt* – touched, almost – through sight and sound.

The unit of the smartphone combined with speakers or headphones as we currently experience them represents a bridge between our senses and a universe of entertainment and information. Harnessing this reality, the ASMR movement has exploited this relationship to construct and make available new forms of care. By carving a niche on the internet and filling that space with personal attention available on demand, ASMRtists are simultaneously stabilising and destabilising the economies of attention that we are immersed (or, perhaps, imprisoned) in. It can only go so far, however: the forms of mediated intimacy that works of ASMR generate should be considered distinct from real-world interactions.<sup>3</sup> Rather than capturing and delivering a socially nuanced, embodied experience, works of ASMR tend to be flattened as an image, framed in a rectangle and oscillated through headphones.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75WFTHpOw8Y>  
*From Television Talk* (1988) by The Sugarcubes ft. Björk, directed by Óskar Jónasson

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OubLf5FgY8>  
*The Cinematography of ASMR* (2024) by Made In France ASMR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLsOqdbTJbo>  
*The Cook and the Kitchen Hand, 1663 | ASMR Roleplay (wood-fire cooking, a bit of personal attention)* (2023) by Moonlight Cottage ASMR

Within the parameters of the medium, works of ASMR can be loosely divided into two broad and, often, overlapping genres: intentional and unintentional. The former describes work created by an ASMRtist specifically to evoke a response; the latter outlines everything else. Designed works of intentional ASMR, usually made post-2010, can often feel cut adrift from those that are unintentional, such as the now iconic clip of Björk explaining how a television works. This snippet from a longer documentary was barely seen when it was first released in 1988. It has since gained global notoriety as a result of its popular categorisation as unintentional ASMR. Contemporary networked image cultures are similarly empowered by means of mass communication and, in the words of the philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, a ‘desire for perpetual self-renewal and the renewal of the present’.<sup>4</sup> Alongside the

flattening of an embodied experience, ASMR is a constituent part of an infinite, two-dimensional online present. From role-play, fiction and fantasy to slime and sponge-squeezing, time is simultaneously stretched and compressed and aspects of the sensorial are centred. In a recent channel trailer, the ASMRtist Maxence Rodier argued that ASMR is not what you're listening to, nor seeing – rather, it is simply a matter of triggers, 'intensified, romanticised, [and] magnified on screen'.<sup>5</sup>

### THE INFINITE LOOP

A direct result of ASMR's handshake with the technologies that have empowered it (frame rates and resolution, GPUs and CPUs, internet bandwidth and so on), subgenres that utilise technology in deeper ways have also emerged. One – let's call it 'Visual ASMR', a subgenre I first outlined in the exhibition *WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD* in 2020<sup>6</sup> – is defined by looping works that play with captivating hyperrealism and an uncanny, immensely gratifying sense of unease.<sup>7</sup> These works fill social feeds with bright, hypnotic, meditative sequences. They are oddly satisfying, simpler versions of ASMR-proper, defined by bright colours, high-frame rates and rich, smartphone-friendly screen resolutions. As mind-tickling as they are, they often lack the personality-based emotive core usually required to trigger a sense of security or personable comfort.



<https://andreaswannerstedt.se/oddly-satisfying-vol4>  
(embedded Vimeo videos) *Slice It Up* (2018) by Andreas Wannerstedt

The seductive nature of ASMR lies in precisely this point: its grand melange of subgenres, distilled emotional experiences and infinite variations on a theme. Thousands of new works are uploaded to video sharing and podcasting platforms each day, devoured by those seeking alleviation from the likes of stress or insomnia by way of risk-free therapeutics. From scratching and stippling to button pressing and soap carving, ASMR triggers are abundant and infinite. There is no such thing as an objective trigger – each is subjective to the experiencer. In a similar way that a millennial might watch episodes of Bob Ross' *The Joy of Painting* for its comfort, recalling cosy late afternoons by the cathode ray tube TV after school, digitally native generations might watch an ASMRtist's homage to Bob Ross, skipping the original entirely. In the case of Ross, often described as the 'godfather of ASMR', tangible triggers include brushing, dabbing and stippling paint, or scratching a canvas with a palette knife to sculpt the sides of mountains. Intangible triggers tend to cir-

cle around kindness, empathy, softness of voice and the satisfaction of following task-oriented actions to completion.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILWEXRAnQd0>  
*Island in the Wilderness* (Season 29 Episode 1) from Bob Ross, *The Joy of Painting*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwuliUHslXw>  
[ASMR] *The Joy of BRUSHING Your Face* (Bob Ross) (2020) by FredsVoice ASMR

*The Joy of Painting* is, by many metrics, a *looping* work of unintentional ASMR. Each episode constitutes a repetitive action – the same painter but a different painting. The ending is predictable: one way or another, a painting will be accomplished. As a viewer, you are conscious of the fact that the episode that follows the one you're watching will most likely return to where the current one began. In a similar way, Visual ASMR represents a refined result of a long trajectory of visual loops. It draws from the GIF, the six-second Vine and TikTok. Loops like these are comforting closed-circuit experiences; ocular droplets, easy to digest. Art history contains an abundance of examples of short, looping works that highlight a single moment, inviting the viewer to live and re-live it. It could be argued that this sense of mediated comfort is also deeply human: children often enjoy watching the same cartoon over and over again. Adults tend to fall asleep watching the same sitcom episode or listening to the same podcast series. As the world around us becomes more anxious, chaotic and precarious, we may be witnessing the rise of the familiar and formulaic. Visual ASMR and its infinite loops are part of this rise, embodying a distilled version of life through screens and our quest to find feeling through them – and be touched by them.

### THE STABLE FRAME

The diversity of the world of ASMR, buoyed by the relatively low threshold required to make it yourself, is part of the movement's appeal. In some works of ASMR, image is secondary to sound. For others, it's precisely the opposite. The ASMRtist's intentions usually lie beyond aesthetics or visual trends and rather in the desire to help the distant experiencer feel something. As such, there is now a vast realm of ASMR types ranging from professionally made advertisements to amateur productions. All types are equally valid and successful in finding audience because all types offer something unique to different experiencers. Consistency is irrelevant. Through trial and error or pure passion, ASMRtists construct their own distinct styles that speak to specific communities.

Dina Kelberman's project *The Wave*, a years-long ongoing work in progress that unfolded as *Sponge Project* on the [permanent beta] website and in which the artist streams point of view scenes of hands poking, squeezing and breaking apart sponges, demonstrates how image and sound combined with specific movements can exist within the elastic boundaries of ASMR. It traces a fine line: Kelberman is a multimedia artist – not an ASMRtist. *The Wave* does not include a recurring camera-facing personality, but does work with the texture of recurrence, consistency and repeat action. The impressions of hands and their sponges (or sponges and their hands) are found online objects – a part of Kelberman's fastidious practice of collecting, sorting and organising. The frame of view is always fixed and unmoving. The evolving work gives shape to an online community of sponge-enthusiasts who, due to their obsession with a specific material world, find comfort in repetition.

*The Wave* is intimate and invasive. Following a prescribed set of 'rules' in which found works tend to follow the same set of circumstances – camera pointed downwards, hands in focus, sponges galore – there is a sense that you, the viewer, are intruding on something secret, if not personal. Unlike more conventional genres of ASMR, in which the affective emotional labour of an ASMRtist is front and centre of the frame, hands massaging sponges puts forward a different kind of intimate experience. The mind soon wanders into its own looping cycle: whose hands are these? Why do sponges tend to be yellow? Can a sponge completely disintegrate through incessant squashing, rubbing and massaging? What even is a sponge?

A remarkable aspect of many works of ASMR lies in their capacity to construct spaces of intimacy amid a vast, impersonal and continually growing compendium of works. A large number of works of ASMR, *meokbang*, or *oogui*<sup>8</sup> are shared each day and devoured accordingly. *The Wave* may not best be understood as a work of ASMR because it sits outside of this stream. It is, above all, a project of collection and representation. And yet there is a particular act of care inherent in the artist's organisation and re-sharing of these thousands of videos in order to construct a wholly new and highly specific immersive experience. The gathering, hoarding and exposition of videos is also an act of absorption – first and foremost for Kelberman, but also for the viewer.

Six years of committed study of ASMR have resulted in more confusion than clarity. As the movement has grown and fragmented across this period, the question of whether ASMR represents a solution to a 'problem' that we do not yet understand, or is a response to an urgency of which we are not yet fully aware, has become less easy to discern. *The Wave* offers up a useful representation of what the world of ASMR is: tangible only in its ephemerality, and impossible in its vastness to pin down and define. ASMR is wet, slimy, slippery and lubricious – it occupies less of a space of its own and

more of the in-between, neither one nor zero. Refusing to be siloed as either sound or visual art, for instance, it borrows from histories and puts to use very human tools. Between hands and fingers, screen and sound, it may be useful to begin to reposition ASMR away from a 'world' unto itself or a genre, and into a practice woven into contemporary life. As technology evolves, so shall it, in tandem. As the world changes, ASMR will either be subsumed into our everyday or be the trigger for new forms of collective, mediated intimacy.

[1] Foley, named after the effects artist Jack Foley, is a term ascribed to the reproduction of everyday sounds in the post-production of a film or TV show, for example. The practice is often associated with ASMR because it uses specific materials and objects to create specific sounds and visuals.

[2] In the context of *WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD*, the first museum exhibition dedicated to the feeling and the field of creativity growing around ASMR, a broad definition is offered to visitors: a static-like sensation of low-grade euphoria or deep calming triggered by gentle sound, touch and movement.

In its most intensely pleasant form, it is likened to champagne bubbles, starbursts or glittering water falling down your scalp. It can also induce a misophonic response, triggered by common sounds such as yawning, chewing, breathing or lip-smacking. The term 'misophonia', which literally means 'hatred of sound', was coined by audiologists Pawel and Margaret Jastreboff in 2003. A misophonic response can be understood as the opposite reaction to an Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response.

[3] ASMR is a form of parasocial interaction – a single-sided psychological relationship experienced by someone towards another in a mediated encounter. The proximity between an ASMRtist and an ASMR experiencer exists outside many of the social demands of the 'real' world. This is not to diminish its value: those who create and consume ASMR are often simply seeking a connection with another person. In this way, ASMR reminds us that intimacy has many adjacencies, and the gradations between them can be striking.

[4] Gilles Lipovetsky, 'Time Against Time, or The Hypermodern Society', in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York, London, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2015), 156–172, here: 164.

[5] Maxence Rodier (Made In France ASMR), *The Cinematography of ASMR* (2024), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OubLf5FgY8> (accessed 31 January 2025).

[6] *WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD: The World of ASMR*, first exhibited from 8 April–1 November

2020 at ArkDes (The Swedish Centre for Architecture and Design) in Stockholm and subsequently at the Design Museum, London (13 May 2022–10 April 2023) and GATE33 Gallery/AIRSIDE, Hong Kong (14 March–13 July 2025).

[7] Works categorised as 'Visual ASMR' exhibited in *WEIRD SENSATION FEELS GOOD* include *Slice It Up* (2018) by Andreas Wannerstedt, *Rotating Rings* and *Cactus Cuddle* (2010) by Oscar Petersson, *Pandamonium* (2021) by Dr Formalyst and *Synthetic Crops* (2021) and *House Without Rules* (2017) by Wang & Söderström.

[8] There are numerous types of ASMR beyond the mainstream definition that have more regional or specifically cultural manifestations. *Meokbang* translates to 'eating show' in Korean, and *oogui* translates to 'gruesome hunger' in Japanese. Both terms describe a livestreamed audiovisual broadcast in which a host consumes quantities of food while interacting with an audience online.

## ‘FOUND STUFF IS MY RELIGION’

Q&A with Dina Kelberman



[Marco De Mutiis]

You have worked with appropriated photos of hailstones sent in to local newspapers, videos of ceiling fans from YouTube, now ASMR videos of sponges from Instagram. What speaks to you, what do these images mean to you, and do you experience a need to collect? How do you know when you’ve found the start of a project? What is on your screen these days (apart from ASMR sponge videos)?

[Dina Kelberman]

Most of my practice has come directly out of spending a tremendous amount of time online. Roaming the internet for long hours and coming across various strange rabbit holes that just sucked me in. It’s very instinct-driven but also feels anthropological. I love shop talk and subcultures I don’t understand. I love to learn their terminology and areas of special interest. It’s like visiting a foreign country but instead of Spain, it’s ‘People Who Love Elevators’.

The accumulation projects I do sort of feel like a taxonomic display. It’s like arranging butterflies or something; I like making aesthetic choices and showing that a bigger thing can be made out of all these little things, but at the same time, I’m trying not to interrupt the ability to see the individual item I found as it is.

Found things have stories that we don’t know and that’s why they’re special and not the same as a thing we buy or make ourselves. As much as I love making things, I always love things someone else made more, especially something old, because there’s a mysterious story inside it that can’t be known. We can know care and love went into making the thing, but we can never fully know what it was or what it meant to someone. There’s some kind of freedom when we don’t know something, when the not-known thing is safe and can’t hurt us, it’s just something to marvel and wonder about. We can plug whatever we

want into it, and then unplug that and try something else, do whatever we want with it. I think found stuff is my religion.

Speaking of which, when I got to the part of this question that said ‘do you experience a need to collect’ I burst out laughing and immediately took a photo of what is directly in front of me in my studio [myroomlol.tif].

I’m basically a borderline hoarder, both digitally and IRL. My grandfather was a real hoarder and though it seems to have skipped my mother, it certainly got passed on to me. I compulsively collect objects of interest, mostly from thrift stores or stuff found on the street. Now that I have a four-year-old daughter, a lot of my collecting energy goes into amassing too many toys, books, clothes, etc., for her. I tend to make things out of found pieces of things, toys for her, shelves and lamps. Little homemade wooden TVs that only play one thing are all over our house. In general, I guess people who make things tend to hoard in one way or another, there’s so much beauty and potentiality in an object.

[MDM]

There's poetics in these intimate and overlooked objects and moments, which you bring together through different digital and networked technologies. Are you part of any of these communities, and in which context do you encounter these images? Do you have favourite websites and alternative ways to experience the internet, do you work within or outside of social media feeds and algorithms, with or against them?

[DK]

I'm not directly a part of the communities I focus on, I'm definitely just a lurker. I often find things when looking for something else. I'm very interested in the choices other people make, especially if they don't make any sense to me. If I see a video thumbnail of something that looks extremely boring, I know that one's gonna be good. I think the draw is that there's a connection, a mutual feeling of obsession, but the subject of the obsession is different. So, there's a familiarity and an exoticism happening at the same time. What could be better than that?

But the internet has changed a lot in recent years and my relationship to it is changing. Algorithms are killing everything and it's becoming harder and harder to roam. Today,

when I tried to do a basic google search to learn about a topic, I was only given shopping results. My social media accounts almost exclusively show me ads. It's becoming increasingly difficult to find anything on YouTube that isn't an influencer channel, reel compilations, sensational garbage.

The internet used to feel like going on a long walk through forests and towns, from slow diversions to wandering into someone's house and going through their drawers, then out the door onto a highway to a whole different jam-packed city. Now it feels like trudging through an endless shopping mall. There are still places full of community and inspiration, but it's a lot harder to accidentally fall into them.

[MDM]

You shared part of your process of making *The Wave* (formerly *Sponge Project*) through weekly live streamed 'office hours'. Can you say something about that experience, the engagement with a community of live 'sponge viewers', and how was it different from your usual ways of working with other internet collections?

[DK]

I loved my office hours! I miss them! We had a small but reliable crew that would show up every week and chat, and it felt really nice. This was the first time I've worked in that way and it reminded me of the 'work parties' I would have when I had roommates, where we'd work on our laptops in a room together, going in and out of chatting, snacking, etc., as we worked on our projects. It felt like an antidote to the isolated nature of my art practice.

However, in terms of public viewing, I could only do that for certain aspects of the project, things that feel less vulnerable, like the organisation process. When it comes to creating the final product, the more nuanced part of creative testing and assessing, that is too intimate for me to want to make it visible. As a perfectionist I would truly hate for people to see all the 'bad' ideas that come before the project is finished!

