

## HAUL OUT – GOODBYES

### Tegan Smith

The YouTube video project *Haul Out* is a riff on shopping exposés where young people show off recent purchases. By creating a persona who cannot let go of possessions and using stuff I plan to discard, I reveal the underside of consumer joy. I present strategies for using social networking sites, specifically regarding how YouTube operates, public visibility, and the nature of physical and electronic garbage.



*Fig 1. Haul Out: 3 Second Thoughts, 2010 and Haul Out: Swap Meet, 2011, Tegan L. Smith, video stills.*



*Fig 2. Haul Out: 8 Unboxing and Demo, 2011 and Haul Out: 9 Elvis Balloon, 2011, Tegan L. Smith, video stills.*



Fig 3. *Haul Out: 3 Second Thoughts*, 2010, Tegan L. Smith, video still.

Through my video project *Haul Out – Goodbyes*, I reflect on consumer excesses in light of accountability to things cherished and discarded; and consider how YouTube participation is influenced by the specific ways it operates as a technology, video-sharing community and commercial enterprise. In this paper I focus on three areas of uncertainty: multiple purposes, public visibility and waste.

### Multiple Purposes

After completing ten *Haul Out* videos, I mull over whether artistic and critical interventions in social media networks have the ability to withstand the flow of commercial messages. This series is a riff on the proliferation of YouTube shopping exposés such as *Hauls*, where people show recent purchases, and have created a fashion and bargain forum. Young women with the most viewers are beginning to make careers with sponsored *Hauls*. From the opposing side of consumer joy, my videos emphasize bad shopping habits, amassing useless things and general wastefulness. The objects I showcase are not new, rather they are about to be given away as charity shop donations. Unlike in the *Hauls*, my price tags are long gone and would not be evidence of thrift but examples of money frittered away. The *Haul Out* vlog was launched on November 26th, Black Friday, or conversely, Buy Nothing Day. Advocating for not shopping becomes problematic in a medium such as YouTube, which is based on advertising.

The *Haul Out* series is part of a larger project, *Tender Loving Stuff*, in which I tackle hoarding and wasting as they relate to psychological attachment, economic prosperity, poetic inspiration and transgression in contemporary social practices. Assuming the YouTube persona TLS1HO began as a spontaneous attempt to understand compulsive buying and stockpiling. The character allows me to indulge in the incomprehensible anxieties of someone who cannot let go of possessions. I toy with truth and fiction in the act of

reclaiming my real-life belongings as art props, and naming the project and persona after my initials. Notions of self and morality are uncovered through statistics of visibility: this is my reality show and I am performing a version of my life.

The transformation of my art practice from video installation to purely internet pieces was a deliberate strategy based on questions about materiality. My primary goal was to explore ideas about stuff without creating more. During the last decade writers and academics from various disciplines have re-examined the degradation of the global environment, while rethinking the relationship between people and stuff in terms of past materialist theory. Notably, W.J.T. Mitchell is "encouraged...by the precedents of Marx and Freud, who both felt that a modern science of the social and the psychological had to deal with the issue of fetishism and animism, the subjectivity of objects, the personhood of things." [1] As I rummage around my hunches about the agency of stuff, I ruminate on thing-power. There is something more complex involved than individual human desires or capitalist manipulations of them. The *Haul Out* videos offer a perspective for observing the plethora of published work, internet sites and television programming on material chattels.

YouTube genres known as *Haul*, *Demo* and *Unboxing* provided existing phenomena to engage with ideas regarding objects, identity and commerce. The three internet categories epitomize YouTube's role as a site for grassroots video production and networking, conjoining with its marketing intent. The videos are shot mainly in private spaces, often in a bedroom. Each video proceeds as a seemingly unscripted one-sided conversation directed at the viewer. The vloggers talk informally, while describing in glowing terms one acquisition at a time. The *Haul* videos are made chiefly by women in their teens and twenties with newly-bought clothes. In *Demo* videos they demonstrate how to use products, usually makeup. A few young men present clothes and makeup in a similar gushing manner to their female counterparts. The *Unboxing* videos are primarily the domain of male geeks who unpack the latest electronic gadgets. In their version of the *Demo*, they set up new equipment. Like many YouTube aficionados, I am drawn to watching these optimistic young people. Elle and Blair Fowler (pseudonyms), twenty-three and eighteen year old sisters, are famous examples. They are interviewed on national television, have hired Hollywood agents, and are now paid for showing specific brands. Truth in advertising legislation has come into play, and some young vloggers use their YouTube channels for pitching their skills to potential sponsors, raising the spectre of self-promotion in social networking.

YouTube is a challenging venue for an art piece, and for an older participant. The numerous videos posted with free, web 2 public access make it an easy place to show off, and an easier place to get lost. Convincing people to view a video takes more than simply posting. According to Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, YouTube literacy "means not only being able to create and consume video content, but also being able to comprehend the way YouTube works as a set of technologies and as a social network," and the most capable users are in their twenties or thirties. [2] Viewer statistics record an immediate standing for each video, and YouTube's ranking algorithm includes views, ratings, shares and links. The vlogger's choice of taglines determines what categories will be matched with their videos. A recent search of "haul out" shows that my videos have slipped behind several sailboat haul outs. Although I have used the tag "haul" on all the *Haul Out* videos, none appear in that word search. Elle and Blair invariably top the list. A producer has no control over what individual and corporate advertising pops up as suggested watching beside their videos.

While Elle and Blair's videos clocked over seventy million viewers in three years, my *Haul Out* videos had just over five hundred during their first six months. In comparing the TLS1HO moniker to their glamorous AllThatGlitters21 and juicystar07, mine is homely. In stark disparity against their youth, meticulous make-up and accessories, TLS1HO is mature, unmade-up and shabbily dressed. Cute items enthusiastically displayed contrast with the worn and unsuitable things shown by my older, rumped and not so self-assured persona. Their articulate and confident performances prompted me to edit out ums making my later videos half their original lengths. Among the haulers, there are socio-economic status clues in items shown, presentation polish and production quality. The most-watched videos are much more slickly produced than mine. Burgess and Green say that "...to build an online presence within the YouTube community as a vlogger requires time, patience, and persistence, rather than a more casual mode of engagement with YouTube." [3] Elle and Blair blog, tweet and facebook constantly, and their admirers post fan pages. Flirting with cyber-celebrity, I keep track of my *Haul Out* statistics to post on Facebook, Twitter and my website. Such public exposure might reveal vulnerability and could result in setting oneself up for embarrassment, like imitating the popular girls in high school. Elaine Scarry says that "...if the person or thing outlives its own beauty... then it is sometimes not just turned away from but turned upon, as though it has enacted betrayal." [4] Emulating young beauty, and the latest trends could be seen as treachery, or instead unveil too much about consumer products, the human body and inevitable decline to develop a massive following. On the other hand, my videos might find aesthetic relevance as cautionary tales about the worth and treatment of stuff.

The *Haul Out* series is both personally and socially timely. *Tender Loving Stuff* grew in response to helping family members move. I became riveted to reality television shows such as *Life Laundry* about compulsive attachments to possessions, and frequented internet support groups for hoarders' families. In one episode of the television show *Hoarders*, a woman broke down in tears when she realized her childhood teddy bear was under her heap of junk, and that she should have taken better care of it. Her grown children were disgusted, for they felt more neglected than any teddy could. Compulsive shopping and squirreling away behaviors are often associated with fearful memories from periods of economic hardship. As an artist and former economist, I aimed to investigate beyond individualistic psychological explanations for other insights into the prevalence of hoarding. Anthropologist Daniel Miller says his studies show that "...the people who successfully forge meaningful relationships to things are often the same as those who forge meaningful relationships with people..." [5] The TLS1HO starting point was the curiosity and confusion of not understanding other people's attachments. Playing and playacting provided a vehicle to inhabit another point of view. Even while TLS1HO voices opinions and displays emotions that are not exactly my own, ad lib faltering seems to make it more authentic than it is. My detachment quickly melts away as I discover the contradictions of my self-deception, and begin to recognize my profligate and avaricious paths.

In the search for more resources and an on-line community, I revisited videos of critical theorist Slavoj Žižek, who takes on global issues as a loud, confident and imposing presence, whether at public lecterns or a landfill. By contrast TLS1HO's small, hesitant persona speaks in a conversational tone from the kitchen or bedroom. While Žižek pounds the air for emphasis, TLS1HO fondles objects with both hands. She looks into the self-operated camera as cohort in production while Žižek seems unaware of the lens. His diatribes incorporate political imperatives and abstract philosophies, whereas TLS1HO's ramblings on domestic concerns occasionally build to whiny harangues. I compare my work to such a tour de force because we are of the same generation with similar interests, yet work in different styles. TLS1HO seems stereotypically feminine in her concentration on shopping and domestic space. Her informative

videos extend to coherent storytelling within the milieu of YouTube shopping vlogs, and acquire social relevance only when enlarged to mass consumption and aggregate demand. Fortunately, there is a sense that anyone can do what she is doing: TLS1HO is no star, and that may prove to be her strength. If she can avoid narrowing her appeal to a niche group and encourage people to examine their own possessions, she might thrive in what Burgess and Green find scarce in YouTube: space for “quieter forms of engagement.” [6]

## Waste

The *Haul Out* project confounds social media and consumption behavior, and draws attention to the ways we coax, idealize, thank and admonish inanimate objects for their performance; use stuff to express individuality, even when it is mass-produced; and collect as a means to prevent feeling empty, lonely, or forgetful. As interactive electronics are becoming integral to daily life it hardly seems unusual that TLS1HO talks to things. As stuff is accumulated and consumed, it is invariably mistreated, favored over and becomes a minute detail in a heap of more stuff. Through the Haul Out videos I comment on responsibility for garbage, while resisting or not, the temptation to buy more. As TLS1HO views her image, she becomes concerned about buying new clothes, makeup and technical equipment.

My personal mound of obsolete and broken electronics is daunting. So far I have dealt with only one appliance, an electric wine vacuum. I have boxes of discarded computer equipment waiting for a *Haul Out* treatment. Such waste contains lead, mercury, arsenic and chromium that can effect human and animal health. According to Environment Canada, 140,000 tons of e-waste are dumped annually and the amount continues to increase. [7] In the U.S.A alone there are over 200 million active mobile phones. To prevent dumping in developing countries, disposing of electronic equipment is now the subject of international law. [8]

Comparing material objects versus digital data and dissonant feelings about dropping each in the trash, I butt against cyber overindulgence. I began adding up my space occupied on YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook and Twitter accounts, my personal website and current entries on other websites, and gave up when a check on wayback.archive revealed references to past exhibitions, one appropriately from the former DeadTech gallery. Like garbage in a landfill, electronic junk piles that I think are gone are still there: will my electronic trash end up with twitter tweets in the Library of Congress or in someone else’s mash-ups? At the risk of feeling overwhelmed by Well-Informed Futility Syndrome, I face additional concerns about the electricity which runs technologies. The examination of unwanted manufactured products takes on a broader meaning with recent natural disasters, as I imagine my stuff floating on a tsunami. The devastating effects of earthquakes, floods and wildfires are exacerbated by products of human invention, like the nuclear power plant. New media speeds up information transfer and nanotechnology promises to reduce storage size, at the same time, rendering devices instantaneously obsolete; and it sometimes seems that what we are saying is going out of style as quickly as the medium.

The *Haul Out* videos reveal a jumble of art concerns, social critique and self-indulgence that parallel the odd and ordinary junk in the donation bags. In *Vibrant Matter* Jane Bennett says that objects “...have the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception: what was trash becomes things, what was an instrument becomes a participant, what was foodstuff becomes agent, what was adamantite becomes intensity.” [9] Hopes are raised for the reinvigoration of democratic principles through social networking and contemporary materialism which takes into account the molecular structures of things and organisms as colonies of microbes. Boundaries between the animate and inanimate change. By giving each

item a moment in the spotlight, I pay homage to its function as a memento to guard against forgetting, and to abet in conjuring up a fictional history of success, accomplishment and love. Excessive memorabilia collections can interfere with sorting through what is important to remember, and clog the present moment, preventing immersion in current relationships.

I conceived and framed the *Haul Out – Goodbyes* project as art even though it was produced independently without plans for showing it within the art market or traditional institutions. As TLS1HO struggles to detach from possessions, I become more considerate of individual objects, their connectedness and the quiddity of stuff. Despite the challenges, YouTube offers a context to reflect on humble objects disregarded after the initial stimulation of purchasing wanes.

### **References and Notes:**

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*(Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 30.
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3. *Ibid.*, 74.
4. Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 50-51.
5. Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 195.
6. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 74.
7. Statistics Canada official Web Site, "Goodbye E-Waste," June 28, 2006, [http://www41.statcan.ca/2006/1762/ceb1762\\_003-eng.htm](http://www41.statcan.ca/2006/1762/ceb1762_003-eng.htm) (accessed May 16, 2011).
8. Andrew Zangilli, "Responsible e-Waste Disposal," FindLaw Web Site, September 20, 2006, <http://articles.technology.findlaw.com/2006/Sep/20/10271.html>(accessed May 16, 2011).
9. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham-London: Duke University Press, 2010), 107.