What It Means to Exceed Normative Boundaries:

A Comparison of Lindsay Elgin's *Untitled* to the Digital Realm

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A pair of snow peas floats in the void of space and a thin metal spiral pierces the pea, forcefully yet involuntarily collapsing the two peas together. This simple but complex pair of snow peas depicted in Lindsay Elgin's *Untitled* (2000) leads us to a state of utter confusion in trying to understand the function of this seemingly functionless structure. A closer look into the form and the context of this photograph leads me to theorize that this photograph is an encapsulation of digital media that was simultaneously on its rise and fall at the time. The work's themes of instability in the objecthood and thingness of the structure and the photograph; power to disrupt and interrupt; and human will and labor all seem to symbolize the contemporary ideas of digitality and the consequent chaos that marked the beginnings of 21st century America.

The initial bewilderment of this work arises from the fact that it is a depiction of something unfamiliar – it is a snow pea made inedible with a metal spiral that turns the former into a functionless object or an incomprehensible thing. We instinctively aim to familiarize this unfamiliar structure, perhaps seeing it as a human ear with piercings or a finger wearing rings; the centrality in taking a step closer to understanding this work consequently seems to lie in understanding the concept of objects, things, and materiality. Aristotle attributed the origins of all matter of the universe to earth, air, fire, and water, and argued that every physical object that could undergo change was the product of this very matter in addition to form. Plato elaborated that "form" was the same as an "idea" and consequently something that exceeded the status of matter.[1] The rise of digital media in the early 21st century led scholars to question how this seemingly incomprehensible realm fit into these definitions. Christine Browaeys argues that physical object, matter, and form are all part of "materiality," which then constitutes the totality of the physical and the intangible; the thing and the atmosphere; the assembly and the information. The traditional approach to materiality analyzed its physical shape first and "its

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[1] Laycock, H. (2017, October 26). *Object*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/object/

dimensional and structural reality"; however, in departing from this "structural logic of a Cartesian approach to matter," Browaeys states that the contemporary digital realm becomes the "emergence of a matter which is 'other.'"[2] This is the first point of intersection between digital media and Elgin's work: the pea-metal structure, through the strange intermingling of two unassociated things that leads us to question its existence (which is evidenced by our attempts to desperately seek for something we are familiar with from the structure), ignores the conventional development and examination of shape and creates an illusion of a structure that opposes the "dimensional and structural reality." When we give up on trying to see a familiar image out of this structure, we at last face a bizarre and unfamiliar figure. As the 1990s showed a rather sudden mainstreaming of digitality with the public rise of the World Wide Web,[3] Elgin reminds the audience of the illiteracy and incomprehension they experienced with the digital realm not long ago. She even makes us uncertain whether we are at a stage in which we are rightfully embracing the unfamiliarity of the new digital domain, or still trying to see the familiar in the structure we do not comprehend. In short, Elgin creates a new matter that is the "other," reminding us of the state of the art in digitality and our experiences within it.

Extending the notion of things and objects, "thing theory" can be used to specify that this separate dimension of matter that digitality embodies and Elgin mimics is characterized by an alternating and unstable nature. Thing theory, popularized in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, sought to intellectualize the relationship between humans and objects, utilizing Martin Heidegger's definition of things as objects that lost their functions as the basis. According to Bill Brown who is largely responsible for the creation of the theory, things are "Temporalized as the

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[2] Browaeys, C. (2019). *La matérialité à l'ère digitiale: L'humain connecté à la matière (Rien d'impossible) (English translation)*. PUG.
[3] *World Wide Web Timeline*. (2014, March 11). Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/03/11/world-wide-web-timeline/

before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects)."[4] In taking this quote literally, Elgin's structure is the "after" of a pea and a metal rod (i.e., two functional objects), and the "before" of something greater (i.e., something that exceeds the two materials), which indicate the "latency" of the structure. Moreover, Elgin perhaps formalistically alludes to Edward Weston's *Pepper* in an attempt to highlight the "excess" of the structure. In *Pepper*, Weston focuses on the very materiality of a green pepper through a black-and-white, detailed depiction of the vegetable just as Elgin does with her snow pea. Elgin further highlights the physicality of the snow pea through the shadows and lighting that emphasize its voluminous and organic form. However, through the inclusion of a metal rod that pierces through this organic object, Elgin has this physicality express a thing that transcends its nature as an object. Through the "latency" and "excess," and consequently the "thingness" of her structure, she illustrates a sense of unstable coexistence of normative object and an external realm. The identity of digital media was similarly very much volatile and insecure, showing latency and excess, as it was stuck between the stages of primitivism and advancement. This instability is evidenced by consequences such as the Year 2000 (Y2K) problem that also highlighted the same coexistence of the normative and the external realms as Elgin's structure: with the digital formatting of the dates not accounting for the year 2000, it illustrated the dangerous dependence of the material reality (such as operations of transportation, engineer-based infrastructures) on immaterial reality, and vice versa. Digital media was not a realm that could outright be defined to be either material or immaterial but rather was closer to the duality of the two, just as the physicality of

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[4] Brown, B. (2001). Thing Theory. *Critical Inquiry, 28*(1), 1-22. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258

the pea is challenged by the metal rod that pushes the structure towards the central line of materiality and immateriality.

Moreover, the medium of photography and the choice of gelatin silver printing granted Elgin additional opportunities to emphasize the ambiguity of the work's physicality, to encapsulate that of digitality. Scholars have applied Brown's thing theory to photographs; in discussing the thingness of images, W. J. T. Mitchell describes photographs as exhibiting "both physical and virtual bodies".[5] This notion of photographs as not merely 2-dimensional objects but also things that exceed the physical can further be traced back to Victorian photographs that were decorated with jewelry, hair, or other signifiers to accentuate the function of photographs as vessels of spirits, some "thing" that is "perched on the boundary between sign and substance" as John Plotz puts it.[6] On the other hand, Elgin's choice of gelatin silver print juxtaposes this external realm of photographs with the emphasized physicality of the technique: the silver metal particles suspended in gelatin is used to create an image, which is reminiscent of Aristotle's view on the formation of physical objects through individual prime matter. Working with this rather analog method of photography at a time where digital photography was on the rise, Elgin combines the undefined dimension that the photographic medium creates with a technique that highlights the physical and normative materiality of the work. Elgin again navigates between the realms of everyday physicality with the unknown, illustrating the duality of the physical and the abstract, which is characteristic of digitality whose development depends on both hardware and software.

Elgin's creation of this dimensionally bewildering work of photography that is reminiscent of the digital realm then leads to the question of her possible intentions in doing so.

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[5] Mitchell, W. (1996). What Do Pictures "Really" Want? *October, 77*, 71-82. doi:10.2307/778960
[6] Plotz, J. (2005). Can the sofa speak? A look at thing theory. *Criticism*, *47*(1), 109–118. https://doi.org/10.1353/crt.2006.0006

In describing her other pieces, including "en suit en masse" and "Someburbia," Elgin reveals her focus on shedding light on contemporary society and "the generic nature of mass culture."[7] *Untitled* seemingly aims to criticize the popularity of digital media and platforms in a similar manner. A closer look into the formal composition of the work underscores a theme of disturbance, mainly with the metal rod piercing and weaving through a pea, but additionally with the scratches created on the pea's surface from the attempts of penetration, and the minuscule white marks that disrupt the total darkness of the background. Moreover, the immense detailing of the pea's texture achieved through the gelatin silver printing technique further surprises the audience with small detailed bumps emerging from the expected smoothness of the shell, and the bright light that is concentrated towards the left end of the pea again gives rise to an interruption and a disequilibrium of the color scheme. Finally, the absence of a surface on which the pea lies, and therefore the defiance of our expectations of physical principles that this photograph presents induces an even greater sense of imbalance. These elements of disruption present to the audience a rather unsettling atmosphere, which perhaps becomes emblematic of the instability that the contemporary digital media faced. For instance, these elements are reminiscent of the aforementioned Y2K scare, which occurred as the result of the interruption of the 20th century by the year 2000, and was believed to lead to a severe disturbance in the operations of daily life. The sense of imbalance is additionally further aggravated by the grayscale of the photograph, which Saskia Sassen argues, "creates distance and thereby unsettles meaning. It is not simply about the image but also about nonimage – all the other presences that hover in a sort of penumbra around the image [which] we can see...theoretically."[8] This destabilization of the

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[7] Elgin, L. (n.d.). *lindsay elgin | photography*. Lindsay Elgin. Retrieved January 10, 2021, from http://www.lindsayelgin.com/photo.html

[8] Sassen, S. (2011). Black and white photography as theorizing: Seeing what the eye cannot see. *Sociological Forum*, *26*(2), 438–443. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1573-7861.2011.01251.x

meaning of the image additionally seems to question if our incomplete understanding of the meaning of the digital web caused the bursting of the dot com bubble and the downfall of the digital economy. Elgin is perhaps describing the digital realm as a whole to be an interruption that destabilized the standard lifestyle of Americans in the 20th century.

An even closer look into the work reveals an even more serious concern of digital expansion. Not only does the formal composition instill uneasiness, but it also embodies a sense of violence. The determined penetration of such a compact organic matter by a thin industrial object projects fear onto its audience in hindsight. The rapid proliferation of the dot com companies in the late 20th century gave rise to the dot com fever, characterized by the excessive purchasing of domains and stocks, and eventually led to the bursting of the dot com bubble. The fears this consequent collapse of the economy brought out parallels the response that Elgin elicits. As an emblem of the digital domain, the photograph seemingly warns its audience that there are haphazard aspects of digitality that will eventually draw horror and destruction. Furthermore, the excessive purchasing, the commodification of digital substances, and the ultimate collapse of the market mirror the fears that Karl Marx held in describing the "commodity fetishism," which is also mirrored in the photograph. Through this concept of the commodity fetish, Marx challenges the capitalist tendency of consumers to instill inherent values to objects to justify their consumption of these commodities while ignoring the human labor that created them in reality.[9] The incomprehensible structure of Elgin's work questions what really is instilled in this photograph and the exploration between the physical and immaterial realms discussed above heightens this curiosity. In a sense, we become consumers of this work as we try

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[9] Felluga, D. (n.d.). *Introduction to Karl Marx, Module on Fetishism*. Introductory Guide to Critical Theory. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from
https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/marxism/modules/marxfetishism.html

to instill some intrinsic value into this object whose existence as something outside of the realm of a regular commodity boggles with our minds. We perhaps compare this structure to familiar objects because we want to see something in the structure that could be useful in our lives, something we can capitalize off of. As mentioned earlier, Elgin may be arguing that contemporary society is merely trying to instill value into digital commodities without fully understanding their possible repercussions that affect individual lives. A close examination of Elgin's structure reveals numerous apparent attempts to pierce the pea (scratches and imperfect holes, rips) that then quite obviously reveal that the inherent value and intentions in the structure lie in Elgin's will and labor. It is through this that Elgin underscores the ignorance of contemporary society towards the fact that behind the digital commodities lies human beings that cannot easily be overridden by the splendor of the dot com interface and the fetishizing of the digital commodities; she seems to unveil the rather bleak truth that at the end of the bursting of the dot com bubble lies individual lives and their jobs, their ability to survive and feed their family. Elgin's concern with the commodity fetishism is additionally indicated in her series of photographs titled "en suit en mass" in which her depiction of the decorative details in hotel rooms questions the relationship between the unique values that these objects seem to possess, and the culture and industry of mass production. With her works, Elgin leaves us wondering about the ethics behind our consumption of commodities. *Untitled* completes its encapsulation of digitality by revealing the violence and corruption that exist as the pixels of the seemingly remarkable advancement.

      With Lindsey Elgin's photograph of a pair of snow peas pierced with a metal spiral in front of us, we as the audience are perhaps faced with the entirety of the digital realm that took over America in the early 21st century. First recognizing that this structure is something different

and something that transcends the ordinary reminds us of the unfamiliar dimensions of digitality. We even lie to ourselves that the structure is something familiar like a pierced human ear; similarly, we lie to ourselves that digitality is something we are comfortable with, something we finally have power over. We invest and sacrifice ourselves in this realm that we think we know well enough, and it is too late when we realize how the manufactured commodity can penetrate and injure objects of nature like how the metal can through a snow pea. We witness the elements of violence and vulnerability that this structure, and thereby the digital realm, possess. An even closer observation reveals the human labor that is embedded in this web of uncertainty and danger. At last, we are faced with the ultimate question: is it worth it to trade humanity for exoticism, stability for modernity?