



How to Chop an Onion / Anna Hawkins

by Nancy Webb

Onions

“I’m going to show you how to chop an onion.”

An onion is more of a smell than a thing. It is the base. Foundational. A first step in many recipes. Slicing into one is the go-to kitchen task that hosts assign dinner guests who feel a social imposition to help out. Maybe your mother or father or a friend taught you how to chop one. Maybe a human on a screen taught you how to chop one. Maybe you still can’t chop one, your knife hovering bewitched, mid-air, in front of your onion.

One summer, Anna Hawkins watches a video tutorial of a mom peeling lemongrass on a camping trip. Very provisional. We are onscreen, despite mosquitos biting at our ankles, sunscreen greasing up the iPad, somewhere in Maine. We have become self-ordained experts at everything.

Clay / Skin

There is an intimate affinity between clay and skin—whether wet, malleable and smooth or dry, cracked and hardened. Like skin, clay yields.

I’m trying to avoid comparing sex and pottery, but it’s bound to happen. Potters make deliberate hand gestures that, without literally miming the letters, spell out “shapely”. Touching wet clay is sexual, or it complicates the definition of sexual feeling. To behold pottery’s sensuality—its exaggeratedly supple demonstration of will becoming form—is to witness clay transmute into skin.

To watch is to feel.

...a pot is a cultural version, then, of the potential fullness and fruitfulness we recognise in ourselves as sexual mammals. We can contain stuff, and a few seconds of passionate interaction can bring new stuff into being. A film about pottery is, in this sense, a culturally sublimated form of pornography.[1]

Many YouTube potters are unaware of how erotically charged their tutorials are.

Tactility / Hollowness

On film, objects and substances that are made to be touched impart a distinct feeling of lack. For only a fleeting instant, watching handfuls of dough ooze between someone’s fingers feels as full

and weighty as kneading it ourselves. In the work of Anna Hawkins, phantom hands mime this action, grasping at nothing. The only sound is a click, and the click is thin: a disembodied sound. The click is hollow. Hollowness is the tick, tick, tick of the hi-hat, tinny and weak, scoring a bricolage of once-embodied tasks.

Hawkins's hands are self-effacing and obliterating. Rub velvet one way to expose a darker shade and back over again to erase it.

French Braid

A braid is a contract, it binds. I weave strands of my hair into a tail as you show me how. There is an intimacy in showing, in being taught. Learning tasks like braiding invites affection and closeness. It is a closeness that feels easy because it falls within the parameters of instruction. Other kinds of intimacy are more difficult to navigate emotionally.

Just watching and learning. Positive memories of learning live inside, in carefully protected nostalgia orbs; an invisible sphere contains the moment you learned to tie your shoelaces.

Anna Hawkins' videos are a transfixing visual language of outsourced knowledge and memories. All of the DIY drummers, makeup artists and chefs pile one on top of another, by the thousands, forming a chorus of instructions.

My understanding of rice proportions lives solely on the Internet.

[1] Nick Currie, "Pots on Video", Mousse Magazine, issue 41, <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=1043>



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