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Slippery When Wet

by Jenalee Harmon

Washing with a clean conscience -- dissolve your worries, fears, resentments, false expectations and desires from polluted, drained, overused skin. Nourish the membrane housing your centralized thoughts that separates you from externalized sounds, smells, images, and nerve-tingling vibrations. Experience body-mind-soul-spirit cleanliness as instant awakening between soul echoes and manifested reality.

Smooth and white, its mass and objecthood traversing the politics between tool, effectiveness, and time. At a previous liquefied state, now sits as an awkward slippery mass of solidified fats and oils. Upon reaction, its reply to water generates thousands of frothing glassy beads eager to embrace the skin.

Typically no larger than the width of a hand, its ergonomic shape of curved and sleek lines evoke an erotic undertone akin to modern design. Not too small to dissolve immediately, and not too large to provoke insecurities—just the right fit. Though, with contemporary mold-making, its objecthood can take the form of shells, crystals, hearts, cubes, cupcakes, puzzle pieces, eggs, and more.

>>> *small* > *slab of* >> *suddily* >> *sultry* > *soap* >

Holding soap requires a gentle yet sturdy grip. Too forceful, and it will leap to its death at the bottom of a shower floor. Descriptors for handling soap often include but are not limited to, “held,” “clasped,” “rubbed,” “massage,” and “grip.” Why shouldn’t sexual innuendos arise? Cleansing with soap is an act of free and reckless nudity within the masked privacy of your shower curtain. Be feverishly ambitious in your cleanliness.

scrub>>*scrub*>>*scrub*>>

Let’s not concern ourselves with the long-standing clash of “moisturizing” effectiveness between liquid and solid soap—we’re focusing on the mass of a solid bar of soap. Liquid soap is the charred aftermath of “trace” in soap making, burnt down from its solid bar shape. Liquid soap is rhetorical.

Unlike liquid soap, bars of soap demand a greater relationship between the hand and object. Bars of soap are compactly condensed fractal beads eager to transform and dance upon the skin.

You recognize, however, that a fresh, crisp, and clean bar of soap cannot keep its shape forever. You revel in the guilty pleasure of drenching the object under the showerhead for the first time, stripping its mass of its sleekly cut lines. Its edges turn soft and slowly dematerialize into thousands of tiny fractured bubbles that drip from its mass magnetizing upon your skin. So eager to please and quench, you recognize it’s dissolving far too rapidly and place it out of the stream of water. Calm down, we have a long road ahead with each other.

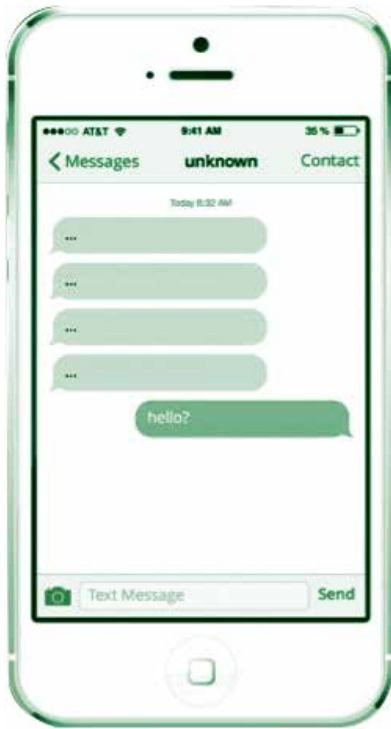
Day in and day out, you and this soap have developed an intimate relationship. Each time, its mass desperately waiting to fall into the palm of your hand and feverishly work to transform into liquid sparks to satisfy you. After a few weeks time, you recognize its mass is smaller and leaner than you previously remembered. Beaten, stretched, and dissolved to a quarter of its original size. You think back to early on in the relationship, when everything hit critical mass after learning the song and dance of each other. Its shape is still plump and firm, but now mirrors the concave space surrounding your holding gesture, sculpted to fit you and your gesture perfectly.

But I may be getting too far ahead of myself. What this discourse promotes is neither its subject nor contextual research. No one talks about the thing they're asked to talk about.

The 1800s marked a period of intense development in the natural sciences. The questions about the forces and matter that bind and hold the universe together soon became devices of discovery and revelation, which lead to new knowledge and developments in the natural sciences, psychology, physics, and communications.¹ Awareness of the surrounding invisible forces once unseen (and more importantly, unknown) within the universe sparked the synapses of scientists, psychologists, inventors, and mediums. The discovery of radio waves lead to inventions that sought to materialize unseen matter- telegraphy, the telephone, the phonograph. Communication shifted from the immediate visible body affixed to spatial proximity for one's cognition, to ethereal bodies suspended in space without traditional modes of recognition.²

¹ Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 253.

² Recognizing an individual or idea is real because of it's tangible mass presented in front of an individual.



Conversations transformed through space, proximity, language, and time with the addition of these new applied sciences. Consciousness shifted from localized immediacy with an individual's state of a 1:1 exchange of awareness, to a deliriously massive scale of 1:infinite. This mesmerization with the previously unseen external forces molding into real ideas, objects, and interactions obliterated the invisible sheath imprisoning one's "true" self from how they "truly" resemble themselves—constructing a de-ontologization of awareness and knowledge. This produced an expression of non-being/unseen and elemental/unknown. Consistency was thrown by the wayside, instead collapsing into and out of the traditional framework of visible as "real" and invisible as "unknown."

Psychic mediums were quick to fill this hole, performing as conductors between the physical (visible) realm of the séance tabletop, and the ethereal (invisible) spirit worlds. The marking of a successful medium often produces a bright white halo that surrounds the medium or ectoplasm- a goo-like substance secreted from orifices of the psychic's body that enables spirits to connect with the physical realm.

These exchanges were photographed, and worked to link images with what was once thought previously unreal. Although, these images produced mere representations of a reality, negating any presentation of a "true" reality. The images were hoaxes, pure fiction. These images go down best in history as fictitious experiments in camera work, early spiritualism, and proving that the first Ghostbusters were female.

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This period in history marks a break from previously polarizing sentiments of knowledge— what is recognized as truth and awareness— in tangible mass, to observing the immaterial as suspended truth— answers are not revealed within the present, but perhaps a future state could experience these answers. This writhing between moments of awareness— of what we know as seen, and what we don't know as unseen— has produced a wiggling of indirect consciousness, folding into and out of itself, and selfleveling to match encountered language. This wiggling is squeezing a bar of soap with wet hands and watching the mass wiggle through your grip— struggling to catch it with altering hands. At once you are performing its intended function with wet hands, producing an effervescence that magnetizes to your skin and yet the foam generated repels your gesture from its objecthood.

Critical awareness has transformed into liquid modernity—materializing into fractal dripping ether. And, as such, conversation shifted from exclamatory statements, to questioning sentiments and, currently, toward loose thoughts bouncing on the edge of a page.

!!! >> ?? >> ... >>

But while conceptualism demanded the internal materialization within an individual to often times “complete” an artwork (whether object or performer/artist was present), the current pulse of contemporary art doesn't demand physicality in a traditional sense, but, rather, embraces the transaction between internalized affect and its resulting vibrations tingling throughout the skin—linking the field of experience into harmonious states.

<<^^body-mind-soul-spirit^^>>

Though, should we drink the Kool-Aid? Grossly generalizing appearances noted, critical discourse used to exist within solidified binary states. With the visibility and vocalization of marginalized identities in the 1990s, criticism shifted towards acknowledging the diverse conscious minds existing between the previous binary posts. With the advent of the Internet (the poor Internet is blamed for everything), has immediacy and accountability radicalized polarizing sentiments? Is there a building of anxiety surrounding misunderstanding, unknowing, unseeing, and of missing the right side of critical history that has produced this fixation on liquidity and wiggling?



:: F.O.M.O. :: *fear of missing out*
 :: F.O.N.U. :: *fear of not understanding*
 >> *accountability > production =/= unseen*

I should acknowledge at this point that I am a commitment-phobe, but for the purposes of this text, let's get back to soap.

A ritualistic cleansing process, the utility of soap has infiltrated the mind of the everyday performing as a beacon of intimate banality. A fresh, untethered bar of soap straight out of the factory box is an unshifted, deactivated object. Its mass pushes against gravity, submitting to the invisible forces binding all objects into the dance of space, and only activated and transformed by you. A bar of soap is at once a solid mass of compactly dense elements, thirsty to be transformed and dissolved of its transgressions.

A mass-produced object, aesthetically and visually alike to thousands of others, but when activated by you becomes an object entrenched with personal memory and gesture. Soap is an elemental that participates in phase transitions, shifting from one state to another at the precise moment when pressure or temperature is just right. Liquid, solid, liquid, gas.

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With continued use, bars of soap abandon their critical mass, gradually dissolving into fractal ribbons of fats and oils. After routine use, it limply falls into the corner of your shower stall. Decisions have to be made—do you continue with its use until it fragments into dozens of pieces, do you place it in the corner and reserve its use for special occasions, or do you rip off the BAND-AID off and toss the soap in the trash to spare it of misery?

At the end of the day, you can reserve its use as iconography or you can accept its disposability. Besides being a tool of transformation and cleansing, soap contains its own sheath of repelling, transforming, dissolving, and performing. In fact, it has known its performative role the entire time. Aware of its inability to control time, place, reception, it attempts to perform to the best of its ability. Either way, its dissolution was activated by you.

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