



<http://serioustraction.otdac.org>

Opening Times: The work you created for your commission is titled *SERIOUS TRACTION*, can you tell us where the title comes from?

Heather Phillipson: Titles in my work are often as much about tone as about a literal meaning. A poet once said to me that a title is like a blind from which everything unrolls. A flash of texture – you give it a tug and see what drops. In this case, I wanted a flash of bombast – something muscular, grippy. ‘Traction’ is redolent of hiking boots and tyres. Or, medicinally, having your body wrenched into place. Etymologically, it also refers to the act of dragging – applying force, for friction or tension – and, in its newer, figurative sense, to the popularity of a product or service – ‘gaining traction’. So it’s there for all of these reasons – to suggest something brutal, that sticks. The addition of ‘serious’ just says that it means business, and it’s grave. Once subjected to caps-lock, ‘SERIOUS TRACTION’ also feels like the video feels – a blunt instrument, being whacked into teeth.

OT: The themes explored in the work, heightened through the way its fast narrative is constructed, give it a mixture of dark humour and anxiety. Is that a conscious choice?

HP: Everything that can be deliberate is deliberate. Or, I think, it should be. Because there are still plenty of associations and affects that you can’t control. But that doesn’t mean that I set out with that intention, specifically – it’s more that both humour and anxiety are the by-product of trying to conjure a scenario. And I should add fear into the equation, as something different to anxiety – the former being specific, the latter, crucially, non-specific – and therefore extensive, permeating. Being coerced into submission, subjected to an exterior regime, disempowered, de-subjectified – these are all states specific to the situation recounted in the video but, of course, they’re also more than that, with ripples and repercussions...In this video, any humour, anxiety or fear (anger, sadness, exhilaration) arises from the same source – discomfort. Recognition. Being forced deep inside/without one’s own more or less failing body. The tragi-comic hopelessness of it...Becoming, in short, meat – and, at the same time, mechanics, the representation of a body – primed for testing, penetration, assessment...an awareness that our fundamental flaw is to pretend that we don’t see the horror at the heart of our (self-imposed) systems.

OT: *SERIOUS TRACTION* develops with a fast exchange of text and images, rhythmically set by the increasing intensity of the sound. Its tension and short duration pushes you as a viewer immediately towards pressing play again.

HP: It's interesting it might have that effect – because repeated viewing parallels the re-living of the event that the video relates. The use of the past-tense is a key narrative tactic – here's something that happened, and it's still happening – in the sense that the 'I' is haunted by it – and it can happen over and over again. When – or even if – it *actually* happened is irrelevant – what matters is the desire/compulsion to dig around in it.

I wanted the video's structure to be, on almost every level, a translation or, perhaps more accurately, a transposition, of the experience – what can and cannot be taken in. So the duration of the video is approximately equivalent to the length of the procedure; the typeface is banal; the clinical colours, graphics and diagrammatic images (images that function to illustrate a point) are of its 'language'; the music is like a heightened, repetitive pulse (that, over time, might become more and more invasive, taking route in the skin); and the words are, perhaps, so direct that they fade away from meaning and towards pictures.

The fidelity here is not to facts but to intensity. It's just as much about what can't be processed. Like the act itself, there are no concessions to beauty or erotics, only the quickest route between two points – getting in and getting out.

OT: How does *SERIOUS TRACTION* relate to the online platform in which it's embedded?

HP: As hinted at in the title page image and the click-thru, I see this video as something that happens in a room behind a door – and the door is down a corridor in a series of corridors, and those corridors are in a building between many buildings, in a street that is part of a network of streets...For me, this is what a web-page is – a room within an architecture within an architecture...It's also how the body functions within the video – as a bounded space, but one that opens onto all these other structures and systems – and bodies, minds – and it's one that, similarly, casually, gets entered, and browsed.

Importantly, once inside that room (web-page, body) there's a sense of confinement, of everything pressing into the frame, or pressing up against it. And this is where the motion of the graphics is important – the attempt to put the frame under pressure – the outer limit from which everything recedes or closes in, or bulges (perhaps to the point of bursting). In this feeling of going *inside* something, and tunnelling around, I guess I'm attempting to conflate the body/video/web-browser – to subject them all to the same stresses of physical and temporal restriction, to suggest an equivalent status as 'content', in which private and public, intimacy and surveillance, are rendered coterminous.

OT: The work deals with a female-only experience that rarely gets exposed to conversation. Its fast-changing visual language is reminiscent of subliminal advertising, conveying information in an almost hidden form, perceived but not directly registered. How do form and content relate?

HP: The experience and the video are both constituted in part by what can't be said or shown – not only the limits of what can be said, but also what's permissible ('you do not have permission to add comments') – and, by extension (opposition), what must be defied, resisted, violated. The torrent of words – with almost no punctuation, only cuts, is enacting precisely this contravention – spilling over, disregarding what's 'proper'. It's one thing to speak around an experience, use it as reference and analogy, but to detail the grisly thing itself, to whoever will sit through it, is less tasteful, and more dangerous.