

A PLACE OF GLOOP AS A SPACE FOR BECOMING...
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Abstract

This film explores golden syrup as an artistic material, one that is viscous, visceral, glistening, its lusciousness enveloping flesh through its sticky, sweet intensity. Developed during an artistic residency as part of *Summer Lodge* at Nottingham Trent University in July 2017, 'Gloop' was an experimental space, a darkened room, inhabited by vessels of golden gloop, where participants were invited to explore, play and discuss. Reactions ranged from disgust to delight, syrup in glorious fluid motion, oozing, slurping, spreading, transforming, travelling, becoming...looking for crevices, resisting, seeping, escaping capture. How does syrup imply action, seeking to choreograph performative movements, sounds and explorations? How can we leave the space unchanged? How can we leave unsoiled?

How can material engagement enable a process of becoming in artistic research? How can gloop embody duration and motion, provoking emergence and regeneration? 'To exist is to change...to go on creating oneself endlessly.'
(Bergson, 1911:7)

Gloop as an event, was an invitation; a visceral experience; improvisational, collaborative performance; fodder for the camera; incubator for future work, an act of gathering and becoming. The space held shared, observed, and private moments, through the ebbs and flows of activity. Gloop as a film is part documentation, part experimental film, exploring the role of the digital eye and ear in looking in, capturing, obscuring experience.

Presented as a film and a paper.

Introduction

This project is a work in progress that is beginning to emerge through different forms and iterations. *Summer Lodge* was a catalyst for action, the event forming out of material play and conversation, whilst writing, film and sound are continually evolving, crossing, informing one another. The idea of becoming, especially in a Bergsonian sense, is central, we are in a continual state of becoming, and this as a project reliant on motion, playing with duration, emergence and regeneration. So, how can *Gloop* act as a conceptual framework for generative action, reflection and emergence?

Generally, I see myself as a maker, juxtaposing materials that have different qualities, resistances, and tensions. I am interested in process, and the co-constructive role materials play in developing work. I have become interested in golden syrup as an artistic material over the last couple of years, integrating it in small ways – for example used as a kind of drawing material, letting it drip down fibres and leave residues in the space. I am drawn to its sensuous qualities, and wanted to explore its possibilities further, whilst also challenging my role as a maker. What if I let the material itself drive the work in a more overt way?

So, ‘Gloop’ was an invitation, a playful provocation, to open out the potentiality of ‘gloop’, as a concept, as a multiplicity of experiences...how might different people respond to its calling?

The Event

The event was never intended as a ‘performance’, though it was a kind of installation, but not a refined or developed one, as the idea developed only a few days before the event. As the ethos of Summer Lodge promotes sharing, invitations, open provocations, the atmosphere created an opportunity to invite people to play with *stuff*, and in particular, *gloopy* stuff. The idea of creating an event seemed somehow formal though, a ‘thing’...something that perhaps seems formed or developed. For Bergson, a thing might be seen as ‘immobile’, although he is clear to note that this is in fact an illusion, as in ‘matter and memory’, he ponders, ‘how should *progress* coincide with a *thing*, a movement with an immobility?’ (Bergson 2016[1911]: 133)

I realised that an ‘event’ as a ‘thing’, could be seen in a similar way as I see an artist’s relationship with materials. It is not about imposing a finished idea upon materials, we *go with them*, following the fluxes and flows of their forces. This relates to Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of multiplicity and rhizomes (2013 [1987]),...patterns of action are not about tracing a route, defining a beginning and end, or having defined choices; an artist cannot control but connect and interact, to form new potentials. This idea of potentiality is taken on by Tim Ingold:

Making...is a process of correspondence: not the imposition of preconceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming...
(Ingold, 2013:31)

So, Gloop was an experiment, with a focus on body-material exploration, an open set of possibilities, one that I hoped would provide fodder for film and for future work, whether this be in the form of physical, made ‘things’, sound, or collaborative possibilities for performance and digital moving image. However, its main aim was to provoke material engagement, without pre-conditions, set ideas or outcomes. O’Sullivan states that,

Art...might be understood as the name for a function: a magical, an aesthetic function of transformation. Art is less involved in making sense of the world, and more involved in exploring the possibilities of being—of becoming—in the world. (O’Sullivan, in Andrews and O’Sullivan, 2013: 20)

Space / Place

In creating a space as the nucleus for activity, we had an incubator, a place with particular conditions to enable growth. Darkness seemed important, to enable a focussing on and in the material, to draw out its ‘glistening’ through narrowly focussed light sources, controlled in part by participants. Light came from an overhead projector, a couple of projected film experiments, and torches, sometimes immersed within the syrup, focussing the eye, blocking and obscuring the ‘in between’ spaces. Tanizaki talks of the beauty and value of darkness in traditional Japanese dwellings, in his essay ‘in praise of shadows’, noting,

A phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and color in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty. (Tanizaki, 2001[1977]:46)

From another viewpoint, Nicholas Royle, in his book, ‘the uncanny’, talks of the relationship between what is hidden and what is revealed in Freud’s essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919),

Darkness is at least implicitly involved in the crucial definition of the uncanny that Freud takes from Schelling: the *unheimlich* or uncanny is what “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light”(U, p.345)...it is not so much darkness itself...but...the process of revelation or bringing to light that is uncanny. (Royle, 2003:108)

He goes on to talk about Paul de Man’s view of important literary texts coming out of a combination of blindness and insight. This points to the value of *unknowing*, perhaps as a route to knowledge, and the inseparable nature of seemingly opposing forces. Following Freud’s focus on repressed desires, perhaps

Gloop might be seen as a kind of ritual or therapy, allowing us to remember our inner child, before we became infected by rules and expectation?! Or does it bring out our repressed understanding of our *own material nature*, our bodily tensions and visceral sensibilities? The idea of the ritualistic is tempting, but it is a term used too carelessly, romanticised; therapy in this form too hierarchical, too reductive, rather than *material as potential* for drawing out a complex web of oscillating forces.



Fig 1: Golden Syrup on overhead projector.

Place

In terms of the Gloop space being a particular kind of 'place', you could say that a sense of collectivity was present, provided by the framework of the *Summer Lodge*. 'Participants' included studio assistants, who are current fine art students, fellow *summer lodge* artists, as well as academics and technicians from my department and beyond. Some stayed at the door looking in, but refusing to set foot inside. Some came in but were tentative, aware that the level of engagement and stickiness may interrupt or work against their own ideas or plans for the day. Others were engaged with the material for a period of time. Patterns of activity seemed to me, a kind of act of gathering and becoming – an experience together, apart, opposed, and yet an emerging collaborative performance.

Non-action

Those that engaged more visibly clearly made it into the film more than those who didn't, but what about those who stood on the edges, did not visibly act? What about the importance of non-action, and non-*doing*? This is surely significant (marks on a 'map' of the event, perhaps), but how might it be revealed? Does it further intensify the activity within, or is each viewpoint indifferent to the other? Non-action may be a statement of disgust or dis-interest, and what, then of non-becoming? It would be interesting to create a map for the patterns of activity (or indeed non-action) within and on the edge of the space,¹ to see how pace and levels of interaction can be seen as a visual – kinaesthetic schema for 'Gloop', perhaps?

Social space – patterns of action

The shape, pattern and rhythm of the work then, was framed by levels of activity within the space. I was interested in the energy of the space, how it changed between highly active, buzzing and fun, to meditative and immersive, a site of discussion or interrogation, or solitary, reflective quietness. Participants engaged in personal explorations and dialogues with the material itself, perhaps focussing on one particular bowl or space, slowly moving, at the same time as others were playfully provoking it, laughing and delighting in its absurdity. Different paces of activity were apparent alongside one another. During this initial active phase, the space quickly changed as gloop seeped out from the boundaries of the bowls and tubs, so it was no longer possible to tread *between* spaces without becoming attached to the floor, or indeed, 'soiled'. It was impossible to stand still on the floor where the syrup lay. What this created, as the space became inhabited by a single visitor at a time (alongside myself), was a space for more lengthy dialogue, a way to almost perform a discussion, to be moving, as another moves, to draw out rhythms, to be engaged in a sensory, mobile act whilst verbally exploring ideas. This leads me to think of Bergson's 'pure mobility', duration as a continually evolving present, building on the past but never repeating without change.

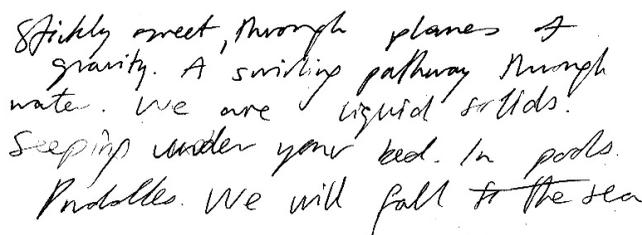
Moments of reflection and pause are useful however, here lies a tension between trying to articulate or consolidate an idea, and yet leave it as an open set of possibilities. Bergson states, 'Our perception manages to solidify into discontinuous images the fluid continuity of the real.' (Bergson, 1944[1911]:328)

The Text

The word gloop itself is evocative of the action or movement of syrup or viscous substances, a kind of onomatopoeia, even if through its imagined sound – the word can be drawn out...g-l-o-o-p...so it inevitably provokes at a cross-sensory level of perception.

¹ see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, to consider the rhizome as a map and not a tracing, a map being 'susceptible to constant modification'(2013 [1987]: 12), performative, rather than a pre-ordained route.

I wanted to see what people's responses would be to the idea of Gloop, without thinking too much about it so I requested visitors to the space to write for one minute before and after entering the space to capture immediate thoughts, anything they could think of in relation to *Gloop*, a kind of free writing exercise. The writings formed a way of capturing a private moment, exploring abstract or visceral responses, associations with the word itself. They were playful, ridiculous, thoughtful, melancholic, abstract, poetic....



Sticky sweet, through planes of
gravity. A swirling pathway through
water. We are liquid solids.
Sleeping under your bed. In pods.
Probable. We will fall to the sea

Fig 2: Anonymous free writing for GLOOP event

The fact that the writings were anonymous, gave the handwriting a kind of aura, an imagined character of gloop itself perhaps. But, as soon as these texts were vocalised for the film, they changed in nature from the uninhibited, scrawled, free writings, each building its own character and weight, sometimes simply read from a page, other times becoming more animated, building a kind of narrative. Bringing others in to respond to either the written text, the moving image, or simply the idea of gloop, evolved the original material and gave new dimensions to the image, playing with directed or potential 'readings', and essentially bringing it back to the body.

The Film

The film was intended as part documentary, part experimental film, made in collaboration with Jonathan Hamilton, who filmed the event. (see <https://vimeo.com/jonathanhamilton>). The aim was to capture the event as 'a thing' but use the editing process as a way to dissect, disrupt, and reorganise the material as a way of reflecting upon it, whilst creating new potential and directions. I saw the film making process as a mouthpiece, if you like, for regeneration and emergence, aided by alternative viewpoints, interpretations, tendencies and set of technical competencies brought by Jonathan.

The camera allows a particular framework for observation, zooming in, zooming out, actively capturing and following flows of movement and space. It has its own choreographic language, working with and intersecting the choreographic actions of movement and material. Editing the film builds patterns and layers, each new iteration building its own sense of choreography, which builds on repetition whilst

continually flipping backwards and forwards in time. The timeline builds upwards, downwards, stretching and compressing as we work on it, the process and resultant form playing with pace, rhythm, direction and duration.

What about the result, or at least its potential aim? How might film provoke bodily sensations or a sense of delight or disgust? How do we engage the visceral through the digital? Can the film be *perceived* as a regeneration of the event, feeding off its own material whilst generating new possibilities? Rhythms emerge, sounds and images intersect, as they converge and go out of sync. This way of developing patterns provoke what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as assemblages and collisions (2013 [1987]), each informing and changing one another. How might we build on this to cross between making, observing, writing, performing, constructing and engaging, through different modes of art practice and collaboration?

How can *material* drive interaction and performative possibilities and feed the camera,
and,
how might text and image feed sound,
and,
how can recorded sounds reframe the moving image,
and.....

According to Alfred North Whitehead,

It lies in the nature of things that the many enter into complex unity' and that this unity is one of unrepeatable combinations, that itself is a 'creative advance into novelty. (Whitehead 1929, in Sherburne, 1966: 35)

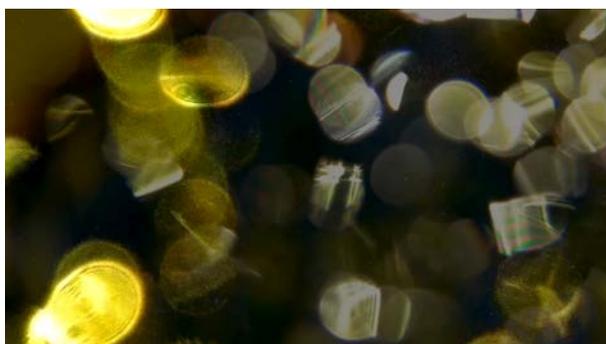


Fig 3: Film still: GLOOP. Golden syrup in water.

And...this inevitably continually evolves ...some collisions need to be revealed and shared in order to pause, consolidate, before embarking on new iterations and opening up to further potentiality. Whitehead poses experience as a

‘conrescence’ but one that drives continually interconnected novelty and perpetual change (see Whitehead 1929, in Sherburne, 1966).



Fig 4: Film still: GLOOP.

Material-Body

So, to come back to the material itself...Why *is* syrup, or gloop so pertinent for a notion of becoming? It has the ability to transform, its fluid motion oozing, spreading, resisting, seeping, escaping capture. Its translucency provides porous boundaries, responding to light, enveloping, emitting, reflecting light. It has a *vibrant materiality*, as explored by Jane Bennett (Bennett, 2010). Its motion and changeability provides ripe fodder for emergent practices and explorations, it is hard to control, but invites action, provoking, seeking to choreograph movements. (Bergson, 2016 [1911]). Some enjoyed playing with slow, fluid movements, whilst others enjoyed squeezing, scraping, almost kneeding it, to oxygenate it, changing its qualities...and still others tried in vein to resist its sliding. All had to engage in movement of some kind, even if to keep away. Its slimy and sticky qualities invoke disgust or delight as a tactile experience; it is hard to remove from the body, it becomes ingrained, in fingernails, hair, between the toes; it permeates, or as Bergson would say, it *endures*.

You may delight in the taste or find it ‘sickly sweet’, with its overpowering scent. In addition, sugar has a relationship with desire, a craving, something perhaps forbidden, and with its own cultural history. It has a significance as food, we can literally ingest it, after which it becomes entwined with our bodily cycles, and Bennett discusses this to blur the lines between external and internal, inert matter and *life*.

The activity of metabolization, whereby the outside and inside mingle and recombine, renders...plausible the idea of a vital materiality. It reveals the swarm of activity subsisting below and within formed bodies and recalcitrant things, a vitality obscured by our conceptual habit of dividing the world into inorganic matter and organic life. (Bennett, 2010: 50)

We can, then, explore the body as the site of emergence, through visceral, material engagement. We can see that multiple forms and approaches feed one another, but how is this useful outside its own cycle of consumption? What if we become more open to the possibility that knowledge is gained through connectivity, that body, material and environment act in symbiotic, organic, rhizomatic relationships? How might we develop a kind of philosophy of gloom, a concept that has the ability to spread and seep into other areas of understanding and practice?

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