Michelle Gay

Interfaces and Operating Systems

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On Interfaces or Michelle Gay’s invitation to resurfacing words

by Marta Marín-Dòmine

A female figure eating words; a screen on which stanzas dance; virtual tiny bodies wiping time off their skins; female figures setting words on fire; the gestures being repeated, repeated — scenes we are invited to watch, sometimes even to intrude in, but discreetly, feather-like, tiptoeing, as if knowing we have been called to enter a space where silence is required, all the better to sharpen our senses.

In accessing the digital works of Michelle Gay, or in encountering them in the street (where electronic poems may surface on buildings), one is never sure whether one is being exposed to acts, or being invited to participate in virtual realities created by a mind questioning day-to-day life by means of the poetry of the machine. The work of Michelle Gay goes beyond the construction of virtual realities.

An important part of Gay’s artistic production since 1996 has been to play with two concepts: language and time. In some works, word-replacing experiments are staged in virtual spaces in which the viewer is immersed. In others, time is a leading element, manifest through the repetition of actions performed by digital figures. It is perhaps the use of these two fundamental elements: language and time — critical in conscious and unconscious formation — that makes possible a technologically produced poetic experience. It is certainly a merger of the familiar in the human body and the uncanny in the machine.

However, unlike some other computer-based works, Gay’s interfaces are only partially interactive. Rather than limiting the works, this characteristic opens them up to a hypothetical dimension while maintaining the inherent playfulness that is so common in computer-created art. Both spirited and reflective, these pieces could equally be visual poems or theoretical statements.

In Gay’s interfaces, language and time are objectified, engaging the viewer in a sort of sensitive self-reflection, since language and time give meaning to being.

On Timers

Timers is a set of works animated by little creatures that are generated from full-bodied photographs of the artist. Automaton-like, they wipe time off their bodies, eat words, use time as kindling for fuel in fire — repetitive gestures performed in loops that, as in any repetition, produce a hypnotic effect. However, the uncanny sensation that these loops also provoke stems from their being the product of gestures performed by quasi-human figures, thus reminding us that repetition is at the core of all human activity. We could say — calling on Jacques Lacan’s theory of desire — that, in blocking access to what we most desire, repetition also blocks the entry of what we most fear.

And here the chain of paradoxes begins: if repetition blocks desire by short-circuiting the access of new spaces in which new gestures could be possible, then why is human life so inhabited by repetition? (Walking, typing, cleaning, brushing — the everyday rituals of existence are in themselves an endless series.) New horizons, on the other hand, are indeed like adventures, potentially unlimited spaces that place the subject face to face with the other. Repetition, it seems, protects us from the unpredictable. This paradox animates the sinister side of repetition, its similarity to death.

Nevertheless, the repetitive gestures of Gay’s Timers are rescued, if not from the uncanny, at least from an imaginary death drive. For the continuous looping actions of the figurines are performed under the gaze, so to speak, of tiny time counters on the screen. By calling present...
time into action, the work opens up a crack calling repetition to a halt. For time, our own present time, announces our presence. Time allows us to know that we are looking on, overseeing, and hence repetition becomes potentially bound to be interpreted, to interpretation.

While the creatures might be eating words, wiping off time, it is our time and our own interpretation that is at stake.

Unlike the automaton—the simulacra-machine that imparts the sinister feeling of mastering a time of its own—the repetition brought about by Timers is, as it were, humanized under the gaze of the viewer’s time. Timers is, in fact, the result of a conjunction between routine and spontaneity, capable of highlighting both the necessity of time for interpretation and the lethal aspect of its contrary—repetition.

On Generating Poems

Poemitron, Stretchpoem, Retrieval Pictures

The result of a mnemotechnic system originating in antiquity, memory palaces were virtual spaces constructed in the mind’s eye in the image of real public buildings. In them, one stored images referring to ideas, and these storage rooms constituted aides-mémoires for the composition of public speeches. Architecture in the service of memory, a notion that pervades the contemporary construction of computer-generated memories.

In spite of the fact that memory palaces seemed to help in the retrieval of images lodged in the brain—to build words and therefore worlds—the question remained as to how exactly images were stored into memory. Reflection on this mystery permeates book X of

Above: Michelle Gay, *machine dreams suite*, 2000 (installation view), custom artware on computers, touch and pressure sensitive input pads, wall mount LCD pads.
Augustine’s *Confessions*, as well as many recent works of neuroscience.

The mechanisms of memory, it can be stated, seem to place images and words in a relation of contiguity, a major process in meaning formation. The similarity of one image to another makes it possible to call up a third. Also, our sense of objects and images is built up through prior recollection of similar objects and images and their sense. The image of a cat and a bowl might recall a previous image of a cat drinking from a bowl of milk, while that of a cat and a hat might not produce any sense, but could nevertheless trigger, if we allowed it, something imaginary (as it did for Dr. Seuss in *The Cat in the Hat*).

*Poemitron* is custom-designed software (or what the artist refers to as “artware”) built by Gay in collaboration with particle physicist Colin Gay (the artist’s brother). Its interface could be defined as both a memory palace and a word-hoard that the software puts into relation with any other piece of writing introduced into its system. *Poemitron* is used as the operating system for *minute revolution* where the system plays with The Beatles’ song *Revolution* as well as in *Spampoet*, where the “artware” engages in a dialogue with writings often found at the bottom of spam-mail collected by the artist over time.

A name evoking those 18th-century automata designed to fulfill collective fantasies, *Poemitron* replaces words right in front of the viewer’s eyes. Watching the
old word vanish beneath the new one, one is reminded of Freud’s ‘Mystic Writing Pad’, a toy composed of layers of transparent material on top of waxed paper that served Freud as a metaphor for how memory traces were imprinted in the brain.

In Poemitron, old words seem to fall into oblivion, while still persisting in the mind’s eye. By connecting texts so diverse (texts which seemingly could never have been connected) the Poemitron produces a new, intrinsically out-of-meaning — out of place, out of space — text, whose comic, ironic, playful effect — so common in Gay’s work — is the product of the viewer’s search for meaning in her/his own memory palace.

But the Poemitron is not a chaotic device dispensing a chaotic product. Poemitron replaces each word with another of the same grammatical category. The final structure of the new text, therefore, entails a slight shift of meaning, just enough to put a smile on the viewer’s face. But this is not all. With its capacity to project the new text against diverse surfaces (buildings and walls, but also natural landscapes), Poemitron invites a questioning of the relation between convention and subversion. When is a poem a poem? Must a poem be constructed by a conscious memory? What is a text? Is meaning its necessary precondition? Does form precede meaning?

All these questions are also at the basis of the interactive, pressure-sensitive Stretchpoem, a series of stanzas operating in 3-dimensional movement on a screen, all tending toward an amalgamated vanishing point. Here, the viewer’s touch on the pressure pad, causes the lines of text to advance, recede, or move up and down depending on their interaction.

Elongating or shrinking in reaction to our touch, Stretchpoem is at once silent, imperceptible, and sensual, as we virtually feel the words through our hands. This tactile displacement suggests rhythm, the basic element of poetry, which in this case is punctuated by a repetitive soundscape, looping through our ears. The stanzas continue to hover until the viewer stops interacting with the pressure pad, an involvement that underlines the infinite potential for alternative and multiple narratives.

Poems and timers, language and time. The human trapped in the mechanical. Ironic comments on art and repetition, on art and the need to find an outer place/outer space. And finally, the need of the viewer to interpret the apparently mechanical.

In this, our historical moment of discursive fragmentation and the circulation of polymorphous identities, the work of Michelle Gay invites a reflection on time and perception and the construction of sense through the most innovative of medias.

However, Gay does not present the machine as all-powerful. On the contrary, ‘it’, the machine, becomes fragile before our eyes through the introduction of real time, our time. The machine — the device that has populated and frightened the imaginary of most, if not all, cultures — is now bound to mortality, tamed. If our time ceases, would the machine still exist? Who would be there to time it? To say that a word is a word, to recognize the stanzas of a poem? To eat words? And above all, to play?

Michelle Gay studied Art and Art History at the University of Toronto, and received her MFA from Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Her work often experiments with the ubiquitous desktop PC as a site of intimate virtual or digital experiences, teasing out resonant connections between machines and bodies, and between digital and actual spaces. She often collaborates with her brother and particle physicist, Colin Gay, on these projects. Interested in the possibilities of touch and poetics within new media platforms, they develop “artware” designed to play with technologies in non-useful ways. She is represented in Toronto by Birch Libralato and is online at www.michellegay.com

Born in Barcelona, Marta Marín-Dòmine lives in Toronto and teaches literature at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her area of interest is the intersection of psychoanalysis, art, and literature in dealing with concepts such as time, space, and identity.