

Pro surfing, Remix, Apparatus: Émilie Gervais and Post-Internet Art

Paule Mackrous

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[See table of contents](#)

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PRO SURFING

REMIX

APPARATUS

ÉMILIE

GERVAIS

AND

POST-INTERNET ART

In an interview for the magazine *We Make Money Not Art*¹ in 2008, artist Marisa Olson proposed the concept of “post-internet art” to describe contemporary art practices. The prefix “post” indicates art that, contrary to net art, has developed subsequent to the widespread, daily use of the internet. Citing fellow artist Guthrie Lonergan, Olson explains that by appropriating elements from the web for their work, post-internet artists are making “internet aware art.”² These artists take a resolutely critical stance on media. Such is the case of Montreal artist Émilie Gervais, whose works combine elements from the internet in order to create insightful experiences. While definitions of post-internet art are not unequivocal, its characteristic concepts, such as pro surfing, an awareness of the apparatus, and the remix, have become useful catalysts for reflecting on web art since 2010. These concepts bring to light various aspects of Gervais’ work without reducing their intensity.

A Pro Surfer in the Vernacular Web

In the browser window, myriad juxtaposed or superimposed images and animated GIFs stream against a glittery background. Stuffed animals, small angels, and trees made of stars mix with doves, butterflies, doughnuts, and chocolate. Somewhere the words “Hell Hell Hell” appear, while a MIDI file plays an ‘80s instrumental version of “Heaven” by Brian Adams. We are in heaven! At least, that is what the work’s title (*Heaven*) tells us. Rather, we have the impression that we have stepped back into a distant past. The images are no more than twenty years old, but the appearance of the web changes so quickly that its visual language already looks old, even outdated, in only a short time.

Faced with a work like *Heaven*, we can decisively say that this is the work of a “pro surfer.” Pro surfing is “characterized by a copy-and-paste aesthetic that revolves around the appropriation of web-based content in simultaneous celebration and critique of the internet.”³ One does not learn how to do this in university. One learns it by surfing the web for many hours out of pure passion. Thus Gervais describes how, while studying in France, she created her own art school, which she called “Bed Art School”: “I figured I’d learn and work more straight from my bed, [...] basically I’m going through art school without really being in it. The internet is my school.”⁴ For the pro surfer, the web is second nature; she knows it like the back of her hand and is fluent in various programming and colloquial languages.

Entering Gervais’ work, therefore, is akin to diving into the vernacular web, as defined by net artist Olia Lialina⁵: an amateur web that took form in the ‘90s. It was enthusiastic and creative, full of starry backgrounds, animated GIFs, and “Hello World” messages. In the early 2000s, when several participatory platforms like MySpace first appeared, websites started being embellished with extravagant animated GIFs that echoed pimp culture. Lialina calls this second phase of the web, the “glitter”⁶ phase. With *Heaven*, Gervais has created a hybrid of these two periods of the web, which stem from two completely different standpoints. Although the iconography of Web 1.0 is sometimes similar to that of glitter, the first

transmits an enthusiasm for the future—“a touching relationship with the medium of tomorrow—while “glitter decorates the web of today, routine and taken-for-granted.”⁷ Through critique and humour all at once, *Heaven* translates this fervour for a new media and its culmination into the vacuity of glitter. As she stages this vacuity, the pro surfer makes us aware of the web as apparatus.

Showing the Apparatus

Apparatuses are omnipresent, directing our thoughts and actions. At least this is the position that philosopher Giorgio Agamben takes in stating “that today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modeled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus.”⁸ Photography, painting, and the web are not just medias or art forms; they are apparatuses, above all, as they have “the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings.”⁹ Gervais uses various strategies to make us see this apparatus.

In *Heaven*, we cannot interact with the website: the cursor disappears as soon as it enters the browser window. This passive viewer position is counterintuitive since we are used to browsing freely. We are “subjected” to a spectacle, rather than deciding how it will unfold. Yet are we usually all that free to interact? While in the ‘90s, the web represented the freedom to choose, to create, to exist, Vito Campanelli claims that today this freedom is for the most part illusory: “The citizens of the network society believe that they are acting, but they are being acted on.”¹⁰ The current web no longer allows subjects to invent themselves. The absence of interactivity and the staging of vacuity in *Heaven* draw our attention to the apparatus as a process of de-subjectivization.

This aspect is even more striking in *Happy Birthday*. A video of the artist serves as wallpaper background. Small MSN emoticons, accompanied by their nicknames, which fail to imbue them with any uniqueness, fall like rain before exploding into fireworks and disappearing from the browser window. If the subject “is formed through action, knowledge of reality, and lived experience,”¹¹ the construction of the subject on the web is both conscripted and ephemeral. Through this rain of standardized identities, Gervais draws our attention to the fluctuating nature of the apparatus, in which presences disappear as quickly as they appear. While the web certainly does offer one the possibility to create an identity, this identity is subject to the constraints of the apparatus, serving to ensure that the apparatus is perpetuated. The freedom to invent oneself thus rests on our awareness of this apparatus and capacity to deconstruct, critique, and remix it.

The Remix, a Unique Composition

Extensive knowledge of the apparatus and its vernacular language allows one to combine or edit pre-existing material in order to create something new. This is called a remix.¹² *The Decline of the Unicorn* presents a tangled mix of photographs of real places (beach, street) and objects related to computing (cables, hard drive), juxtaposed with GIFs and imaginary figures, such as a manga character, a witch, and

unicorns. The unicorns are drawn using ASCII characters in such a way that the source code is identical to the image we see in the browser window. All aspects of the web are contaminated by each other: the mundane world (which holds the physical servers of the web), the interface (which takes the form of the screen), and the world of computer code (which is usually hidden). The remix of these elements creates what Artie Vierkant calls “an alternate conception of cultural objects,”¹³ articulated here through the erosion of boundaries.

Yet the remix is more than the sum or the intersection of its parts. It is a kind of signature that comes from the structure of the work itself, which ensures that we recognize it as the work of a particular artist. Speaking of the many aspects appropriated from the ‘90s web, Gervais argues that the appropriated elements add semantic layers to her work.¹⁴ One can insert disparate visual content into the structure and the work still makes sense. This constitutes a fundamental stance of post-internet: “Post-internet is made up of reader-authors who by necessity must regard all cultural output as an idea or work in progress able to be taken up and continued by any of its viewers.”¹⁵ The elements of the remix are therefore incidental and interchangeable within a structure that produces a unique effect.

I call this effect of Gervais’ work “intensity.” The intensity is produced by the iconographic overload: an excess of images that continuously bring the gaze back to the surface of the screen. If there is depth, it rests in a series of layers rather than in an illusion of three dimensions in which one could immerse oneself. The works are flashy, but their appeal is not ephemeral. The iconographic overload makes the work compelling in the long term. In *Heaven*, *Happy Birthday*, and *The Decline of the Unicorn*, the specific arrangement, the precise disorder that Gervais articulates, as well as the large number of remixed elements produce the overload. In *Justin*, a single image—a female chest moving frenetically—invades the browser window, producing the overload. In this work, just as in the others, the experience of the intensity orients how we interpret the work.

Although I have paid particular attention to the work’s critical aspects, it does not mean that these aspects dominate the experience of Gervais’ work. It is simply the case that celebration somehow always eludes theorization. In a letter addressed to young internet artists, Gervais writes: “Art movements are as irrelevant as categorizing art under medium labels, because 2014 is about life.”¹⁶ Through their continual motion and energetic overload, Gervais’ works are full of life. Among the slick websites and preformatted platforms that characterize the current web, their intensity rekindles the initial enthusiasm of the vernacular web.

Paule Mackrous

Translated by Oana Avasilichioaei





Paule Mackrous received a PhD in semiotics from UQAM. Her doctoral thesis focused on emerging art forms on the web, remix culture, and creative methodologies in art history. She is a researcher for the film production company Film 53/12, a writer for Agence Topo, a laboratory for digital writing and creation, and a regular contributor to several cultural magazines.

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