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Graphics Interchange Format

Translated by Katarzyna Bartoszyńska

1.

As a starting point, the GIF allows for the creation and unveiling of the kingdom of kitsch.

This straightforward graphic form invented in 1987 was from the very beginning widely used on the internet. Today it primarily serves for the creation of simple animations, or maybe rather, of putting specific elements of images into motion.



The popularity of this technology and the range of its forms **is so big**, that there is no point in trying to formulate a typology or classification that aims at completeness and precision. The widely used GIF shimmers (often literally) in myriad ways.

A gilded and sequined armor is worn by figures from the world of “cuteness”—kittens, puppies, turtles—and from the world of fantasy—dragons, princesses, Piglet, and unicorns.

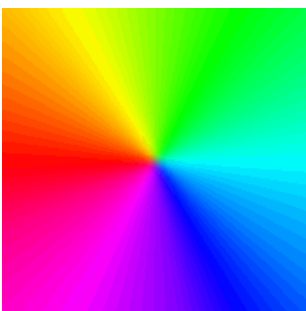
The effect can be rich:



Or rather austere:



The colors, most often pink, gold, and various shades of neon, hide the picture's weaknesses. The GIF assaults the eyes. The joy of GIF creation can be likened to the pleasures of an amateur writer, who writes because s/he likes to. The world smiles at its creator with all the colors of the rainbow, redeemed and available at the reach of a hand, from the distance of a keyboard and a monitor. Pleasure.



2.

Simple pleasures are not always enough. With an enjoyment and repetition akin to obsessive compulsive disorder, the GIF registers all possible human accidents,

reminding us of the cruelties of hidden camera TV shows. When watching the Polish version of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, featuring the bluff host Tadeusz Drozda, one has the sense that what is “worthy of laughter”—in keeping with the Polish title—is the spectacle of painful accidents and spectacular falls. Many of them are in fact staged. The show carries with it the optimism of an era of large, heavy video cameras. Contemporary technology grants us continuous access to images of people stumbling and falling. One competes to be recognized as the most strange or absurd, a desire reflecting the need to impress. The internet is full of **failed stunts**, some of which could easily be nominated for a Darwin Award (granted posthumously to members of the species who actively participated in the process of natural selection)



The record of an appearance can easily turn into the record of a downfall. Jean Baudrillard wrote about the precession of media in relation to violence.¹ The logic of the presence of TV cameras almost ensures its appearance. The audience is in a state of anticipation, waiting for something to happen, for something unexpected to disrupt the scene—this is the secret of “live” television. The GIF changes an image broadcast “live” into one broadcast “forever,” which robs the threat of its force. The fall is repeated infinitely, eliciting primordial laughter, just like the immortal scene with the banana peel. This may remind us of the early pleasures of the discovery of cinematography. One of the first films by the Lumière brothers showed a wall crumbling and then, through the use of a single mechanism the effect was reversed and the wall rose again before the viewer’s eyes. A person run over by a car would get up and walk away, and another, flattened by a steam-roller, only needed to be re-inflated with a bicycle pump in order to be resurrected. This ease of reanimation is still alive in contemporary cartoons. GIFs introduced a new mechanism and moved from that which is reversible to that which is repeatable. As with Beckett’s poorly completed homework assignment: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Is this already the queer art of failure that Judith Halberstam describes in her praise of blunders and falls, as well as the childish delight of creation; anarchic enough to accept defeat (defining success differently), and brave enough to create utopia?²

A lot depends on where you make the cut.

Looping a failed bungee jump undoubtedly yields satisfaction. It effectively emulates a purely bodily mechanism, an impulsive reaction to the pain of someone else's body, a reaction which turns one's own body into one torn with laughter. But in the GIF everything depends on editing. What if the rhythm of repetition creates a point of return before the (possible) fall?



3.

The creators of a GIF installation exhibited in May 2014 in the Museum of Moving Image in New York, invoked the category of the gesture. They titled their installation *The Reaction GIF. Moving Image as Gesture* *The Reaction GIF. Moving Image as Gesture* .



The first image on the page is striking: Michael Jackson (his new album, *Xscape*, has just been released) is gorging on popcorn in the darkness of a movie theatre— he might for example be watching policemen and thieves throw pies at each other. The gesture is understood as a visual rejoinder to an event on the internet or in reality, an extended and complicated emoticon. These moving images for every occasion record the emotions of the sender, amplifying them through the use of the loop. Emoticons were meant to protect users from overly flat expressions of feelings, from the disappearance of nuance, but instead they killed all irony by forcing us to be explicit. The GIF on the other hand introduces hysteria, an expression of emotion at the limits of the scream. A scream that freezes through repetition. Signaling, in effect, a lack of trust in reality—excess and exaggeration sap the rules of communication.

This is explicitly thematized by the author of the GIF-blog „[PhD Stress](#)“, where GIFs serve as a form of meta-commentary on the process of (not) writing academic articles and the life of the academic precariat, as well as the situation of the LGBTQ community—both to ways of talking about them in humanist discourse and to their social and political contexts. In this visual narration what is striking is precisely the gap between hopes and expectations and that which reality brings.



Defeat, however, is taken on and accepted as a part of identity—accordingly with the optimistic interpretations of Judith Halberstam. This relates both to failures to fulfill one’s social roles as well as a strong identification with subjects deprived of political support, the persecuted.



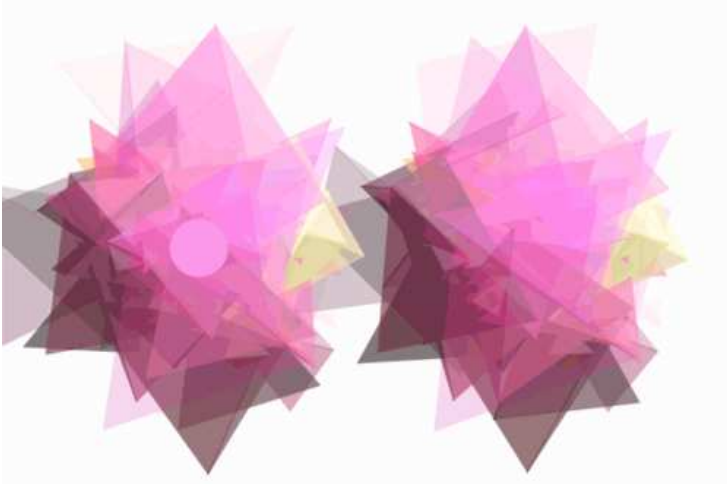
One of the author's posts directly quotes [the words of José Esteban Muñoz](#): "The future is queerness's domain," from the book *Cruising Utopia*³. Similarly to Judith Halberstam, who in fact references Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia* the author clearly expresses the need to think in terms of futurity and suggests faith in utopia. He calls for the transgression of the rigors of time and space, which characterize our contemporary moment.

4.

The GIF becomes a work of art when the cut is introduced in the right place.

This isn't about introducing this form into the gallery, though that discussion has already begun, particularly in the wake of the anniversary of animation in 2012. That year (May 19–June 10, 2012), The Photographer's Gallery in London prepared an exhibition of GIFS, "Born in 1987: the Animated GIF" [Born in 1987. The Animated GIF](#) and invited the audience to submit [their own animations](#).

In an article for Artnet News, Paddy Johnson expressed skepticism about the introduction of GIFs into the art world⁴ emphasizing among other things the role of the digital environment in their functioning. Animation existed on the internet pretty much from the beginning, but it was only the universalization of various platforms of exchange, so-called communities, that maximized their visibility. Simultaneously, their expressive character—a small fragment demonstrated in an over-expressive loop—is well suited to the kind of distribution characteristic of the internet, which is in conflict with the white walls of the gallery. A provocation to shine and sparkle, to delight in form.



[Andrew Benson](#), an artist who uses GIFs, defines them as a form that is above all else exploratory, a laboratory or practice-run. Their simplicity and accessibility serve a “proper” artistic effect: “The lowbrow quality of animated GIFs opens up the opportunity to do something off-the-cuff and experimental.” GIFs are defined here as a low and weak category within the hierarchy of images.⁵

It seems, however, that this is in fact its strength. The GIF opens onto the museum of the imagination and allows one to fumble with the commonly accepted norms of the construction of space-time.

In a recent text about GIFs, [Agnieszka Słodownik](#) captured a certain joy flowing from a sense of the infinite:⁶ “the GIF frolics ad infinitum.” It’s a specific kind of infinity. The GIF is a product of technological reproduction based on other images (film for instance). It thus inserts itself, it would seem, into the normative order of reproduction characteristic of capitalist society. Nobody demonstrates this better than Disney, with its call to labor.



But to sentence the Princess to endless labor? To demonstrate that the dust will never disappear?

5.

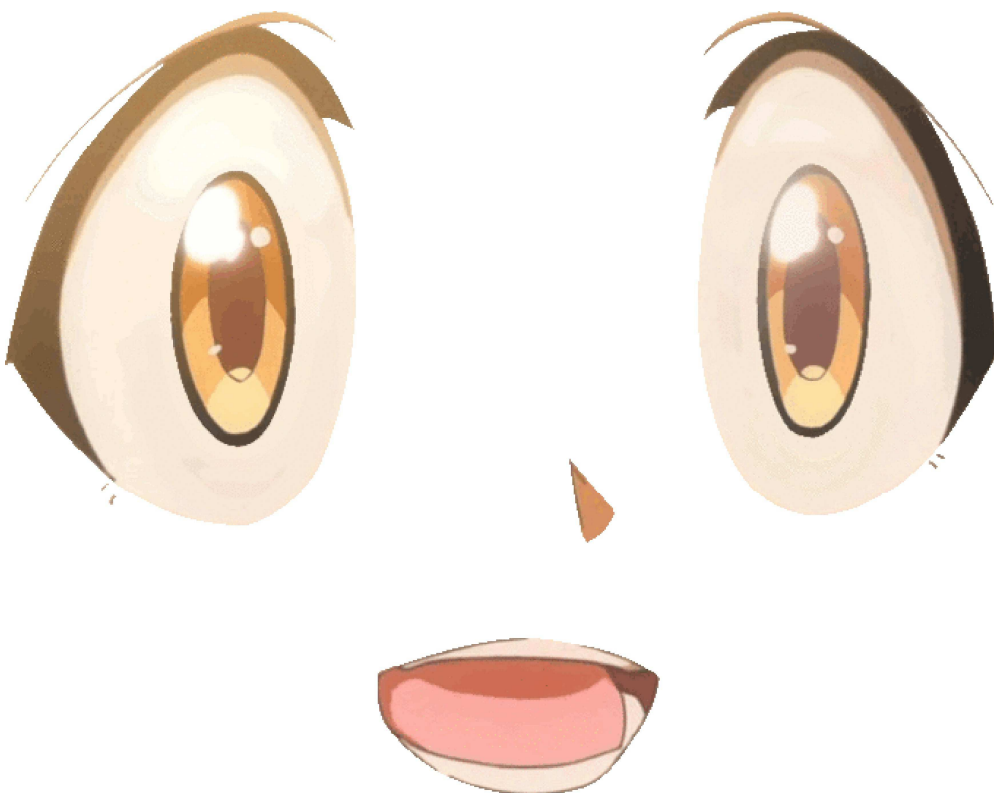
The disruption of the time and space of heteronormative society and the logic of sexual and social reproduction is of fundamental importance for determining a truly queer gesture. Even so, a GIF, the child of reproduction, can assume a certain queerness, and sometimes it tries to. It acts as a Generator of Identity Freakness.

It thematizes the dimensions of reality.





Sometimes, it plays with uncanny impressions.



Above all else, it problematizes temporality—not only through its ostentatious reproducibility and play with endless repetition.

In this context the gesture takes on another meaning. It is not only the question of an expressive reaction to reality, but of presenting the gesture as a social gesture, as understood by Giorgio Agamben.⁷ The GIF isolates a certain practice or action

from a greater whole. It refers to it, but the effect of looping and cutting, specifically, demonstrates that reality is a glitch in the matrix.



Déjà vu is raised to the rank of cognitive principle. It simultaneously reveals the separation of gesture and context—because the whole is severed through the workings of montage. The gap between reality and the reaction to it might be painful, but it also gives hope for the possibility of the appearance of something new, a glimmer or heralding of a new reality.

(Even if a girl named Glitch, who finally becomes queen, reveals her terrifying face for a moment)



In essence, this is about recognizing the potential for perception and creation—and the delight of it. GIF art begins at the moment when the thousandth fall from the trampoline is transformed into the anticipation of a successful leap.



The category of childishness returns. Its anarchic nature, even if it isn't capable of creating a new world, can at least function as a glitch that shows the failures of the project we live in. That and how much we would love to get a unicorn.



Footnotes

- 1 See Jean Baudrillard, "Le syndrome du Heysel", in: *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 12, 1998.
- 2 See Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham–London: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 3 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (London–New York: New York University Press, 2009).
- 4 Paddy Johnson, *Will Galleries and Museums Ever Embrace Animated GIF Art?*, "Artnet News", 11 April 2014, <http://news.artnet.com/art-world/will-galleries-and-museums-ever-embrace-animated-gif-art-9650>, accessed May 30, 2014.
- 5 See Hito Steyerl, *Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation*, e-flux 32 (2012), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-spam-of-the-earth/>
- 6 Agnieszka Słodownik, *Perpetuum mobile*, "Dwutygodnik.com" 2013 nr 111, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/4622-perpetuum-mobile.html>, accessed June 1, 2014
- 7 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993)