nostalgia

machines
And he said: History is an angel being blown backwards into the future
He said: History is a pile of debris
And the angel wants to go back and fix things
To repair the things that have been broken
But there is a storm blowing from Paradise
And the storm keeps blowing the angel backwards into the future
And this storm, this storm is called
Progress
— Laurie Anderson, The Dream Before (for Walter Benjamin)

Outbreaks of nostalgia often follow revolutions
— Svetlana Boym, The Future of Nostalgia

If nostalgia looks toward the past, progress belongs to the future, or so it would seem. Technology connotes progress, and new media art (usually defined by its use of technology) connotes cutting-edge, future-focused work. Yet this exhibition springs from the growing body of work by artists who make free use of technology in ways that undermine this past/future dichotomy. Paradoxically, the sculptures in this exhibition use mechanics to nostalgic effect.

Nostalgia is a powerful, complicated sentiment, intimately connected to progress. As Svetlana Boym writes, “Somehow progress didn’t cure nostalgia but exacerbated it” and indeed, “the sentiment itself, the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility, is at the very core of the modern condition.”¹ The arts have registered that displacement, at least since the invention of photography and the resulting crisis of the art object’s aura.² Still, technology itself resists association with nostalgia, even when prompting it. Instead, technology continues to exude a powerful scent of progress, ultra-modern — and now wireless.

The artworks in Nostalgia Machines subtly engage the ongoing tension between progress and nostalgia. Certain characteristics emerge here, notably the repurposing of found technology, visible use of mechanics, and a contemplative pathos. The technology itself is not old or nostalgia-inducing in the sense that an Underwood typewriter might be. Its poignance lies in its visibility: the gears and wires give the pieces a laid-bare quality.
In addition to its use of technology, the work here engenders reflection in the viewer through a range of means, in two broad categories: the sense memory and the nostalgic aesthetic.

The most famous instance of nostalgia in literature begins with a sense memory: Proust’s madeleine. His taste buds recognize something profoundly familiar in the teacake, which leads to childhood memories. Yet, there is a moment of suspense before his memories flood in, a sensory déjà-vu (“where have I tasted this before?”). The involuntary quality of this moment before lends the nostalgia its intensity. Sensory mnemonics operate similarly in several pieces in this exhibition, but here the narrative is left open, engendering a reflective state that allows each viewer their own recollections.

Meanwhile, the market for nostalgia-themed products booms, and formal tropes of nostalgia abound. The case of the Hipstamatic app for the iPhone camera is especially instructive. The application generates the texture of nostalgia by adding “old camera” imperfections to the user’s snapshots. The consumer isn’t longing for a remembered rudimentary camera of their childhood: the Hipstamatic never existed, contrary to viral marketing claims. Its “nostalgic aesthetic”—generated by specific formal attributes—is its own end, and makes for a wildly popular product. One wonders, what are consumers nostalgic for? Perhaps they long to see present-day images from the perspective of remembering.

The five artists in this exhibition have each made what we might think of as time travel machines that work in a combination of two ways: by deconstructing worn nostalgic tropes, or by offering a mnemonic, contemplative route to our own personal memories. Whether engaging the hipstamatic issue, or offering up mechanical madeleines, each work with the tension between technology and nostalgia.

Of the artists in this exhibition, Jonathan Schipper’s work perhaps most directly engages this tension. Schipper often employs big, heavy machinery and altered time to explore subtle metaphysical questions. His work is kinetic, but often the movement is barely visible, so slow that we first see the work as a static sculpture, and only deduce the motion over time. In The Slow Inevitable Death of American Muscle (2008), two sports cars (“muscle cars”) crash into each other, inching together over a span of days, a potent comment on illusions of fragility and strength. In Slow Room (2011) countless threads pull the furniture of a cozy living room slowly into a hole in the wall, inching closer over the course of the exhibition—as if disappearing in time.

In Measuring Angst (2009), included in this exhibition, a beer bottle spins through space, smashes against the gallery wall, and explodes into pieces in excruciating slow motion. A huge curving mechanical armature embraces the bottle and “rewinds” the gesture until the bottle is whole again. A tiny constellation of lights orbits with the armature, moving shadows across the walls. The machine tenderly guides the bottle back in time, repeatedly.

“Birth and death are only a rewind button away,” writes Schipper about this work, “that videotape can be both rewound and fast-forwarded, endlessly replaying the best events again and again.” Schipper has made a time travel machine—the perfect remedy for the longing to return to the past. Like Benjamin’s angel of history, it can never fully return and hangs suspended, looking backwards, trying endlessly to reverse time.

Is regret or joy the key sentiment in this piece? In Benjamin’s narrative, it is a longing to repair the past. In Schipper’s text, it is a desire to re-live the best parts. Schipper takes a decisive moment of no return, and abstracts it from its narrative context: someone threw a beer bottle against a wall—in anger or in celebration? It doesn’t matter: this mechanical angel keeps replaying the moment, and we bring our own imagined narrative to the work, bitter or sweet.

Measuring Angst also conjures a tension between past and future on a formal level. The armature mimics those used in dinosaur exhibits and is powered by machinery used in high-tech assembly plants. Technology and engineering are associated with progress—the future—and have been since the industrial revolution. Yet cutting-edge technology today is usually invisible, behind touch screens and wireless connectivity. The work is thus doubly nostalgic: the visible machinery awes us in a manner reminiscent of the early world’s fairs, while the machine’s gesture endlessly replays a lost moment.
At first glance, JASPER RIGOLE’s OUTNUMBERED: a brief history of imposture (2009) looks like a documentary film, with slow pans across an old black and white photograph. A narrator tells us about historical figures. In the next room a machine moves a camera lens across an old photo: the same photo as in the documentary. A-ha! — the viewer puts it together: this machine generates the video projection next door in real time. The machine moves the video camera across the photograph, the image moves on the screen, and the narrator mentions a new name as they settle on a new face. But there is no connection: the computer generates the historical anecdotes randomly, and the camera is programmed to randomly settle on a new face with each new anecdote. Importantly, each anecdote tells of a person associated with deception and false identities.

By generating an aleatoric narrative (using chance operations), Rigole undermines the power of the documentary aesthetic, especially the “Ken Burns effect” of slow panning across a very old photograph during voice-over narration. More subtly, the imposter biographies and chance operations of camera and narrator tease apart storytelling itself. What does it mean to relay a memory? Who is remembering? Surely not this omniscient narrator with the British accent. Not the camera machine. And the photo retains its own memories, mute.

The piece is rife with tropes of “remembering,” from the black and white photo to the historical narration, yet it refuses to stake any claim on the past. On the contrary, OUTNUMBERED renders these tropes abstract, pure aesthetic effect unconnected to actual history. The narration and black and white photo generate an odd nostalgia for what-we-can-not-know. Rigole has effectively severed our association between the documentary aesthetic and historical accuracy (for the moment).
Gregory Witt’s sculptures bring mundane gestures and materials into hypnotic focus: opening a refrigerator door, flipping on a light switch, or unrolling packing tape. He foregrounds the formal qualities of humble materials such as Styrofoam, drywall, and plywood. Witt doesn’t glamorize or polish the gestures or materials in question, allowing them their matter-of-fact awkwardness. The body of Witt’s work falls into two main categories: large, formal works, and small, gesture-based narrative works. A certain pathos pervades both.

In the first category, huge pink Styrofoam gears float and grind like an industrial cotton candy fantasy in Cloud (2009). Although this is perhaps his most overtly beautiful sculpture, the unpolished details—raw wood, manufacturer labels, visible technology—cast it as an endearing ugly duckling rather than swan. Most recently in Room (2010), he built a similar structure—huge floating gears—from drywall, rendering another industrial fantasy, in grey.

Here the tone becomes poignant: instead of blossoming upward, those floating gears are suspended, both anchored and elevated by a system of stepladders and cinder blocks. It shuttles up and down, never able to fly or to land.

This exhibition features two of his smaller, gesture-based sculptures. In Packing Tape (2010), a short plywood arm arcs up from the floor in a staccato motion. An old speaker zip-taped to the arm amplifies a sound so familiar that it takes a minute to identify “rip, r-r-rii-iiip… rip” — unrolling packing tape across cardboard boxes. Synced perfectly with the sound, the robot arm repeats its gesture, irregular and distinctly human.

The awkward sweetness of Packing Tape’s robot form turns haunting with its audio, together a perfect echo of the human gesture of packing boxes, and one can almost see the scene of moving out. Stripped of narrative context, happy or sad, the imagined scene retains the pathos associated with a life chapter closing.

Gregory Witt, Cloud, 2009
Styrofoam and mixed media

Gregory Witt, Packing Tape, 2010
mixed media, sound
Rather than developing our sympathies for his personal history, Witt renders a sensory moment associated with real human nostalgia—as opposed to cinematic tropes for the sentiment—that will be varied and unique to each viewer. As with Schipper’s work, it may have happy or sad associations, but no traces of drama remain.

In his most recent sculpture, *Light Switch* (2011), a more subtle gesture takes center stage, re-enacted by wonderfully awkward technology. A set of gears move a plywood-framed video screen to tilt down, then up, then down, pausing at points along the way. This moves in perfect sync with a video playing on the screen of a machine flipping an actual light switch up, down, and pausing. The raw plywood construction and the exposed gears give it a “made in my garage” feel that belies the small, careful gesture represented: moving a light switch with complete awareness and curiosity, sensing the moment when the electric current connects or breaks.

The quality of the sense memory is similar to *Packing Tape*, a kind of Proustian mnemonic, but a less direct route to nostalgia is at work here. *Packing Tape* evokes a specific scene of packing boxes, which many viewers will associate with nostalgic scenes of moving out. Like *Packing Tape*, this awkward machine has an uncanny ability to channel a human gesture such that the viewer is transported to the moment, but here the moment is the feeling of a light switch under their finger. Is this nostalgia? The machine may call forth a sense memory in the viewer—a memory that lives first in our body. Whether one has purposely slowed down to feel the moment a light switch turns “on,” we have all felt it as part of our daily lives. It is this déjà-vu of the senses that animates the nostalgia described by Proust, and that Witt works with so directly here.

**MERIDITH PINGREE**’s reactive, kinetic sculptures for this exhibition have a distinct quality of skin crawling, hairs standing on back of neck, a sigh of relief, and other visceral sensations. These associations may lead to narrative memories (“the first time we held hands” or “when I felt that spider crawl up my leg”), but unlike the other works discussed here, they are purely abstract. Instead of offering any figurative referent, they respond directly to the viewer’s presence, which generates unique motions in the work. The viewers see their own echo in the sculptures.

The biomorphic green plastic arms of *Umbrella Torque* (2009) cringe and curl in upon themselves, recoiling into a spiny cluster, then extend out in relaxed, luxuriant waves. Recalling either a chandelier or a wind-damaged umbrella, the piece hangs above viewer’s heads, flinching and writhing with each passerby. Each link in the chain form responds individually to movements in the room, even flinching in response to its own motions.

*Yellow Star* (2008) works in a similar way, but here the form (yellow plastic rectangles set in a circle) generates less anxious associations, instead recalling ballroom dance formations and coy gestures, rippling and accordioning in and out of formation.

Strikingly, these abstract forms invite our empathy or revulsion, just by responding to us. Naturally one tends to anthropomorphize anything that seems to respond to its environment. The work’s movements are uncanny and familiar because they mirror those of the viewer so directly. Each expands upon the movements in the room, sampling and transmitting the energy of the crowd. With remarkably simple motors—of the kind used for windshield wipers in cars—plus plastic and zip ties, Pingree manages to evoke physical sensations that carry an emotional resonance: “where have I felt this before?”
ZIMOUN creates elegant, quietly chaotic sound installations. Many of them feature small dc motors of the kind used in turntable devices (CD players, for example). He exploits these motors and other similarly minimal technology for their audio potential, pairing them with different found textures (such as cardboard boxes and cotton balls), generating a multitude of minimal, quirky and meditative environments.

In this exhibition, 150 prepared dc-motors, filler wire 1.0mm (2009/10), the motors activate a curtain of filler wire. As each one spins, its wire gently taps and whisks against the wall, filling the room with a rich chaotic sound reminiscent of rainfall. The audio effect varies depending on the surfaces in the room. The visual element — long strands of wire rippling in vertical lines — faintly echoes that of rain on a window-pane. Rather than a representation or recording of rain, it evokes the idea of rain.

Rain, of course, is an exceedingly common nostalgic trope in cinema and popular music. Zimoun’s visual presentation prevents the sound effect from becoming hostage to cliché. The raw little motors add an idiosyncratic visual buzz, spinning the thin wires into a delightful rippling vibration. If the work were static, it would recall sober, minimalist forms. The motors activate it, however, rendering the installation slightly giddy. This visual texture of giddy minimalism allows Zimoun to free the rain sound effect from its clichéd “sad nostalgic” associations, not unlike Rigole’s deconstruction of the documentary aesthetic in OUTNUM- BERED.

The visual component of 150 prepared dc-motors reveals all: there is no recording of rain here, it is just simple machines spinning on a wall. In this laid-bare way, the work allows the viewer to experience the sound directly, and perhaps to enter a reflective and even nostalgic state.

Most of the artists in this exhibition work in a variety of media, not exclusively kinetic sculpture. None identify as new media artists, per se. They move easily between the new media and mainstream contemporary art worlds. Art critic Domenico Quaranta distinguishes these two worlds through their concerns: new media art is characterized by earnest, serious engagement with technology, while mainstream contemporary art is characterized by ironic self-referentiality. Yet, for many in this generation of artists, the inclusion of technology in their work is not a defining characteristic, perhaps because new media has graduated to a focus on Internet technologies, while moving parts are just that: moving parts.

Still, technology has a way of generating a certain level of anxiety in viewers, even when it is not new or necessarily novel in its deployment. In Nostalgia Machines, the visibility of the motors and gears welcomes this anxiety, drawing the viewer deeper into the content by inviting contemplation of the gears and wires on a symbolic level. Remarkably, the artworks exploit tech-anxiety to initiate a progression toward meditation, perhaps even to a state of reflective nostalgia, defined by Boym as “backtracking, slowing down, looking sideways, meditating on the journey itself.”

Not everyone has childhood memories of eating tea-soaked madeleines, or any sense memory linked to the cake — Proust had to lead his readers through the sequence of associations. Likewise, the works here will not prompt extended associations for all viewers. Unlike a time machine, nostalgia works differently for each traveler.

Maya Allison  Exhibition Curator

**ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES**

Meridith Pingree’s work has earned critical praise and awards, including a SmackMellon fellowship and a Skowhegan residency. Pingree recently earned her MFA in sculpture at RISD. She has since exhibited extensively in the U.S., at such venues as Freight and Volume (New York, NY), the Soap Factory (Minneapolis, MN), Bravin-Lee Programs (New York, NY), and the Fringe Exhibitions (Los Angeles, CA).

Jasper Rigole is a Belgium-based artist and filmmaker. His work has been featured in exhibitions and film festivals throughout Europe, including the Manifesta 8 Biennial, in Murcia, Spain. He has degrees from the Academy of Fine Art in Ghent, and The Higher Institute for Fine Arts in Ghent. This will be his first exhibition in the U.S.

Jonathan Schipper has exhibited widely in Europe and the U.S., most recently at the Swiss Institute in New York, the Marfa Ballroom in Texas, the Tinguely Museum in Switzerland, and a solo show at the Pierogi Gallery.

Gregory Witt was recently awarded “Emerging Artist of the Year” and a solo show by Pittsburgh Center for the Arts. His work garnered positive critical press in New York when he showed with his Skowhegan cohort in Brooklyn during summer, 2010. He recently earned his MFA from Carnegie Mellon.

Zimoun is a sound and installation artist based in Switzerland. He has exhibited and performed extensively worldwide since 2000, most recently installing solo shows at the Ringling Museum of Art in Florida, the Gray Area Foundation for the Arts, San Francisco, and Bitforms Gallery, in New York.

**WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION**

Dimensions are in inches, height precedes width and depth.

Meridith Pingree
Umbrella Torque, 2009
car parts, sensors, mixed media
48 x 72 x 72

Meridith Pingree
Yellow Star, 2008
car parts, sensors, mixed media
60 x 108 x 108

Jasper Rigole
OUTNUMBERED, a brief history of imposture, 2009
camera, photograph, computer, robotics, projection
dimensions variable

Jonathan Schipper
Measuring Angst, 2009
glass, steel, electronics
dimensions variable

Gregory Witt
Light Switch, 2011
mixed media and video screen
36 x 24 x 12

Gregory Witt
Packing Tape, 2010
mixed media, sound
32 x 20 x 20

Zimoun
150 prepared dc-motors, filler wire 1.0mm, 2008/2010
dc motors, filler wires, laboratory power supply, aluminum profile
39½ x 236¼ x 2
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COVER Zimoun, 216 prepared dc—motors, filler wire 1.0mm, 2009 / 2010 [detail]