I pluck — contemplating dyeing and ageing through Gray hairs

Terhi Marttila

UNIVERSITY OF PORTO
ORCID: 0000-0003-2868-7206

RESUMO

Só na casa dos 30 percebi que a maior parte das mulheres à minha volta pintam o cabelo. Depois encontrei vários cabelos brancos entre os meus cabelos castanhos. Comecei a perguntar-me por que é que é tão difícil encontrar cabelos brancos nas cabeças das mulheres. Escrevi *Gray hairs* e percebi que escolher não pintar era um ato de resistência à opressão e discriminação baseado tanto no género como na idade. Este artigo é uma reflexão crítica sobre a criação de *Gray hairs*. Esta obra é contextualizada em relação aos comentários de algumas mulheres com quem partilhei a mesma. É também analisada para perceber e verbalizar a ligação entre a parte escrita e os componentes visuais e processuais, inclusivamente a interação através do click (como forma de arrancar ou pintar o cabelo).

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

envelhecimento feminista, cabelos brancos, escrita digital, arte digital, investigação artística

ABSTRACT

It was only in my late 30s that I realised that most of the women around me dye their hair. I began to scrutinize my own hair and found many gray hairs amongst my dark brown ones. I started to wonder why women's gray hair is so invisible. I wrote *Gray hairs* and realised that to choose not to dye is an act of resistance to both age and gender-based oppression and discrimination. This article is a practitioner reflection on *Gray hairs*. I begin by contextualizing the work, and then I reflect on some of the comments that people made when I shared *Gray hairs* with them. Finally, I look at how the visual, process-based elements and interaction through clicking (as plucking) of gray hairs complement the written elements.

KEYWORDS

feminist ageing, gray hairs, digital writing, digital art, practice-based research

INTRODUCTION

I was sitting on the bus, observing the people around me, when suddenly I realised that the vast majority of women dye their hair. Old women, young women, I thought, *why only the women*? In the end, *Gray hairs*[1] became my rant, my *provocation*, as Caitlin Fisher described it in her introductory remarks for my live performance of the work at ELO2023 in Coimbra (Fisher, 2023), an attempt to raise awareness about how the culture I am engulfed in places these gender-based standards on what is considered socially acceptable when it comes to hair color. For women: *gray* is a big no-no. *Gray hairs* is dedicated to those billions of invisible gray hairs hidden under industrially produced hair dye. In the end, and against my expectations, *Gray hairs* became more about ageing than about beauty. I have begun to think that *beauty* may not be the locus of oppression in the feminist battle for the right for one's invisible gray hairs to exist. Beauty may be just a smokescreen, when what we really need to think and talk about is age and death.

In *Gray hairs*, I write: "I am a woman, how will I feel when it comes time for me to dye, what will I think? Will it matter what others think?" I jotted some of these observations in my notebook, and a few weeks later I began to envision how this writing would take a digital, process-based and interactive form. Soon enough, I found myself writing code that fills the screen with black dots that begin to fade to gray, eventually leaving my screen white. *Gray hairs* became a process of artistic inquiry into ageing that opened up dialogue with the women around me about ageing, gray hair and about dyeing and about dying. *Gray hairs* was created as something that would be *listened* to, and for this reason the play on the words dyeing-dying, which are indistinguishable when spoken, was always an important component of the work. The text was reworked multiple times in response to the conversations that I had with women. Linda Candy writes: "practitioner research, with its focus on personal practice, involves reflecting on and documenting one's own creative process and interpreting any questions and insights arising from it" (Candy, 2019: 237). In this practitioner reflection, I first reflect on

_____

1   *Gray hairs* is available at: https://terhimarttila.com/gray-hairs.

how different aspects of ageing, dyeing and dying are represented in the written component of the work, and then analyse how the visual, process-based and interactive elements contribute to the meanings of the work and how these non-verbal elements complement the text-based meanings in *Gray hairs*. Elsewhere, I have focused my reflection on the written aspects of the work, asking how the use of the confessional tone in *Gray hairs* is positioned within feminist practices of writing (Marttila, 2023b).

FEMINIST AGEING AS A THEME IN *GRAY HAIRS*

Cecil et al. point out that although henna has been found on the hair of Egyptian mummies (suggesting that altering hair colour is an ancient human practice), the turning point for western society was in the 1950s onwards when hair dye kits became available at home and as a result, dyeing became socially acceptable (Cecil et al., 2018). Dyeing one's hair is a relatively cost-effective way of obfuscating the visual signs of aging, and as more and more people and especially women do it, gray-haired older women become less and less visible in society. This would seem to be a vicious circle, in which the increased lack of visibility of gray-haired women leads to ever greater pressure to not don one's grays. I slowly begin to go gray, knowing that a significant portion of the powerful and talented older women around me do not wear their hair gray (thankfully, many also do!). This is, of course, an understandable choice made by women in a society where sometimes we are set back socially, in the workplace and in other contexts, by visible signs of ageing.

As Gerike points out, dyeing one's hair, "in our youth-oriented culture, represents the attempt of aging people to 'pass' as members of a group with greater power, privilege, and prestige than the group to which they in truth belong" (Gerike, 1990: 37). Gerike thus suggests that youth comes with certain social advantages, and that for this reason it makes sense to pursue a youthful visual appearance. On the converse, in an ageist society, we tend to think that to look old comes with disadvantages that we try to avoid by pursuing a youthful visual appearance. As such, it is hardly surprising that women would opt to dye their hair at this intersection of ageist and sexist oppression. And as one of the women with whom I spoke with through *Gray hairs* observed, what she does not like is when women judge each other either way — for dyeing or for not dyeing. In *Gray hairs*, I capture this perspective by writing: "I sympathise with all the women, with all the women who dye their hair and with all the women who do not dye their hair." But I pull this thought towards advocating against dyeing: "Yet, I don't think I will be able to dye. My grandmother insisted that I never dye my hair (my grandmother died)."

As I wrote in the abstract for the exhibition of *Gray hairs* at ELO 2023 in Coimbra, "between youth and death, there is a space in which ageing looms and disquiets a woman living the first signs of this slow transition." Whether we choose to dye or not to dye, the cringe that is evoked by the social pressure on the ageing woman is hard to evade. One of the women I spoke with through *Gray hairs* said "don't worry about your gray hairs — whether you choose to dye them or not, they are there. Age brings with it wonderful things." As I worked on *Gray hairs*, I began to realise that this cringe and unease was, for me personally, not so much related to the social pressure and to the gray hairs per se, but rather, to the very realisation that this woman touched upon in her comment. I cringed as the gray hairs forced me to think all the thoughts related to ageing and death itself. What will old age bring indeed?

One of the women I spoke with in response to *Gray hairs* told me that their daughter asks them to please dye away their grays. This child probably associated grays with age and with death, a frightening association when made to one's own mother. Whatever we may think about their aesthetic value, gray hairs do imply decay rather than it's opposite. Gray hairs imply some degree of coming apart, and I ponder this in the following part of the writing: "a gray hair is a hair that grows from a hair follicle whose pigment cell has died. So I pluck a part of me. This pigment cell has died: life is over. It churns out hair with no pigment. Invisible gray hair." Even though there is a long way to go between one's first gray hair (which, depending on the person, can emerge in one's twenties, thirties and usually latest in one's forties) and final death, graying hair is a visible reminder that processes of decay are in motion.

While writing *Gray hairs* I also stumbled upon transhumanism[2], the idea that humanity can or should strive to transcend the limits of our *bodies*, mostly through transcending this death and decay. This observation made its way into the creative process as follows: "I watched an interview with a transhumanist. He is quite old, I can hear it in his voice — the effort he makes for that raspy sound to emanate. He is quite old, but he believes in life prolongation. He believes in cryopreservation, and he believes he wants to live forever. I note that he dyes his hair." Together with what I heard the transhumanist say, I saw his dyed hair as a proposition to decouple the body from death itself through disavowing the decay of the pigment cells in the hair follicles.

---

2 See for instance the book by Mark O'Connell: *To be a machine — Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (2017)

While working on *Gray hairs*, I began to think more and more about death and about the forms of invisibility that older age implies for men and women alike. I decided to end my writing with a reference to these invisible, aged people that we, as a society, tend not to see and tend not to even look at: "the other day I sat on the bus looking at all the gray hairs looking out the window." I then refer to the actually invisible people, that is, those that came before us and roamed these streets before us, who, as us, were very visible at one time in these spaces and streets but who are now invisible: "I sat on the bus, and I thought about all the invisible people." In the closing line of the poem, I mix these two categories of invisible people: the very elderly and those already dead saying "and I thought I saw them looking at the end."

THE VISUAL AND PROCESS-BASED MEANINGS IN *GRAY HAIRS*

Although *Gray hairs* was born a poem or narrative, it also stands alone as a visual and processual experience. I will describe and comment on some of the key components of the visual experience, namely the importance of the first gray hair for the sake of the visual narrative, the idea of social invisibility as it relates to ageing and finally, the paint bucket-button as a way to represent the act of dyeing one's hair.

In the visual component of *Gray hairs*, we begin with a screen full of equally spaced black dots which, very slowly, begin to fade towards white. Because the background is white, this means that eventually the black dots will fade into invisibility. As such, *Gray hairs* can be experienced on this level only, without any input or action by the user. The first time I tested the visual experience of watching a full screen of equidistant black circles fade to white, I was mesmerized. I refreshed the browser window and watched the process unfold again, not clicking to read the poem. I took in the vibrant mesh of dots (see figure 1 below) that change to gray almost imperceptibly. This visual experience is so intense that some could find it unsettling, and for this reason the editors of *The New River* added an accessibility notice when the work was published in the Spring 2023 issue: "accessibility notice for flashing and visual strain" (Marttila, 2023a).

What I found attractive about the screen in front of me was the vibrancy of the grays. As I write in the poem about looking at the gray hair on a woman's head: "I revelled in the lush palette of deep grays, of light grays, of whites, the lush palette of grays abuzz with life. Have you ever noticed how beautiful a woman's gray hair is? I try to portray what I saw that day on this screen. I saw so many things that day." It was important for me that the visual aspect of the work would make visible the beauty of the gray palette,

because I want the work to have a chance at inspiring us to *look at* and to notice gray hair on women's heads. In my process of writing *Gray hairs,* I realised that my gaze tended to avert from looking at gray hairs, and as part of the artistic process I made a conscious effort to *look.* For this reason, it was important for me that the screen, with its graying dots, had visual precedence in *Gray hairs.*
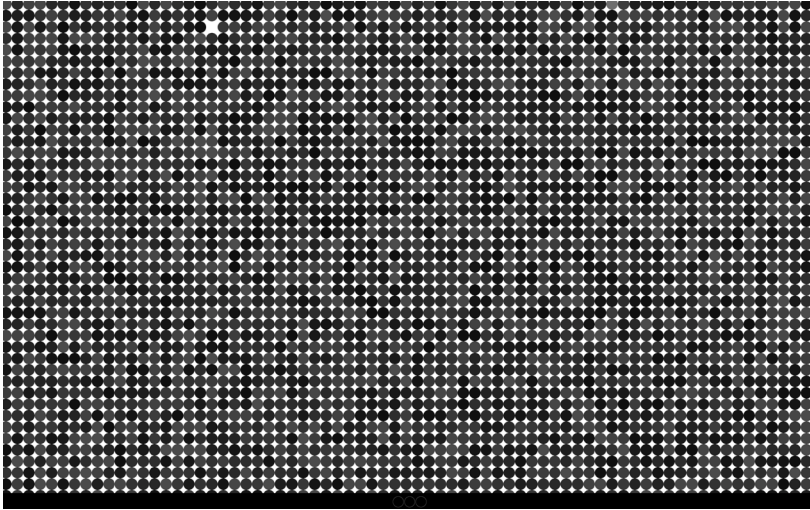

Fig. 1: a vibrant mesh of gray dots

When I shared an early version of this piece with one person, this person commented: "visually, it's wonderful to see the eye-watering op-art browser-filling image!" (personal email exchange), yet the same person was left wondering whether the interface was working as intended as "the click just caused a gradual, shifting fade to white of everything. No text, no sound?." It turns out that Firefox did not respond as expected, and the clicking was not causing the poem to unfold on this person's browser. I found the comment intriguing though, because it suggested that this person had appreciated the work as a visual experience, possibly even from beginning until end. At this point in time, the work was called "dyeing," so I wonder what associations this visual experience, together with the name of the work, brought for this person.

Granted, watching a screen full of black dots become invisible might not be the most exciting visual experience for all people who come across the work, but on a conceptual level, these visual and processual aspects of *Gray hairs* are as much about gray hair dyeing and dying as about the poem itself. As I wrote in the abstract of the work for the ELO exhibition, perhaps provocatively: "we can choose to pluck or to dye, or to do neither,

but in either case, we will die." The visual process of the black dots slowly fading out of sight is a metaphor of the gradual and continuous processes that slowly cause human life to disintegrate on various levels and eventually lead to the "end" (although the matter of our bodies itself continue life in other forms). As we saw in the previous section about feminist aging, while *Gray hairs* may have started out as a work about women dyeing their hair and gendered beauty standards, it ultimately seems to become a work about aging and death.

Fig. 2: becoming invisible in *Gray hairs*

The visual process of fading (see figure 2 above) is also a metaphor of the social shift towards invisibility that age brings for all human beings, and for women in particular. As psychologist Gerike writes: "the graying of hair is interesting primarily for sociological, not biological reasons. For of course millions of women, and increasing numbers of men, color their hair because of the negative myths and stereotypes about aging which form the basis of ageism in our society" (Gerike, 1990: 37).

This idea is also addressed in the poem itself, asking: "does an aged woman become useless? Is that why aged women become invisible?." Gonsalves and Hodes write in their editorial comments for *Gray hairs:* "to 'avoid' the graying process and evade invisibility, the user can click a gray circle" (Gonsalves and Hodes, 2023). The significance of this performative gesture of *clicking* to read and engage with the work (or to "counter invisibility" as Gonsalves and Hodes wrote) in *Gray hairs* is an integral component of the process-based or procedural rhetoric[3] of the piece.

---

3   See Ian Bogost's book *Persuasive games — the expressive power of video games* (2007).

In their editor's note to the Spring 2023 issue of *The New River Journal* (where *Gray hairs* was first published)* Florence Gonsalves and Amanda Hodes wrote: "Terhi Marttila capitalizes on this inherited [gendered] pressure [around beauty] in a way that implicates the user upon first click in *Gray Hairs*" (my additions in square brackets, for context)*. Here, Gonsalves and Hodes are referring to the *click* as a gesture that "isn't optional," in a literal sense, "if the user wants to participate" (Gonsalves and Hodes, 2023). That is, if the user wants to read or hear the work, they must click. If they do not click, they will not hear or see the text of the work.

Yet, as Gonsalves and Hodes point out, "similarly, given societal pressures and standards of beauty, women are often scrutinized for aging "naturally." They are expected to do something about it, usually at a cost, whether through the time and energy of altering their hair color, or spending money on products meant to counter the inevitable" (Gonsalves and Hodes, 2023)*. Here, Gonsalves and Hodes underscore the parallel between the not optional participation through clicking/dyeing in order to read *Gray hairs* and the not optional participation in dyeing and other forms of enhancement in order to escape judgment over looking old. In this sense, the act of clicking as a way to cover up the graying hairs and turn them back to black — which can be thought of as either plucking or dyeing — becomes a significant meaning that the work communicates through its mode of interaction and the related processes of graying that continue despite the user gesture. As Gonsalves and Hodes write, clicking "turns the hair black again, restoring the user to relevance, and also displays a fragment of the poem spoken in the artist's voice" (Gonsalves and Hodes, 2023).

Another key visual aspect is that particular importance is given to *the first gray hair* — it appears soon after loading the page, and it is immediately white, pointedly standing out from the rest of the hairs (see figure 3 below). This first gray hair depicts that turning point, that memorable moment in which we discover, for the first time, a gray hair amongst our coloured hairs. I don't know whether this moment is memorable for others, but for me it was. In the text, I write: "I still remember the moment I found my first gray hair. I was in my late twenties and there it was, very white, amongst my dark, brown hair. I must've plucked it. I thought, this is it, the beginning of the end." This first gray hair purposefully takes some time to appear, which forces the reader to wait for quite some time in front of a screen of black dots. This waiting is meant to be a parallel to the roughly two decades or more that it takes for the first gray hair to appear. This hair is pointedly white and not gray, as that "first" gray hair which we notice tends to be — it stands out from the rest like an exclamation mark.
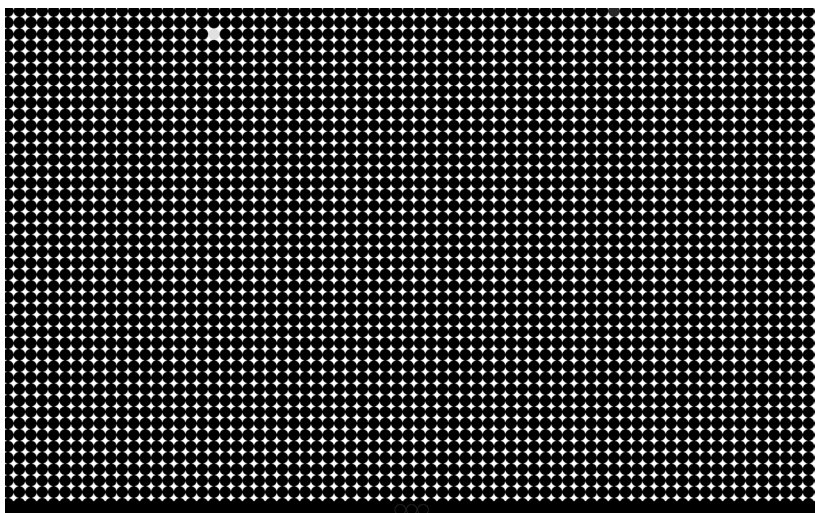
Fig. 3: becoming invisible in *Gray hairs*

Besides this first gray (white) hair, the only other visual element that breaks the pattern of fading back dots on screen is a menu bar at the bottom of the screen (see figure 4 below). It is a black strip that stretches horizontally across the bottom of the screen, with three dark gray circles that allude to a menu. When hovering (desktop) or clicking (mobile) over the three gray circles, this menu expands to reveal seven circular icons: a loudspeaker, "Abc," an arrow, a play -button, a paintbucket, an "i" and a reload symbol. These allow for turning the voice on/off, turning the text on/off, shifting between the linear and non-linear modes, toggling between autoplay and clicking to read/listen, the paint bucket which dyes all the hairs back to black, the "i" which shows instructions and explanation of these icons, and finally, the reload button, which refreshes the page and restarts the work.

I also implemented a button to toggle between the linear reading of the writing (as per my original artistic intentions for this work) and a non-linear reading. It was my attempt to, in retrospect, make space in *Gray hairs* for a non-linear reading in response to a reject review. I implemented the non-linear as fully random, which does not contribute in any way to the theme of the work, leaving the experience of the non-linear reading flat. This unsuccessful artistic experiment which I have kept as part of the work suggests that the work, whether linear or non-linear, should follow an intention and a purpose in order to produce a meaningful experience.

Fig. 4: the menubar for *Gray hairs*

The menubar also includes an option to toggle audio on/off. The possibility to just *listen to Gray hairs* was very important for me, because I wanted to provide the opportunity to immerse oneself in the visual experience unfolding on the screen with only the voice to listen to. When I performed the piece at ELO, I opted to keep the text transcript visible so that people could refer to it as well for sake of accessibility, however, I made a point to think the stage setup such that I, myself, my body, would not interfere visually with the experience (see figure 5 below). As such, the massive projection was the visual locus of the performance, with my voice emanating from the sound system of the theater.

Fig. 5: performing *Gray hairs* on stage at ELO, photograph by Sal Nunkachov

Another interactive or interface-based element contained in the menu bar that I want to highlight is the paint bucket button. This button allows the user to dye all the fading hairs back to black instantly, making the dots on the screen completely black once again. In the code below for function paintBucket, there is a loop that goes through all the hairs, and on line 161 (see figure 6 below), changes the colour of the hair to black: hairs[i].fill = 0. The next line, 162 sets the "life" of the hairs with a random number, but

unlike in the initialisation of the program, the code now sets the life closer to the variable graypoint than originally (see comments below on line 162). That is, the hairs that were dyed will begin fading to gray quicker than the hairs born at the beginning of the reading of *Gray hairs*.

```
155 ∨  function paintBucket(){
156       started = false; //to stop autoplay, if it is on
157       setTimeout( () => { started=true; readMe(); }, 3000); //take a 3s break
158       //to give time for hairs to go gray
159       //so that readMe does not go into infinite loop after dyeing hairs
160 ∨     for( let i=0; i < hairs.length; i++ ){
161         hairs[i].fill = 0; //paint all hairs black
162         hairs[i].life = random(0, graypoint-10); //give them a new life, quite close to graypoint
163       }
164    }
165
```

Figure 6: the *paintBucket* function

The paint bucket found its way into *Gray hairs* because I have fond memories of playing with the Windows 95 MS paint program as a child. I wanted to reference the act of dyeing one's hair, and amuse myself with depicting dyeing through the paint bucket. I created my own icon for the paint bucket, based loosely on what I remembered of the MS Paint icon. I did not include the option to dye one's hairs in the initial version of *Gray hairs*, but it slipped in because I wanted to include the possibility to choose to dye because so many women do. The procedural rhetoric of this interaction is important for me because even when we use the paint bucket tool, the hairs will soon continue to fade to gray.

When I performed *Gray hairs* at ELO, I did not touch the paint bucket button, but in hindsight I realised that its use could have dramatic impact in a live reading or performance of the work at different moments in the text. At a performance in November of 2023 at the Videojogos conference in Aveiro, I clicked the paint bucket after reading this section of the text: "I find this sense of panic within myself, I find this desire to not give into this transition towards old age." I waited a moment after reading this, then sought the paint bucket tool and clicked it, flipping the screen back to black. The gesture was very communicative, and caused an immediate reaction from the audience. Hair is often dyed precisely because of "this sense of panic" or at least a discomfort with the grays and with one's visible age, so the performative gesture of dyeing the hairs at this point in the reading, although very literal, serves as a non-verbal way to include in the work the perspective of dyeing hair, implying many of the common justifications. Moreover, the performative gesture of clicking on the paint bucket during the performances also makes visible how the process of graying continues despite dyeing.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I reflected on the observations and realisations about the societal expectation that women should dye their gray hairs, making women's gray hair invisible in society. I analysed how the visual elements of *Gray hairs* complement and underscore the meanings in the written (and spoken) elements, namely thought the gradual visual process of graying that even the plucking and dyeing cannot end, even when it does manage to delay it. I reflect on how the plucking, through clicking, in *Gray hairs* ties in with the oppression of women's gray hair: we must act to counteract graying in order to participate in the reading of the poem, just as we are called upon to counteract our graying in order to counteract our invisibility in society. As such, *Gray hairs* plays with notions of invisibility and death through both the written and the visual elements. What is more, though the process of artistic inquiry began with the contemplation of beauty standards, it currently stands as one which led me to think about questions of ageing and death and the fear of invisibility that death engenders.

REFERENCES

CANDY, Linda (2019). *The creative reflective practitioner — research through making and practice.* London and New York: Routledge.

CECIL, Vanessa, PENDRY, Louise F., SALVATORE, Jessica & KURZ, Tim (2018). "Women's grey hair as an abomination of the body — conceal and pass, or reveal and subvert." In *Feminist Interrogations of Women's Head Hair: Crown of Glory and Shame*, edited by Sigal Barak-Brandes and Amit Kama, 124–140. London and New York: Routledge.

FISHER, Caitlin. (2023) Introductory remarks to the performance of *Gray hairs* at ELO 2023 performances, July 12th at Teatro Académico Gil Vicente. Author's notes.

GERIKE, Ann E. (1990). "On Gray Hair and Oppressed Brains." *Journal of Women & Aging* 2, no. 2: 35-46.

GONSALVES, Florence & HODES, Amanda (2023). "Spring 2023 Editors' Note." *The New River Journal.* https://thenewriver.us/s23note/

MARTTILA, Terhi (2023a). Gray hairs. Artwork for browser. In *The New River.* https://thenewriver.us/2407-2/.

MARTTILA, Terhi (2023b) "These Gray Hairs Really Scream Out at me: the Confessional I and Autofiction as Feminist Writing in Gray Hairs." *Journal of Science and Technology of the Arts* 15, no.2: 18–44.

ROBINSON, Claire (2016). "Greying is a feminist issue." In *The Journal of Urgent Writing 2016*, edited by Nicola Legat, 154–169. Auckland: Massey University Press.