The Digital Reality: Artistic Choice

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Abstract. Contemporary artists are tempted by the latest art digital technologies. Art analysts and practitioners (artists, exhibition curators and teachers at art educational institutions) form the problematic for this contemporary culture sector. A new generation of artists integrates into the global digital art system with varying intensity; to no small extent, it is affected by the traditions forming the basis for a school. To what extent is the art education system to enter the process of formation of advance digital art competences: that is the matter of the relations between the tradition and innovation within the education system. The article compares different sources that clarify the goals and means of solving the tasks set in modern artistic practice. When analyzing motivation to create a contemporary art piece, the artist’s argumentation is of the same importance as the analysis of working programs of an artistic institution. This issue is analyzed based on the graduation project implemented by the Stieglitz Academy at St. Petersburg. The traditional theme of the Nativity performance combined with the setting created by computer technology allows the artist to implement their artistic plans by the means of modern digital technologies. The specific task of organizing the space for the traditional Nativity scene is solved by the means of digital printing; sketches are made in the computer editor program. A work of art merging the tradition and innovation refers to the so-called fundamental “tradicional” art that generally determines the boundaries of their possible interaction.

1. Introduction

Digital technologies penetrating all spheres of our existence are becoming commonplace. This also applies to such a “human-made” creative field as art. Art critics, culture experts, figures of the media art culture – all testify to the unprecedented expansion of the digital technologies boundaries in art and the growing interest in new digital practices among artists that represent, inter alia, the traditional types and genres of art culture. As a contemporary writer composes their works using a computer and all possible informative database, search resources, presentation forms, instant feedback, etc., in the same way a contemporary artist employs the emerging prospects for bringing to life their artistic initiatives in the modern digital technologies systems. The spreading of such “digital zones” forms a special structure of reality – a digital reality – which is superimposed on the “secular reality” formed by our natural, non-technical means. These areas can coexist without provoking conflict and discomfort, as it happens with the “digital natives” generation (digital aborigines immersed in the environment of various digital devices and not conceiving the world without them) [1]. The new digital generation representatives differ in their information behavior (including new forms of information consumption, self-presentation, community-organization, manipulations with technological artifacts in the space of everyday life) as compared to previous generations. These features are of key importance in the establishment of all social practices in modern society, including artistic activities. The global digital art systems are being formed with varying intensity, thus affecting the establishment of relations between the traditional and digital creativity in different ways. Art analysts and practitioners (artists and exhibition curators) form the problematic for this contemporary culture sector. The cross-themes of the media art are as follows: the cross-cultural relations between art and science [2-4]; the possible death of traditional art in the age of culture.
digitization [5]; issues of presentation, archiving, storage, reproduction and restoration of digital-art works [6]; the characteristics of the ontological status of virtual worlds embodied by technical means (Cyberspace or Interface Fantasy) [7]; the constitution of the holistic media landscape of modern culture in a digital application [8], commercial strategies of modern art [9]; forms and structures of the digital art communication [10]; trends in visual aesthetics that instantly spread via social networks [11]; problems of the contemporary digital art institutionalization [12]; new forms of art education in the digital age [13-15]; expansion of the digital art influence due to the ability to present classical art with high precision [16]; the dark side of technology [17]; transformation of representations about reality as a pre-existing common ground for all its conceivable forms [18]; functioning of the art world as multiple ways to present virtual worlds [19].

We witness digital practices spreading with unprecedented speed and becoming a form of everyday existence of modern humans. Artists are engaged in the production of digital pieces; new forms of artistic professions are generated, among which freelancers stand out as carriers of new freedom and sources of non-standard professional initiatives. Computer art ideologists are trying to determine the new transformational vectors for the social structure, where technological changes acquire the character of continuous impulses that restructure reality. The computer revolution has turned out to be a new manifestation of the Pandora’s box contents. And in this vein, we think it is extremely important to look at the “residual world”, which hangs over the new digital reality with great caution (depending on many factors) – the world of art education based on strong conservative traditions, of which educational institutions reluctantly rid of. If a concession to the latest technologies occurs, it only relies on the principle of inclusion and subordination of digital modeling to human-made handicraft production. The principle of “tradigital” art generally defines the boundaries of contained penetration of new technologies into traditional art forms. The author’s arguments are important for the analysis of internal motivation for the creation of contemporary artworks. This is both a form of “appropriation” and “turning a blow”, rather a sign of backwardness. We will try to reproduce the logic of such containment based on the reproduced arguments of the stakeholders.

2. Methods
The research is based on the comparative-analytical method making it possible to compare different forms of presentation of artistic experience and modern art education programs. For this purpose, we use both theoretical researches in the field of application of new art technologies (including digital ones) and the diploma note accompanying the creative project for obtaining the art education certificate. The study embraces the materials of the work programs of the courses offered to students at the Monumental Decorative Art Faculty, Department of Theater and Decorative Painting, Saint Petersburg Stieglitz State Academy of Art and Design (Stieglitz Academy). This makes it possible to compare the latest digital art trends with the educational process policy. The research article aims to look at this process from the inside, through the eyes of a graduate student involved in the artistic process and defending her project, which applies modern technology to create art products on traditional topics. The focus is on the artistic practice, as well as the artist’s creative expectations and the ability of her self-expression within the educational standards system.

3. Results and Discussion
As an example, we will take the diploma defense paper written by graduation student Zinaida Nikolaeva, the Monumental Decorative Art Faculty, Department of Theater and Decorative Painting, Saint Petersburg Stieglitz State Academy of Art and Design.

The modern domestic educational institutions introduce digital technologies with varying intensity. This depends on many reasons: the overall strategy of a department (taking a more traditionalist or innovative approach); the availability of professors who are able to supervise projects run by students and graduates on the mastering and application of new technologies; the overall involvement of the department in digital processes; students’ initiatives who have the choice of technology to execute their projects. The scale of the project carried out by a student can be a reason for turning to new art technologies. As a rule, art schools tend to compromise the use of digital means of creating artistic artifacts. This might be affected by the traditions of antique ways to create human-made artifacts when digital technologies are traditional in fact. The research task is to compare the increasing pressure of modern technologies with the internal author’s artistic logic, which determines the boundaries of the use of digital methods to form artistic images within a particular project. In general, the problem is to perceive the forms of creative productive energy in the horizon of incredible opportunities to implement
the project through new technologies and in a new artistic context, where graduates of art educational
institutions fit. The website of the Department of theater and decorative painting of the Stieglitz Academy
outlines the artistic principles for the artistic education in this specialization which are determined by the
following qualifying signs of mastering the profession: the ability to creative work in the architectural
environment; the ability to create own creative design works of monumental art in the urban landscape;
the mastering of design practices; ability to generate architectural-aesthetic and spiritual-ethical human
environment; understanding the social significance of their future profession; having a high motivation to
perform their professional activities. The importance of the school’s tradition, to which the individual
creativity of the artist should conform, is strongly emphasized.

The history of the Stieglitz Academy, one of the best art and industrial educational institutions, has
been continued without interruptions since 1945. The main aspect of its educational and creative activity
was and remains the solution of “the most important problems of monumental painting within the context
of the established traditions and new artistic practice trends” [20]. The main task of education is to
achieve a harmonious combination of applied and decorative arts and architecture, as well as the artist’s
ability to fit into the architectural and natural urban landscape. In this context, the decorative applied item
should become another dimension of urban space, its aesthetic and ethical correlate. The program
52.05.02 for the specialization of painter (theater decoration painting) assumes competence that
-corresponds the knowledge of modern technological practices and processes; it is included in the
educational task and specifies the degree of education of a graduate student. Although none of the items
of the basic professional educational program mentions digital technologies, modern technological
practices are assumed in the educational process as one of the competencies. We will analyze a specific
either of how an artist’s motivations define the technology to execute the diploma project.

The diploma work by Zinaida Nikolaeva was executed at the faculty of monumental and decorative
arts Department of theatrical and decorative painting Stieglitz Academy in 2018. The graduation project
was headed by Associate Professor Zinaida Revchuk. The diploma is dedicated to the design of the
Nativity performance with the use of artistic textiles. When describing the process of creating this project,
we will use the diploma note to this project, in which the artist explains all the stages of its production.

First of all, let us pay attention to the artistic task set in the diploma work. The project was conceived
as the design for the Nativity scene accompanying the festival of Christmas. A most important Christian
event in Christian history and a part of the so-called Twelve Great Feasts cycle, it has been as a source of
inspiration for works of many art genres and forms. Spatial composition of three-dimensional figures,
made, most commonly, of tough cardboard, wood, papier-mache or wax is often called the Nativity scene.
Another form of the Nativity shows was spread in Catholic countries: a mechanical Nativity scene with
all or some of the figures set in motion with a hidden mechanism or engine. As a rule, a Nativity scene
composition includes canonic biblical characters: Joseph, the Virgin Mary, an angel, the three Magi and
shepherds. However, animals not mentioned in the mention of which is not in the Gospel (an ox, a donkey
or a small herd of sheep) also happen to be acting characters. Generally demonstrated during the
Christmas week, Nativity shows were integral to public festivities. In Russian folk culture, this holiday
was arranged and played out as an important theatrical performance combining music (hymns), drama
(depiction of scenes from the Gospels) and visual forms (scene decorations). Usually, it involved
children, and everything happened outside a temple, not far from it. The scene space, the cave (the creche
or weather shelter where Christ was born), was needed to be somehow emphasized. The creche is a cave
located near Bethlehem, where the family of the future Savior found themselves accidentally, due to
circumstances beyond their control. This gives Christmas a special authentic atmosphere and meaning. A
small temporary stage held the performance, usually divided into two parts. The first one demonstrated
the audience the birth of Christ and the adoration of the Magi, while the second one depicted any satirical
scene of everyday manners. Often all the roles in the play were performed by wooden, cardboard, wax or
glass dolls controlled by one or several actors, while the Nativity – a multi-tiered mobile structure –
became the scene with the cave, the Palace of Herod and Bethlehem. The upper level served as a stage for
the events of Jesus’ birth and adoration of the Magi and shepherds; the lower one hosted the flight of the
Holy Family to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents by King Herod, whose death dramatically
changed the mood of the play to entertaining. A sexton, a soldier, a peasant and his wife, and a Gypsy –
these grotesque folk characters replaced the Virgin Mary, the righteous Joseph and the Magi in the stage,
while the owner of the Nativity scene, disguising their voice and singing ditties, amused the appreciative
audience with the everyday part of the play. Sometimes the performance went “big”. In that case, dolls
were replaced by actors who played in a complex set, often installed simply outdoors. Sometimes, there
was no setting as such, while picturesque ruins, historical buildings or natural landscapes (for example,
real caves) served as the stage. Sometimes, the performance got a truly unimaginable scale, and the
location turned into a Bethlehem or Christmas village that consisted of a whole complex of buildings,
with craft workshops and taverns. The troupe numbered several hundred people; sometimes animals were
also engaged in the performance. It was for such a large-scale Nativity theater with live actors that the
project of Zinaida Nikolaeva was created. The artist aimed to design a large space serving as a space for a
mystagogic performance. The Christmas mystery play assumes that the artist undertakes to outline and
arrange a part of the space where transcendental events and meanings are depicted by material means.
The task is over large-scale both in terms of the space involved in the performance and the semantic
meaning. For the background, the artist chose to combine 11 canvases 150 cm wide and 400 cm high
each. Color becomes the main way to identify the inner space in such a monumental project. The color
palette of the panel is based on the coexistence of two contrasting colors, which outline the space and
separate it from the real secular world: moderately blue and gold ochre shades flow into each other
through complex gradients. The compositional center is occupied by the star of Bethlehem, from which
color and tone stretch to the right and the left; the composition is rounded out on both sides by the dark
blue canvas.

The sketch of the diploma project composition was computer-designed with the use of digital
technology. The image was created in the raster graphics editor Paint.NET. Z. Nikolaeva used no patterns
or textures from stock web sites: absolutely all pattern for this project were painted by the artist, i.e. they
are unique. The frescoes by Andrei Rublev and Daniil Chyorny located at the Assumption Cathedral in
Vladimir served as references and inspirations. Their surprisingly harmonious color range, complex
compositions and subtle color transfers formed the picturesque base for the project, along with frescoes
and mosaics by Byzantine and Western European masters. The use of hand-drawn patterns enable unique
and original ideas and solutions in digital drawing and makes it possible to achieve picturesque and rich
colors and patterns in order to avoid “computer” dryness and “diagram-likeness” of the image. The
images were printed using sublimation technology on polyester gabardine with a density of 160 g/m2.
This synthetic fabric with a particularly strong twist and dense weave of threads is almost crush resistant,
non-combustible and resistant to tearing and deformation. The material is also moisture-resistant; it easily
cleans from any dirt. Sublimation printing technology enables the use of almost any material (fabric,
glass, metal, ceramics, paper, film, stone, etc.) as a basis. Sublimation printing fall into two types: direct
(inks are heated and mixed directly in the printing device and immediately transferred to an item) and
intermediate (the image is first put on an intermediate medium, sublimation paper (serving as a print for
the thermal transfer), with which the print is finally transferred on the material. Sublimation printing
offers a number of significant advantages: molecules of dye substance penetrate deeply into threads
fibers, “burning into” them, which make it possible to get products that are resistant to temperature
changes, moisture and mechanical stress (including numerous washes that will not affect the product
appearance). All these factors together make the method of sublimation printing on gabardine a great way
to make a theatrical setting that boasts robustness and durability.

It is not important for the viewer perceiving the work of art to know what methods were used to
achieve the results that outlined a special separated space for the sacrament. It matters whether or not it
produces mystical communion with the performance. Usually, it is the art critic who is interested in this
question and for whom the motivation of the appeal to new technologies is constructed. What are the
reasons? Ease of execution of the project goals? Cheapness? Impossibility to perform it in any other
technique? The artist’s desire to move in line with the latest art trends?

As for the latter, it should be mentioned that the combination of traditional and innovative aspects in
an art project relates to the inventions of the 1990s and is called the “tradigital art”. A certain artistic
conformism is generally explained by the fact that the artist sought not to violate the established and quite
given traditional form of the Nativity performance. Another factor limiting innovation was determined by
the task to demonstrate the acquired skills; it was necessary to demonstrate the command of human-made
craft as a result of artistic skills obtained within the education process.

4. Conclusions
Analyzing this particular case of digital technologies applied in the work of the young artist, we can come to the following conclusions:

1. In the traditional art school, such as the Stieglitz Academy, digital technology is not the main way to implement art projects, rather a marginal event relying on a graduate’s student initiative. However, in 2018, three of the eight graduate students chose digital printing. Meanwhile, e.g., Oliver Grau [21] specialists doubt Express whether the development of innovative technologies is likely to commonly succeed without special educational strategies, especially for art school professors. Besides, it is necessary to form special information platforms that cover the previous experience of digital art production.

2. The artist chooses new technology quite consciously and has justified her choice in the diploma note as the most appropriate way to implement the project topic.

3. Digital technology allowed the artist to achieve such artistic effects, which were hardly possible with the use of traditional methods of setting building.

4. Digital technology is quite compliant with the traditional, even archaic mythological theme, which was chosen by the artist.

5. The author’s artistic idea found its practical application within the Nativity scene, as the setting was donated to the parish of the Church of the Transfiguration in Tyarlevo (located in Pavlovsk, a suburb of St. Petersburg).

6. Unfortunately, this project was not included in the register of new media art projects simply because the Academy is not included in the interactive field of modern digital archives. Therefore, the artist never stepped out of the shade of marginal creators, as it remained a matter of her private initiative.

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