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Image as Experience:

Better Than the Future

Abstract

Comparing different stages of art development – in renaissance and 21st century, we try to point out major aspects of art progression in arts and its mutual influence on human visual communication. The question is: are there particular signs of importance in current visual mainstream smog? If yes, are these going to change in time? And do these signs compare to the universal signs based in esthetical theories of philosophers and scientist? How do these signs compare to the historical and geometrical rules of art? What were the achievements of renaissance masters in light of today art theory? Commenting on a current ways of artistic progress, we try to provide leads for future research.

Keywords

progression, fine art, visual smog, dimostratione, zero points

„There is no other aesthetic problem than that of the insertion of art into everyday life.“[1]

The Golden Ages

"We are still inclined to accept the state of the arts as the surest token of the greatness of an age, even though, on reflection, we may have to admit that it is a test of most doubtful validity."[2]

It is generally well known, that renaissance was an age of big changes for artists. Their social status have evolved. *"[In renaissance age] the idea of progress brings entirely new element. No, […] the artist had not only to think of his commission but of mission."*[3] For the first time, renaissance introduces the status of artist to be something more than mere craftsmen. Or at least many of artists were trying push that notion. Undoubtedly, some of the most memorable a legendary names of history of arts are the renaissance artist.

Perhaps for the first time, artist were also able to think about transgressing the firm (mostly religious) canons of art. The high state of their arts gave (educated) renaissance people notion they live in the best age yet. Similar thinking can be observed in the 21st century, however, based on different social-economical values. Comparably, in 14th or 15th century, average working people would only encounter a single artists-made image in their life – and that would be an altarpiece in their local church or chapel.[4]

"It is a revolution which has it's martyrs who produced art for art's sake in increasing isolation from public demand. And for all its weaknesses this idea of mankind being engaged in building up an autonomous realm of values which can somehow be conceived to exist beyond the individual's contribution and comprehension remains inspiring. It is linked to the idea of the "contribution", the "dimostratione." There is an element of "dimostratione" in a hayrick by Monet no less than in a cubist still life by Picasso."[5]

Some of the artistic *results* are simply too important to be ignored. However, they might surpass its contemporary state of critique and perception. That fate of great misunderstood artists, that became accepted and celebrated years after they've passed are just too many. Yet by their artistic clairvoyance, they add much to the experience of future generations.

1   DELEUZE, Gilles a Félix GUATTARI. *What is philosophy?* London: VERSO, 2009. p. 293.
2   GOMBRICH, E. H. *Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance* ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p.3.
3   GOMBRICH, E. H. *Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance* ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p.3.
4   PETŘÍČEK, Miroslav a Martin VELÍŠEK. *Pohledy (které tvoří obrazy)*. Praha: UNIVERZITA KARLOVA, 2012.
5   GOMBRICH, E. H. *Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance* ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p.10.

As for the term of *dimostratione* as introduced by Gombrich[6], undoubtedly, it represents will to transcend both craftsmanship and conceptual skills in order to present unprecedented mastery. Post-modern fully proved that the technical finesse and material form of the artistic artifact itself is of no value alone. "[...] *a dimostratione, a token of the master's skill [...] surpassed anything done before* [...]."[7] But no doubt the renaissance masters (each in a different way), due to their clairvoyance and genius have surpassed more than just a pinnacle of form.

We could also understand that as a kind of *zero points* in renaissance art, where is no pushing the hurdle higher, nothing more to say and add (or subtract). Similar to the 20th century - where the limits of medium and thinking have been reached as well (empty gallery, silence, blank canvas...). Yet there's always more than just a form or medium. "*Neither normative criticism nor morphological description alone will ever give us a theory of style.*"[8]

We could argue there is no universal recipe[9] for a good artwork, as it is to bring ingenuity – the artistic outcome mustn't never be expectable, always surprising and bringing new surprise and amazement, both to the artists and the onlooker. For the greatest of artwork, the amazement should stay with the audience for a long time, and in future.

However we could put our finger on some universal signs and perceptional principles in humans that follow many great pieces of art geometry[10], psychology, aesthetics, thing that are hard-coded in human perception and perhaps in the order of nature itself. These phenomenons are, of course, part of the theory systems such as *Gestalt*, John Dewey's concept of *Experience*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept described in *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques* and many others. Such signs might not be apparent at a first sight. It might be in a form of masterful combination of color or it could be present in the artwork's composition – in a combination with the artwork subject and form. For renaissance, for instance, the universal signs, can be found in the expression of nobility and transcendence in paintings and sculptures or in overall vividness of transformation of marble or other materials by the greatest artist of the time. Some of these are values we still do admire and respect, six or seven centuries later when the industrial design can easily produce perfect shapes cheaply and quickly.

Nevertheless, it is very important to understand the popular or mainstream visual thinking and ways of perceiving or consuming imagery in order to criticize and react to that.

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6   GOMBRICH, E. H. Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p.8.
7   GOMBRICH, E. H. Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p.8.
8   GOMBRICH, E. H. Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p.98.
9   compare with A.I. art logarithms in 2019
10   phenomenons such as golden ratio, Fibonacci number etc.

Yet at the same time, social media are obviously influencing users themselves in the way of recommending the visual and other content for them (feed ordering)[11]

How do we define progress in fine arts in 21st century? There's even no valid name for our time period yet (and there hasn't really been since some 1970's and the end of post-modernism). How should art follow on the *zero points* in art of Duchamp and further post-modern artist? After all of the form and borders of the artworks that diminished? Perhaps today's never-ending stream of visuals following us is another form of a *zero point*. As we are facing so many images every second that we can no longer fully conceive single one of them.

Swamped visions

It increasingly feels like the Instagram (IG) and similar platforms are no longer serving as visual communication service. Instead they offer a virtuality, fiction worlds, of constructed and filtered low quality pictures[12], meant to be viewed on a small screen which, ironically, leaves a lot of space for one's imagination. The image is pretending to offer more than just an imagery.[13] That principle has of course been known for decades and many contemporary artist have reacted to it.

The artificiality of the diorama: Back in the 1970s, dioramas by the American Museum of Natural History inspired the early photography of Robert Gober (*1954) and Hiroshi Sugimoto (*1948). Gober's pictures play with two different levels of perception: Some leave the impression of scenes photographed in nature, while others emphasize the artificiality of the diorama and dissolve the effect of reality. The series "Dioramas" (1976–2016) by Sugimoto critically tackles the promise of authenticity that comes with documentary photography and dioramas. In his black-and-white shots, the habitat of the diorama appears abandoned and morbid: The animals and plants become ghostly images of themselves.[14]

And so the world of fake and not-existing worlds of made-up photographs of IG might feel equally void and ghostly. Manovich argues, that the biggest power of IG is giving their users feeling of unique visual identity[15] and perhaps an illusive power to forge their own worlds. Just a decade ago, for

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11 and we are not going to mention the phenomenon of the *fake news* in this paper (which is going to be more be visual with every passing year)

12 at the same time, due to the smartphone real time imagery, demand for actual pictural quality, for instance, in journalism is dropping as well

13 Symbolically, camera obscura – the image generating core of photography, was included in one the major Brunelleschi's realization in the church of San Giovanni in Firenze - https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1467-8365.1990.tb00397.x

14 https://www.schirn.de/en/magazine/context/diorama/diorama_inventing_illusion_exhibition_frankfurt/

15 MANOVICH, Lev. *Instagram and Contemporary Image* [online]. 2017 [quo. 2019-01-14]. Available from: http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image. p 90.

example, such feeling of uniqueness was most easily achievable through other specific skills, such as playing a music instrument, writing or drawing.

However, now, skill-cap, the accessibility, for taking filtered pictures that look out of this world is considerably lower and thus such media are much easier to approach and popular. That concept become so widespread that has become a lifestyle and the measure of success of it even a social class index, such as a luxury car.[16] This might give us an illusion of high-aesthetic society is being risen. Unfortunately, due to the low skill-cap and insufficient overall interest in contemporary art and art education, this is simply not happening. The major drive of the users is still their social status and feeling of uniqueness, enumerated by the count of their audience, "*followers*". For successful few, that status can be turned into an economic power, as they can become influencers and start advertising products and services of other businesses.[17] In order to become successful, one must follow the popular setup and demand, and produce imagery that is widely accepted and expected, i.e. mainstream. Which includes the process of creating narratives in pictures, which is obviously artificially made up then with a necessity of interactivity in mind. That makes it impossible for genuine works of art. Thus, social media, due to its high volumes of visual smog[18] and ever-repeating patterns, is not a suitable platform for evolving artistic language. And most of the visual results are just virtual, with no artistic, or other, value. Thus, for the majority, the current condition could bassically be described as a regress, even in the simple terms of thinking bout the visuality of our time.[19]

Nowadays, even general public people are desperate for attention, ever waiting for "*likes*" and "*upvotes*". That is partly caused by the disparity brought by the streaming[20] technologies – millions can watch and hear people across the globe, billions listen to the same songs and watch the same movies. There hasn't been direct feedback between performing artists and the audience for centuries (not even possible in a crowded music hall). Just as much as there rarely is for visual artist – it's impossible to,

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16 MANOVICH, Lev. Instagram and Contemporary Image [online]. 2017 [quo. 2019-01-14]. Available from: http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image. p 95.

17 MANOVICH, Lev. Instagram and Contemporary Image [online]. 2017 [quo. 2019-01-14]. Available from: http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image. p 117.

18 we use the term for abundancy of image information in digital, virtual or real environments

19 "*Benjamin called the image illiteracy of the photographers incapable of reading their own photographs. It is a question of visual dyslexia. Teachers have been saying for a long time now that the last few generations have great difficulty understanding what they read because they are incapable of re-presenting it to themselves.... For them, words have in the end lost their ability to come alive, since images, more rapidly perceived, were supposed to replace words according to the photographers, the silent film-makers, the propagandists and advertisers of the early twentieth century. Now there is no longer anything to replace, and the number of the visually illiterate and dyslexic keeps multiplying. Here again, recent studies of dyslexia have established a direct connection between the subject's visual abilities, on the one hand, and language and reading on the other. They frequently record a weakening of central (foveal) vision, the site of the most acute sensation, along with subsequent enhancing of a more or less frantic peripheral vision - a dissociation of sight in which the heterogeneous swamps the homogeneous. This means that, as in narcotic states, the series of visual impressions become meaningless. They no longer seem to belong to us, they just exist, as though the speed of light had won out, this time, over the totality of the message.*" - VIRILIO, Paul. The vision machine. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. Perspectives (Bloomington, Indiana). p. 8.

20 not only the internet, but mass-media such as newspapers or radio, TV in general

say, meet every onlooker in an art gallery. From sociology point of view, the situation can be even bleaker - the internet communities introduce extremely disproportionate and unbalanced connection between people, where thousands or even millions are feeling to be "friends" with a chosen few.

Reinventing perception

Sometimes it feels like vast majority of contemporary artists and critics are examining the state of contemporary visual culture and society in general, rather than actually coming with new solutions – trailblazing new approaches and experimenting in art itself. We also believe people find themselves in a situation where thinking about big questions of life is getting overlapped by the technical progress, rapidly year after year. The gap is getting so immense that it might become impossible to fix. Simply put, philosophy has not enough time and manpower to catch on and evaluate the new big challenges of humankind – i.e. AI, DNA editing or uncontrolled virtual reality. And if philosophy cannot, could art ever successfully interpret and respond to these issues? Or perhaps art should provide values to outweigh the lure of new technical possibilities – or at least put them in perspective.

Almost a century ago, in the time when photography and cinematography were to become mainstream, there was an artistic and theory movement radically shifting its visuality.

"[...]Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy and other New Vision photographers of the 1920s and early 1930s. They created the visual aesthetics of "making strange" by practicing visual strategies that similarly opposed the popular taste [...] In other words, they were making photography that was defamiliarizing the familiar reality, thus creating a visual analog of ostranenie effect that Viktor Shklovsky described in 1917 in relation to literature. And, as many other avant-garde visual movements of the 1910s and 1920s, they were making perception difficult—by not using visual strategies of "normal" photography. That is, I think that simply understanding the content of many of their photos required more cognitive effort, since the compositions and subjects of these photos did not immediately trigger familiar cognitive frames."[21]

In the spirit of this thesis, we could say, that *cognitive frames* can be understood as a part of the larger concept of the term of *experience*. In order to intervene with one's experience, the thoughtful act of perception must take much longer time than is usual in today's both virtual or real environments. Similarly for my personal artistic practice in photography, I try to visually break the surface of the photographic image and draw the onlooker deeper by breaking the usual and pre-destined ways of looking at images by showing hard-to read pattern and compositions. On the other hand, these pattern

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21 MANOVICH, Lev. Instagram and Contemporary Image [online]. 2017 [quo. 2019-01-14]. Available from: http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image. p 122.

should be potent to associate with inner emotions and values of the onlooker.

The options and influences are many – putting emphasis on the image physical structure (grain) in conflict with photographed micro-structures, image rotation, using negative "Ma" space, working with onlooker's expectations when they see the image from far away, finding visual similarities in different macro levels and industries, abusing onlookers' impatience, using their knowledge of art history though quoting famous artworks and more…

History of art slowly adds to the sum of both universal signs and human visual experience frames. Photography, due to its ambitiousness, feels like an ideal medium for discussing on forms of reality and our approach to it.[22]

As Paul Virilio points out[23], progress and speed were the keywords and paramount of the 20th century. With the technological superiority of our time, people might also feel immense skepticism to older works of art. With the indescribable changes in the way we live and the technology we have in command, the role of art changed rapidly. Perceptional habits there were being evolved for thousands of years fall flat in face of the moving image and all the distribution and representational possibilities that are widely available today. And just as philosophy struggles to stay relevant and influential, just as much art is still redefining its role (especially after several art *zero points* climaxes of the last century). Thus, on contrary of supporting straightforward progress, some of the most common topic of nowadays is either warning from the power of new or future technologies and to reinterpret the past. There's so much progress (and turmoil) in the world's society and technologies that art can be most pottent in commenting and re-describing it. That eventually may provide the humankind with the progress (or a way) to a sustainable and actually, a future.

Of course, there many great artist taking visual art and photography to the new heights year after year. However, the predominant medium of visuality and phatic images for most of the audience suddenly became equal to Instagram. Unless we understand and deal with the IG and it's influence of how we communicate with pictures, we can hardly focus on other issues of visual arts.

In meantime, some of the sub-culture philosophers and artists are looking for ways of expressing themselves by unspoiled perceiving through deep immersion of their minds, leaving the world of today and tomorrow technologies (especially threats such as AI) behind. Let's see what the future progress brings.

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22 *"Photography and other new media, as the latest ways to describe the world, are constantly evolving at the speed of light. Fine art in general seems to be a perfect tool to redefine the properties and qualities of what we consider reality and what attitude we have towards reality and ourselves. A proper visual translation of core values requires a much stronger focus on philosophy and human sciences than on the technologies alone." - Jana Stejskalová on the Ten Seas exhbition in Nitra Galerry, June 2018 https://nitrianskagaleria.sk/en/event/pripravujemedeset-mori/*
23 VIRILIO, Paul. *The aesthetics of disappearance*. New York, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), 1991.

Temporary resumé

We may feel, that the technology simple developed way too quickly for humans to put a grip on it. Our brain simply has not been evolutionally prepared for the technical image – and the amounts of it. Although humans are immensely capable of adapting themselves, it's uneasy to predict how can our sensory system and cognitive functions deal with the unending amount of visuality, over time.

''*We can imagine for the future," writes Charles Schreider, "a transformation (of reality) into video signals stored on tape, or better yet a decomposition and coding of images in digital signals capable of storage in various materials... " The development of high technical speeds would thus result in the disappearance of consciousness as the direct perception of phenomena that inform us of our own existence. Technology introduces a phenomenon without precedent in the mediation of time, for if we've affirmed that time is only one reality, that of the instant* [...]*[24]

We are lacking powers to serve as a lighthouse in the digital world. For many, the solution is to step back, disconnect (or at least mindfully stay offline for portions of their week) and to reconcile on the situation and art itself. Perhaps only deep, un-conflicted and focused thinking and deep perception, we can connect with that what really matters, just like well-known geniuses did when they were creating their art piece. For example, Lenoardo da Vinci was known to go through a series of mind exercises to get to the state of "trance" - and that was the only way to get the masterpieces done.[25]

The age of renaissance opened new possibilities for artists and theirs status. They, perphaps for the first time, became celebrated and famous for their achievements and their skills. In the 21st century, IG seemingly became an easy way for everybody to receive fame. However, not everyone brings unique set of skill and vision and can be an artist. For my personal approach, the most important asset of an artwork is the use of universal signs and inclusion of experience-tangible aspects in it. History of art slowly adds to the sum of both universal signs and human visual experience frames. Humongous amount of visuality and visual content in environments around us, i.e. visual smog, makes it difficult to concentrate on what really matters in arts. It also causes what Virillio call "*visual dyslexia*" and shallowness of feelings and living.

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24 VIRILIO, Paul. The aesthetics of disappearance. New York, N.Y.: Semiotext(e), c1991. p. 104 – 105.
25 GOMBRICH, E. H. *Norm and form: studies in the art of the Renaissance* ; v.I. 4th ed. Oxford: Phaidon, 1985. p 61.

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