



Through the Screen Darkly? Enchantment in Digital Art

Zoltán Körösvölgyi

Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music (Budapest, Hungary)

E-mail: korosvolgyi.zoltan@gmail.com

Abstract. The phrase in the title, borrowed from Paul (1 Corinthians 13:12), though used in a twisted form, suggests interest of new media in faith-based art, and leads to the question of whether and how such applications work in that specific context; also, if they do, then how they contribute to the spiritual and religious experience. Our media world is “the shelter where the vast majority of those of us who live in the West dwell and from which we draw the material out of which we make sense of our lives,” Cobb (2005) claims. Accordingly, as part of our world, the rise of digital art has also become common in faith-based (spiritual and religious) art. This phenomenon has been addressed in international theory, including studies of the post-secular age and (re)enchantment, as well as in theory combined with curatorial practice (e.g., Groys and Weibel 2011). The paper pays special attention to the practices of Central European artists.

Keywords: digital art, faith-based art, new media art, enchantment, Central European art.

Triggers

Let me begin with the memories of three personal experiences that came one after the other, working as triggers for this paper and the conference presentation¹ that served as a basis for it. The first one comes from late January 2019, a short visit to Cuenca, a small town in the Spanish Meseta, dramatically set at the edge of the gorge washed out by the Río Júcar, with houses partly “hanging” above the abyss in the part of the Old Town. The weather was warm and sunny, in strong contrast with where the journey started, in the heart of Central Europe.

1 The article is based on a presentation at the conference entitled *Affective Intermediality* organized at the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania between 20–21 October 2023.

The visit was intentional: having learned about the last weeks of the exhibition of a dozen works by the late American video artist Bill Viola (1951–2024) – works only seen in reproduction before – the rapid decision seemed obvious.² The exhibition in Cuenca, entitled *Via Mística* (Mystic Way) occupied three deconsecrated church buildings: Iglesia de San Andrés, Iglesia de San Miguel, and the former Convent of Las Angelicas, currently the old edifice of the Escuela de Arte Cruz Novillo (Cruz Novillo School of Art); and some works were incorporated into the outstanding permanent collection of the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español (Museum of Spanish Abstract Art).

We planned a one-day visit: the exhibition in the morning and the old town in the afternoon. Soon, we needed to redesign our plan: after seeing the first part in Iglesia San Miguel, we realized that the twelve works in total would demand a whole day. The words describing our experience were deceleration and immersion; we were lost in our encounters with the works. This is in striking contrast with what is summed up from museum studies as communicated, for example, by Tate Gallery on their Instagram account on the occasion of Slow Art Day in 2022: “Studies have found that visitors to art galleries spend an average of eight seconds looking at each work on display. Visiting a gallery can sometimes feel overwhelming – with so many works on display, trying to see everything can feel like a race against the clock.”³

So, what makes the difference? Is it the scale of the videos? Most are large. *Tristan’s Ascension* and *Fire Woman* are each 580 x 325 cm; *Emergence* is 213 x 213 cm; *The Messenger* [Fig. 1] is 430 x 300 cm; and *The Greeting* is 280 x 240 cm. Is it the exclusivity, the focused presence of Viola’s narrative and style? Is it the looks, the catchy visual perfection of the execution of the videos? Or is it the fact that these artefacts are moving images? Perhaps all, but let me return to that later.

The second experience is a more recent one – and is in connection with the phenomenon also addressed by Zsolt Gyenge in his article *Affective Immersion in Large-scale Moving Image Installations*, also part of this special issue on intermedial affectivity, published in this volume. What Gyenge suggests about the immersivity of these installations was in line with the 2022 work of Turkish-American artist Refik Anadol, created in and for the MoMA Museum of Modern

2 The only exception is Viola’s 1996 *Messenger*, originally commissioned for Durham Cathedral in North England, which was on show at the exhibition *Messiások* (Messiahs) at the MODEM Centre for Modern and Contemporary Arts, in Debrecen, Hungary, in 2009.

3 Tate. 2022. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cb2EjiQFOVT/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==. Last accessed: 23. 01. 2024.

Art in New York. *Unsupervised – Machine Hallucinations* is a very large-scale, more than seven-meter-high projected moving image artwork, which, based on a sophisticated machine-learning model, collects and interprets data from MoMA's publicly available collection. "As the model 'walks' through its conception of this vast range of works, it reimagines the history of modern art and dreams about what might have been – and what might be to come. In turn, Anadol incorporates site-specific input from the environment of the Museum's Gund Lobby – changes in light, movement, acoustics, and the weather outside – to affect the continuously shifting imagery and sound," the museum website describes the AI-driven work.⁴ A very good visualization of the work – purchased by MoMA for their permanent collection – is available on the artist's website,⁵ which illustrates the visually dramatic experience of this abstract and dynamic, turbulent flow of colours and forms. Let me act with doubt again: is it the breathtaking scale, the catchy visualization, the hype, the concept, the commodity of not needing to get through the entire exhibit, as it is encapsulated by a single artwork? Or is it more?

The third trigger was a partly similar experience: the *Cinema Mystica* exhibition [Fig. 2] in the historical Art Nouveau building of Párizsi Udvar (Paris Court) in Downtown Budapest, a discovery made shortly before the conference presentation in October 2023, serving as a basis for this study. "Home of light, sound arts, and magic. A sensory journey that leads across various new media installations," the website of the exhibition describes,⁶ which is mostly advertised – using English wording and pricing above average – as an attraction for tourists and hype-hunters. Yet, the complexity of the various works on show, some filling up an entire room, others framed on walls, most using still and moving images, "otherworldly" colours, as well as sound and other haptic sensory effects (like vibration through the flooring), one even applying Chat GPT-based interactivity, as well as the references to mostly Oriental, partly New Age spirituality create a special feeling, as if visiting a very trendy spiritual lounge. Again, is it the size, the otherworldliness, the complexity of sensory experiences, or the hype of applying very recent technical solutions (ChatGPT, sound-and-vision, lounge-like interior design)? Or is there more to it?

4 See: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5535>. Last accessed: 23. 01. 2024.

5 Anadol, Refik. <https://refikanadol.com/works/unsupervised/>. Last accessed: 23. 01. 2024.

6 *Cinema Mystica*. <https://cinemamystica.net/>. Last accessed: 23. 01. 2024.

The Power to Affect

My contention is that the first of the above-described experiences differs from the other two. Viola's video works offer immersion that leads to deeper introspection. We might not only be enchanted by the outstanding visual quality of the works and receive easy answers, but as beholders we are also challenged with thoughts and perhaps driven to raise difficult questions. What is it that we see and hear? Why is it mesmerizing, familiar, and fearful at the same time? Why cannot we just skip these works easily? How can we relate to the ideas introduced by the works?

In contrast, the other two examples are mostly functional, falling rather in the category of entertainment. Besides being an interesting technical experiment, Anadol's *Unsupervised* mostly pleases the eye and serves as a novel and spectacular attraction well aligned with the row of new museum trends. *Cinema Mystica* serves as a full-body spiritual massage salon treatment offered in a pretty and stylish, Instagram-compatible lounge interior, a perfect selfie background – which could appear anywhere in the world, addressing no deep issues, and which we can easily forget right after leaving. No afterthoughts, no lasting effect.

The large scale does count in making these works visually attractive and worth our attention, just like their visual quality, the attractive or even catchy nature of the works, or their concepts. The motion of the images displayed also counts, not only for the current outstanding popularity of moving images, but also for the effort of the beholder to see the whole content of the video and thus understand it.⁷ My claim is that art applying digital solutions could offer less entertainment, less decoration, less chic, less easy perception, and more immersion, more enchantment, more thought and room for reflection. As Kira Perov, Executive Director of the Bill Viola Studio summarizes it in the exhibition catalogue of *Via Mística*, Viola, his works, and the way they are exhibited have a similar aim: “Bill's goal is making the work, and our goal is showing it, is to immerse viewers in an inner world, one that is created for them, but one, also, that leaves plenty of room for discovery and reflection. As he has said: ‘Art, for me, is the process of waking up the soul’” (Perov 2018).

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines affect not only as something that produces an effect or causes change but also as something that produces an emotional response.⁸ Lucy Fischer specifies that by affect “we mean the subjective component of the emotion, the *feeling* [...] experienced by a particular

7 For a more detailed discussion the author published earlier, see Körösvölgyi 2020.

8 See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/affect>. Last accessed 20. 10. 2024.

individual,” although she recognizes that “contemporary critical studies known as Affect Theory [...] highly invested in foregrounding the preconscious, visceral, nonintellectual aspects of emotion” have a different understanding (2023, 7). Such a different view is expressed by Eric Shouse, who reminds us that “although feeling and affect are routinely used interchangeably, it is important not to confuse affect with feelings and emotions” as “feelings are *personal* and *biographical*, emotions are *social*, and affects are *prepersonal*” (2005). Shouse emphasizes the role of intensity when he claims that “without affect feelings do not ‘feel’ because they have no intensity” (2005). Such intensity goes beyond providing solely short pleasure through spectacular, breathtaking, hype-sensitive, or chic, mostly momentary multi-sensorial experiences. The core element is influence and the resulting lasting change that occurs in the beholder, the way they see the world and act accordingly.

András Visky, Hungarian author, playwright, poet, and theatre director formulates it brilliantly in the chapter of a booklet that aims to explain the Ten Commandments understandably to young readers. Visky’s text attempts to explain the meaning of the second commandment: what to do with the ban on making images in today’s image-centered world, and how can, if at all, this dichotomy be dissolved. Visky defines “the real work of art” (as opposed to idols), claiming that it “delights, but also awakens and sends us out into the city to see the homeless, the outcast, and the crippled. I am not the goal, says the artwork. I am just an event of self-awareness, self-discovery.”⁹

Affect, accordingly, does not denote the one-way influencing and being passively influenced, rather, it leads to “self-awareness” and “self-discovery,” resulting in a change – of viewpoint, opinion, attitude, behaviour, and perhaps of the entire culture itself. As Visky said in a recent interview: “Culture itself is the change, the reception of a multiplicity of perceptions of the world.”¹⁰ Similarly, in their paper discussing the relationship of philosophy and the “Affective Turn” claimed to have appeared in the Humanities and Social Sciences in the mid-1990s, Marguerite La Caze and Henry Martin Lloyd (citing Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg’s introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader* 2010, 1) lift the phenomenon of affect out of a solely passive perspective and place it as an active

9 In the Hungarian original: “A valódi műalkotás [...] Gyönyörködtet, de fel is ébreszt és kiküld a városutakra észrevenni az otthontalanokat, a kizsáftottakat és megnyomorítottakat. Nem én vagyok a cél, mondja a műalkotás, én csak egy önismereti, önfelismerési esemény vagyok.” (Visky 2016) – English translation by the author.

10 In the Hungarian original: “A kultúra maga a változás, azaz a világhérzékélések sokaságának a befogadása.” (Forró–Erős, 2024) – English translation by the author.

agent in the world, emphasizing that “affects arise ‘in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon:’ affect arises between the thinking mind and the acting body, between the power to affect and the power to be affected, between two bodies, and between bodies and the world” (2011, 3).

Affect and More

The importance of media and their relationship with the message has been unquestionable for decades. “McLuhan argued that the way we perceive, the way we communicate, and the way we interact with our communication media affects the way we think,” summarizes Ken Friedman and Lily Díaz in their fundamental study on intermedia, multimedia, and new media (2018, 48).

The blurring and dismantling of boundaries between different kinds of media lead to entirely new art forms. The term “intermedia,” conceived by the artist Dick Higgins, “referred to art forms that draw on the roots of several media, growing into new hybrids” (Friedman and Díaz 2018, 43). Higgins’ *Intermedia Chart* (1995) very well captures this conglomerate of art forms shaping up the universe of intermedia: with art forms traditionally belonging to literature, dance, theatre, or visual arts interconnected and merged, while still leaving abundant space for future extension.

This dissolution of traditionally applied and accepted art forms and the birth of new ones took place not only in the secular art world but also as a phenomenon of post-secularization. One of the apt terms to understand this shift is “re-enchantment,” attributed to the visual artist, theorist, author, and art critic Suzi Gablik in 1991. In a conversation, she stated that her book “tries to show that everything in our culture is now moving in the direction of process-oriented and interactive models. My work is mostly about artists whose focus is less on making objects and more on participatory or collaborative relationships” (Merchant 1995).

Art historian and theologian David Morgan, in the introduction to the volume *Re-Enchantment*, edited together with art historian James Elkins, gives a detailed account of the history of the term “disenchantment,” which the term re-enchantment is a reaction to. The term of disenchantment attributed to sociologist, historian, and political economist Max Weber in its original form as “Entzauberung” of the world, refers to the elimination of the magic from it, claiming that the idols were not “inhabited by spirits or gods, but consisted only of dead matter,” thus “pointing to the real architect of the universe and human

affairs” (Morgan 2009, 3). This “de-divinizing” of the world – the term Weber borrowed from the poet, playwright, author and philosopher Friedrich Schiller and developed into his concept – is in line with “the rise of science and technology, hymned by the Enlightenment and exploited by the Industrial Revolution and the rational administration of economy, resulted in the disenchantment of the world, as it was explained by Weber and has been echoed by many others” (Morgan 2009, 4–5). The concept of re-enchantment reflects the acknowledgement that magic in the form of enchantment can be carried, mediated, and created through works of art, an idea that lived on unbroken in vernacular culture, as Morgan confirmed shortly after the publication of their book.¹¹

In relation to the previous chapter, we can find a connection between enchantment and affect as offered by Morgan in his book, *Images at Work*, where he claims that “one of the primary functions of one’s own sacred imagery is to render invisible the deep assumptions that anchor one’s life-world. When the foundations of what we take to be real are coincident with the physical structure of the universe, we feel at home. This is one of the most enduring functions of enchantment and is most viscerally experienced in the affect of wonder” (2018, 8).

Such acknowledgement, hand in hand with the widening discourse on the relationship between religion and art, opened the gate wide to several great exhibitions, out of which *Medium Religion*, curated by Boris Groys and Peter Weibel at the ZKM Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, Germany, in 2008–2009 is of particular importance for our investigation. This exhibition showcased a wide range of works of art and documentary installations. Its catalogue edited by the curators provides a very rich collection of important studies covering subjects of religion as a medium, its status in the age of digital reproduction, the fabrication of truth, causes for wonder (see enchantment), divine mass reproduction, and remembrance, to quote a few.

In the opening study of the catalogue, *Religion in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, investigating how “religious attitudes have shifted from culturally marginal zones into the mainstream,” the philosopher, art critic, and media theorist Boris Groys argues that these are based on freedom – of faith, as customary in the secular democratic societies of the West, and of sharing opinions on the Internet –, and reproduction – repetition as practice in religious rituals, as well as the digital file’s propensity of being easily and often automatically

11 David Morgan: *Recognizing Jesus: Visuality and the Study of Religion*. Unpublished lecture at the Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion Conference, London, March 2010: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324091388_Recognizing_Jesus_Visuality_and_the_Study_of_Religion. Last accessed 29. 10. 2024.

reproduced (Groys 2011, 23–29). Not only do highly active religious movements on the rise (like evangelical NRMs or Islam) use video as a prime medium in their communication, but also established churches follow that practice (especially since the worldwide estrangement caused by the pandemic). Early examples of applying digital media in religious communication appear primarily in the English-speaking world, just like the first digital works of art in a religious environment (like Viola's *Messenger* as mentioned earlier, commissioned by and first installed in Durham Cathedral in 1996).

The reason why the digital can be a perfect medium to communicate faith-based messages is due to its immaterial nature: digital art is essentially invisible and intangible, as it is carried by digital data, and its sensory perception only occurs after the data is represented: digital files displayed on a screen, projected on a surface, or made audible by an audio system. Groys even argues that “the act of visualising invisible digital data is [...] analogous to the appearance of the invisible inside the topography of the visible world (biblically speaking, signs and wonders) that generate the religious rituals.” In this respect, using a surprising analogy, he claims that “the digital image functions as a Byzantine icon – as a visible representation of invisible digital data” (2011, 28–29).

Accordingly, as Groys continues, the “opinion about what is identical and what is different, or what is original and what is a copy, is an act of belief” (2011, 29). Belief, as we all know, is something definitely in common with art and faith. As American art historian Daniel A. Siedell aptly summarizes, “both religion and art require belief for them to work. For example, just as for the Eucharist to be efficacious, the recipient must believe (i.e., have faith) that the wine and the wafer is the blood and the body of Christ, so too must the beholder of a work of art believe that the oil paint smeared on a canvas surface means something” (2010, 11–12).

Timelessness, or rather, endlessness is another argument for the common ground of faith and the digital. Addressing this idea, Groys uses the word “immortality” by pointing at the phenomenon of repetition, a quality innate to the digital, claiming that “potentially eternal repetition [...] becomes a form of immortality because of its ability to interrupt the flow of historical time” (Groys 2011, 29).

In agreement with it, in the following chapter of their catalogue, the late Peter Weibel, artist, curator and theorist adds that “what the technical media promise is comparable to what religion has always held in prospect: the overcoming of time and space and the promise of eternal life” (2011, 41). Weibel's concept

of theo-technology is based on the fundament that religion itself is a proto-medium, a medium of absence, since “it seems to render present something that is absent” (2011, 41).

Examples Inside and Outside of Central Europe

This absence, the vacuum of the divine/spiritual/holy experience, and the need to make the invisible visible/audible/tangible have been represented by several artists using digital media in the past decades – some in religious environments, others in secular spaces of the art world. Bill Viola created several such works following the 1996 *Messenger*. Two of them are on display in religious spaces: *Martyrs (Earth, Air, Fire, Water, 2014)*, a set of four colour high-definition videos on plasma displays originally installed as a tetrptych at St Paul’s Cathedral in London; and *Mary (2016)*, a silent multi-channel high-definition colour video installation displayed on monitors in the form of a triptych, exhibited in the same church building. These two figurative works, parts of the collection of the Tate Modern, appear as “video altarpieces” in the space used both for devotion and tourism.

The Italian artist Davide Maria Coltro’s *CRUX per crucem ad lucem (Through the Cross, to the Light)*, created in 2013, is a video installation of eleven monitors arranged in the shape of a vertical Latin cross and displaying views of the sky in continuous change (modified by algorithms and making it unpredictable). In their appearance, these are similar to Viola’s video altarpieces, especially with the setting of the monitors in the shape of a cross as a polyptych, but their placement in the space of a gallery as well as their non-figurative imagery are distinctly different. Nevertheless, the connection to liturgy appears in Coltro’s work, too, which the artist claims to be an “electronic painting,” as following the liturgical calendar it is not only the view of the sky that changes, according to the artist’s intent, but also other visual elements of the image. For example, on Good Friday the wire fence that distracts the beholder’s view of the sky in the images projected on the monitors (a reference to refugee camps, according to the artist) disappears, “freeing our full vision of the cross made up by heaven.”¹²

Light, a key element of the works above (together with the view of the sky), is also central in the oeuvre of the American artist James Turrell, who seeks to

12 The presentation of the installation: *Crux, per cruces ad lucem: l’installazione permanente di Davide Maris Coltro per la GASC*. (Cross, Through the Cross, to the Light: The permanent installation by Davide Maris Coltro in GASC) *Espoarte*, 03. 04. 2021. <https://www.espoarte.net/arte/crux-per-crucem-ad-lucem-linstallazione-permanente-di-davide-maria-coltro-per-la-gasc/>. Last accessed: 25. 01. 2024.

investigate the act of seeing, not so much the seeing of an object, but rather seeing itself, seeing the seeing and seeing beyond in his works. Several, if not most, of Turrell's works could be linked to the transcendent – with his “skyspace” edifices being open to the sky and having only the sky as a sole exhibit, or the great and unfinished complex of *Roden Crater*, an architectural structure built into an extinct volcano in Arizona intended to serve as an instrument to watch the sky, what is above. Turrell seeks to understand more about our seeing our perception, and ourselves. One of his permanent light installations is the *Chapel Dorotheenstädtischer Friedhof* (Berlin, Germany) created in 2015. [Fig. 3.] Colour light inside a church building is nothing new since Abbot Suger's early 12th-century initiative that resulted in what we now call Gothic church architecture interior space experience (Basilique Cathédrale Saint-Denis, 2023). In contrast, in this memorial chapel in Berlin, the visitor cannot see the source of the changing light, as there are no magnificent stained glass windows; the source of light remains hidden, yet the space is filled with light and colour. “In Turrell's light spaces, the architecture appears dematerialized, relieved of its severity, and the visitor immediately experiences the presence of pure light” reads the short description by Häusler Contemporary.¹³

A work created during her doctoral research, at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, UK, *Art as a Living Theology*, the Czech Dominican sister and artist Pavlína Marie Kašparová's *Ora Pro Nobis* is also light art, complete with sound. [Fig. 4.] This work was introduced in her home country's Bazilika svatého Vavřince a svatého Zdislavy (Basilica of St Lawrence and St Zdislava) in Jablonné v Podještědí, Czechia, in 2019. While she thinks of it as a pilot project for her doctoral work, it is a good example reflecting that Kašparová, though working with diverse media, sees primarily the digital to be her medium. As she claims, for her, “digital art is the primary medium of communication and collaboration.”¹⁴ Kašparová's art, however, is also openly connected to both theological thinking, especially religious communities as beholders, and a focus on femininity. Reflecting on the work she writes, she points out that “the comprehensive art project *Ora Pro Nobis* was conducted to apply and evaluate the methodology for using art to share religious experience with a broad audience. The collaboration with the local religious congregation was a crucial component of the whole project because it tested how religious life can be shared with others when mediated

13 Turrell, James. Chapel Dorotheenstädtischer Friedhof. Häusler Contemporary: https://haeusler-contemporary.com/james-turrell-dorotheenstaedtscher-friedhof_en. Last accessed 25. 01. 2024.

14 Kašparová, Pavlína Marie. *Ora Pro Nobis* (projection), 2019. <https://www.creativenun.com/portfolio>. Last accessed: 29. 01. 2024.

through art and an artist. The primary research technique was observation and reflection” (Kašparová 2022, 90).

Similarly, femininity and interactivity (thus community building through interaction) are of prime importance for the young Hungarian artist Eszter Júlia Kuzma, though for her the theological approach is replaced by a deep interest in spirituality. Ancient symbols and the digital world interconnect in her oeuvre to tell myths, traditions, and rituals by translating them into interactive installations and objects. Kuzma’s 2021 installation *Altar of the Holy Generation* [Fig. 5] is a complex work that uses painting, light projection, music, and smoke to summon into the spiritual the world of non-earthly experiences of the “holy generation” through rave parties as contemporary rituals. The shape of the triptych (a reference to Christian liturgical art) is contrasted with scattered light projection on the surface of the central panel, as well as the painted image of hundreds of synthetic drug tablets (MDMA, commonly known as ecstasy) on the side wings appearing here as doors. The “altar” is approachable and thus suggests that while in the established religions only priests and initiates are allowed to approach it, here “the community, brought to life by the rave, is present in the space as equals” in practicing and experiencing “today’s religion.”¹⁵

The Hungarian artist and researcher Veronika Szendrő’s artworks and research also focus on the connection between contemporary art and religions. In her doctoral research at the University of Pécs, Szendrő investigates “The Effect of Mandala Art on Contemplative Brain Activity,” whereas in her artworks she combines her background in sculpture with digital art, primarily with video art. In her 2021 video installation *Mandilyon* [Fig. 6], she used the technique of the icon to create a triangular frame with a golden base to welcome a video mandala projection. By intentionally mixing Eastern and Western ritual traditions, she “draws attention to their common sacred root, and by doing so contrasts and unifies the different religious reality (and beyond reality) experience” – as she writes in her artistic statement. The title of Szendrő’s work is a direct reference to “the so-called ‘akheiropoiotos’ icon type: according to Christian tradition, the Image of Edessa was a holy relic consisting of a square or rectangle of cloth upon which a miraculous image of the face of Jesus had been imprinted – the first icon (‘image’).”¹⁶

15 Kuzma, Eszter Júlia. *Altar of the Holy Generation*. <https://eszterjuliakuzma.com/artworks/?filter=1&term=3#/>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

16 Szendrő, Veronika. *Mandilyon*. <https://veronikaszendro.com/page4.html>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

Zoltán Vadászi, a photographer and artist from Hungary, infuses the know-how of his background in biomedical engineering into making art. His project *1/0* [Fig. 7], however, on top of this combination, attempted to investigate a question also relevant to theology and theological art: making the invisible visible by using digital media. In this project, Vadászi applies medical imaging modalities (CT, MRI, US) indirectly by scanning 20 x 20 x 20 cm of air, continuously adjusting the modalities to enable them to visualize the invisible (to the human eye) as photographs and as video loops. Later, Vadászi also prints these models using 3D-printing techniques to create sculptures of the scanned objective reality air fragments. *1/0* not only reflects the beauty of what is invisible to the human eye, but also “the presence of non-perceptible realities by representing the complexity of decision-making situations,” claims the artist.¹⁷

Except for NFTs,¹⁸ which I am excluding from this investigation, most digital works of art usually appear in traditional/real space galleries – after being printed and mounted, visually projected, or otherwise materialized. Nevertheless, extreme dematerialization of the gallery experience does occur. *Technology of the Sacred*, a group exhibition organized and curated by Lukáš Likavčan and Display Sdružení pro výzkum a kolektivní praxi (Display Association for Research and Collective Practice), “a platform active in the wider field of contemporary art,” is an exhibition exclusively existing in digital form, available only online.¹⁹

In the introduction, the artists claim that “the task of the research exhibition *Technologies of the Sacred* is to rethink the boundaries between technology and religion or mysticism. The disenchanted world of the modern era is but a continuation of sacral tendencies by other means – magical thinking is camouflaged as technical rationality, which needs the sphere of the sacred as its hidden source of secular majesty. This approach allows us to both reformulate our relationship to what technology essentially is and to craft new cultural practices for an age when the world as we know it is irretrievably falling apart. What is it that we should be mourning, and what songs of praise should we be singing to the world to come?”²⁰ *Technology of the Sacred* is a definite attempt to answer this question by creating an extremely focused experience of visiting,

17 Vadászi, Zoltán. *1/0*. <https://www.zoltanvadaszi.com/1-0>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

18 Non-fungible tokens, often referred to as NFTs, are blockchain-based tokens that each represent a unique asset like a piece of art, digital content, or media.

19 See the *About* section on the webpage of the association: <https://www.display.cz/en/about>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

20 See the description of the exhibition on the webpage of the association: <https://sacred.display.cz/en>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

encountering and beholding art. You sit by your computer in an exclusive space occupied solely by yourself as a beholder and are offered a multi-channel, complex sensorial experience of looking at images, reading texts, listening to speech, sounds, music, and chanting. The curiosity of browsing through the rooms, discovering the way to use buttons/mouse to approach the works of art from the comfort and safety of your environment, independent of where you are browsing from, and having a technically unlimited amount of time and repetition to behold allow a unique and democratic experience. Let us not forget that the exhibition was organized (and opened online, using an online videoconferencing platform) in 2020, the year of the curfew resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is easy to latch on and become addicted to this new way of enchantment: with the click of a button, we can enter the “gallery space,” use “corridor“ to approach the “rooms” where we can see/hear the art “objects,” and, in the case of some, if we wish, by clicking on the button, see/hear the digital videos “behind.” While walking through the rooms, we can also read the text written on the “ceiling.” The artists in the exhibition reflect the borderless and limitless approach: works by András Cséfalvay (Slovakia), Alice dos Reis (Portugal), Halima Haruna (Nigeria/USA), Holly Childs (Australia), Danae Io (Greece/The Netherlands), and Adéla Součková (Czechia), available exclusively online, represent a wide horizon: different nationalities and artistic approaches are represented with works of art as digital (mobile) sculpture, 3D model, video, audio, and music.

Among the exhibitors of *Technologies of the Sacred*, András Cséfalvay, an artist living and working in Bratislava, creates predominantly digital art, short films, music, and installations, besides teaching. Cséfalvay is interested in “where the ordinary, history, the commonly accepted sense are changed to gain distance and get a new perspective upon what knowledge is, how language operates, what is hidden or inaccessible.”²¹ Accordingly, one can find works dealing with prehistory, and nature as well as ones addressing questions of religion, and rituals. From the latter falling in the subject of this paper, the site-specific video created for the Samorin Synagogue *Automated Messiah Artificial Peace 2222* (2021) [Fig. 8] is an imaginary animated digital “documentary” on how “artificial intelligence learns the biomechanics of human religion, and repeats moves even after humanity is gone,” while *Gates of Sanity* (2019) shows the digitally animated video of a figure resembling an antique Assyrian composite human-animal divine figure praying. Cséfalvay creates and uses images and sounds alike

21 See the introduction written by Cséfalvay himself: *On Behalf of My Own Works* on his personal website: <http://www.andrascsefalvay.com/words11>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

to allow us to experience what we cannot otherwise. As he claims, “I believe art has the mission of borrowing a voice to those entities that appear to have lost it, are without one, or are silenced by a dominant world interpretation.”²²

Borsos Lőrinc, a fictitious artistic (id)entity created and operated by Lilla Lőrinc and János Borsos, Hungarian artists, have had a long history of dealing with sensitive subjects strongly linked to their identity – including religion. Although the digital is present in their works from time to time, the emphasis in their oeuvre is on material works. A rare and exclusively digital work is *Nevük légió* (*Their Name is Legion*) [Fig. 9] – in cooperation with Elod Janky – published online (Borsos Lőrinc 2021). This imaginative meta-diary explores Borsos’s identity through the fictional perspective, although referencing real experiences, including their time in organized religion (2003 to 2010), which has left a lasting print on their identities – and a long process to work on afterwards. This intentionally old-school and “ugly,” HTML-coded untrendy digital diary with “notes, dreams, quotations and writings from parallel timelines, complemented by drawings and additional visual elements” is part of this process: a painful deconstruction and analysis of the contrasting or sometimes very similar relationship between the roles of believer and artist. This artistic process of “burning away religion,” to borrow the term used by James Elkins for a certain artistic approach to dealing with religion in his 2004 book, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, needs more than eight seconds to behold – and much more time for the beholder to process the experience, dive into the depths, and be affected.

As a final example, let me introduce a work by Erik Mátrai, an artist from Hungary, whose interest focuses on light and colour. Mátrai works with both painting and the digital media, the latter, lately, in the form of installations. His artistic attitude, though for some time working in a studio shared with Borsos Lőrinc, is radically different. Mátrai’s urge to make the miraculous visible, and to do so with a contemporary medium, is tangible, for example, in his 2022 work *Csak a fénye* (*Only its Light*) [Fig. 10] showcased as part of the *Megújulás* (*Reform*) exhibition at the Pannonhalma Archabbey. The work consists of a white cube-shaped box, which seems first closed, but out of which coloured light is projected on the wall. Only then would the beholder realize that the light projected on the wall behind the cube emerges from it and is coloured by a monstrosity inside, if, driven by curiosity, s/he walks around the cube and attempts to peak inside. To quote from the statement of the artist: “Instead of highlighting the

22 See the webpage of the artist: <http://www.andrascsefalvay.com/words11>. Last accessed 29. 01. 2024.

object (i.e. the monstrance, ‘a fundamental element of Catholic liturgy’ which ‘on prominent occasions [...] holds the sacramental bread, the Body of Christ, as it is presented’),” reads the description of the work at the exhibition, “this work conceals it in a cube. Inside the cube, the monstrance is illuminated with a hard light, the brightness of which, radiating through a hole, lights up on the opposite wall. Therefore it is not the object we see but the light radiating from it, which does not illuminate, instead it manifests itself in the space, as a body of light. [...] Rarely, when all colours meet, a pure white light is born, comprising each of the colours, hence expressing fullness and a reformed descent.”²³

The mystic experience of using coloured light, a phenomenon well-known since Abbot Suger’s initiative and also used by Turrell, as mentioned earlier, receives another layer here: the light radiating through the monstrance, basically making the beholder perceive it as the source of light, which turns completely white on rare occasions is a straight reference to the Transfiguration. Making the beholder experience it in a novel form that necessitates their interaction and participation in creating the experience is an obvious form of enchantment.

Conclusion

In the previous pages, I attempted to uncover how digital and new media can contribute to the affective power of faith-based art, with a short overview of the international art scene and a few insights into Central Europe. Due to the limits of the paper, the scope is far from being complete, nevertheless, I hope I could provide food for thought and perhaps a new perspective on the subject, as well as an appetite to discover the works discussed.

Enchantment provided by digital and new media can offer a novel way of beholding, seeing differently, and experiencing what’s beyond. As the art historian Ronald R. Bernier put it in his writing *Bill Viola, the Icon, and the Apophatic Sublime*, “we are open to being ‘caught upon’ by the image, instead of having authority of visual possession over it (as in the modernist narrative); we are called into an aesthetic posture of attentiveness” (2023, 241). Such attentiveness might turn into sensitization, change of mind and heart, and action. Borrowing Cséfalvay’s questions from his PhD thesis as a summary to guide our way: “What good is a sermon, if there is no conversion? What good is an artwork, if there is no transformation?” (2014, 53).

23 Mátrai, Erik: *Only Its Light*. Description of the work of art available at the site of the *Megújulás* (Reform) exhibition at the Pannonhalma Archabbey, 2022.

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Figure 1. Bill Viola: *The Messenger*, 1996. Color video projection on large vertical screen mounted on wall in darkened space; amplified stereo sound. 430 x 300 cm. Continuously running. Installed in Iglesia de San Andrés, Cuenca, as part of the exhibition *Bill Viola: Via Mística*, 2018–2019. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 2. *Cinema Mystica*, Budapest. Exhibition interior, 2023. Photograph by the Author.



Figure 3. James Turrell: *Permanent Light Installation*, Chapel in the Dorotheenstädtischen Cemetery, Berlin, 2015. Photo by mangtronix. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mangtronix/29433981590/in/photostream/>. Used with CC BY-SA 2.0 permission.



Figure 4. Pavlína Marie Kašparová: *Ora Pro Nobis*, 2018–2019. Large-scale video projection, HD video with sound. 11 min 07 sec. Bazilika svatého Vavřince a svatého Zdislavy (Basilica of St Lawrence and St Zdislava), Jablonné v Podještědí, Czechia. Source: <https://www.creativenun.com/post/ora-pro-nobis>. Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 5. Eszter Júlia Kuzma: *Altar of the Holy Generation*, 2018. Installation, aluminium, metal shelf system, polycarbonate plate, canvas, acrylic, aluminium foil, spray, smoke machine, 225 x 185 x 50 cm. Source: <https://eszterjuliakuzma.com>. Courtesy of the Artist.

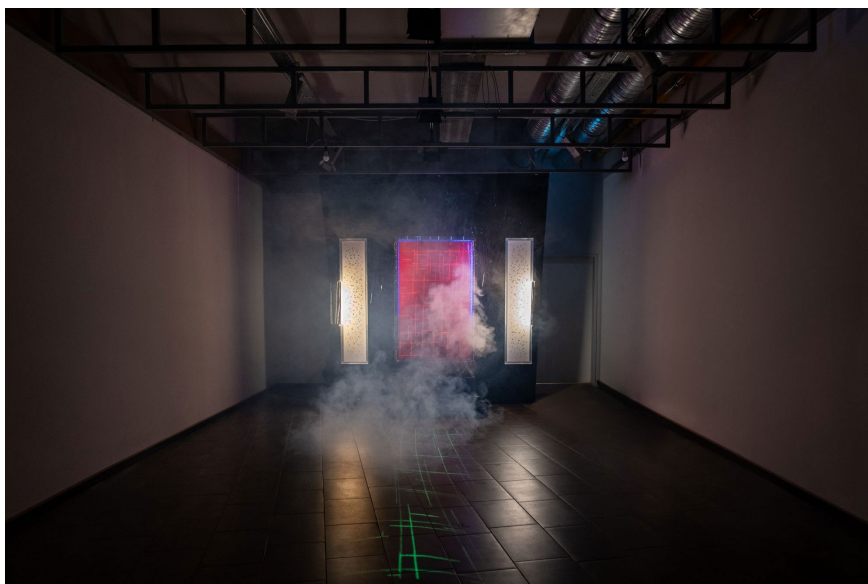


Figure 6. Veronika Szendrő: *Mandylion*, 2021. Video installation, duration 6:13. Source: <https://veronikaszendro.com/page4.html>. Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 7. Zoltán Vadászi: *1/0*, 2019. Photographs, video loops, 3D (FDM & PolyJET) printed objects of abstract or pre-defined physically not presented air entities scanned in 3D, using medical imaging modalities (CT, MRI, US). Source: <https://www.zoltanvadaszi.com/1-0>. Courtesy of the Artist.

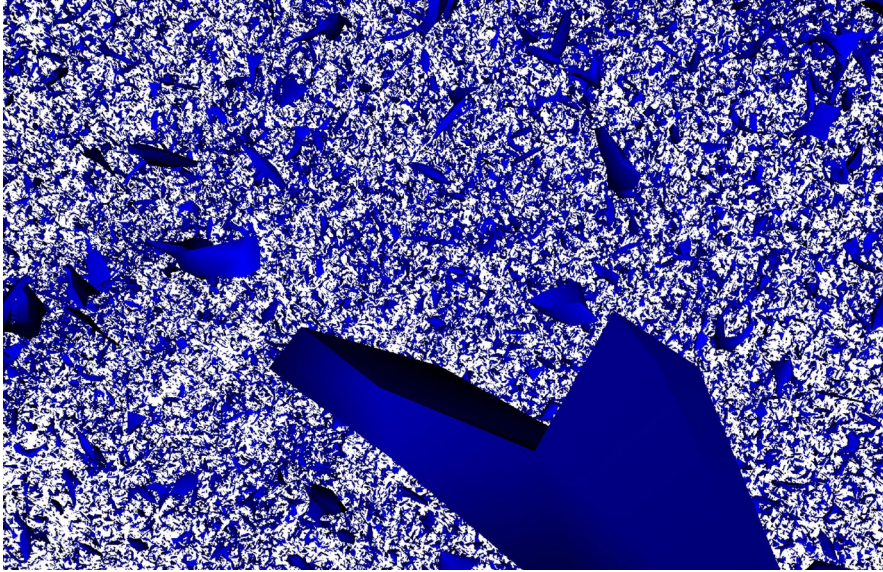


Figure 8. András Cséfalvay: *Automated Messiah Artificial Peace 2222: A project in the Samorin Synagogue for the future*, 2021. Video, duration 3:31. Courtesy of the Artist.



Figure 9. Borsos Lőrinc: *Nevük légió (Their Name is Legion)* (2021). Online. Published as part 6 of the *Transzrealizmus (Transrealism)* series on *tranzitblog.hu*. Screenshot. Source: http://tranzitblog.hu/nevuk-legio-transzrealizmus_06/.



Figure 10. Erik Mátrai: *Csak a fénye (Only Its Light)*, 2022). Installation, wooden cube, spotlights, gilded copper monstrance with gemstones and glass. View at the *Megújulás (Reform)* exhibition, in the Pannonhalma Archabbey, 2022. Photograph by the Author.

