

Review

Bringing Bosch alive through multimedia

Voica Pușcașiu

DigiHUBB, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania,
E-mail: voicapuscasiu@gmail.com

When one talks about “digital art” there are a great number of very different manifestations that could potentially fall into this category. One of the first things to keep in mind is the fact that as a term “digital art” does not refer to any particular style or aesthetic, thus the great variety. Much rather it is a medium through which artists choose to present their ideas. However as with all things digital, this can take on a lot of different facets, the digital turn has provided not only the opportunity for art archival and dissemination, but also as an extensive creative tool whose only limit lies in the imagination and/or technical skill of the author. To put it simply, digital art can range from works created entirely with the use of a computer and software, to alteration done with the help of the digital medium. It can include appropriation of other classical works that receive new life and meaning through this approach.

Included in this last category there has been a sharp increase in the number of truly delightful projects, one of which includes a mesmerizing stroll through Salvador Dali’s surrealist paintings. In *Dreams of Dali*, the viewers get to be in a virtual reality and “walk” around the deserted and bizarre landscape, passing underneath the spindly legs of Dali’s signature elephants. The full virtual reality experience can be accessed at the Dali museum of Saint Petersburg, Florida, or is downloadable as an app for the users of HTC Vive or Oculus Rift for the modicum price of \$2.99, but a linear 360° version – a panoramic video – is available online for anyone.¹ This new manner of interacting with the works of the famous surrealist engages the viewer in an entirely different way – and dare I say perhaps even a more enjoyable one?

¹ [<http://thedali.org/exhibit/dreams-vr/>]. Accessed June 1st 2017.

Seeing as though surrealist works hold a constant fascination in the public's eyes and mind, it is not entirely surprising that a similarly oriented project put the spiritual godfather of the current into focus. His name is Hieronymus Bosch, and few have not heard of him, who despite living and working around the 1550s, continues to intrigue and amaze people through the ages with his otherworldly and mysterious iconography. His paintings need no introduction, from the ghoulish imaginary creatures to the foul acts performed by mankind in nightmarish landscapes. He captivates the imagination perhaps even more so since the meaning behind his works has never quite been clarified. Arguably a pessimist and a moralist, Bosch shows the vile and hedonistic world of man and the horrifying repercussions that await in this realm or the next. What is more, the medieval imagery of Bosch's paintings seems to possess that rare quality of timelessness, by not giving true indications of specifically where or when it was created.

The year 2016 marked a full 500 years since the death of the painter, and as the year of his birth is but speculation, this was considered to be the proper time to pay an homage to this very peculiar artist. As the Year of Bosch unfolded in many locations around Europe the multimedia show Bosch. Visions Alive was opened in Moscow and was then moved to Berlin, which is the subject of this present chronicle. Such was the success of the show in Germany that even though it was supposed to stay open from July 6th 2016 to October 30th 2016, it actually got extended by popular demand to June 2017.

The project was created by Artplay Media, which according to their website² is an international team of professionals specializing in exhibitions, art, technology, sound, design, architecture, marketing, and public relations. Their quickly expanding portfolio is based on a patented technology titled "new media experience" which combines multimedia and interactive hardware, cinematography, and motion design in creating a synergy between education and entertainment, which they dubbed "edutainment". Not surprisingly this approach to art in a new format manages to bring in crowds of visitors. Artplay Media statistics boast over 1.000.000 visitors in 10 cities in 5 countries. Their itinerant shows including *Michelangelo. The Creation*, and *The Great Modernists. Revolution in Art* can be hosted as long as all the conditions (venue, expenses, etc.) are met, but they also offer solutions for permanent installations. As a side thought it is worth mentioning that Artplay Media are not the only ones involved in setting up this type of shows. Grande Exhibitions for example are true veterans in this field, and also hold the patent for the new media platform called Sensory4^{TM3}, which they developed themselves. Their offer an even larger number of travelling shows such as *Van Gogh Alive – The Experience*, *Monet to Cézanne – The French Impressionists*, various da Vinci exhibitions,

² [<http://www.artplaymedia.com/>]. Accessed June 1st 2017.

³ [<http://grandeexhibitions.com>]. Accessed June 1st 2017.

but also shows unrelated to art, like *Ottoman Empire – The Experience*, *Planet Shark: Predator or Prey* or *Leaders: Speeches That Changed the World*.

The show itself was hosted at Alte Münze, a typical Berlin space, repurposed from what was originally a coin minting centre and eventually transformed into a venue for various events. The entire exhibition occupied a total of 4 rooms, with an ample space that provided a one of a kind viewing experience. The very first room hosts not only the ticket office and the small gift shop which contains all the regular items one might expect, but also a couple of tables where refreshments can be purchased, or even alcoholic beverages for those who look to further enhance or alter their viewing. However, from a curatorial point of view, before passing through the dark curtain into the show per se, it is interesting to stop and take note of the slide show which features the original works that were used in the production of the multimedia feature. Since the show consists of fragments and characters from different works of the artist, that are made to interact, it is quite thoughtful to see the original, static sources and familiarize yourself with them beforehand. Hieronymus Bosch has a small number of accredited paintings, so it is obviously that some of the most intriguing and specific ones have been chosen for this project. Among them were the world-famous *Garden of Earthly Delights*, *The Last Judgment*, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, and *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*.

Going through the curtain the visitor is transported into a room brimming from floor to ceiling with an animated collage of Bosch's characters and landscapes. The entire video is played in an approximately 40 minute loop, and even though it is difficult if not impossible to control at which point of the video one would enter the room, the ending and the beginning sections of the loop are quite distinguishable through their rhythm. In a rather obvious manner, the starting scene was consecrated to the passing of time as indicated by a complex projection of rotating cog wheels, accompanied by the specific sound of ticking clockworks. Immediately after, starting from a liquid droplet, one was revealed Bosch's vision of the Creation as depicted on the closed panels of his *Garden of Earthly Delights* triptych.

However from then on the entire narrative was much less clear and basically featured a random flow of nightmarish scenes from the aforementioned paintings, which were brought to life through the means of very clever, albeit minimal, animation. Various parts of Bosch's vast painterly universe made an appearance from a giant knife cutting through a solitary human ear, to mermaids, faceless knights, flying fish and other animals – be they real or fantastic beasts, to highly detailed berries of all sorts, the latter of which were greatly enlarged and rained down like an eccentric storm all around the chamber. The only utterly unexplainable sequence that had the potential to ruin the entire visual experience, was that of a man's animated silhouette dancing to the instantly recognizable moves of Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, that is in the company of medieval musical instruments taken straight out of Bosch's works.

As for the space itself and how the video was shown it must firstly be mentioned that all four walls were covered in imagery from floor to ceiling, but none showed the exact same picture simultaneously. Instead there were slight variations be it in size or orientation. Some were zoomed in, while others were flipped on a vertical axis, so that each viewer could choose which “wall” to follow or even move between them. As a viewing option the space was also interesting in the sense that it provided benches and a cluster of bean bags in the middle of the room, but also all along the walls. This decision made for a cozy and comfortable stay and much less stiff than your usual art exhibition or even movie theater. The music, all of it exclusively instrumental, only added to the atmosphere, without being too loud or distracting for the moving visuals.

Moving along from the main room of the show, there was yet another, but much smaller room with less available wall space for projections seeing as though it has two doors. There was still a bean bag or two, but the greatest asset of this particular room came from the fact that it offered to possibility to chance to view the images up close and to revel in all their wonderful details and to truly appreciate the astonishing quality of the resolution.

Last but not least, there was yet another room free of any moving image, but which focused on the life and times of Hieronymus Bosch. The centerpiece of the room was a chronological timeline that marked every single year of the artist’s life starting from 1450 onward. A total of 66 years, each featuring a relevant thumbnail image and a narrow column of text which pointed out a wide array of facts – such as the birth of Barbarossa in 1475 or the death of Vlad the Impaler in 1477, but also mentioned particularly draughty years, or the creation of important and relevant works of art or political acts. All in all without following a specific discourse it seemed aimed to paint a lively, eclectic picture of more than half a century in European history and it absolutely managed to do just that.

This room also provided a tribute to Bosch’s artistic influence throughout Art History by linking all the artists that proudly cited him as their source of inspiration. The names range from Pieter Bruegel the Elder, his contemporary to the already mentioned Salvador Dali and other representatives of the artistic avant-garde like Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Francis Picabia, Otto Dix, Paul Eluard, Paul Klee, and George Grosz, all of which dabbled in surrealist imagery. The curatorial choices present in this room enriches the show in a way that makes viewers realize it is much more than an entertaining production through digitization and video art, but also provides historical context into the life of this strange character. The connections with other artists also try to connect the loosely arranged dots in Art History, while at the same time underlining Bosch and making him stand out as a singularity.

Speaking of which, other than the 500th anniversary of his death, Bosch is already thought of as a highly interesting artist because of the mystery aura surrounding his paintings. Due to the fact that his works are brimming with small and intricate details

that could always benefit from closer inspection, it is quite natural that they were used in projects meant to showcase the wonders of new technologies regarding digitization. The Google Art Project is already involved in creating extremely high-resolution images of masterpieces, but Bosch's painting was particularly selected in yet another separate project. The *Garden of Earthly Delights* was turned into an online interactive adventure⁴ in which you could wander through the painting and discover its many stories through audio commentary or text – with a children's version also available, but only in Dutch. This goes to show the continuous fascination that this artist still holds on the imagination of contemporary art lovers, and story lovers of all kinds.

It is safe to say that the creators of this exhibition have successfully tapped into a well-received genre, which is also easily seen by the success of similar shows. It is hard to decide if this type of viewing is ultimately able to replace the experience of seeing the actual paintings, or even if it ends up providing something more, whatever that may be. Sincerely I consider that as a non-issue, it is simply a different experience and that is important in itself. It is an entirely new way of viewing art, brought on by the ever-evolving digital means and in this age of democratization of art, it is quite undeniable that this kind of show has the potential to bring Bosch (as well as others) to the attention of a different group of people than the ones who visit museums. And what is more, it can truly influence their perception of art and increase their overall interest for this subject. The educational potential brought on by the digital turn should never be underestimated, perhaps it can even make people want to see and know more about a painter's life and work. And even without this very optimistic note, I must admit that I do look forward to many more of these reinterpretations, if only for the sheer visual and sensorial pleasure they provide.

⁴ [<https://tuinderlusten-jheronimusbosch.ntr.nl/en>]. Accessed on June 1st 2017.