

DIGITAL VISUAL ART AS A SOCIAL INTEGRATOR (on the example of digital art in Kazakhstan)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving role of digital art as a social integrator, with a particular focus on the digital art scene in Kazakhstan. Art has long sought to create emotional and spiritual balance, mediating between contrasts like past and future, reality and dreams, and internal and external worlds. Today, with the rapid development of technology and globalization, art increasingly engages with digital media to perform its communicative and harmonizing functions. The work of contemporary Kazakh digital artists, such as Danabol Birlesbek and Magnificum, addresses significant social issues, including national identity, domestic violence, and environmental concerns. Through their art, these creators provoke reflection on the rapidly changing society in Kazakhstan. Additionally, the article explores the innovative approaches taken by multimedia exhibitions, such as those at Lumiere-Hall in Almaty. These exhibits merge traditional art with new media, transforming the experience into something more immersive and interactive. For instance, the exhibition Salvador Dali. Cryptography blends recognizable Dali imagery with symbolic and interactive digital elements, requiring viewers to actively interpret the narrative rather than passively observe. The article also highlights the work of Nargis Rakhmanova and other Kazakh artists who use digital art as a bridge between traditional cultural values and contemporary social issues. These artists contribute not only to the development of art but also to public discourse on topics such as gender, identity, and family dynamics. By incorporating modern technology into their practices, Kazakh digital artists play a crucial role in shaping the country's cultural transformation and fostering deeper societal dialogue.

KEYWORDS

digital art, media art,
contemporary art,
Kazakhstan



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Issue and Discussion

The phenomenon of art, across all peoples and eras, lies in its persistent aim to guide individuals and help them maintain inner emotional and spiritual balance. This balance, between emotions that tear us apart and stabilizing experience, between the past and the future, between reality and the realm of unreal dreams, fantasies, and visions, and between the inner and outer worlds, has been an unconscious goal of creativity since the earliest stages of human expression – whether in the form of petroglyphs, temple frescoes, impressionist paintings, or the experimental works of digital artists.

Culture has always been, and continues to be, a unifying force in society. It helps us process and reconcile dichotomies, offering solutions to immediate disagreements through its age-old ability for creative resolution. Although Aristotle, in his delineation of the three primary functions of art (cognitive, educational, and aesthetic), did not explicitly identify a communicative-harmonizing function, we now understand that this was implicit in ancient Greek culture. Perhaps Aristotle, immersed in one of the most unique cultures in history, could not fully perceive this aspect from within, but it is apparent to modern observers: the desire to tame chaos and harmonize the world is a legacy of ancient civilizations, even those that have disappeared. As the world has become more complex, art has taken on an increasing number of functions. Yet, the communicative-harmonizing function has remained fundamental. Today, this function is at the forefront of cultural discourse and sets the direction for the development of visual art. In the context of the rapid advancement of digital technologies and globalization, art finds itself at the intersection of numerous cultural and technological shifts. More and more, it turns to new media and tools to maintain its societal role. As Barcherer T. and Coover R. note: "Art continuously redefines itself in response to cultural transformations. Nowadays these transformations are very closely linked to the pace of technological developments, and therefore it is appropriate that art addresses itself to technology on the most fundamental level of its aesthetic and conceptual discourses" (Barcherer & Coover, 220).

Many researchers have written about the significant role of art in societal development and its transformative creative power. Notable works include those by Barcherer T., Coover R., Bentkowska-Kafel A., and Grau O.

The collection of essays edited by Thomas Barcherer and Roderick Coover, "Switching Codes: Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts", delves into the impact of digital technologies on art and the humanities. The book explores how new technologies such as artificial intelligence, interactive media, digital modeling, and the internet are transforming creative processes, scholarly research, and philosophical approaches to studying art.

In the book *Digital Visual Culture: Theory and Practice* (edited by Anna Bentkowska-Kafel, Trish Cashen, and Hazel Gardiner), the authors examine how digital technologies are reshaping visual culture and art. They discuss how computers and digital media are transforming the ways artworks are created, perceived, and analyzed. The authors explore key themes such as the interaction between art and technology, the role of digital archives, the impact of interactive media on aesthetics and public perception of art, and the preservation of digital art.

Following the insights of many scholars, we turn our attention to the work of contemporary Kazakh digital artists, specifically addressing the question: "What and how does the Kazakh artist seek to harmonize through their art?"

Kazakh visual art actively engages with contemporary issues on both content and thematic levels. A notable example is the work of Kazakh digital artist Danabol Birlesbek, showcased on his [Instagram page https://www.instagram.com/bdanabol?igsh=MXd0NWhheW1tem5nYg==](https://www.instagram.com/bdanabol?igsh=MXd0NWhheW1tem5nYg==). The central theme of his work, which introduced him to the world of digital art, is the responsibility of preserving national identity and ensuring the Kazakh people's place in global culture and

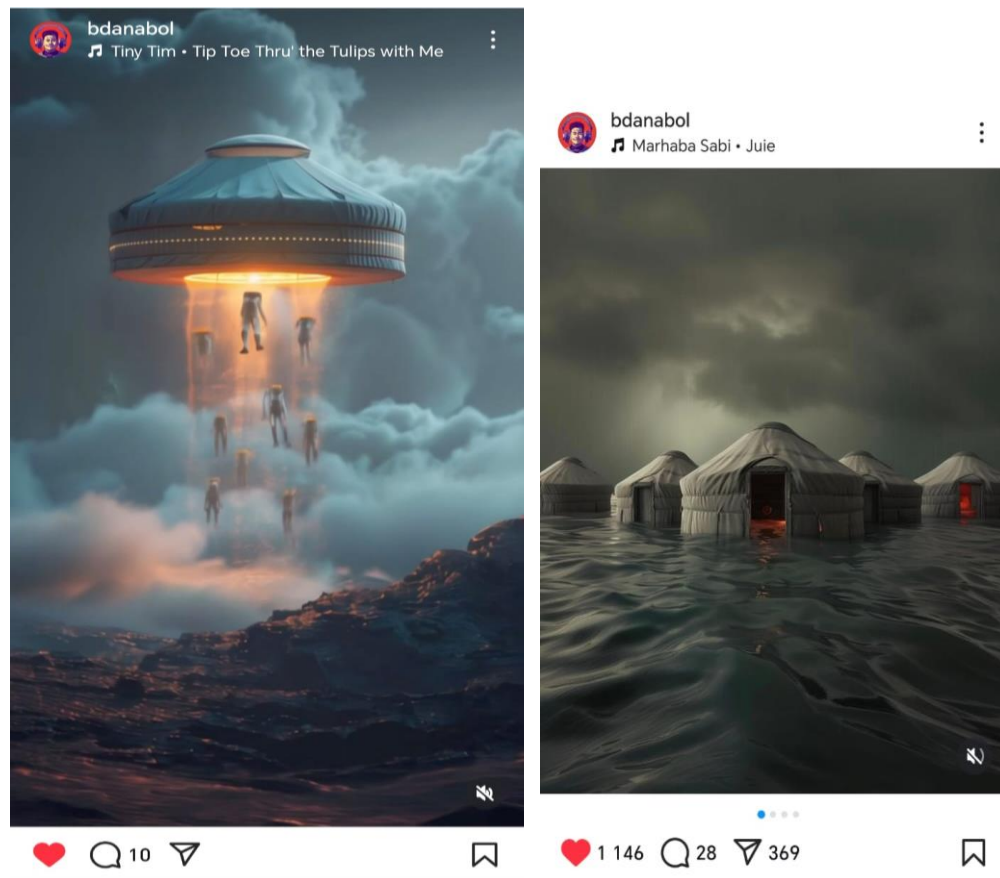
history. His vivid portrait works either integrate European celebrities into the canon of Kazakh culture or depict historically significant figures in the style of modern photography, bridging historical poles and making the subjects feel intimately relatable. His AR-enhanced paintings (particularly "Girl with a Pearl Earring") emphasize that any individual can be the central figure in art.



Figures 1-2. Posts by Artist Danabol Birlesbek on Instagram

Contemporary art, which integrates technology and visual imagery, showcases how profoundly our perception is evolving. As Oliver Grau asserts: "What is virtual art? Never before has the world of images around us changed so fast as over recent years, never before have we been exposed to so many different image worlds, and never before has the way in which images are produced changed so fundamentally. To an unprecedented degree, so many utopian expectations are intertwined with so much skepticism" (Grau, 3).

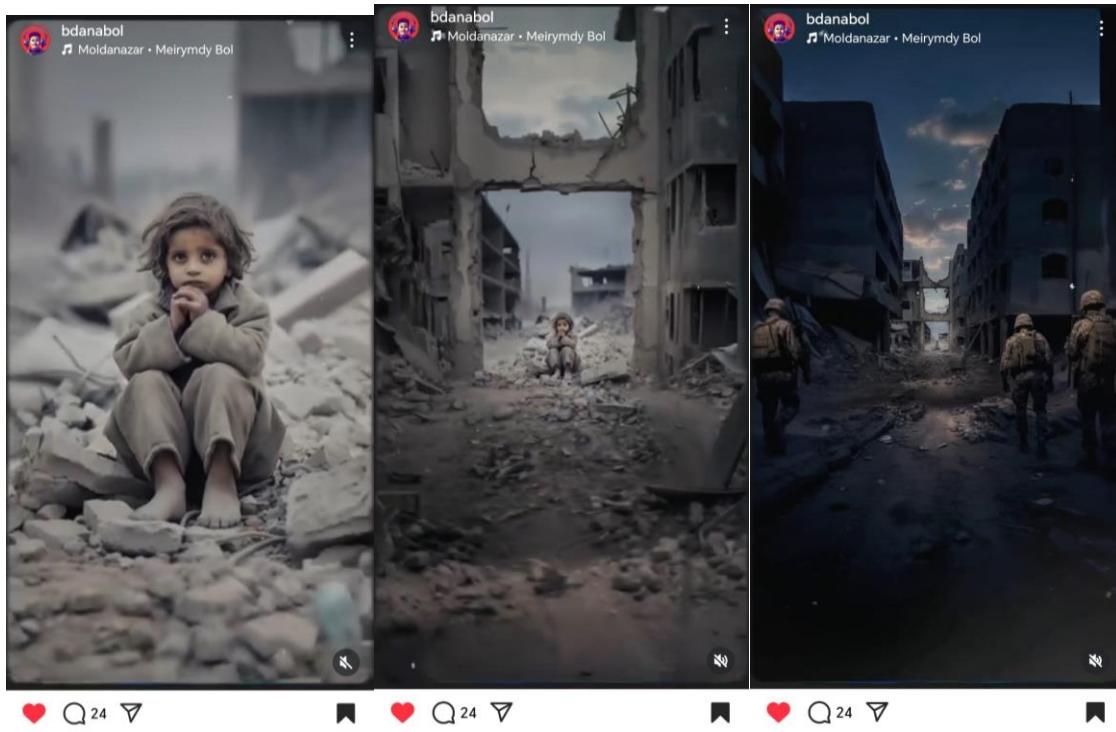
The series of digital animations dedicated to the yurt (a traditional Kazakh dwelling) not only promotes Kazakh culture but also raises profound social issues. One such issue is the recent flooding, which has primarily affected people living in steppe regions who rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. This artwork serves as a powerful commentary on the challenges faced by these communities, linking cultural heritage with modern-day socio-environmental concerns:



Figures 3-4. Posts by Artist Danabol Birlesbek on Instagram

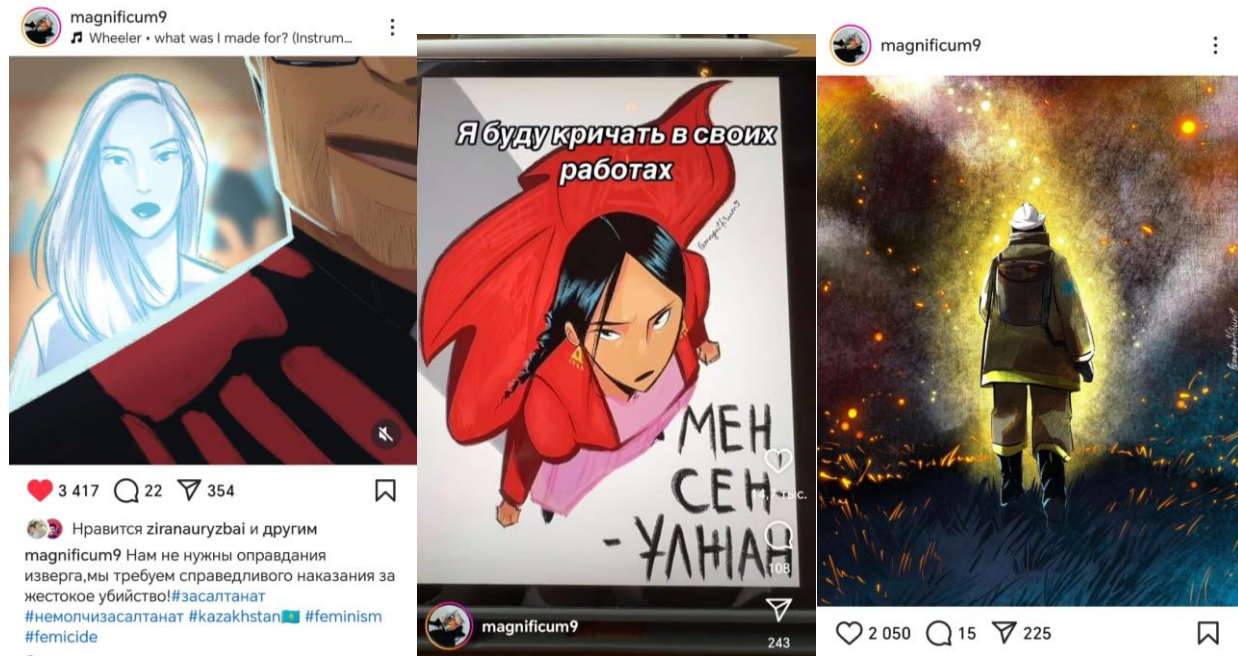
By using artificial intelligence, Danabol Birlesbek creates brief yet deeply impactful digital "messages" that leave no one indifferent. One such work is an anti-war video message based on a photograph of a Palestinian boy in the Gaza Strip, accompanied by hashtags like #palestine, #palestiniangenocide, #gaza, and #freepalestine (<https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cym60hLoZgF/?igsh=Yjhwb3lxNHBzbDNk>). The digital camera zooms in closely on the face and figure of the small boy, covered in ash and dust from the bombed-out city. As the camera pulls back, it reveals the ruins, burnt-out cars, and the bodies of the deceased, with soldiers advancing on the city. As the camera moves further from the boy, the scale of the devastation becomes increasingly catastrophic.

However, the artist does not intend to allow the viewer to distance themselves from the horrors of the Gaza genocide. Birlesbek "returns" the audience to the child, to his prayerfully clasped hands, and to his gaze directed just above the camera's lens, as though toward God. Through this work, the digital artist breaks down walls of indifference and isolation, asserting that no pain is distant or foreign rather, the entire world is united in shared suffering...



Figures 5-7. Posts by Artist Danabol Birlesbek on Instagram

Similarly, another young artist, known on social media under the pseudonym "Magnificum," addresses contemporary issues in Kazakhstan. Her work can be explored on her [Instagram page https://www.instagram.com/p/C-RuK5ibGE/?igsh=aTR6NHlxnbc3aWZi](https://www.instagram.com/p/C-RuK5ibGE/?igsh=aTR6NHlxnbc3aWZi). Through her art, she communicates her civic stance and subtly reaches out to her contemporaries. Her digital "messages" are particularly focused on defending women who have suffered from domestic violence and remembering firefighters who lost their lives in the line of duty. Notably, the artist employs two types of text in her work: visual and verbal. She carefully selects concise, powerful messages to accompany her images (for example, "We don't need the abuser's excuses, we demand justice for the brutal murder," "I will scream through my works," "Heroes. Eternal memory"). These dual-text compositions create a strong, emotional resonance, allowing her to communicate her activism through both visual and written mediums.



Figures 8-9. Posts by Artist Magnificum on Instagram

It is crucial to highlight that young artists today are evolving art with a profound sense of responsibility toward society. One cannot overlook the fact that nearly every artist engages with the theme of national identity – whether through illustrations on national subjects or portrait galleries of notable Kazakh political and public figures. This focus is highly significant for contemporary Kazakhstan. The social issues addressed by these artists, such as corruption, domestic violence, and other pressing concerns, are expressed through striking graphic or animated images and powerful caption texts. It is encouraging to see artists' strong interest in the events happening in their country. Additionally, it is heartening that these artists are actively seeking their own style while positively harnessing the influences of globalization, including various youth subcultures such as those from South Korea.

Considering that the primary theme of art has always been communication, it's important to observe the methods today's visual artists use to convey their ideas to the audience. The experimentation with the texture of the materials used in their work also plays a role in engaging contemporary viewers. Today, it's difficult to find an artist who does not employ the combination of contrasting tools, textures, or compositional solutions.

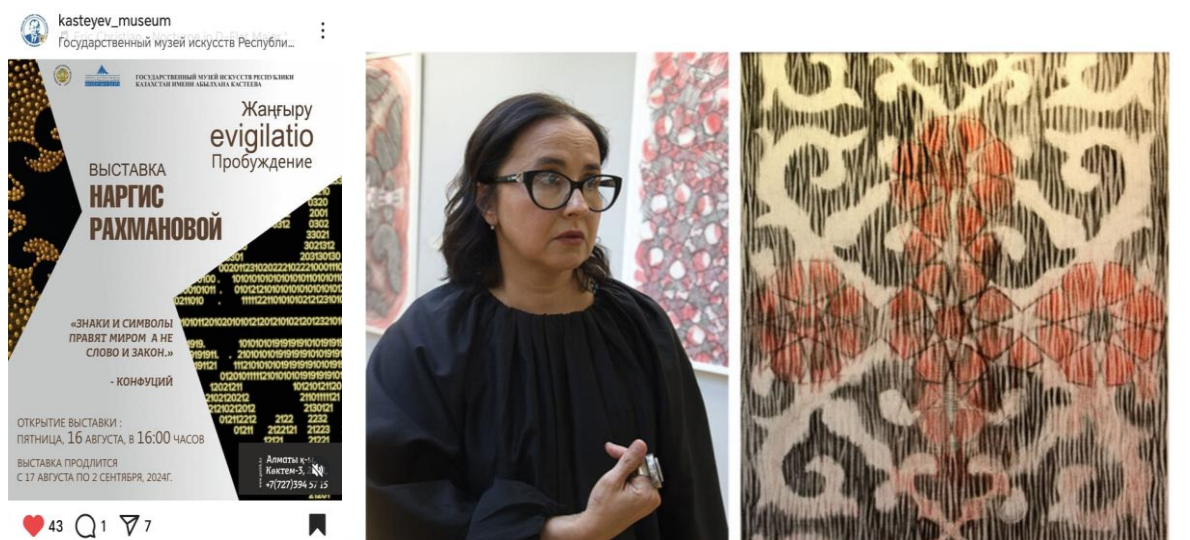
In the context of this discussion, I would like to draw attention to the exhibition of works by Austrian artist Willy Kempel, displayed at the Has Sanat gallery in Astana in April 2024. Willy Kempel, an artist and a member of the international diplomatic corps, has lived and worked in Africa and Asian countries for many years and is currently in Kazakhstan. His life experiences have sparked his interest in the theme of communication. His series *Communication Is...*, which includes 41 pieces, is crafted using collage techniques with various materials such as wood, metal, fabric, buttons, leather, plastic, coins, cardboard, walnut shells, and more. The unique feature of

this series, which occupied the majority of the art space, was that all the works were created on wooden panels cut in the shape of SIM cards of varying scales. As a result, visitors instantly recognize the image of a microchip and are drawn into decoding the artist's message, actively engaging in a dialogue and seeking to understand each communication conveyed by the works.



Figures 10-11. Photos of Willy Kempel's "Communication Is..." Series Displayed at the Has Sanat Gallery (Astana) in April 2024

One of the most prominent artists consciously searching for a revelation or principle at the core of art is Nargis Rakhmanova, a Kazakh artist living in Germany. Her exhibition, which took place this summer at the State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Kazakhstan named after Abilkhan Kasteyev, was titled *Awakening or Evigilatio* (<https://www.instagram.com/p/C-RulK5ibGE/?igsh=aTR6NHlxbnc3aWZi>). The exhibition's slogan was a quote by Confucius: "Signs and symbols rule the world, not words and laws." According to the artist, her creative goal is to find the key to understanding art by integrating music, physics, mathematics, and ornamentation (Yevdokimenko). Rakhmanova is deeply involved in studying mathematics and is a part of academic circles of European researchers. At the exhibition, she presented an experiment where fine particles placed on a sound membrane formed perfectly symmetrical shapes when exposed to the vibrations of music by the renowned Polish composer Frédéric Chopin, creating patterns resembling ornaments. Rakhmanova's artistic concept, which argues that art unites various sources of knowledge, also supports the idea that art fulfills a communicative and balancing function. Her work exemplifies how art can synthesize science and aesthetics, providing deeper insight into the ways these disciplines intersect.



Figures 12-13. Photos from Nargis Rakhmanova's Awakening Exhibition at the State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Kazakhstan named after Abilkhan Kasteyev

It's fascinating to see how different elements and forms of contemporary visual art are being reconciled. The merging of a classic masterpiece with its reinterpretation – done in a new style, mood, or context – is now a staple of postmodern artistic culture. When these transformations occur in digital art, virtual reality (VR), or animations, they attract even more viewer engagement.

For example, in the spring of 2024, the Kasteyev Museum of Arts in Kazakhstan hosted an exhibition titled *The Art of the Past on the Screens of the Future*, dedicated to the 120th anniversary of Abilkhan Kasteyev, the first Kazakh painter and watercolorist and a People's Artist of the Kazakh SSR. During the summer, animated versions of Kasteyev's works were displayed on screens alongside his traditional canvases. Some of the digital pieces presented included *Collective Farm Festival* (1937), *Harvest* (1957), *Aksai Quarry* (1967), *Turksib* (1969), and *Medeo*. Interestingly, the digital artist (whose name, unfortunately, remains unknown) provided his or her own interpretation of these works, consciously or unconsciously shifting the focus away from the themes of socialist realism. In Kasteyev's *Collective Farm Festival* (1937), which originally glorified socialism with its optimistic outlook on the future, the digital version highlighted only two figures. This transformed the interpretation: while a young woman in a national costume, portrayed in the familiar style of Shara Zhienkulova, begins dancing in the lower part of the painting, a black van ominously enters the center and halts. This juxtaposition contrasts the people's support of the art of dance with the oppressive power controlling human creativity and imagination. If the sequence of animated elements or the active figures were changed, the painting's meaning would shift as well.

Although photographs cannot fully capture the dynamism of these animated images, we encourage you to compare Kastejev's original painting with the digital rendition, even if the photo only captures a single moment in time.



Figure 14. Painting by A. Kastejev "Collective Farm Festival" (1937)

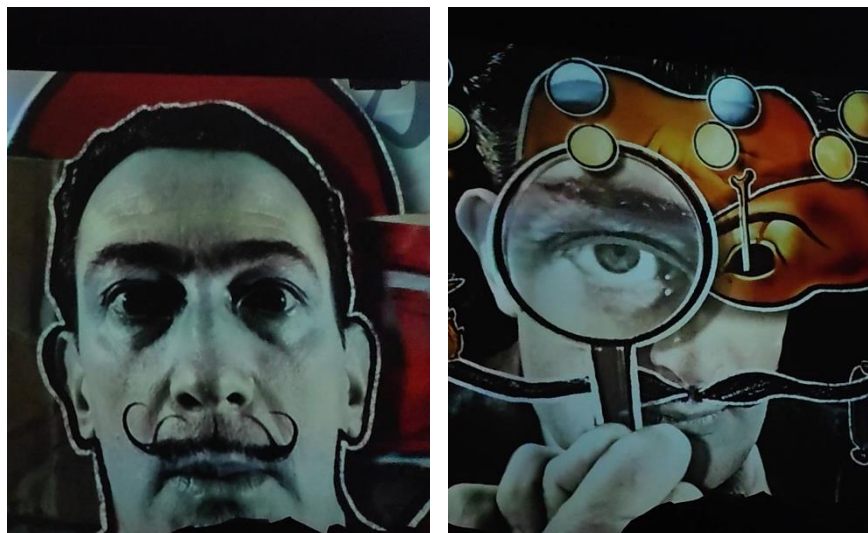


Figure 15. Fragment of a digital animated adaptation of A. Kastejev's painting "Collective Farm Festival" (1937)

The multimedia museum Lumiere-Hall in Almaty has become known for its projects that merge traditional artistic exhibits with the cinematic dynamics of modern shows, creating new ways to impact viewers. One particularly intriguing example is the exhibition Salvador Dali. Cryptography, where two distinct levels of semiotic-communicative space are intertwined.

For the first 50 minutes of the performance, participants engage by watching, listening, and connecting the meanings of both familiar and unfamiliar elements from Dali's work with symbols of writing, musical compositions, and light effects. The low seating, the comfortably dimmed room, the 180-degree viewing radius on the curved wall, and the expertly balanced music volume

– all contribute to the immersive experience. Most importantly, the carefully crafted storyline of the performance allows the viewer to become an integral part of this visual and musical spectacle.

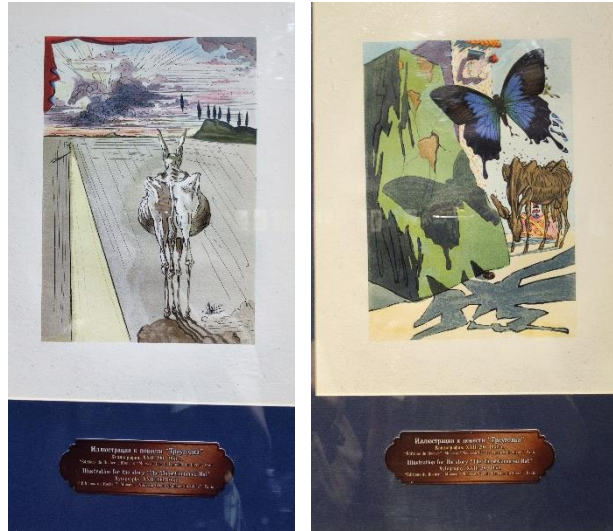


Figures 16-17. Frames from the video presented at the Lumiere-Hall exhibition "Salvador Dali. Cipher"

The main idea of the Salvador Dali. Cryptography exhibition is to present the image of this great artist without focusing on his often scandalous personal stories. Dali's symbolic figure accompanies the viewer throughout the performance – sometimes appearing as a shadow on the wall (causing visitors to turn around, expecting to see a real person), at other times “coming to life” and winking from a portrait, or simply appearing as an eye, attentively watching the audience. The text, which appears silently, functions like a traditional guide for informational sections. The music sets the mood, while symbolic images guide the media narrative. These symbols include photographs, reproductions of Dali's works, and familiar cut-out figures from his surreal worlds – such as the famous deserts and roads, faceless monks, crumbling stones, people turning to dust, birds and butterflies, riders and horses, bicycles, and clocks. The sheer number of images and projections makes it nearly impossible to fully capture the emotional and conceptual essence of the show in a single visit.

At Lumiere-Hall, the visitor cannot remain mentally passive. The constant flow of symbols and images requires an emotional response and prompts continuous reflection on their meanings and interpretations. Iconic signs blend into symbolic images, each carrying a multitude of semiotic associations. For instance, Dali's surreal horses are suddenly contrasted with a more realistically depicted horse and rider (from the Dalinian Horses series), evoking memories of Don Quixote's loyal steed, Rocinante. Dali's butterflies can take on completely different meanings on various screen planes – representing beauty, serenity, destruction, aggression, or love. These interpretations are fleeting and fluid, emerging within the media space of the performance. It's

challenging to pinpoint a singular, most significant moment in this show, as the symbolic images continuously shift, urging viewers to revisit and reinterpret them multiple times.



Figures 18-19. Photos of S. Dali's illustrations for the story "The Three-Cornered Hat," presented at the Lumiere-Hall exhibition "Salvador Dali. Cipher"

The second part of the project – an exhibition of nearly unknown lithographs and woodcuts by Salvador Dalí from the three previously mentioned series – brings the audience back to the media content they have just experienced. It offers the realization that the viewer is no longer a passive observer but an active participant in the artistic communication. Dalí's vividly depicted images of walls, houses, roads, deserts, horses, butterflies, machines, men, and women are now recognizable as symbols. The visitor's first lesson in recognition was learned in the adjacent hall, in a more traditional exhibition environment. Since the mental inertia from this experience pulls the visitor back to the media hall, new layers of meaning are inevitably created in the mind. However, these do not fully unveil the cryptography of Salvador Dalí. While the project's authors bring the artist's genius and uniqueness into sharp focus, they preserve the mystery surrounding his work.

Conclusion

Thus, digital art in Kazakhstan is becoming a powerful medium for expressing both personal and societal changes. It opens new horizons for creative individuals, allowing them to explore pressing issues and phenomena in contemporary society, such as gender issues, the role of family, identity, and more. A crucial aspect is the role Kazakh digital artists play in the cultural transformation of the country, contributing not only to the development of art but also to social thought. Their works adorn both virtual and physical exhibition spaces, stimulating dialogue and fostering deeper reflection on the changes taking place. In the digital age, art serves as an important bridge between new challenges and traditional values, helping society find balance in

a rapidly changing world. Of particular importance is how art interacts with new technologies, integrating them into its practices. As noted by Anna Bentkowska-Kafel in her research: "The construction of digital artworks demands a wide range of expertise. Conception, production, and technology are closely intertwined; existing technologies have to be adapted to new artistic concepts, and new technologies inspire and create new meanings, iconologies, and contexts" (Bentkowska-Kafel, 33).

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