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NEOMODERNIST DIGITAL PAINTING

Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century we can observe a kind of revival of specifically modernist features, characteristics, and aims in the art practice which focuses on creating images. I presume that digital painting is neomodernist in its essence, and in the present article I will try to demonstrate that it can be understood within the characteristics of modernism, as Clement Greenberg has defined them. Digital painting continues to question the medium used by the critical investigation, by focusing on the flatness and on the aesthetic features devoid of any representational sense, and by its drive to touch the untouchable and present the unrepresentable - that is the absolute. As a case study, I present the works of the Polish artist Zbigniew Romanczuk and the Turkish artist Yaman Kayihan, who represent two different ways of creating digital paintings.

Keywords: digital painting, geometric abstraction, modernism, postmodernism, neomodernism, aesthetic values, medium, technologies.

Introduction

An inquiry into neomodernism in contemporary art theory is of special interest, because we can observe a kind of revival of especially modernist features, characteristics, and aims in art practices which focus on creating pictures; at the same time there is a profound lack of reflection on neomodernism. The reason for this deficit may be that for the last half-century philosophical, aesthetic, and artistic discussions were focusing on postmodernism. Best defined by Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, neomodernism is based in fluid narrative language games with neither objective

end nor aim.¹ Fluidity and inconsistency, devoid of any metanarration, have become popular theoretical ideas since the 1960s. Since that time they have also been implemented in artistic practice, with the appearance of Pop art in post-war America considered as the point of demarcation.

The new postmodern mindset has appeared to a large extent as a result of disappointment with the modernist promise of creating a rational and just world, and in the face of the tragic events of the 20th century (in part a negative effect of the rationalisation and technologization of the human lives on a large social scale.)² Postmodernism has loosened the tight rationale binding each individual to a coherent identity characteristic of specific social, ethnic, national, political, sex, etc. groups. It has also freed us from the constant search for the pure origin of ideas, words, things, people, and all other wordly phenomena which we can conceptualize. Starting with Nietzsche as the originator, passing through Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and finishing with Deleuze's and Guattari's writings from the 1980s – postmodernism had been decomposing, deconstructing, and denaturalizing our ideas, concepts, and ways of understanding. At the end of this deconstructivist work, hardly anything remains: a handful of puzzles, a bunch of pieces of kaleidoscope. These pieces are often considered flexible, to be assembled as we want in the concrete moment, and are neither assigned nor formative to any specific and important meanings. Temporary consensus on acceptable forms was thought to be all that we needed; however, it is noteworthy that a seemingly unordered kaleidoscope turns out to be a special kind of order – 'chaosmos,' as Deleuze and Guattari call it.³ In this we can see a certain shift, from proliferating 'chaos' to 'cosmos,' which is defined (or rather, structured) by organic-like rhythm. A broader understanding of intersectional postmodernism should be developed in a separate study, as it contains various trends: an attempt to reinstitute traditional rationalism (Kantian or Fregean analyses being done, for example, by Robert Brandom⁴ and John McDowell⁵ from Pittsburgh School, in reference to pragmatism), as

¹ See: J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Transl. from French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Foreword by Fredric Jameson. Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 10. Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984 (originally published in 1979 by Les Editions de Minuit, Paris).

² For further discussion about the problems of post war leftism and radical artistic practice, after noticing how the Age of Reason was exploiting the masses, see for example: N. Jachec, *Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg*, in: Oxford Art Journal, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1998), p. 128. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360617>

³ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Transl. and foreword by Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1987 (originally published in 1980 by Les Editions de Minuit, Paris), p. 313.

⁴ See for ex.: Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

⁵ See for ex.: John McDowell, *Mind and World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.

well as an attempt to constitute a new version of rationalism not in reference to Newtonian perspective, but rather to quantum physics (in up-to-date new materialism as developed by Karen Barad, among others.)⁶ I must limit my considerations here to just one direction, and I want to investigate a symptomatic turn observable in contemporary art, the shift from postmodern to neomodern painting.

The exhaustion of postmodernism in art practice

Postmodern art focused on kaleidoscopic modes of presentation, deprived of any specific sense, with individual senses and/or meanings in each encounter with an art piece – Pop art, Neo-Dada, Conceptual art, Minimalism, Video art, Performance, and Installation art, among others – in artistic practice, painting had been slowly relegated to the outskirts. If images or pictures were being created, with increasing frequency they were videos (later multi-channel ones) offering more possibility of unexpected juxtapositions devoid of any narration or fixed meaning. Therefore, hardly any aesthetic reflection has been undertaken concerning the image, entailing a paradox: in the times after the *iconic turn*, as proclaimed by W.J.T. Mitchell⁷ – when we are now in our everyday lives immersed in the iconsphere – aestheticians, philosophers, and art theorists have not been talking much about images. Perhaps this is because while the “iconic turn” was announced within visual culture studies, in philosophical aesthetics and art theory there was a recognized “performative turn”, closely linked with Lyotard’s postmodern definition, focusing on the enactment and realization of meaning through performance (specifically in reference to John Austin’s performatives.)⁸ The phenomena of performance, performative arts, performativity, performing, etc. not only forces us to recognize the transformative power of art, but also makes us focus on utterances, and on how their “effect upon the referent coincides with its enunciation”.⁹ Discussions on the performative turn highlight the different postmodern forms of art introduced since Avant-garde;¹⁰

⁶ See for ex.: Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham, North Carolina, Duke University Press 2007.

⁷ The ‘iconic turn’ or ‘pictorial turn’ – the second term was the one used first by W.J.T. Mitchell in his text “The Pictorial Turn”, published for the first time in 1992 in *ArtForum* and two years later in the book *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London 1994 (*The Pictorial Turn*, pp. 11-34.)

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*. Edited by Lilianna Bieszczad, Wydawnictwo Libron, Kraków 2013.

I do not claim that the two turns I have mentioned are radically opposed or that we should accept one while denying the other. In my article „Obraz – akt wizualny“ (“A Picture – A Visual Act”) I have argued that reflection on images and pictures should be included within a performative perspective, attempting to answer the questions of the performativity of the image, but I cannot develop that point at length here.¹¹ The neglect of painting within the postmodernist focus (in various forms) has led many artists to abandon the creation of pictures, due in part to their disillusionment: if the painter cannot represent anything in the world faithfully, if he or she cannot convey any specific meaning, if there is no origin and no aim, the activity of painting may seem to have no sense. At most one can start creating images which cannot be seen, either in a material form,¹² or without it (imaging images¹³). This is the dead end of postmodernism in artistic practice, especially in painting – the imagined, not externalized, image. Fortunately, this dead end of postmodernism in painting is not the dead end of painting as such, and in the last several decades we can observe some revival of painting in a manner which trespasses the postmodern limits. These artistic currents (which may refer to modernism, although not in an innocent and naive way, but rather after the experience of postmodernism) are geometric abstractionism and digital painting. I will not occupy myself here in detail with geometric abstractionism as considered by – among others – Paulina Sztabinska in her paper *Czy można dziś mówić/pisać o abstrakcji geometrycznej?*,¹⁴ not because I neglect its importance, but because I would like to include it into the broader picture, treating it as a step towards digital painting and sometimes a very important part of it. I conjecture that digital painting is neomodernist in

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- ¹¹ A. Łukaszewicz-Alcaraz, *Obraz – akt wizualny* in: *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*. Edited by Lilianna Bieszczad..., pp. 321-332. I am arguing from the point of view of philosophical anthropology and phenomenology of Hans Belting, Georges Didi-Huberman, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty; however it can also be followed via the lines drawn from W. J. T. Mitchell, because his perspective supports a strong argument on the performative, active, agent-like power of pictures. Similarities exist on the Polish theoretical scene, see also Konrad Chmielecki (*Images are living things. Problematyka performatywności w studiach kultury wizualnej*, in: *Zwrot performatywny w estetyce*. Edited by Lilianna Bieszczad..., pp. 285-304.)
- ¹² One example is of a canvas covered with chlorophyll and rolled so that it cannot be unrolled and seen, by Katarzyna Nawrocka, a student of painting in the studio of Prof. Wojciech Lazarczyk at the Department of Painting and New Media, Academy of Art in Szczecin in the academic year 2014-2015.
- ¹³ This can be done in various different ways starting from creating visions embodied just in human bodies until creating visual bio-environments experienced visually. See: *Więcej niż obraz*. Edited by Eugeniusz Wilk, Magdalena Zdrodowska, Ewelina Twardoch, Michał Gulik, Wydawnictwo Nukowe Katedra, Gdańsk 2016.
- ¹⁴ P. Sztabinska, „Czy można dziś mówić/pisać o abstrakcji geometrycznej?“, in: *Dyskurs. Pismo Naukowo-Artystyczne Akademii Sztuk Pięknych we Wrocławiu*, pp. 194-210. Dyskurs online: <http://www.asp.wroc.pl/dyskurs/Dyskurs4/PaulinaSztabinska.pdf>

essence, and that it often (though not always) includes geometric abstractionism as its synchronic or diachronic part.

Towards "digital painting"

The term "digital painting" is somewhat problematic; some authors, such as Craig Staff, tend to trace the affinities between paintings – mostly understood in a traditional way – and “digital“ techniques, trying to avoid the term “digital painting“. Staff differentiates between paintings and the "digital," showing either the use of technology "as an instrument by which imagery can be generated," as is the case with Monique Prieto,¹⁵ or as a critical usage of "*ideas* of the digital and a related set of thematics this heralds," as with Cheyney Thompson, among others.¹⁶ Staff does not agree to accept the term "digital painting" to refer to images created within a computer and subsequently printed or displayed (like the work of John F. Simon Jr.) being of the opinion that painting is resistant to different strategies of appropriation.¹⁷ I consider Staff's belief too conservative, observing how contemporary artists tend to understand their artistic practice as "digital painting," using an alternative medium to physical canvas and paints.¹⁸ I decide to follow this line, and to distinguish digital painting differently, based on the form of exposition of the painting, which can be either printed on a physical substratum or displayed. In both cases I focus on the critical approach to the digital medium by artists using digital methodologies. The critical approach to the digital medium is one mark of the return to the medium in a modernist sense, as Clement Greenberg put it. I will try to show that digital painting can be understood as a continuation of modernist painting, along a line drawn by Greenberg. This argument goes against the sort of analysis conducted by Sztabińska, who regards geometric abstraction as either neoconstructivist or an abandonment of modernism.¹⁹ I disagree with this alternative, as modernist painting reaches beyond the scope of Russian or international constructivism. The impression of this limitation may be perhaps especially felt in Poland because of the influential writings of Andrzej Turowski, who was occupied especially

¹⁵ C. Staff, *After Modernist Painting: The History of Contemporary Practice*, I.B. Tauris, London 2013, p. 149.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 149.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 165.

¹⁸ Vinci M. Weng, „Re-imagining painting in digital fiction. Time, colour, and space in recent experimental moving images“, in: *Procedia Computer Science* 3(2011), p. 710 doi: 10.1016/j.procs.2010.12.117.

¹⁹ P. Sztabińska, „Czy można dziś mówić/pisać o abstrakcji geometrycznej?“, p. 208.

with Polish constructivism.²⁰ On this point, I am closer to Staff, who investigates “the extent to which Greenberg’s claims with regard to painting still continue to inform both its production and reception (...) [and] how the physicality of painting, an *idée fixe* of Greenbergian aesthetics, continues to be staged approximately half a century later.”²¹

For these reasons I take as case studies examples from Poland and abroad, which may in some cases lean towards geometric abstraction, although not hand-painted on canvas. The examples I favor focus on the flat surface of the picture (1), use color non-figuratively in the purely aesthetic perspective (2), investigate their technologically defined medium in a critical way (3), and aim to the certain form of understanding the absolute (4). Before I examine the artworks, I would like to recall, in a general scheme, Greenberg’s thought on modernist painting as my basis to demonstrate the neomodernist character of contemporary digital painting.

Clement Greenberg’s definition of modernist painting

Clement Greenberg dated modernist painting, radically different from traditional painting, to the early Renaissance in Italy; the Giotto and Florentine Schools aimed to represent reality as best as possible. Observing the historical trajectory of painting we have to agree with Greenberg that painting, until the discovery of photography in 1839, had been creating increasingly faithful and illusionistic representations with the use of achievements in mathematical perspective, and with the elaboration of color shading and modelling (which, in the Baroque, had reached peak excellence in Dutch painting.) However, since approximately the mid-19th century, photography has taken over the function of accurately representing the world, and so has superseded painting and other representational arts – such as drawing or sculpture – questioning their status, function, and form beyond the representational function of realism. Painting, losing its representational function, had to ask itself: what is the reason for its existence? What is its objective? What is its specific nature? Greenberg, best known and important defender of modernism, did not define modernism as such. In his article „Necessity of 'Formalism,'“ he wrote that

Modernism is as specific a historical phenomenon as Romanticism was, but it doesn’t represent nearly so specific an attitude, position, or outlook.

²⁰ A. Turowski, *Konstruktywizm polski - próba rekonstrukcji nurtu (1921-1934)*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków-Gdańsk 1981, p. 23.

²¹ C. Staff, *After Modernist Painting...*, p. 150.

(...) In the context of what is signified by terms like Romanticism and Classicism when they are used *unhistorically*, Modernism as a whole distinguishes itself by its inclusiveness, its openness, and also its indeterminateness.²²

Greenberg tried to define Modernism as a “movement,” less as a program than as a kind of bias or tropism: bias towards aesthetic value; aesthetic value as such and as an ultimate.²³ This clarification can be understood in relation to the ideas of Ludwig Wittgenstein from the time of his *Philosophical Investigations*.²⁴ He observes that the term “modernism” shares the situation of the term “art,” which we use despite being unable to universally define it, point to the objects and phenomena specific to art, state that something is or is not art basing on the unstable and unclear “family resemblances.”

Clarifying the idea of modernism, Greenberg refers to history and points at some characteristic (but not exclusive) features of this movement; the most important characteristic features of modernist painting are its focus on the ideal of “pure art” and its basis in technical innovation. These two basic features can be analyzed more precisely and in their interrelation, because the explicit drive to innovate in art resulted in work far removed from representation and the return to the medium of painting as such, with its definitively characteristic qualities, especially its flatness.²⁵ The flatness of painting is its special characteristic that it does not share with arts like sculpture, dance, music, literature, or others. Although it allows the creation of visual illusions or of three-dimensional objects, this ability ceased to be necessary or anticipated since photography has taken over this function. Therefore painting is free to occupy itself with purely painterly qualities, becoming technologically and materially defined; it explores the possibilities of the painterly medium, effected with different ways of distributing the paint on the canvas, with changes in the composition underlying the importance of the painterly activity as such.²⁶ (Of

²² C. Greenberg, *Necessity of Formalism*, in: *New Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Modernism and Postmodernism: Inquiries, Reflections, and Speculations (Autumn, 1971), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p.171. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468386>

²³ C. Greenberg, *Necessity of Formalism*, p.171.

²⁴ See: L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Transl. by G. E. M. Anscombe, MacMillian, New York 1953.

²⁵ See: C. Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*, in: *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, edited by John O'Brian, The Chicago University Press, London 1993.

²⁶ „If modernism started by impressionists was based on the return to color, then this turn was paying attention to the technique used in putting the color onto canvas. The mode of laying out the paint was influencing the effect obtained, which in turn, by means of the technique used by Matisse and the change in the composition he made - from centripetal to centrifugal,

course these innovative ways of distributing paint and treating the painterly medium, as for instance by Eduard Manet, have inferred a lot of gripes and criticism, e.g. by Fromentin in the 1970s.).²⁷ For this reason Greenberg argues that modernism was "a reviver of an aesthetic quality," which moves to the fore.

The refreshment of the medium, which Greenberg mentions in reference to painting, is also true in reference to other types of art such as poetry, prose, music, or architecture. If faithfulness and informative-ideological functions are not the base for the existence of painterly images, the answer to the question about their purpose is in their medium and aesthetic values. This problem has been elaborated from another point of view, the political one. Especially after World War II, many debates focused on the question of how to be a non-Marxist socialist; Greenberg had been a socialist, however there is a difference between the Greenberg of the 1930s and of the 1960s.²⁸ In his later writings Greenberg argues, alongside other English-language scholars, that: "[w]hile the social and historical conditions of art production are not altogether ignored, they are however, 'relegated' (...) [and] formal concerns maintained a priority over, and an autonomy from, external and political ones."²⁹ There is much more which can be recalled about Greenberg's analysis of modernism and modernist painting, however that is not the point of this article. I would rather show, relying on Greenberg's clarification of modernist painting, that today we can observe a definite return of its most important characteristics. I will not refer here to the broader picture of the modernism's revival as such, but I would like to illustrate how contemporary digital painting in its different forms can be reasonably understood as neomodernist in Greenberg's sense of the term "modernism," or rather, "modernist painting." The focus on a technologically and materially defined medium is one of the paths I want to follow, the other relates to the purely aesthetic qualities removed from any informative and/or ideological function. These two paths converge, but I try to show that after the decline of postmodernism, which offered meaning at best in the form of a game, the time

has affected the accentuation of the activity itself and of its technical side too, as in the case of Jackson Pollock's work" (from Iwona Kwiecień, „Obrona modernizmu”, in: *Estetyka i Krytyka* 15/16 (2/2008-1/2009), *DIALOGI I DIAGNOZY*, p. 318 (translated into Polish by A. L. A.).

- ²⁷ Fromentin was a painter inspired by Delacroix, creating romantic works with enhanced colouring, also a writer and the one of the first "art critics" occupied with classical art works and with the Golden Dutch Age - *The old masters of Belgium & Holland*, Transl. by Mary C. Robbins, Boston and New York, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1896 (Originally published in 1876).
- ²⁸ Nancy Jachec, „Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg”, in: *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1998), Oxford University Press, p. 124. Stable URL: <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1360617>>
- ²⁹ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Editorial preface to "Modernist Painting", *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* Blackwell Publishers: London, 1992, pp. 685-686.

has come to reflect on contemporary pictures (and images), their media, and art as such in a more rational way.

The characteristics of digital painting

Digital painting is a recent form of creating pictures and making art. It has appeared alongside the proliferation of computer technologies, which were also adopted by artists. It is not homogenous and there are at least two different ways of its creation. One method combines the traditional painterly medium – paints and canvas – with computer software so that the image is created first in the computer (in different forms) and then transferred to canvas with the use of highly advanced printers. The other way involves the use of virtual paints, brushes, colors, and canvas, leading to the creation of digital artwork. Both these methods of creating digital paintings focus on their medium, whether physical-electronic or just electronic,³⁰ exploring its potential and refreshing the aesthetic qualities of painting that had not been a point of interest for the last half of the 20th century.

In order to be precise in explaining digital painting in terms of neomodernism, I will focus on two case studies concerning different forms of digital painting which I have mentioned above. Zbigniew Romanczuk, a Polish artist, can be placed within the realm of digital painting that combines physical and electronic matter, creating images in the computer and transferring them to canvas; Yaman Kayihan, a Turkish artist, creates completely digital artworks which cannot be displayed or seen without a computer and a projector.

Zbigniew Romanczuk

Zbigniew Romanczuk is a contemporary Polish painter, who grew up from abstractionist painting, passing through expressionist abstraction³¹ and geo-

³⁰ I agree with Polish philosopher Michał Ostrowicki (alias: Sidey Myoo) who prefers to use the term „electronic” reality, rather than „virtual,” because it eschews the implicated opposition to „real”. If we talk about „electronic” reality we acknowledge that it exists, that it is real. See Ostrowicki, M. O Pojęciu Wirtualności (On the Concept of Virtuality), in: *Wirtualne Realis. Estetyka w epoce elektroniki*, 15–19. Kraków: Universitas.

³¹ There are two monographs dedicated to Zbigniew Romanczuk’s art. One is bilingual: *Wizualne reprezentacje. Zbigniew Romanczuk / Visual Representations. Zbigniew Romanczuk*, edited by Lech Karwowski, Muzeum Narodowe w Szczecinie, Szczecin 2013; and the other is dedicated to his more recent works: *Nowe pola obrazowania. Cyfrowe malarstwo na przykładzie Grid System Zbigniewa Romanczuka*, edited by Joanna Szczepanik, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Sztuki w Szczecinie, Szczecin 2015.

metric abstraction. Since the beginning of the 21st century he has explored how technology and culture affect an image, the autonomy of an image, as well as the material, structure, and perception of a digital image.³² He started by editing photographic images, altering their color, contrast, composition, and the juxtaposition of visual layers in a computer, in order to obtain abstract images. The result is an impression of a piece of nature, like a sea of delicate flowers, or a shaded countryside road. These digitally obtained images were printed out on large canvases and titled *Nature of an Image* (*Natura Obrazu*).



Ill 1 Zbigniew Romańczuk from the series: *Nature of an Image*, 2010

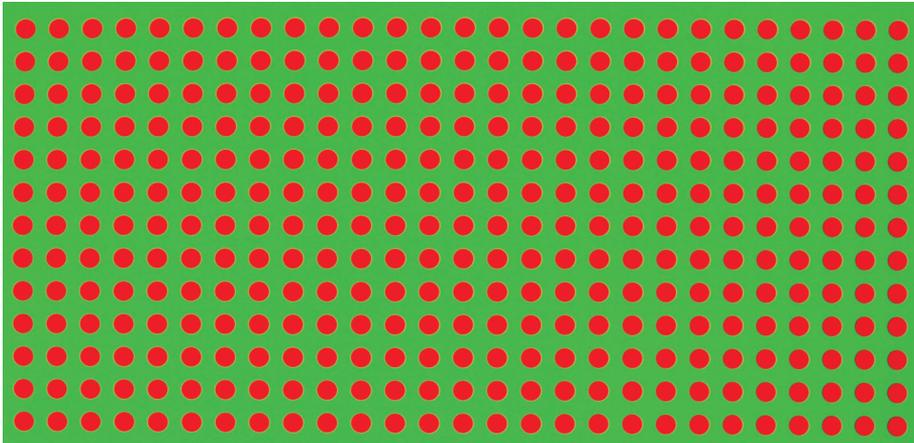
The next stage of artistic investigation into the nature of the image brought Romanczuk to artistically consider digital matter and ways of perceiving it. In another piece,³³ I have deeply analyzed the way to understand Romanczuk's paintings from that period (2010-2013) as a phenomenological investigation, as *epoche* conducted not with linguistic, but with artistic means, a possibility of what was first explicitly signaled by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in relation to Cezanne's paintings³⁴ and is now being recalled by – among others – Lambert

³² The works belonging to that series have been displayed at many exhibitions, including: *Edited Images at the National Museum in Szczecin* (2013); *Spatial Screens* at the Gallery of Schloss Bröllin, Germany (2013); *Singularity of Image I* at Gallery ZPAP in Gdańsk (2014); *Singularity of Image II* at MS Gallery in Wakayama, Japan (2015); and *Moving Images* at the Gallery Profil CKZ in Poznan (2016).

³³ A. Łukaszewicz Alcaraz, "Forms of Visual Perception and Ontology of Image: Formal Aesthetics on Geometric Abstraction in Painting, on an Example of Zbigniew Romańczuk's Works", first presented during V Meeting of the Organization of Phenomenological Organizations, 08-12 December 2014, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia; now in print in the proceedings in the phenomenological series of Zeta Books.

³⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", transl. by Carleton Dallery. In *The Primacy of Perception, and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History, and Politics*, Edited by James Edie. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, p. 21.

Wiesing.³⁵ In his next series, *Geometry of Color* (*Geometria Koloru*) Romanczuk based his creation on modular form and on the psychophysiological knowledge of human perception, not referring to any specific representation. Purely abstract forms using afterimages and other optical illusions tend to focus our attention on purely aesthetic experience, understood in a way going back to the idea of *aesthesis* rather than to classical categories of beauty. This is also why his endeavours can be readily compared with impressionism (especially divisionism) from one side, and with op-art (focused on optical illusions) from the other. This artistic practice fits Greenberg's analysis of modernist painting, pointing at modernism's "heightened sensitivity of the picture plane [which] may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or *trompe-l'oeil*, but it does and must permit optical illusion."³⁶ However, the interests of the Polish painter go beyond pure impression and optical illusions for their own sake, as he asks about the modes of perception of digital imagery outside representation, and about its mode of being – that is, about the ontology of the digital image. When a viewer concentrates on the form of Romanczuk paintings, for instance painting No. 5 (2013), showing regularly distributed red circles on a green background, he or she perceives a "disappearing image," the afterimages of red circles forming green circles of a different hue even after the viewer is no longer looking at the painting. This gives the effect of a picture flickering in perception, a similar



Ill 2. Zbigniew Romańczuk from the series *Geometry of Color*, 2013.

³⁵ L. Wiesing, *Widzialność obrazu. Historia i Perspektywy estetyki i formalnej*, Translated by K. Krzemieniowa, Warsaw: Oficyna Naukowa. 2008, p. 313.

³⁶ C. Greenberg, *Modernist Painting*, op.cit.

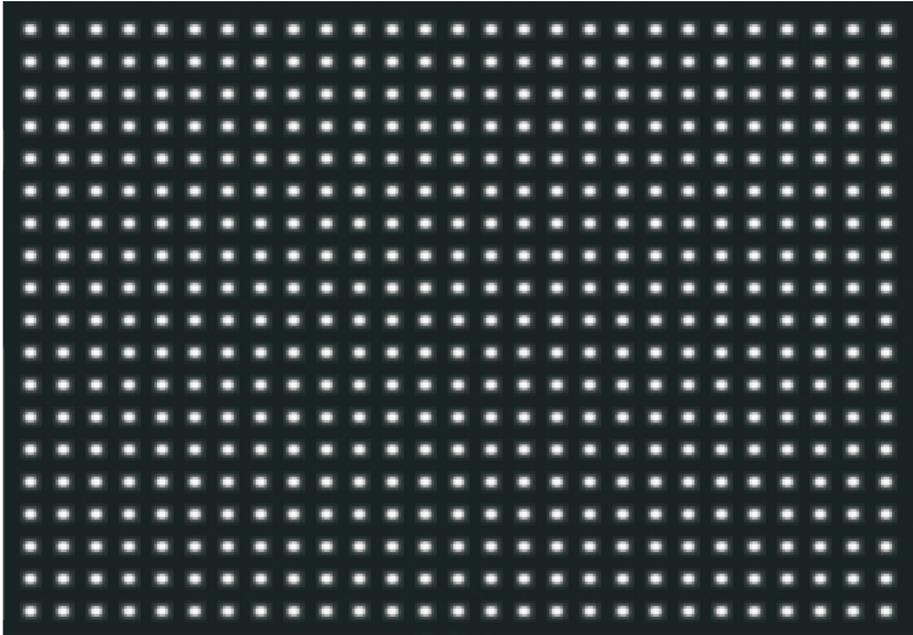
experience to a digital image on a screen. It hypnotizes the viewer. At this stage of investigation Romanczuk reaches the level of the pixel, the basic modular part of the digital image perceived by the viewer.

In his most recent exhibition, Romanczuk takes just a small fragment of one of his paintings from his "Geometry of Color," painting No. 6 (a black-white-grey grid) and enlarges it to the size of an autonomous image, showing its record in binary code. In that way he has constructed a picture from regularly positioned numbers, starting from {2, 2, 2} through {95, 95, 95}: digitally encoded hues from nearly black to grey. Every pixel carries information on the color, encoded in the sum of three elements: red (R), green (G), and blue (B). Each pixel is defined by these three numbers. For example a completely white pixel is defined as {255, 255, 255}, and a black one as {0, 0, 0}.³⁷ In this, Romańczuk goes beyond our (superficial) perceptions to the mode of surpassing the perceived reality. This line of artistic investigation shows his drive towards enabling phenomenal reality, though it is not presentable in our ordinary life, according to Greenberg's understanding of the absolute as neither religious nor spiritual.³⁸

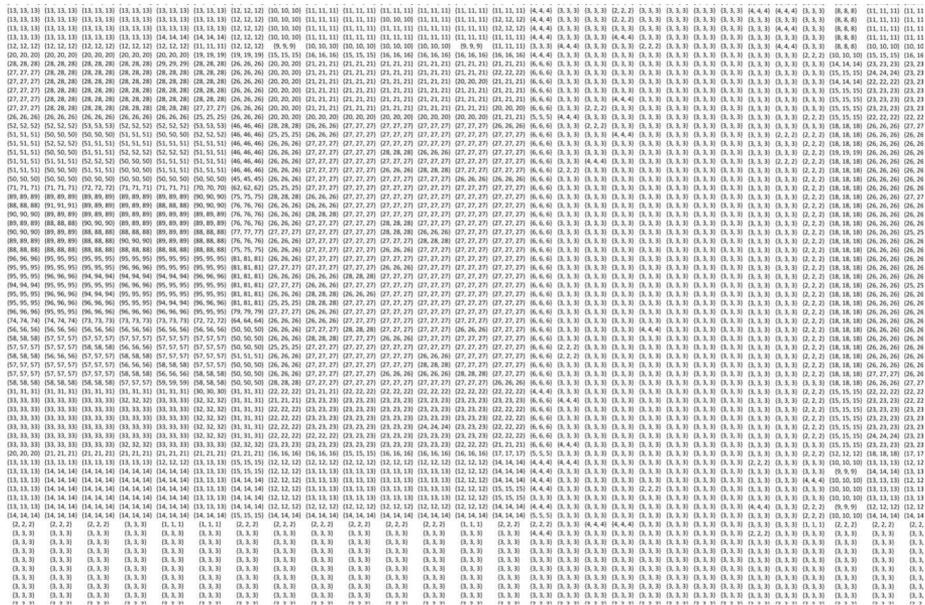
Romanczuk's digital painting is therefore a mixture of traditional painting, with the use of paints and canvas, and technical computer machinery, electronic operations. By these means Romanczuk explores the possibilities of his medium in both its historical forms. His exploration is, importantly, technologically mediated and defined, concentrated on innovation and research with epistemic aims (to understand human perception of digital imagery and its mode of existence.) He focuses on the flat, limited space of the painting, surpassing imitations of three-dimensional reality and trying to reach the mode of being as such. From this point of view I claim that Romanczuk's digital paintings fall into the category of neomodernism and are defined by characteristically modernist features as pointed at by Clement Greenberg, i.e. a critical return to the medium and its flatness, a focus on technologically mediated innovation, the purely aesthetic value of art, and on the 'absolute,' understood as the essence of the being of electronic reality.

³⁷ In the computer memory these numbers are recorded in binary code, while programmers, in order to avoid writing many numbers (as it is in binary code) use a hexadecimal system, in which there appear numbers from 0 to F, where {F, F} equals {255, 255, 255}.

³⁸ C. Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston 1989 (originally published in 1961), p. 6.



Ill 3. Zbigniew Romanczuk from the series *Geometry of Color*, 2013



Ill 4. Zbigniew Romanczuk from the series *Digital Code*, 2016

Yaman Kayihan

Yaman Kayihan, contemporary Turkish artist from Ankara, creates a different kind of digital paintings from Romanczuk; the computer is necessary not only for the creation of her paintings but also for their exposition, or rather, projection. Kayihan has been digitally painting, like Romanczuk, since the beginning of the 21st century, but she works with fluid abstract animation rather than optical illusions, impressions and numerics pervading her work beneath the perceived phenomena. Nevertheless, it is evident that Kayihan's general orientation is similar to Romanczuk's, as both are focused on innovative technologies used in art creation, especially painting. Kayihan herself calls her work kinetic pictures, but they are also explicitly analyzed as digital paintings, as Jale Erzen did in July 2016 during her presentation at the International Congress of Aesthetics in Seoul.³⁹ This analysis bears some similarity to the aforementioned definition in reference to self-understanding (by Taiwanese artist Vinci M. Weng, in his article "Re-imagining painting in digital fiction time, colour, and space...") although different from Craig Staff's understanding of John F. Simon Jr.'s work.⁴⁰ It is worth mentioning that all these pictures are animated digital images projected on a screen or LCD panels.

The art works of Kayihan are oriented toward purely aesthetic, painterly values. This is one case where digital imaging shows clearly how much more similar it is to painting than to photography, a stance taken by some philosophers nowadays, referring to the nature and status of technologically mediated imaging, starting with photography. One might remember here for example François Soulages, who, in the last sections of his book dedicated to the aesthetics of photography, argues that digital photography is a different mode of imaging than photography, due to its fluidity and uncertain indexality.⁴¹ Another French theorist, André Rouillé, claims that "digital photography" is still being called "photography" only based on superficial similarities. It is already a different way of imaging, based not on indexality of physical and chemical matter, but on numeric code. This lack of indexality, along with an infinite number of possible transformations, in his opinion brings this form of creation much closer to a painting than to analog photography, due to its aesthetic values.⁴² These opinions seem relevant and applicable to paintings by Romanczuk and Kayihan.

³⁹ Jale Erzen, *Digital Painting - a challenge to mass culture*, during the International Congress of Aesthetics, New Media session, Seoul National University, Seoul, 25th of July 2016.

⁴⁰ C. Staff, *After Modernist Painting...*, p. 157.

⁴¹ F. Soulages, *Estetyka fotografii. Strata i zysk*, Translated into Polish by B. Mytych-Forajter, W. Frajter, Kraków 2007, p. 149-150.

⁴² The opinion expressed during the series of lectures in Poland organized by A. Łukaszewicz Alcaraz on behalf of Academy of Art in Szczecin, 22-26 of November, 2011.

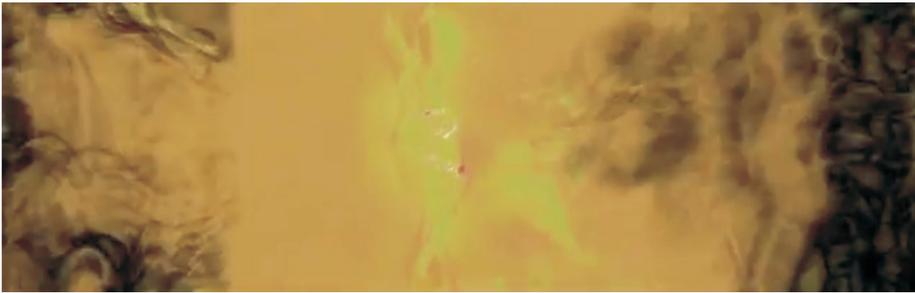
Kayihan's digital paintings are one to four minutes of digital animation accompanied by music, at first classical music (with a mysterious voice sometimes appearing, as in Kinetic picture 1) later replaced by experimental jazz (also sometimes digitally created.) The works have titles which appear in deliberately creative ways in the beginning and end of the painting. The time duration of the paintings marks the time of their perception, an extraordinary move. The time is not necessary to relay information, but is the time of contemplation, which bears some of the features of hypnosis. Approaching the "motion picture as a painting"⁴³ shows the double framing of the picture, by the physical frame of the display as well as by the time-frame. Within these frames Kayihan exhibits the phenomena she is interested in, the prime matter and its features, to which the use of innovative technologies can bring us closer: fluidity, radiance, oscillation of the first matter, of plasm or protoplasm that is self-forming and (photo)phosphorent. These interests are well exhibited in the names of her works, for example: „Kinetic picture 68: Self formation“; „Kinetic picture 58: Photophosphorescence“, „Kinetic picture 52: Radiance“, „Kinetic picture 54: Protoplasm, „Kinetic picture 51: Oscillation“, „Kinetic picture 66: Fluid but fragile“, and many others. She visualizes the self-organization, oscillation, and radiance of the prime matter which is not human blood, but something much earlier („Kinetic picture 67: Not blood“) before its enclosure in the specific category of worldly things.



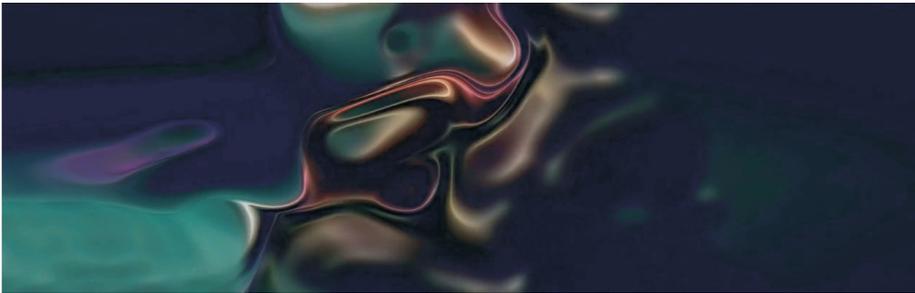
Ill 5. Yaman Kayihan, *Kinetic picture 67: Not blood*, (screen shot).

⁴³ Vinci M. Weng, *Re-imagining painting in digital fiction...*, p. 711.

The essential instability and fluidity of digital matter allows her first to recompose the representation (*Kinetic picture 48: Recomposed*), then to contemplate and reflect its liveliness beyond organic form. The only boundaries one can find in the plastic and open art works of the Turkish artist are the boundaries of time, which is the time of our perception, and the digital frame of the projection. The matter and its flux are permanently open. I claim that aesthetic reality and the presence of the absolute in that reality are simultaneous for Kayihan, as Greenberg noted in the case of modernist painting. Her work is that of an artist not imitating God, but treading a similar path, showing the process of formation of the prime matter.⁴⁴



Ill 6. Yaman Kayihan, *Kinetic picture 48: Recomposed*, (screen shot)



Ill 7. Yaman Kayihan, *Kinetic picture 68: Self formation*, (screen shot)

Kayihan's works are therefore neomodernist at their heart. They investigate the possibilities of the digital medium to create purely aesthetic works, with no explicit informative value. Their epistemic input is on the side of the presentation, and not representation, of the fluid, digital matter as such. Innovation, technological

⁴⁴ C. Greenberg, *Art and Culture...*, p. 6.

determination, purely aesthetic features making themselves visible on the flat surface of the projection screen – all of these characteristics are again strictly neomodernist in Greenberg's sense of modernist painting. The drive to the absolute, to reach the prime matter beyond the boundaries of physical objects and beyond representation, is prominent in Kayihan's work, and serves also as the argument for its neomodernist definition. She suggests something not present in a phenomenal way, but existing underneath, which seems to be a kind of attempt to describe *the noumenon*; in doing so she precedes Lyotard's analysis of avant-garde endeavors in *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*.⁴⁵ Kayihan's digital painting more closely approaches the unrepresentable absolute due to the features of digital images, still modernist in their essence, although they overcome the immobility of traditional painting. However, one may state, on the basis of Lyotard's writings, that in this way it loses the value of sublimity, due to the direct presentation of time.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The presentation and analysis of modernism conducted by Greenberg allows us to understand not only the art of the end of the 19th century and of the first half of the 20th, but also contemporary digital painting developed since the beginning of the 21st century, which can be reasonably regarded as neomodernist because it is technologically defined, oriented toward "pure" aesthetic values, and critically approaching its medium. The critical approach to the medium of both traditional painting and technological media used to create digital painting allows it to present the unrepresentable either in non-phenomenal form as a record (digital code) or in its fluidity. It is not the absolute as such, as it is a created picture which is doublyframed – by the physical frame of the screen and/or by the time-frame of the animation. However, this confirms that Greenberg's claims about modernist painting are regaining their value⁴⁷ after the half century where its adequacy out of its historical context was hardly acknowledged.⁴⁸

The digital art works created by Zbigniew Romańczuk and Yaman Kayihan examined in this article are but a fraction of digital art – the others mentioned

⁴⁵ J.-F. Lyotard, *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*, in: *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Stanford University Press, Stanford California 1991, pp. 89-107 (Originally published in 1988 Editions Galilée as *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps*).

⁴⁶ Ibidem, p. 107.

⁴⁷ C. Staff, *After Modernist Painting...*, p. 150.

⁴⁸ Iwona Kwiecień, *Obrona modernizmu...*, p. 315.

include John F. Simon Jr. or Vinci M. Weng – arguably not paintings in a strict sense, because of the use of different technology for their creation and because of different material formats. If one wants to stick to a stricter way of understanding a painting, it does not change the main thesis of my article, which is that the contemporary digital means of creating images and pictures continues the line of modernist painting drawn by Clement Greenberg in its most essential characteristics. Elsewhere I argue that the difference in the material can draw the radical line dividing practices and objects – as in the case of analog and digital photography,⁴⁹ where the use of the term "photography" can be only metaphorical, relating to superficial visual features. However, we have to keep in mind the variations in time and the development of technology, compelling us to adopt unforeseen visions and to transform our concepts in unexpected ways. Therefore, it depends on us and on our interpretations what we decide to call digital art works, referring to photography and to painting; we may decide to base our definition on the physical substrate and its qualities, or rather on the form of their functioning in the human world.

Digital photography continues to shape our beliefs about the identities of different social groups and individuals, and on the world of our existence – as did analog photography, although the contemporary influence differs from the previous one.⁵⁰ Digital painting continues to question its medium by its critical investigation, focusing on the flatness and on the aesthetic features devoid of any representational sense, and by its drive to touch the untouchable and present the unrepresentable – that is the absolute. By these means, digital painting can be rightly claimed to be neomodernist – never mind if the term "painting" is used in a metaphorical or a straightforward manner.

⁴⁹ For a broader version of the analysis see: A. Łukaszewicz Alcaraz, *Epistemologiczna rola obrazu fotograficznego*, Wywadnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warsaw 2014; a shorter one is found here: A. Łukaszewicz Alcaraz, *Epistemic Function and Ontology of Analog and Digital Images*, in: *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 13 (2015). <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=724>

⁵⁰ A. Łukaszewicz Alcaraz, *Epistemic Function and Ontology of Analog and Digital Images*.

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NEOMODERNISTYCZNY CHARAKTER MALARSTWA CYFROWEGO (streszczenie)

Od początku XXI wieku obserwujemy odrodzenie specyficznych cech modernizmu w praktyce artystycznej zorientowanej na tworzenie obrazów. Twierdzę, że cyfrowe malarstwo jest w swojej istocie neomodernistyczne i w poniższym artykule postaram się wykazać, że można je rozumieć w kontekście charakterystyki modernizmu przedstawionej przez Clementa Greenberga. Cyfrowe malarstwo nadal podchodzi w sposób krytyczny do swojego medium, koncentrując się na płaskości i cechach estetycznych pozbawonych znaczenia przedstawieniowego, starając się dotknąć niedotykalne i przedstawić nieprzedstawialne – czyli Absolut. Jako studium przypadku posłużę się pracami polskiego artysty Zbigniewa Romańczuka oraz tureckiej artystki Yaman Kayihan, którzy prezentują dwa różne podejścia do tworzenia cyfrowych obrazów malarskich.

Słowa kluczowe: malarstwo cyfrowe, abstrakcja geometryczna, modernizm, postmodernizm, neomodernizm, wartości estetyczne, medium, technologie.