

Lifestyle & Culture

IS DIGITAL THE WAY TO GO?

■ Audrey Rose Mizzi

The APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale 2020, under the artistic direction of Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci, will feature digital artworks in this upcoming edition of the international exhibition. It will explore the use of sound, video, light and virtual reality to create a different experience within the Mdina Cathedral Museum. Regaining a Paradise Lost - The Role of the Arts, the chosen theme, will ask artists and audiences to engage in the relationship between the human species and its role in generating, regenerating, or destroying its existence on our unique planet. The relationship between spirituality and the environment will be the main focus, but there will be links to the protection of the world, all species, human or otherwise.

Technology has taken over the world. As tangible objects start to dwindle, intangible ones are being created. Museums, art fairs, biennales and other exhibitions around the world are going digital, but is this the way to go? With the age of technology, came the age of digital art. The latter started in the late twentieth century with computer-generated artworks by artists such as Harold Cohen and Jeff Wall. With technological improvements, this art allowed artists to manipulate and create



Yael Toren's video 'Pieta' at the 2017 APS Mdina Biennale

new scenes that weren't possible before. Nowadays, this digital aspect has taken contemporary art to a whole other level making

the visitor interact with the work, every time creating unique artworks.

Globally, digital art is changing. It is no longer an Untitled Computer Drawing by Harold Cohen. Its use is becoming pivotal in today's society as it is outlining different issues the world is facing in this century. With the ever-growing climate crisis, the role of the arts is drastically shifting. The use of digital art will only enhance one's experience of a particular theme. So how can digital art raise the ongoing issue of this climate emergency?

Environmentally, museums, exhibitions and art fairs contribute to a large carbon footprint. These exhibitions import and export artworks use an abundant amount of packaging for safe travel and not to mention people travelling to and from the event. Sculptor Anthony Gromley has criticised art fairs and biennales around the world as not being environmentally friendly and questions as to how these events can lessen their impact on the environment. Therefore, should institutions and organisations look into going digital? The use of sound, light, virtual reality and video may be the way to go to limit their impact.

Notwithstanding, digital art can merge with nature, and through contemporary art, this relationship becomes magnified. Sound and video have been used throughout past years to enhance the environment and its experience. In 2014, artists Daniel Jones and James Bulley mapped 600-square meter areas of forest

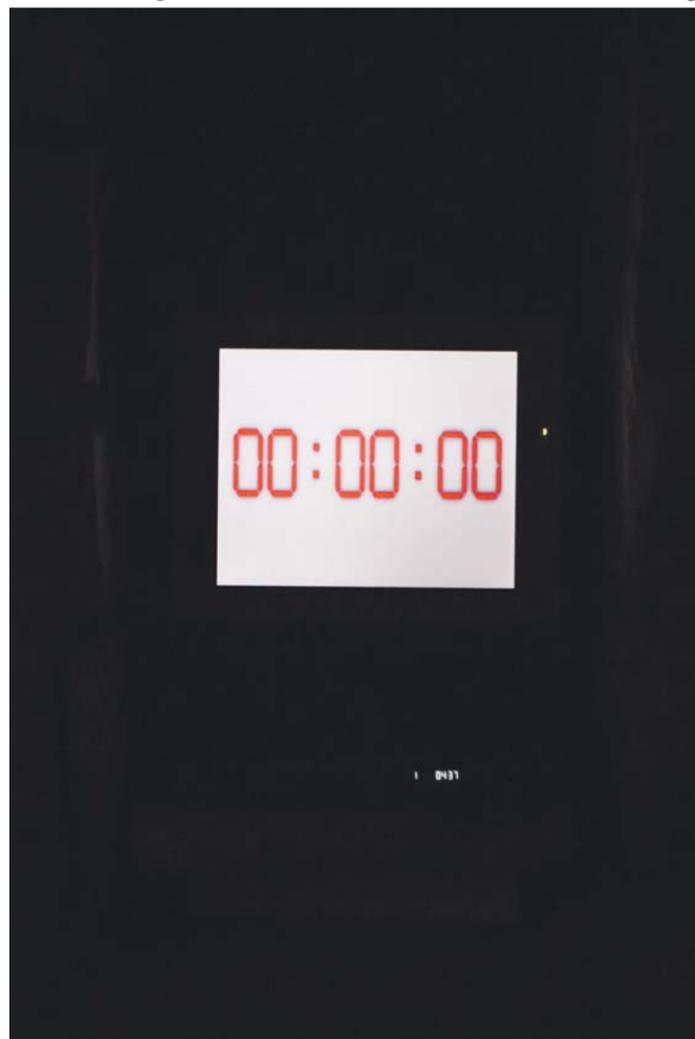
and worked on listing all the fauna and flora that inhabited the area. They then worked to create a simulation which was turned into sound – the artists created a musical piece with over one hundred instruments representing different organisms. Through twenty-four speakers embedded within the forest, a visitor could listen to a symphony. Earlier on this year, the Arboretum in Los Angeles, as well, organised sound and video installations within a garden landscape. Artists were encouraged to look at various themes relating to the environment and create projects that were going to be projected over the green spaces. Visitors walked through the landscape and engaged with the art, whether it was video, light or sound.

The use of video and sound art is not new to Malta. Artists around the world such as Andy Warhol and Bill Viola experimented with video art and has since become a medium used in contemporary art. Overall, it is an excellent way for artists to creatively produce different narratives, concepts and ideas that are not quickly done with painting or sculpture. Maltese artists Vince Briffa, Norbert Francis Attard, Ruth Bianco, and others have worked with this medium to highlight different social issues. Recent work for Malta Pavillion at the Venice Biennale 2019 by Briffa and other artists explores the myth of Calypso and Ulysses through the use of video, sound and water. Ruth Bianco's SEALAND, on the other hand, is a work that ques-

tioned the notion of ownership through a two-channel video projection. She reflected on the politicization of the shoreline, which stays the same, unlike the sea that is an ever-changing body of water.

International artists such as Lena Lapschina and Yael Toren have exhibited video art in Malta. Both participated in the 2017 edition of the APS Mdina Biennale. Lena Lapschina's Runtime was made up of a three-channel video with sound. Yael Toren, on the other hand, presented the Pieta' through video. The image of the Pieta' is compared to the refugee that wanders from one country to the other. The figure holding a lifeless body in its arms is repeated and lined up in an endless succession seemingly on a never-ending loop.

Sound art, on the other hand, has been around since the early 20th century and has recently regained momentum. Futurist Luigi Russolo and Dada's Marcel Duchamp experimented with sound recreating sounds of industrialisation and warfare and music from notes pulled from a hat respectively. This form of art continued to evolve, and nowadays, it is being used to enhance the auditory experience for the visitor. The incorporation of sound art was explored in the 2017 APS Mdina Biennale. Robert Stokowy worked on [structures] during his stay in Malta, going out, researching, drawing and exploring Mdina's soundscape.



A section of Lena Lapschina's video installation at the 2017 APS Mdina Biennale