

Dejan Grba

# CGA2018 INTERVIEW

## Intro

This interview for VFXSerbia, with Zlatko Miložić (VFXSerbia), Miloš Milošević (VFXSerbia) and Mladen Savković (PR of CGA), took place on occasion of the panel *VR to Begin With* that I hosted at the CGA 2018 conference in Yugoslav Cinematheque in Belgrade on 16 November 2018. The panelists were Johanna Pirker (TU Graz), Ninoslav Adžibaba (VRlabs Belgrade) and Vladimir Todorović (UWA Perth).

## Q & A

**You earned your BA and MA in Painting, but your doctoral art project was a **generative video** based on morphing. What motivated you to shift from painting to new media?**

I initiated my art career with the intensive exploration of the expressive potentials of drawing and painting, which allowed me to recognize the interrelatedness between the exploratory, conceptual and technical aspects as crucial and most exciting element of the art making. A superior space for experimenting with that interrelatedness opens up through the concept of universal Turing machine which is a foundation of modern computers and digital technology. So, in the second half of my BA studies I entered my artistic exploration of digital technology and theoretical research in new media art. It continues to this day, evolving through various focuses of interest, experimental frameworks and methodologies.

**In 2015 you founded **New Media** department at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade, that you chair and where you teach **Transmedia Research** studio course. Please tell us more about this department.**

As a valuable update to the FFA, New Media department has been rapidly developing

and progressively attracting talented freshmen. Our current priority is to broaden and intensify the international partnerships, and collaborative projects with our partners in the ICT sector and in creative industries. With one of the organizers of CGA 2018—Crater Studio—we have excellent collaboration that we formalized into a multifaceted protocol last year.

**You are also establishing the international MA program The Art of Digital Media at University of the Arts in Belgrade. Which skills will the prospective students gain and what are the professional challenges they will face after graduating?**

In each of the three initial modules—*Computer Games*, *Interactive Media* i *Digital Animation/VFX*—the students will get the opportunity to explore the fundamental creative layers in contemporary digital arts, with equal openness for free experimentation, for redefining the arts and for practical applications in the ICT sector, in creative industries and in cultural production. This will help them form and evolve an intellectual profile capable of complex thinking, flexible creative work and critical assessment but also keen for permanent learning, for understanding current trends and for anticipation of cultural, economic and political changes.

**Your syllabus for **Transmedia Research** studio course at the FFA includes topics such as the VR and AI in the arts, and we may say that we are in the early stages of the VR and the AI permeating all aspects of our lives. What is the scope and what are the challenges for the artists to expand their creativity with these technologies?**

All the available means and almost all circumstances are suitable for making art. In general, one of the key challenges for the artist is to make an interesting work regardless of its technical complexity, a work that captures our attention, intellect and emotions, motivates thinking, learning, positive change, or enriches our lives in some other way. With such “new” technologies as the AI and particularly the VR (the premise of our CGA panel *VR to Begin With* is that these technologies are not new), job number one for the artists is to recognize and transcend the trivial fallacies, primarily our tendency to escalate our natural fascination with novelty into fetishization of curiosity. This fallacy is one of the reasons that pioneering artworks in new technologies tend to age badly, quickly get discredited as superficial and deemed worthless.

**We have been witnessing that, beyond helping us make art, the AI can itself make art. Are we to expect that in the near future the humans will compete with the AI in the domain of artistic creativity?**

Nobody knows the answer to that question. Human intelligence, as well as human experience of reality in the context of the VR, are not sufficiently well known and understood clearly enough so that we can capture them with formally coherent sets of definitions and rules, which is the condition for mathematical modelling and computer emulation of any phenomenon or process. That's why we do not know if or when the artificial general intelligence will be feasible, or how it would function. However, because of this very cognitive deficiency combined with our fear of the unknown, every time a software or a robot or other technical system—which simulates but does not emulate intelligence—surpasses some human physical ability or cognitive skill or manifestation of creativity, we wrongly conclude that from now on, in this particular domain, humans will be competing with technology. It is often difficult for us to discern that this new functionality actually opens positive challenges for our intelligence, so we naively ascribe it with competitiveness and subjugation rather than making an effort to objectively detect and correct in it the human weaknesses and problematic human interests that reflect in every technology but are elusive.

**The idea of the VR has been with us for half a century, but its tech research and development has accelerated just recently. In your opinion, will the VR one day attain its fruition like the cinema had, or perhaps it may even transcend the cinema?**

The expansion of the VR undoubtedly opens the considerable creative, expressive and artistic potentials. But the VR, even if still technically modest, is a specific perceptive realm, clearly distinct from cinema, and it has to discover its own experiential and communicational identity – that is, we have to build it up. The arts are always based on and work with limitations so the new art forms, utilizing more complex technologies, usually do not cancel the older, technologically simpler ones. For example, we still enjoy reading fiction although the movies “tell stories” much more efficiently, or we enjoy silent films even when we watch them in DTS-enabled theaters which are the default for contemporary cinema, or we enjoy black and white movies exactly for their distinguishing formal dynamics absent from color films.

**Painting and sculpture are generally considered as traditional disciplines while the VR (and the computer graphics in general) are perceived as new media. However, we are witnessing the increasing adoption of new media in both painting and sculpture. Does this mean that in near future we will go beyond the distinction between traditional and new media arts?**

Similar to my answer to your question about the VR and AI, the artists constantly adopt new tools or colonize new technical means, exploring their potentials. This creative evolution is subtler and faster than the evolution of language, so the differences between “new” and “traditional” media are less pronounced in the actual production and experience of the arts than in the artistic discourse which is inert and clumsy in that respect. New media in the arts are always already old.

**What is your view on the convergence of the sciences, technology and the arts in education? Is there a future for the Art + Science platform in Serbia or is it just a pipe dream?**

The intelligent synergy between the sciences, technology, humanities and the arts into a robust corpus of transdisciplinary research, education and creativity is not only necessary for complex studying of the nature, for layered understanding of the human nature and for better appreciation of our place in nature, but it is crucial for the survival, welfare and progress of human civilization. That was one of my key motivating insights for authoring the Art of Digital Media MA program we mentioned earlier. However, nobody knows for sure how to achieve that synergy and many previous such efforts and initiatives have been rightfully discredited as inept or superficial. On the other hand, the mentality of contemporary actors and leaders and all disciplines is becoming more transdisciplinary than before. The complexity of this dynamics makes it uncertain if we are going to transcend the disciplinary parochialism and resolve the divides between natural sciences, socio-humanist sciences and the arts in some reasonable time. While that uncertainty is global and general, the Serbian perspective for the Art + Science platform calls for additional caution and critical focus required by local idiosyncrasies.