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Visual arts tempted by virtual reality

A generation of artists seizes the new digital tools to paint without canvas, to draw without walls or to sculpt in the air.

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Drue Kataoka gesticulates, her mouth half open, her face turned towards the ceiling, barefoot on a large green screen that covers the floor and the walls. She receives me in the wooden pavilion that serves as her studio, in the heights of Palo Alto, in Silicon Valley.

What she has to show is there, floating in these few square meters, but it is necessary, to see it, put on, like her, a helmet of virtual reality. One then discovers, persuaded to be alone, a fantastic universe that extends in all directions, and in which one can move. In this orange forest where gravity does not exist, the trees grow roots in the sky, a lake of stones pours into an abyss, giving as much vertigo as the desire to bend over.

"We are at the dawn of a revolution"

This artist of Japanese origin realized her work using Tilt Brush, a virtual reality drawing application available for HTC Vive and Oculus headphones. Sold for 20 dollars, the tool would have reached 190,000 users, according to unofficial figures, one year after the beginning of its marketing by Google, in April 2016. It allows one to draw in 3D, without support, using a helmet and two manual controls.

The tool's first use, assumed by the team at Google, to entertain an audience of amateurs. A demonstration of a few minutes is enough for the novice to stammer a work, half-painting half-sculpture, that he can archive and share. But, for a new generation of artists, this technology announces a turning point for the visual arts.

"We are at the dawn of a revolution," Drue Kataoka said. It is a fascinating period to be an artist. Paintings without canvases, graffiti without walls, without materiality sculptures virtual reality works are paradoxical, and galleries do not know how to display them. For the spectator also, the deal seems to be changed. The work of art is no longer a material object that one has to look at or sell, but an experience in which one has to delve.

"The only limit: the imagination"

It is the immersive nature of the device that intrigued George Peaslee, a 29-year-old sculptor from Hawaii, now based in Los Angeles. He started using Tilt Brush a year ago to recreate in reality virtual The Starry Night of Van Gogh. "I dreamed of being able to send a drone to this painting," he recalls, "or to be able to dive into it, see it from the sky but also from the city."

In its creation, the image has a real depth, and the viewer can zoom in and out of the room, reducing it to a bubble, sometimes to a landscape of giant. "I have never returned to traditional sculpture since," he continues. It's too much bazaar, it's too binding. With virtual reality, the only limit is imagination. We approach as closely as possible the dream of the artist: put the viewer in his own world."

Because the spectator is no longer facing the work but inside it, the artist must change his way of working. "I often think of the sculptures high on the pediment of the Parthenon on the Acropolis," says Drue Kataoka. "The artists knew that the backs of the sculptures would never be visible to a person standing so far below. But they still sculpted them with an extraordinary amount of detail, so that the sculptures would be worthy of being seen by the gods. In virtual reality, every detail must be considered with great care because the viewer can take a God's eye point of view, going around, looking downwards, from above, and even from within what is painted or sculpted. He becomes an agent in the work, a sort of co-creator, Taking a certain path and making choices."

"Painting with fire"

This is the major difference between pre-recorded virtual reality, as it is widely disseminated in cinema, and real-time volumetric virtual reality, in which the viewer can move.

For New York artist Rachel Rossin, virtual reality invests cinema theaters for circumstantial reasons (budget, audience, popularity), not because it would be more legitimate or more appropriate. "The directors do not yet sufficiently take into account the presence and the consciousness of the spectator," she explains. In many movies, the experience resembles a Disney attraction, it is walked there. Virtual reality is a simple addition to the work, whereas it should structure it."

The Tilt Brush technology and its competing applications (Quill and Gravity Sketch for drawing, Medium for sculpture) also struggle to go beyond the gadget stage. The Tilt Brush Sketches platform, launched by Google on April 27, to centralize the creations previously scattered on social networks, looks more like a play space than an artistic project. The aesthetics are surprisingly repetitive, the colors often garish, abusing the effects neon, fluo or glitter, very popular with users.

Elisabeth Morant, product manager at Google, says that this Tilt Brush leg is due to the taste of the public, more than the limitations of the tool: "The palette of colors and textures is immense, she insists. But it is very tempting to paint with fire when you have the opportunity for the first time."

"An art still unsolved"

Baldur Helgason, an Icelandic painter in Chicago, is not frightened by the fact that this fallow art has not yet reached maturity. "It is an art still unsolved," he comments. In this discipline there are no masters, no rules, no canons."

As for the sculptor George Peaslee, he looks forward to the improvements of the tool: to animate his drawings or to reintroduce a form of touch in the virtual sculpture by stimulating, with the controls, certain parts of the hand. Drue Kataoka, says she dreams of a "multiplayer" mode that would allow several to work, from anywhere, in "a kind of modern version of the great workshops of the Renaissance".

A more pressing problem seems to be solved for this generation of artists who has made virtual reality its speciality. How to exhibit and monetize these works-experiments?

Google has made sponsorship a central element of its communication campaign during the launch of the product, organizing artistic residencies in San Francisco, New York and Paris. Some 60 illustrious cartoonists, sculptors, graphic artists, painters or caricaturists took part in it, but a majority of them seem to have returned to their original medium by passion or by prudence. For the others, there is nothing left of this residence but a deep fascination, and a precious visibility.

Steve Teeple, a 28-year-old artist specializing in animation, was one of the first to use Tilt Brush from his studio in Oakland, San Francisco Bay. He is now an artist as well as consultant VR (for virtual reality), selling his services in turn to collaborate with a production box, to advertise a brand of shoes, more rarely to develop his own projects. Artists can hope to be paid during performances, by painting for example for shows.

"Growing Skills"

The seam is all the more promising as Google has developed brushes sensitive to sounds, which allow the traits to react to music in real time. But for now, visual artists in virtual reality have to rely on derivatives.

Steve Teeple has just exhibited for the first time one of his creations in virtual reality in an Oakland gallery. He was able to sell to the enthusiasts "postcard types", to keep to the flat country two-dimensional images.

Drue Kataoka also plans to print, in 3D this time, details of her fantastic worlds: "Imagine, they would be like small talismans, between the real and the virtual worlds. They would be brought back from a world we have seen, in the manner of heroes who bring back a proof of their exploits."

For the time being, museums and institutions are using virtual reality mainly to return to traditional arts, seeing it as a means of seducing young audiences or making their collections visible from a distance.

"This is partly for cost reasons," says artist Rachel Rossin, "because the installations require equipment and a lot of maintenance. But it is also a question of knowledge, especially in programming. A whole generation of artists is in the process of cultivating skills that are already transforming this situation." In his studio, the artist works also to develop its own virtual reality helmet.