THE LAYER PROJECT—LOST AND FOUND IN DIGITAL TRANSLATION

Julia Heurling, Cederegrensvägen 48 126 36, Hägersten, Sweden. E-mail: julia@heurling.se.

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Abstract
How can technology and digitalization be used to challenge and develop an analog idea? What happens in the translation from the analog to the digital? Can technology reveal previously hidden aspects of an art object? What happens to the relationship between art and viewer in the process of digitalization? The Layer Project, still in progress, originated in analog mode: cutting paper photographs into strips as layers. Digital filming became important for documenting the objects, as photographing them did not capture the changeability of their three-dimensional aspects. What happens at these borders of 2D and 3D, analog and digital? What defines them and what explains them? How can we compare them, relate them to each other? How are they different? Does media transform or simply transmit imagery? This statement also discusses how technology can be a tool for reflecting on an artwork—a tool to evaluate, develop and challenge an artistic concept.

The Layer Project
I first developed The Layer Project at a photo workshop in Härjedalen, a small rural village in Sweden where nature is dominated by forest. The concept of layers emerged from the idea that a forest resembles a raster in its repetition of trees. I was fascinated by the coexistence of contrasting qualities such as simplicity-complexity, natural-mysterious, exposed-hidden.

I took photos of the surroundings, both of the forest and of manmade things at the local recycling station. I was tempted to see if I could apply the forest quality of layers onto something else.

The project emerged in analog mode, through making two- and three-dimensional paper sketches by cutting paper photographs into strips as layers. For an exhibition, I made three-dimensional objects as boxes or frames in which the images were mounted as combinations of layers (Figs 1 and 2).

I thought the layer boxes worked as art objects. They operate on the border between 2D and 3D and have an interactive effect—they change visual appearance as the viewer changes position in relation to the objects. This interactivity makes the viewer aware of their own presence in the room and may have enough impact on the viewer’s mind to stay in its memory.

To document the objects, I started filming them to capture the three-dimensionality and movement within them. In doing so, I realized there were differences between filming the objects and filming the movement. When zooming in within the frame, I could disregard, for the moment, the frame and the idea of object. The film expressed visual content as separate or independent from the idea of object—it could instead reflect movement or changeability of appearance. Examples of the films can be seen on my website (www.juliaheurling.se).

Animation creates the illusion of motion through static images. The objects I created could be referred to as static. They depend on movement by the viewer to activate changeability within the frames. The movement within the objects exists only within the frame but depends on change in the viewer’s position and perspective. I call it reverse animation, as it is not the image that moves but the spectator.

Digital Translation
In this context, I use “translation” to refer to the transfer of a live experience to a recording. Translation between mediums results in transformation of content. “Filming” here refers to the translation of content into digital form, adapted to computer technology for a wider range of consumption and communication through publication online as opposed to existing in fixed position as objects in a gallery.

Filming can be seen as a way to extract or isolate the visual feature from its physical source or origin. Animation in this case creates a connection between analog and digital dimensions. The visual experience is lifted or extracted from the object and gains communicability through increased visual immediacy.

Abstraction
In my work I use abstraction as a method to separate qualities from each other and from their context and to look at these individual qualities closely. As abstraction, filming is a way to lift the content from its context of time, place and object. The objects, or frames, can be seen as containers of visual information. As an abstraction, the film relieves and releases. When you don’t see the frame, or the gallery, you can apply the imagery anywhere. As abstractions, the films gain imaginative power through removal of the frame.

Lost and Found
So, what happens in this case of digital translation? What is lost and what is found?

Lost
• The moment of surprise or realization when the imagery within the frame changes depending on viewer perspective—a moment of here-and-now awareness, a reminder of our existence.
• Interactivity. A film provides visual content as one-way communication, regardless of the viewer’s effort or engagement.
• The complexity of the object. The perception of the object is narrowed to one interpretation, directed by the filmmaker. The freedom of the viewer to direct their own experience is lost.
• The exclusivity of object and the experience of it. If published online, the digitalized experience becomes “common,” accessible to anyone.
• The live experience of the present: A recording has been made in the past.

Found
• The artwork’s visual content. The act of filming releases the artwork’s visual content from its frame. It becomes independent of the physical object as mediator of visual experience.
• The associative and imaginative aspect of the imagery, which, through abstraction, increases when transferred to film.
• An immediacy in impact, or at least in delivery of message. Time and effort spent experiencing content is minimized.
• A potentially larger audience, if published on a digital platform.
• Durability. Digital film is immaterial. It does not age. It is not physically fragile. It can be reproduced and distributed easily, without loss of technical quality.

Conclusion
Technology is a way to optimize image qualities but is also a tool for reflection. It can be used to evaluate, develop and
challenge a concept. This investigation of translation can be seen as a way to look at images through digitization but also as a way to look at digitization through images. What is digital translation? It depends on context.

Animation can be seen as translation on several levels: from physical to digital, from real life to immaterial, from exclusive (one of a kind) to reproducible, from gallery context to online experience, from concrete to abstract. Translation transforms content. It is one step in development, or in the mapping of possible extensions, of the artistic concept of *The Layer Project*. Animation opens possibilities for further development and enriches the project through its conceptual core: complexity.

**Fig. 1.** Four of the *Layer Projects* objects, seen from the front. (© Julia Heurling)

**Fig. 2.** The corner of one of the *Layer Projects* objects, seen from the side. (© Julia Heurling)