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The concept and essence of contemporary art

Abstract. The study aimed to substantiate the concept of art as a general term referring to various forms of contemporary art, which were positioned in contrast to classical art, to which the term “art” was applied. The methodology involved analytical and comparative methods. The concept of art encompassed forms of visual and audiovisual arts that emerged at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries with the development of multimedia technologies. It had been demonstrated that the critical distinction of contemporary art lay in the deliberate placement of its objects outside spaces explicitly designed for artistic exhibitions, leading to its interaction with the urban environment. Art was characterised by a desire to deny or oppose traditional art forms, which was reflected in many cases by its name – avoiding the distinctly Ukrainian word “мистецтво/mystetstvo” (English: art) and using the word “арт/art” borrowed from English. This period witnessed a fundamental shift in artistic practice, as artists began to move beyond traditional exhibition spaces such as galleries and museums, deliberately placing their works in unconventional or public settings. This integration of art into the urban environment redefined its boundaries, fostering interaction with everyday spaces and challenging established norms of artistic presentation. A defining feature of this new wave of art was its conscious opposition to traditional forms, frequently expressed through its nomenclature. Artists often replace the Ukrainian term “мистецтво/mystetstvo” (English: art) with the English “art”, reflecting a linguistic and conceptual shift away from traditions to engage with global discourses. The term “art” was strongly associated with visual arts, where digital technologies and multimedia experimentation predominate, in contrast to its infrequent use in music, even in digital forms such as electronic compositions. This distinction emphasised a unique connection between language, medium, and identity. By integrating art into public and unconventional spaces, artists had redefined its boundaries, fostering interaction with everyday environments. This evolution illustrated the interplay of technology, space, and culture, transforming contemporary artistic landscapes

Keywords: contemporary art; visual art; media art; fine art; audiovisual art

Introduction

In contemporary Ukrainian art discourse, terms incorporating the word “art”, borrowed from English despite the existence of the Ukrainian equivalent “мистецтво/mystetstvo” (English: art), are becoming increasingly widespread. The process of terminological adoption is primarily driven by the assimilation of artistic techniques that have gained popularity in the West, and it applies to both fine arts and other art forms, as well as various subcultures. Compared with the centuries-long history of art, this process is developing at an unprecedented pace. It has a significant impact on Ukraine’s cultural landscape as a whole, so understanding it is essential for

formulating an effective state policy to support the development of art and facilitate Ukraine’s integration into the global cultural space.

The analysis of recent studies and publications has made it possible to identify several research areas concerning the characteristics of various types of visual arts (public art, video art, street art), auditory art forms (contemporary music and sound installations), the concept of “digital art”, and the features of contemporary art functioning within the market. An attempt to define the concept of digital art was made by M. Chikarkova (2022), who explored the issue of delineating the boundaries of

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this term concerning the nature of digital technology use and its role in forming an artistic image. She raised the question of whether works from past eras that have been digitised and created long before the invention of the computer, should be considered digital art. The researcher focused exclusively on visual arts, leaving musical art and cinema beyond the scope of her study.

A comprehensive study of NFT art technologies was conducted by K. Marakhovska & T. Uvarova (2022). The authors examined the main characteristics and specifics of NFT art, demonstrating that it allows for the identification of digital artworks and can be used for the preservation of national art and folklore while maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity. The functioning of the visual art market was analysed greater in depth in the research of R. Bezuhla (2021), who highlighted changes in terminology, including the replacement of the category of “artistic image” with the concept of “concept”, the relevance of economic laws governing supply and demand, and the emergence of the “artist’s brand” concept. This was described as a structured template filled with content that may be entirely unrelated to the actual behaviour or characteristics of the artist. According to the researcher, such branding acquired mythological features, but its real purpose was to enable the sale of artwork at a significantly higher price.

The article by O. Panfilova & O. Kaleniuk (2022) examined the components of promoting contemporary artworks in the market, particularly the role of social media and online platforms for selling digitised drawings, illustrations, paintings, and videos. It also outlined the role of digitisation in preserving and cataloguing artworks, ensuring the accessibility of their digital copies. A. Kravchenko (2023) studied the significance of art blockchain in the creative industries of audiovisual culture (including show business, fashion, artistic design, and painting) and outlined the role of digital crypto-art tools in cultural management strategies of the 21st century. The author noted the transition from RR (“real reality”) to VR (“virtual reality”) metaverse, the blurring of boundaries between mass and elite culture, and predicted a future in which traditional ways of experiencing artistic masterpieces, such as visiting exhibitions, may become a luxury. A key issue remained the formation of the terminological framework of contemporary art studies. According to Z. Alferova (2009), the terminological framework of contemporary art was underexplored and “in the process of formation, and the relationship between the concepts of “visual art” and “media art” created several paradoxical contradictions”.

This research aimed to define the concept of “art” as a comprehensive term encompassing the diverse forms of contemporary art to which the term was attributed. Scientific novelty: the concept of art has been substantiated for the first time, uniting modern artistic trends that actively use the latest multimedia technologies.

Materials and Methods

The methodology of this study involved a range of general scientific methods, primarily analytical and comparative, to examine and compare the essential characteristics of various forms of contemporary visual arts. In particular, the empirical research method was used to analyse scientific studies of net art, which was thoroughly examined by O. Balashova (2009); public art, explored by A. Yefimova (2011); and video art, described in the research of H. Vysheslavskyi (2009). An important contribution to this study was made through the analysis of the research of O.I. Lishchynska (2013), who investigated media art, as well as the research conducted by K. Marakhovska & T. Uvarova (2022), who described NFT art. The study of street art, which was also examined here, was conducted by I. Miro (2018), while M. Chikarkova (2022) explored digital art. The functioning of infrastructure and the modern art market was examined based on an analysis of the research findings of other authors. An important aspect of this study was also the analysis of the articles of scholars, such as N. Bulavina (2015), N. Pavlichenko (2015), and S. Rusakov (2019). The empirical approach sought to identify the defining features, techniques, and conceptual frameworks that distinguish different artistic practices, allowing for a deeper understanding of their unique qualities. Through the analytical method, the study examined the internal structure and components of contemporary visual arts, focusing on their aesthetic, formal, and conceptual elements. The comparative method was employed to contrast these features across different artistic practices, enabling the identification of commonalities and differences. In particular, several sound installations and artistic internet-based projects by Ben Benjamin, JODI Group, and Andy Deck were studied from the perspective of the material and technical resources involved, as well as the formation of a holistic artistic image. This methodological framework facilitated a comprehensive analysis of the evolving landscape of contemporary visual arts, contributing to a broader discourse on their development, interpretation, and classification.

To determine the boundaries of the concept of “art-мистецтво/mystetstvo”, the analytical method was applied. The concept of “relevance” was analysed in terms of its applicability to contemporary art phenomena that were not typically classified as “art-мистецтво/mystetstvo”, such as the musical works of L. Grabovsky and O. Ilnytska, as well as the cinematographic works of T. Yashchenko and A. Seitablayev.

Results and Discussion

Contemporary Ukrainian discourse is characterised by an active renewal of the terminological framework and the emergence of new words of foreign origin. In particular, this applies to art-historical terms in which the Ukrainian word “мистецтво/mystetstvo” (English: art) had been replaced by the word “арт/art”, a direct transliteration of the English term, which in turn derived from

Latin. In addition, contemporary discourse had increasingly adopted the phrase “contemporary art”, which tended to be positioned in contrast to art that was not considered contemporary. At the same time, the chronological framework of “modernity” often remained unclear or controversial. For example, W. Gompertz (2012) considered the art of the last 150 years to be “contemporary” – a period which, according to the author, reflected the duration of the debate on distinguishing contemporary art from past artistic traditions.

According to O.A. Zakharova (2014), the interpretation of contemporary art had been primarily based on concepts such as “conceptual”, “relevant”, “radical”, and “critical”. It was characterised by a focus on “searching for painful moments in society”. According to source K. Botanova: Contemporary art responds to society (2010), contemporary art was “something that confronts society, engaged and actively responds to the state of society and the state of the world today”. Thus, the emergence of new terms in contemporary artistic discourse can be explained by the increased adoption of Western art forms, whose terminology developed in the English-speaking environment, and the artists’ desire to confront and oppose existing art forms.

It was noteworthy that among art forms using the term “art”, visual arts predominate, whereas in audio arts, replacing “мистецтво/mystetstvo” (English: art) with “арт/art” was uncommon. In fact, the only musical genre that incorporated “art” in its name was art rock, a type of rock music characterised by a more experimental and conceptual approach. The substitution of “мистецтво/mystetstvo” with “арт/art” occurred more frequently in the visual arts, such as street art, media art, and others. It was worth examining these forms in greater detail. Street art was a broad term referring to art forms, where objects were placed directly on the streets of cities (hence the name, derived from the English “street”) (Fig. 1). I. Miro (2018) defined street art as a form of fine art with a distinct urban style, which included both static forms – murals, graffiti – and dynamic ones – events, performances, and flash mobs. The former consisted of images placed on building façade or urban infrastructure, while the latter involved the direct participation of groups in pre-planned public events. The researcher noted that street art objects were typically deliberately temporary, which influenced the choice of themes during their creation. As a result, socio-political themes and protest aesthetics were

prevalent, including ideas of anarchism, antiglobalisation, consumer activism, and colonialism.



Figure 1. P. Banksy’s graffiti on Independence Square
Source: World-famous Banksy supported Ukrainians with his graffiti (2022)

According to O.I. Lishchynska (2013), media art was a broad term encompassing art forms based on the use of contemporary multimedia technologies, including video art, video installations, media performances, net art, kinetic sculptures, sound installations, and others. A distinctive feature of media art was “focusing on the specifics of communication processes, blurring the boundaries between art and life, art and other areas of culture”. O.M. Landiak (2015) distinguished between screen and non-screen types of media art: while the former relied on a screen to display certain information in graphic form, the latter does not use a screen. Non-screen media art was relatively less common and included sound installations, radio plays, and experimental works involving old telephones and other communication channels that do not transmit video information. The classical radio play, which emerged in the 1930s, has typically not been classified as media art, perhaps due to its lack of emphasis on confrontation and radicalism.

Sound installations were considered the most prevalent form of non-screen media art and, at the same time, a type of street art that generated sounds in public places typically unsuitable for listening to music. Sound installations vary in interactivity, functionality, location, and installation technology. Examples of sound installations involving human interaction were presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of sound installations that involve human contact

Installation name	Location/Context	Description
Piano-Staircase	Stockholm	A staircase structure in the form of a piano keyboard, where each step produces a sound of a particular pitch when stepped on
21 Balançoires	Montreal	A series of swings that produce different sounds depending on the movements made by the person swinging
Sound Trees	Musik 21 Festival	Metal wires attached to tree trunks transmit sound, allowing listeners to hear music, while leaning against the tree

Table 1, Continued

Installation name	Location/Context	Description
Musical Roads	Various locations	Grooves on the road surface emit sounds of a particular pitch, when they come into contact with car tyres
Marine Organs	Seashores	Installed along the seashore, these instruments emit sounds as a result of wind or water impact on the structure

Source: developed by the author

It should also be added that sound installations do not involve broadcasting a pre-recorded (or pre-composed) piece of music, which distinguished them from musical compositions. Screen-based media art was characterised by screens that display video sequences. In addition to cinema screens, TV screens, and monitors, holographic screens, exterior surfaces, or “clean air as a projection surface” may be used (Landiak, 2015). The most prevalent form of screen-based media art was video art, which was defined as “art that uses the capabilities of video technology, equipment that allows you to capture a moving image in electronic form and display it on a monitor screen”. This category included video documentation of performances, experimental videos, and “video installations” – videos presented in public spaces in a manner that integrated them into the surrounding urban or natural environment. An important feature of video art was its individualised language, which involved creative abstraction, “an upward movement from matter through the mediation of symbols to the realm of the ideal message – now the “aesthetic body of the work” containing the artistic image” (Vysheslavskiy, 2009). A distinct category of

screen-based media art was net art, which was understood as “network art”, referring to the Internet as a contemporary means of communication. According to O. Balashova (2009), a defining characteristic of net art was its dialogic nature and the openness of the communication system, “to which the recipient connects and which they fill with their content”. The following works were regarded as outstanding examples of net art.

“Superbad” by Ben Benjamin was a pioneering work of early net art that exemplified the creative exploration of the web as a medium. Launched in the late 1990s, the site features a labyrinthine structure of interconnected images, where hyperlinks guide visitors through an abstract, non-linear journey. The visuals ranged from minimalist geometric shapes resembling CSS-based pattern construction exercises to intricate vector illustrations of animals and humans. This juxtaposition of abstract and figurative imagery underscored the playful, experimental nature of digital aesthetics in the emerging web culture. “Superbad” transcended traditional website functionality, offering an immersive, almost dreamlike experience that encouraged contemplation of the Internet as both a canvas and a playground for artistic expression (Fig. 2).

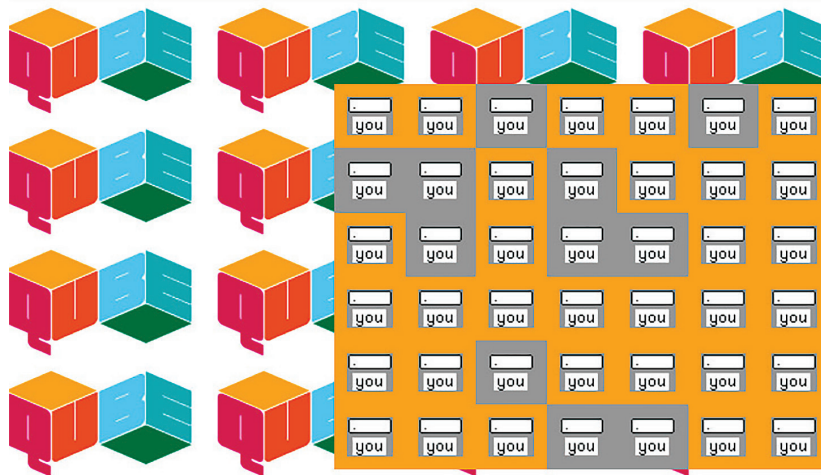


Figure 2. “Superbad” by Ben Benjamin. Fragment

Source: Superbad (2024)

The work of the JODI Group appeared to be a collection of symbols incomprehensible to the user, yet according to the authors, it concealed the blueprint of a hydrogen bomb. The project exemplified a radical interrogation of the digital medium, where the aesthetics of malfunction – glitches, fragmented code, and

chaotic visual distortions – functioned as deliberate artistic strategies to challenge the apparent transparency of the technology. By exposing the hidden complexity of internet infrastructure, JODI subverted conventional notions of web functionality, transforming HTML, user interfaces, and browser behaviours into a disorienting

yet thought-provoking experience. This pioneering exploration of net art challenges users to confront the duality of digital systems, where order and chaos, visibility and obscurity, seamlessly coexist, while underscoring the performative and conceptual potential of computational errors as an artistic language (Fig. 3).

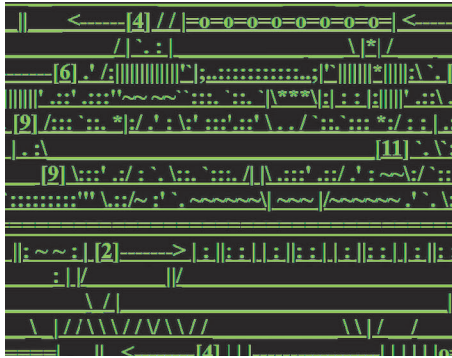


Figure 3. JODI Group. Main page of the project
Source: JODI Group (2024)

Andy Deck's project invited users to participate in the collective drawing of squares, thus "dissolving" the creator in the collective act of creation. Through a circular, continuously evolving visual interface, users were invited to contribute by drawing, modifying, and interacting with shared imagery in real time. This piece exemplified the ethos of networked art, where the boundaries between artist and audience dissolve, transforming passive viewers into active co-creators. By embracing open participation and leveraging the communal nature of the internet, "Screening Circle" highlighted the creative potential of collective input, while reflecting on the fluid, ephemeral nature of digital expression in the public sphere (Fig. 4).

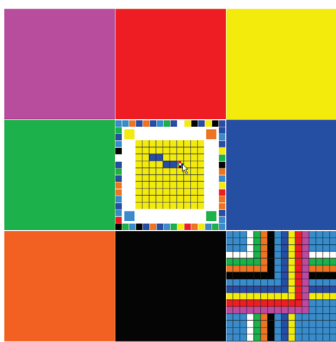


Figure 4. Andy Deck's project fragment
Source: Screening Circle (2024)

Thus, the viewer became an accomplice to the creative project, which, according to O. Balashova (2009), "breaks with the usual ideas about art". Digital art, which some researchers argue was best referred to as "digital art", was also recognised as a separate art form. M. Chikarkova (2022) defined digital art as a creative

activity "based on the use of computer technologies, resulting in works in digital form, the main environment of which is computer platforms or a network". At the same time, works of digital art weren't include digitised versions of traditional art. However, an analysis of publications revealed that the phrase "digital art" was primarily applied to visual art forms, overlooking audio-based works, particularly the diverse range of contemporary electronic music created exclusively through digital technologies (Bondarenko, 2012). A separate "art terms" category pertained to the economic and social aspects of art. This group included terms such as art market, art marketing, and art management. These terms first emerged in Western countries, where, for historical reasons, the commercialisation of art progressed more rapidly than in Ukraine.

Researchers had described contemporary society as a symbiosis of the economy and culture, making the existence of art outside these domains virtually impossible. Works of art became a commodity on the art market, which, in contemporary Ukrainian discourse, was often referred to by the shorter term "art market" – a corruption of the English phrase "art market". As noted by R. Moulin (1987), the art market was where, by some secret alchemy, the cultural good became a commodity. Art has become integral to the global market (Kowalski, 2018). Researcher D. Held *et al.* (1999) called the art market a "hybrid, multifunctional and polyphonic" phenomenon, and one that, on the one hand, "tends to be artistic, pragmatically disinterested, and, on the other hand, to market profit and explicit pragmatism". A re-evaluation of the traditional paradigm that characterised the current stage of art commercialisation: whereas the functioning of art markets was previously defined by the "4P" model – Product, Promotion, Price, Place – worldview changes had led to a shift towards the "4E" model – Experience, Evangelism, Exchange, Everyplace (Walmsley, 2019).

As in any other sector of the economy, the art market operates according to the laws of supply and demand, raising questions about the significance and appropriateness of "pure art" – art guided solely by artistic principles (Pavlichenko, 2015). Works of art have come to be regarded as commodities, pushing the notion of artistic value into the background and prompting debate on whether artistic value was necessary in the marketplace. In this regard, the study by O.A. Zakharova (2014) showed that only 44% of respondents surveyed by the researcher believed that the quality of work affects its commercial value, while 31% believed it may or may not have an effect, and 9% did not. As part of his analysis of the art market, S. Rusakov (2019) noted that the art market functions as a meaning-making space for the emergence, presentation, and consumption of contemporary art.

Returning to the artistic disciplines discussed, it was worth posing a general question: what was the difference between these artistic forms and those with a more extended history, such as the visual arts, music,

and theatre? It was unlikely that “relevance” can serve as such a criterion, whether in terms of demand or in responding to contemporary events. At least the statistics on music viewership on YouTube, which in some cases had reached several billion views (Bärtl, 2018), prompt a clear rejection of the assumption that classical art forms were allegedly irrelevant. It would also be a mistake to assume that the classical arts were incapable of responding to current global challenges – for example, numerous cinematic and musical works had been dedicated to recent events, including Russian aggression against Ukraine (since 2022). Notable examples included symphonic works such as “To Victory” (2023) for orchestra and choir by Olena Ilnytska (Olena Ilnytska “To Victory” for vocal sextet and orchestra, 2023), or “Credo” by L. Hrabovsky (dedicated to Maidan victims). Cinematic works included “Cherkasy” (2019) (director: T. Yashchenko) and “Cyborgs: Heroes Never Die” (2017) (director: Akhtem Seitablayev).

A common feature of various forms of street art (including sound installations) and media art were the avoidance of specific sites for placing artistic objects and the desire to reach the widest possible audience through spaces not initially intended for exhibiting works of art. Attempts to place an art object in a public space create the best conditions for the “confrontation with society” mentioned in this study. As noted by V. Kebuladze (2013), “art imposes itself on everyday reality. Art turns into a dictator”. In her study, A. Yefimova (2011) noted that public art had primarily developed in Kyiv and, to a lesser extent, in other Ukrainian cities. She observed that, despite the challenges in developing this field, the key issue was the need to actualise public art. H. Vysheslavskiy (2009), in his research on video art, noted that the degree to which a work exhibited a distinct visual language and its methods of construction was crucial. N. Bulavina (2015), meanwhile, conducted an institutional analysis of the Ukrainian contemporary art system in the late 20th century.

The relationship between art and the art market remains unresolved. Thus, when researchers considered art as a commodity, they mainly referred to works of classical art, primarily fine art. The commercialisation and transformation of street art or Internet art into

commodities were more complicated due to the intentional integration of these art forms into non-traditional artistic spaces, which raised several issues related to property rights, technologies for physical relocation, and the rights to photograph objects.

Conclusions

The artistic space of the late 20th and early 21st centuries was characterised by the emergence of many artistic movements that incorporated the latest technologies. Most of them first appeared in the West and were later adopted in Ukraine, along with English-language names that typically included the English equivalent of “art”, such as street art, media art, video art, and net art.

Unlike traditional art forms, including fine art, which were predominantly exhibited in dedicated art spaces such as galleries, concert halls, and theatres, art objects, as conceived by their creators, were instead placed in public or urban spaces and became an integral part of the built (or, less often, natural or park) environment. This decision often led to conflict between artists and society and subjected them to criticism for imposing their works too aggressively. These confrontations highlighted the evolving relationship between art, its creators, and its audience, as well as the role of art in shaping public consciousness. It had often been suggested that contemporary art forms were “relevant” or “actively responding to the state of society”. However, these qualities should not be regarded as defining features, given the presence of numerous equally relevant and contemporary works within more traditional arts, such as music or film.

The prospects for future research include the exploration of the genre diversity of contemporary art, with a particular focus on attempts to classify its various forms. This involves identifying and analysing their distinctive features through a detailed study of different artistic movements, their technical methods, and artistic characteristics.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Поняття та сутність сучасного мистецтва

■ **Анотація.** Дослідження мало на меті обґрунтувати концепт «art» як загальний термін, що охоплював різні форми сучасного мистецтва, які протиставлялися класичному мистецтву, до якого застосовувався термін «мистецтво». Методологія включала аналітичні та порівняльні методи. Концепт «art» охоплював форми візуального та аудіовізуального мистецтва, що виникли на межі ХХ-ХХІ століть у зв'язку з розвитком мультимедійних технологій. Було доведено, що ключовою відмінністю сучасного мистецтва є його свідоме розміщення за межами спеціально призначених для художніх експозицій просторів, що сприяє його взаємодії з міським середовищем. «Art» характеризувався прагненням заперечувати або протистояти традиційним формам мистецтва, що в багатьох випадках відображалось навіть у його назві – уникненні виразного українського слова «мистецтво» на користь запозиченого з англійської «art». У цей період відбувся фундаментальний зсув у художній практиці: митці почали виходити за межі традиційних виставкових просторів, таких як галереї та музеї, свідомо розміщуючи свої роботи в нетипових або публічних місцях. Така інтеграція мистецтва в міське середовище призвела до переосмислення його меж, сприяючи взаємодії з повсякденним простором і кидаючи виклик усталеним нормам художньої презентації. Визначальною рисою цього нового напрямку була його свідомо опозиція традиційним формам, що часто проявлялася навіть на рівні термінології. Художники нерідко замінювали українське слово «мистецтво» на англійське «art», що відображало мовний і концептуальний відхід від традицій для залучення до глобальних дискурсів. Термін «art» міцно асоціювався з візуальним мистецтвом, де домінували цифрові технології та мультимедійні експерименти, на відміну від його рідкісного використання в музиці, навіть у цифрових формах, таких як електронні композиції. Ця відмінність підкреслювала унікальний взаємозв'язок між мовою, медіумом та ідентичністю. Інтеграція мистецтва у публічні та нетипові простори призвела до переосмислення його меж, сприяючи взаємодії з повсякденним середовищем. Ця еволюція проілюструвала взаємодію технологій, простору та культури, що трансформує сучасні художні ландшафти

■ **Ключові слова:** сучасне мистецтво; візуальне мистецтво; медіа-арт; образотворче мистецтво; аудіовізуальне мистецтво