

# Contemporary Art: Learning Methods and Tools for Distance Learning

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## **Abstract**

**The EU reference framework for key competences for lifelong learning (implemented in Latvia from 2016 as ESF project) defines ‘cultural awareness and expression’ as one of the competences contributing to the individual’s social cohesion and sense of identity. In respect of the latter, visual literacy has been defined as a specific competence developed through an interdisciplinary approach: the individual develops her self-competence in the creative process; her social competence by displaying and communicating the outcome of her creative work; her methodological competence by selecting the technique and outlay to manifest her idea (Wagner, Schönau 2016).**

**Visual literacy is applied and developed as a competency that educates the individual and can provide individualized solutions. Thus the students evolve their skills and abilities that they have mastered beforehand, enriching their capacity for visual literacy and visual intelligence (European Framework of Reference in Visual Literacy, 2016). The analysis of the means of the artistic expression of an artist as an information medium helps students to dis-**

**cover the pathways of visual communication and to recognize signs, symbols, archetypes, narratives and other elements of cultural communication. The following task is embodiment of the acquired knowledge as an artistic expression. As a result the students both explore theoretical and practical realms of artistic experience.**

**Cultural and arts education is also closely interlinked with the social aspect promoting social cohesion and identity shaping (European Framework of Reference in Visual Literacy). Developing visual literacy helps students to understand the cultural diversity both of their local community and of Europe or of the world. The understanding of the cultural diversity helps students to learn how to efficiently apply creative skills at their everyday and professional communication (Wagner, Schönau 2016).**

## **Keywords**

**Arts education, visual literacy, cultural awareness, competencies in lifelong learning, distance education, visual means of expression.**

## **Introduction**

A contemporary school has to be a school of changes, as nowadays world embodies constant and exciting transformations. These words could be regarded as a plain courtesy, however, they also have evoked a tangible response. The EU reference framework for key competences for lifelong learning has been implemented in Latvia since 2016 as an ESF project, providing all the levels of education with competency-based contents.

I have eight years of experience of teaching visual art for lower secondary and upper secondary level students at the Riga Distance Education Secondary School where I have been

working as an arts teacher since the school was founded in 2009. During this period the school has provided certificates for primary and secondary education for about 1500 students aged from 17 to 58. I am responsible for preparing online resources, video lessons, online tests and practical assignments for distance learning, as well as for conducting webinars and online communication with students. The requirements for the tests and assignments are being changed yearly in order to ensure the maximum efficiency of the feedback and the assessment of the theoretical knowledge and practical skills of the students.

Students are able to recognize the solutions of visual communication and cultural contexts during the analysis of the means of artistic expression of a certain artist whose aim has been to deliver a certain message. However, one has to bear in mind that visual communication can be blocked by differences in individual experience in visual communication or visual literacy. Thus artists, whose works should influence the audience, can end up unheard or misunderstood. The aim of art teachers is to help pupils to recognize the means of artistic expression and elements of cultural communication such as signs, symbols, archetypes, narratives etc. in order to facilitate visual communication. The next step is encouraging the pupils to transform the learned theory into a practical creative work paving the way both towards new knowledge and new skills developed in practical experience – visual literacy.

Visual literacy or visual intelligence as a competency of an individual is necessary in order to recognize the opportunities and boundaries of designing ideas or patterns in various contexts of visual communication. The prospect suggested by the European Framework of Reference in Visual Literacy (2016) refers to building equal opportunities for the quality of visual literacy and comprises comparative research designing in cultural education as a tool for building cultural competencies. It is important to note that there still exists a possibility of differences regarding national and historical / traditional perception of quality and assessment. The definition for cultural literacy and understanding of its meaning involves two approaches: according to the

first one, aesthetic tradition prevails and art education serves as an introduction to ‘high’ art as well as to the history of art and artistic practices, while the second one is based on economic reasoning highlighting creativity and innovation as well as the increase of integrated art forms.

To continue to explore the purpose of art as a tool of visual communication between an artist and their audience, it is important to realize to what extent artistic creation is shaped by own personal experience, standards of life and relations to other artworks seen before. Do the people who possess the ability to create artworks and influence others through their art bear in mind the ethical and aesthetical mission carried forth by their creative work, do they experience responsibility? As seeing is believing. What traditional – well-known or new – means of artistic expression are applied to communicate with an audience?

Every pupil who analyses the artistic production as a piece of information and is able to identify the means of artistic expression applied by an artist, can discover certain means of artistic expression and the principles of their organisation, as well as she can recognize cultural context and elements of cultural communication such as signs, symbols, archetypes, narratives etc. The research paper analyses how pupils have developed interdisciplinary visual communication skills why mastering Visual Arts study course at the Riga Distance Education Secondary School.

## **Discussion**

In 2016 the National Centre for Education (NCE) of Latvia, supported by a policy initiative launched by the Ministry of Education of Latvia and European Structural Funds, started implementing an education project No 8.3.1.1./16/1/002 “Educational Curriculum and Learning Approach” (hereinafter the project Skola 2030). The project suggests that “the understanding of the knowledge and skills that will be needed in the society in the future is changing not only in Latvia, but also elsewhere in the world. Overall, Latvian pupils are good in tasks requiring

to remember or act in known situations, however, they lack skills and experience to get deeper, process various data, work as a team, offer solutions for non-standard situations. Therefore, schools should attempt to offer children and youths such learning experience, which would result in pupil's expertise or competence: the ability to use knowledge, skills and express attitudes in a complex way, solving problems in various real-life situations." From September 25, 2017 to February 1, 2018 everyone: teachers, other professionals in the field and parents could get acquainted with the project description. On October 11, 2018 education curriculum standards based on the project guidelines have been submitted for approval to the Cabinet of Ministers (CM).

The purpose of general secondary education has been defined as the following in the project description: "The purpose of general secondary education is to allow each student to become a goal-oriented and skilled collaborator at shaping their professional future, one that cooperates and is a patriot of Latvia, that has enriched their knowledge, skills and approaches required by a knowledge-based society according to her goals, and that innovatively and productively participates at growth of economics, welfare and sustainability in her homeland and the world". The curriculum has been addressed to pupils from 1.5 years of age to age 18 respective to finishing secondary education. Henceforth the curriculum has been divided into three grades, pre-school, elementary school and secondary school education. For each grade the curriculum has been divided into fields as the following for elementary school education: Languages, Social and Civic, Cultural Understanding and Self-Expression in Arts, Natural Sciences, Mathematics, Technologies, Health and Physical Activity.

The field Cultural Understanding and Self-Expression in Arts (hereinafter Self-Expression in Arts) as part of elementary school education provides pupils with an opportunity to discover and develop their creative talents, knowledge, skills and techniques in four artistic practices (teachers often qualify them as learning subjects): music, drama, visual arts and literature. Self-

expression in arts is divided into sub-elements:

- forms of art;
- creation of ideas;
- practical assignments;
- assessment and interpretation;
- ethical and aesthetical experience;
- cultural contexts.

Discussing the subject requires developing an understanding of visual means of expression which proposes how the general ideas are suggested by the Forms of Art sub-faculty: “Each form of art has its particular characteristic means of artistic expression” and, for instance, after finishing grade 3 (at age 9) a pupil must be able to distinct the simplest means of artistic expression such as lines, plains, forms and colours and apply them for experiments and gaining experience; after grade 6 (at age 12) a pupil must be able to distinct several means of visual artistic expression such as line, plain, volume, colour, light, texture, and basic principles of composition such as balance, contrast, rhythm, proportions and perspective as well as to be able to gain experience by applying them; finally, after grade 9 (at age 15) a pupil shall be able to characterize the means of artistic expression of different fields of art, including cinematography, design and architecture and to assess their combinations oriented towards diverse purposes and meanings.

The contents of the Arts Course as part of general secondary education in Latvia comprises three faculties: first, Literature which is mandatory, second, Visual Arts and third, Music. Both second and third faculties are optional which means that a student can choose one of them. The frequency of visual arts lessons is 40 minutes once per week in two years time, while for distance learning this intensity is even more reduced, therefore self-tuition matters a lot. The visual arts course consists of online webinars, face to face classes and home assignments, both

of theoretical and practical nature. Students also have to get acquainted with theoretical course materials on their own. Video tutorials of visual art practices such as painting or drawing lessons done by me personally are also prepared and provided. At Riga Distance Education Secondary School the pupils get acquainted with artworks representing the modernism and post-modernism in Latvia and worldwide, process the acquired theoretical knowledge, learn new means of artistic expression and master their application depending on individual skills, needs and requirements of the curriculum. The application of the means of artistic expression depends also on the objective to be reached, for example, if the objective is to perform an analysis of an artwork representing particular style or direction, the students have to result in a new visual composition, for instance, a drawing, a sketch, a painting or a photograph that should reveal how the principles of the relevant means of artistic expression or their composition are observed or, just the opposite, neglected. Assignments are purposefully orientated towards building an understanding of most important artistic trends predominating in certain chronological periods. The most common teaching methods for visual arts distance learning are these:

- Analysis of verbal, visual, audial texts
- Experiments;
- Practical assignments;
- Narration (lecture, presentation, description, outline);
- Visualisation;
- Preserving of works.

In order to identify students' ability to recognize and apply means of artistic expression, I would like to provide an example from grade 11 visual arts course addressed to pupils starting from 16 years of age. This is one of five test assignments of a difficulty level two. The assignment considers two performances of distinguished artists. The first option provides an introduction to the creative work by Joseph Boys (see figura 1) and the second option provides



	
<p>Caroline Tisdall, Joseph Beuys Coyote (2011), 1 of 10 list.</p>	<p>Caroline Tisdall, Joseph Beuys Coyote (2011), 3 of 10 list.</p>
<p>Joseph Beuys, "I Like America and America Likes Me" (Performance, 1974) Rene Block Gallery, New York. Photographs by Caroline Tisdall Joseph Beuys Coyote (2011)</p>	

Figure 1: The first performance of distinguished artist


<p>Marina Abramović, The Artist Is Present (2010), Museum of Modern Art, New York. Video</p>

Figure 2: The first performance of distinguished artist

an introduction to the creative work by Marina Abramovich.

The required tasks for the students are the following:



- first, watching the images and the video;
- second, reading the description of the artist's conceptual approach;
- third, analysing the information according to the following criteria;
- first, they need to identify the artist's message;
- second, they need to discuss the means of artistic expression;
- third, they have to comment on the applied materials and resources;
- and finally, they have to consider whether the performance can be regarded as a work of conceptual art.

Let me show you the data of the quantitative survey conducted at the Riga Distance Education Secondary School in two subsequent school years: 2016 to 2017 and 2017 to 2018. The data represent how the means of artistic expression are identified by the students in reference to the both performances.

Within this assignment, the students named about 50 different means of artistic expression. The results also show that recently a new trend has emerged that previously was not observed at the Visual Arts course – respectively, the students enrich their practical assignment performance with integrated or interdisciplinary knowledge and practical skills.

Here comes a brief overview of the means of artistic expression named within this assignment:

1. Line - 13% (the best known means of artistic expression)
2. Colour – 8,5%, black or white colour – 3%
3. Form – 7%
4. A human being or a human body– 7%
5. Facial features or gaze – 8,5%
6. Music, sound or silence – 6,5%
7. Movement or plastics – 6,5%

8. Emotions or irony – 6,5%
9. Allegory – 6,5%
10. Space – 4,5%
11. Silhouette – 4,5%
12. Plain – 2,5%
13. Finish – 3,5%
14. Texture – 0,5%
15. Dot – 0,5%
16. Text – 0,5%
17. Chiaroscuro – 3%
18. Contrast – 1%
19. Photo/illustration – 1,5%
20. Composition – 1%
21. Coyote – 1,5%
22. Symbol – 4%
23. Personification – 4,5%
24. Metonymy – 1,5%
25. Metaphor – 3,5%
26. Paradox – 2%
27. Parallel – 3%
28. Comparison – 2%
29. Abstraction – 0,5%
30. Visual means of expression – 1,5%
31. Language – 2%
32. Time – 2,5%

33. Thoughts – 1%
34. Conversation/dialogue – 0,5%
35. Communication – 1%
36. Theatre/performance – 1%
37. Body language – 2%

Let me draw some conclusions from here:

- Through the analysis of the works of art, students learn to recognize and to memorize the means of artistic expression;
- Consequently, students learn to apply these means of artistic expression in their own creative work and practical assignments;
- Since distance learning is strongly focused on independent problem solving it is essentially important to motivate students to work independently;
- It is necessary to arrange performing of the practical assignments step by step, a draft can be evaluated instead of a completed drawing/painting.

Let me introduce you to the practical assignment requirements:

- To create 3 drafts for representation of a socio-political / economic condition / event in Latvia, focused on successive development of the topic;
- To create a draft in pencil or computer graphics technique;

To apply the following means of artistic expression:

- Line;
- Space;
- Contrast;
- At least two colours.

Finally, the work has to be signed.

The usage of the means of artistic expression depends also on the objective and technique,

for example, whether the work has to be visual or audiovisual, whether it has to be a drawing, a painting, a sketch or a photograph. Recently a new tendency has become present at the outcome of practical assignments – the pupils tend to prove having interdisciplinary knowledge and skills. This tendency shows also in the above mentioned survey results. Analyzing a visual/audial work of art, the students increasingly refer to literary means of expression such as personification (3,5%) or metaphor (4,5%) and to audial means of expression, for instance, music, sound, silence, conversation and communication (8%). That is particularly characteristic for analysis of multimedial artworks. It signifies that the students become more and more confident regarding applying the gained knowledge and skills for analysing non-standard situations new to them. This also proves that they can apply knowledge and skills mastered in other school subjects, that they can select those which are relevant and combine them.

Since distance learning involves lots of self-tuition, motivating students is of great importance. In order to increase motivation it is important to start with babysteps, for instance, if a pedagogue wants to encourage a pupil, initially it is essential to allow her to choose a technique they like or can access (several students live abroad and can have a restricted access to art supplies). The greatest part of the pupils (57% from the total amount of the submitted works in 2018) prefer drawing techniques. However, it should not be regarded as a handicap or inability to use imagination, as the students draw not only linear sketches (31%) but also complex tonal drawings (13%) and colourful drawings in colour pencils or felt-point pens (13%).

The creative assignment for grade 11 students (17 y/o) where the pupils were asked to create a draft for a performance idea consisting of three sketches in a freely chosen technique, the results are very different. The drawings are made in a linear technique by hand or computer graphics: see figure 3 and 4.

18% of the students decide to make a colourful tonal drawing. These works, made in felt-point pen or colour pencils can be of different artistic performance level – from elaborated



Figure 3: 11th grade schoolgirl. *Rabbit Action*. 2018.

comics to simplistic and naive drafts. Only 5% of the submitted works are made in computer graphics technique. It is however more difficult to assess these works – if the drawing is very professional, it can be suspected to be copied from another artwork and adapted to the requirements of the assignment.

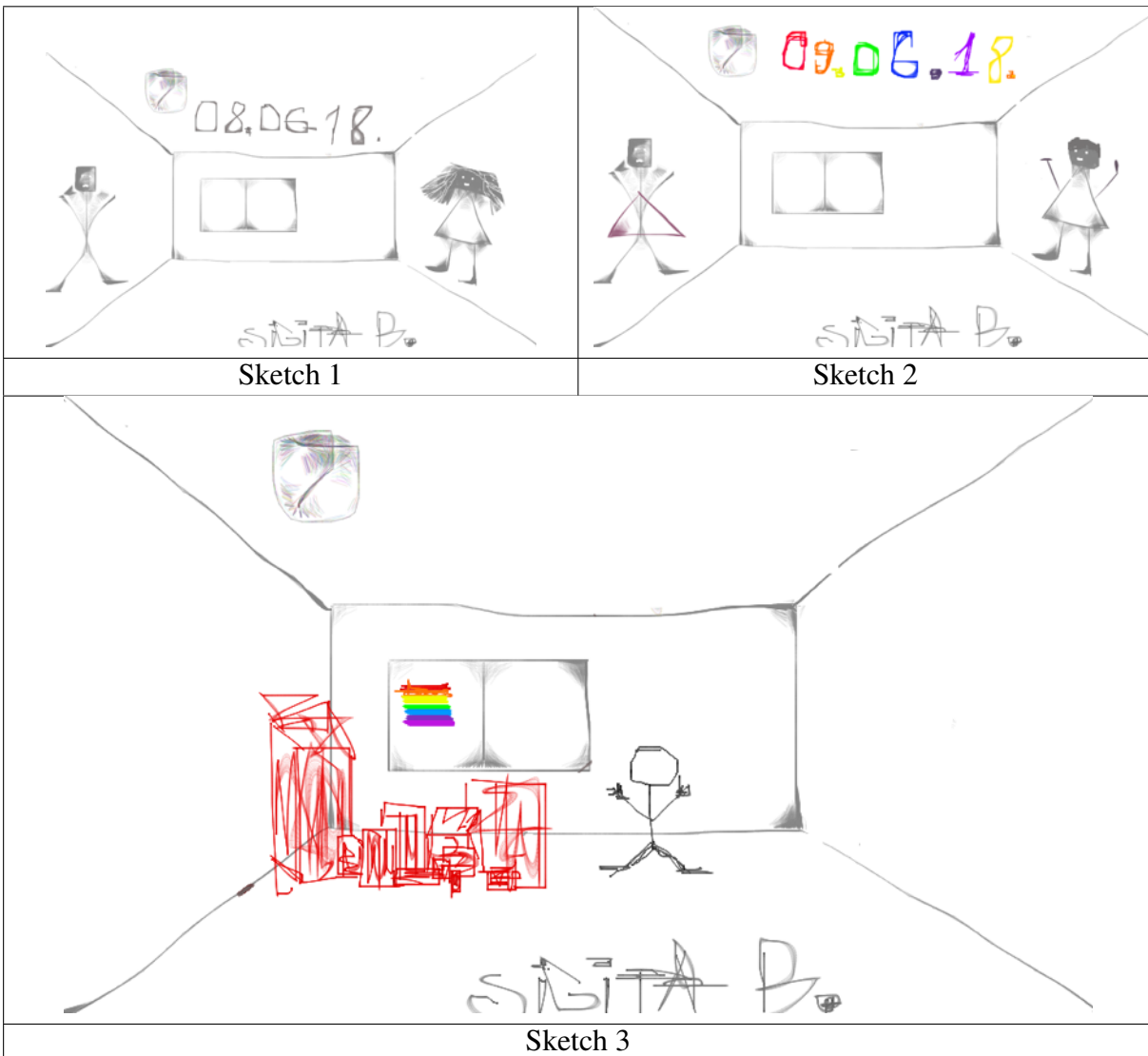


Figure 4: 11th grade schoolgirl. *One Day*. 2018.

The next most popular technique is photography (27%). While performing the task, the students arrange their photographs as idea drafts for already set stories, for instance, they arrange objects in still life compositions or, most often, they take photographs of themselves and their friends in diverse environments according to the given assignment. The creation of a tonal and coloured collage (including a photo collage) requires much more responsibility, as the pupil has to invest more time, knowledge and skills in order to design the plot and embody it (see figure

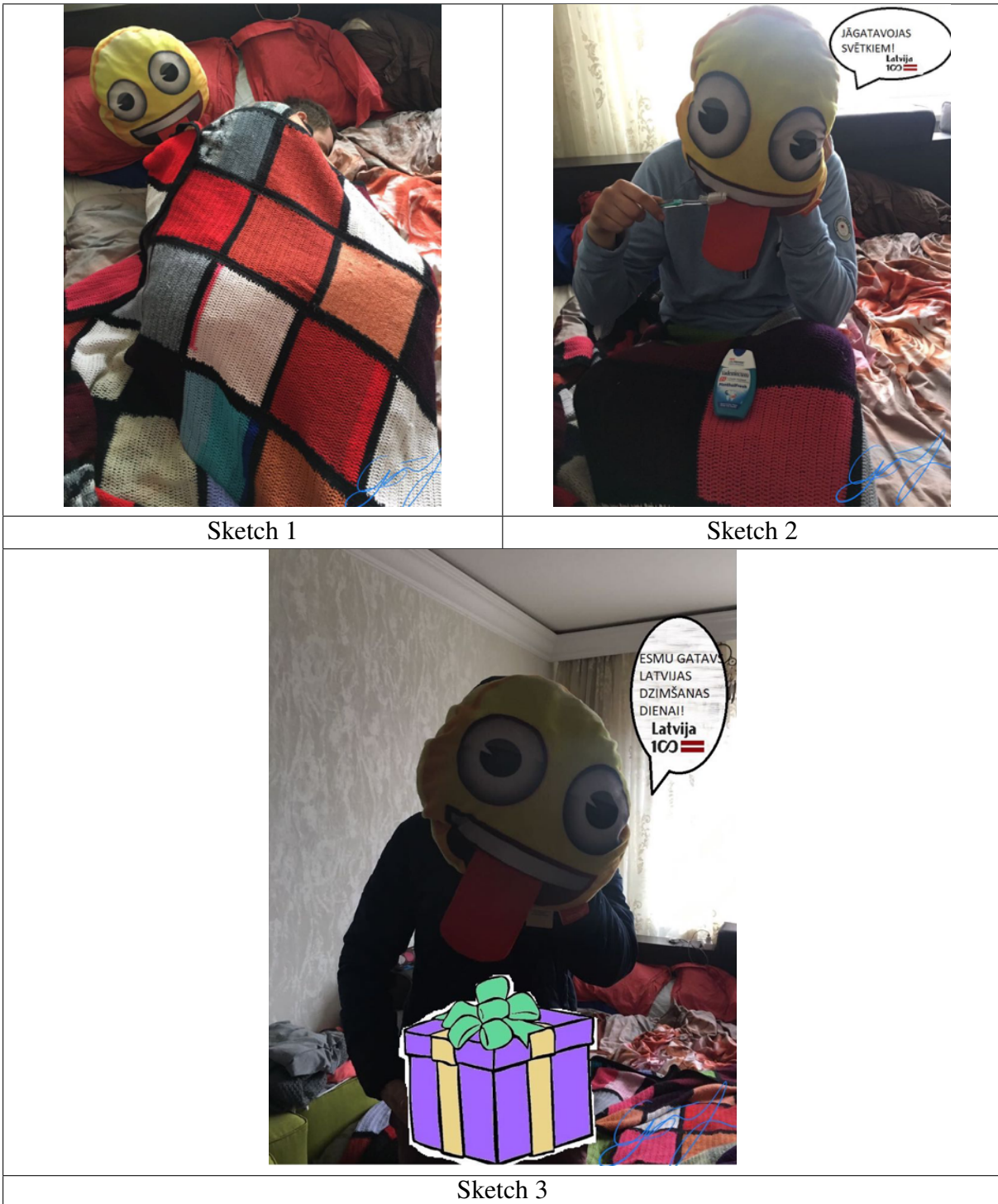


Figure 5: 11th grade student. *I am ready for the National Day of Latvia!* 2018.

5). The analysis of these works allows also to talk about chiaroscuro or the position of the source of light, as well as other specifics of photography.

The requirements for creative assignments were higher before, thus the decision has been made to lessen them, for example, painting has been replaced by drawing. It has borne fruit as more pupils decide to do creative assignments. If for this test only 8% of the students have not completed the creative assignment then before it was much greater number, about one third. The assignment for testing painting skills has been provided for the final study grade.

The most proactive students create plastic compositions in clay and add the photos of those to the test – these images work as separate animation shots that together form a story (see figure 6).



Figure 6: 11th grade schoolgirl. *Song*. 2018.

The biggest surprise, are the cases when students are ready to show their animations or video films, often on complex subjects such as the book by Juris Rubenis “Her and Him. Love. Sex” – in this case the dispute between spiritual leaders of the Lutheran Church of Latvia Janis Vanags (whose name means a hawk in Latvian) and the priest Juris Rubenis (whose name means grouse) after the book has been published has been depicted. The student has made a visually



expressive animation referring to the “bird dispute” and the book that has caused it (see figure 7) with very simple means of visual expression- line, silhouette, tonal contrast and texture as well as 15 – 16 photoshots creating a moving animation.



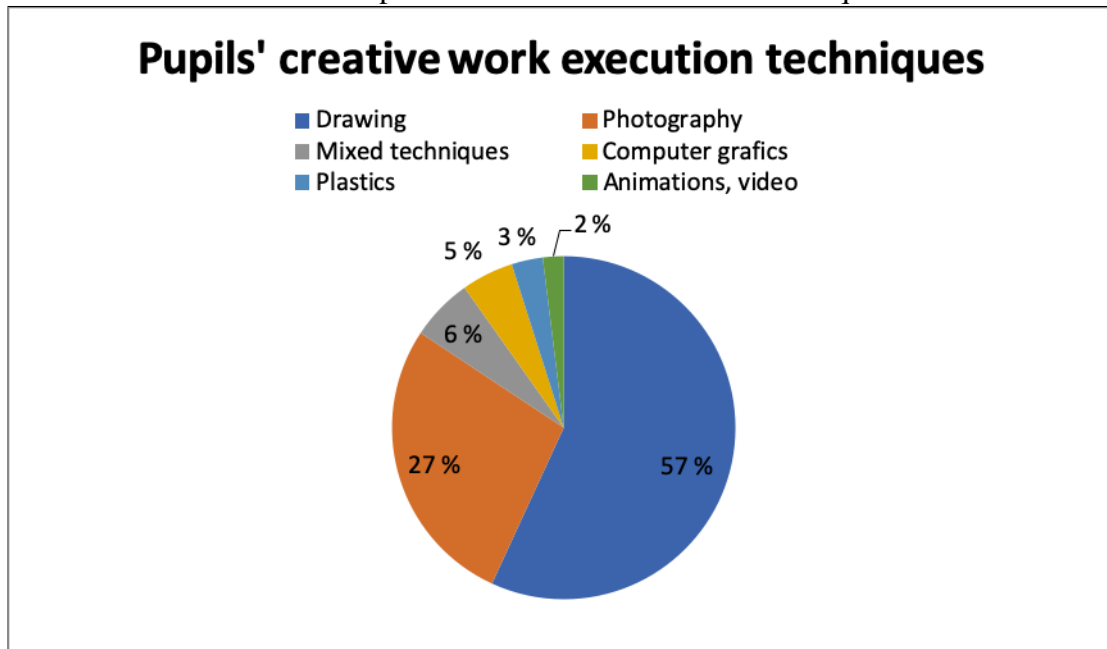
Figure 7: 11th grade schoolgirl. *Rubenis. Book. Vanags. Church.* 2018. Animation

## Conclusions

At the end I would like to provide a diagram on the techniques applied by the pupils (table 1). As it has already been mentioned, mostly the students prefer linear drawings (31%), thus the most popular means of visual expression is line, followed by tonality (13%) and colour (13%). Photography is often used, thus chiaroscuro, plain, texture and composition are of great importance too.

Can there be observed any influence from the performances by Joseph Boys and Marina Abramovich? We shall conclude that there are not much direct visual evidence. Separate methods are applied, for example “silence” as an audial means of expression in the first part of the schoolgirls work in Figure 6, influenced by Marina Abramovich in *The Artist is Present*. Similarly, right after most actual cultural events the students have chosen to tackle issues of

Table 1: Pupils' creative work execution techniques



environmental protection and ecology, following the inspiration by Joseph Boys. Figure 5 by student deals with this staged state of calmness in its first episode, alike to Boys.

To conclude, students of Visual Arts as proven by the research conducted at Riga Distance Secondary Education School possess interdisciplinary knowledge and skills. Besides influences can be observed from other learning subjects such as, for instance, postmodern practices, feminism, multiculturalism, community and social values, semiotics represented by simple sign and symbol appliance, also deconstruction as addressed by art pedagogues *Michael Day* and *Al Hurwitz* in their methodology material *Children and Their Art*. Despite mastering art practices under difficult conditions, the pupils of Riga Distance Secondary Education School are able to analyse, communicate, create, describe, perceive, draft, get an insight, foresee, enjoy ethically, experimentate, interpret, consider, present, apply and assess – in other words, they can prove possessing the competency of visual literacy consisting of the abilities of producing and responding, just like it is provided at the EU reference framework for key competences for

lifelong learning.

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