

Instagram Filters: The New Ways to Create Visual Art

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Abstract

Instagram filter is a new feature on Instagram that is unique and diverse. Instagram becomes more fun with the existence of this feature since most of them are made by third party creators. A moment life shared for a limited time (24 hours) via Instagram Stories becomes more interesting. The development of this filter has many uses, not only some consider as makeup to beautify their face, but also as utilities with a wide range of functions such as distorting images, changing colors, pasting animations, and conducting games/quiz, thus creating a space for user interaction. The artistic power and interaction of the filters create fascinating ideas to create visual art. Filters do not stop at an entertainment, but can also help sharpen the narrative, for example, through visuals. Therefore, filters on Instagram can be used to assist in the process of making visual art and video art. Artwork exploration and analysis of works of art was the method for the present study to figure out how aesthetics and narrative are present in artwork creation facilitated by Instagram filters. This practice-led study has become an exploration of new media art that is conceptual and instant.

Keywords: *instagram filter, art exploration, visual art*

INTRODUCTION

The methods of creating visual arts are increasingly diverse, one of which is by utilizing filter technology in the Instagram application. Instagram is a social media platform that became popular in 2014 in Indonesia. Its main function is as a platform for sharing photos. Elisa Serafinelli stated that, Instagram users easily attract the interest of photography enthusiasts. After its release, this application began to be in demand. Users felt "appreciated" especially when receiving social interactions such as likes and positive comments on their photos (2018: 56-57). Nevertheless, along with its development, Instagram added many features, one of which can be used as an idea or method to create visual art.

Instagram filters are an interesting feature because they could change visuals. Of the many features, the presence of the Instagram feature is essential because now what users want to share becomes more fun. This is because the output generated from the use of filters can beautify visuals (e.g., make over), add theme to visuals (e.g., color grading), and distort visuals (e.g., mirror images), to interactive power between filters and users (e.g., quizzes, games). Hence, users are not hesitant in choosing and using available filters for their virtual world or social media needs.

Instagram itself has the characteristics to create a very strong show-off culture. This relates to the relationship between social media and its users. Stijn Ossevoort in his research on product design development stated that in the past the main purpose of designers was to create an object. Today designer's role includes, enhancing and building connection between the consumer and the product (2008: 396). What Ossevoort said is true because today Instagram has many features including filters. These filters are present according to the culture on Instagram, namely creating images. This is one of the actual forms of the relationship between the application and its users.

The presence of filters and other features such as Instagram Stories and Reels create an instant and interactive aesthetic production movement. According to Instagram, the Reels feature refers to the ability to record and edit 15-second multi-clip videos with audio, effects, and other creative tools. Users can share Reels with followers on feeds (homepage). If the user has a public account, the Reels can be watched by all Instagram users. Reels is an effort to explore new content. This way, users could become a global content creator. In short, Reels has a complex feature but easy to use.

Filters and Reels have become a digital phenomenon. For artists, in particular, it can be a new exploration in art. For instance, one of the new media artworks is an installation of a plasma screen with a sensor. When one stands in front of the plasma screen, one's body will be processed into a new visual form with the help of sensors and programs. Technically, there is no significant difference between the plasma screen and filters on Instagram. However, the difference is that filter is not an installation. Instead, it is a mobile tool in the form of application on a smartphone. The emergence of filters on Instagram allows artists to be more creative. They are not limited to having to make their own installations because the installation is already in their hands.

From this idea, even artists do not need a way to program (if the artist just wants to use filters) the filters that exist on Instagram. Artists can easily use it to create

visuals with the help of smartphone cameras and Instagram filters. Due to many characteristics of filters, the artists can freely use which one to help them create a visual work. Artists only need to understand how Instagram filters work so that the work can be conceptual, abstract, and in other visual forms.

Moreover, in its use, an artist can respond with certain motions based on the selected filter. Sometimes funny to strange gestures are created to make a visual appeal as a medium of expression. Therefore, this filter is not only limited to visual works, but also the movements given become the visual touch itself.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

In the experiment and analysis of how Instagram filters become one of the methods for visual production in visual arts, practice-led research method is employed to investigate visual aesthetic elements in the use of Instagram filters. Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean stated,

“The term practice-led research and its affiliates (practice-based research, practice as research) are employed to make two arguments about practice which are often overlapping and interlinked: first, as just indicated, that creative work in itself is a form of research and generates detectable research outputs; secondly, to suggest that creative practice – the training and specialized knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art – can lead to specialized [*sic*] research insights which can then be generalized and written up as research. (2009: 5).”

From this explanation, exploration, and experimentation in making works of art becomes a search to find the relationship between art practice and science. The findings in practice become references on theories to conduct analysis. The results of the analysis can be used to build an argument that Instagram filters can be a way to create visual art, in this case, video art.

In the process of creating visual art, two video art pieces have been created using different filters.

1. Pandemic by Rizal Sofyan

This video artwork is about psychedelic art. Robert E. L. Masters and Jean Houston describe psychedelic art as artwork that depicts psychedelic experiences (hallucinations), causes psychedelic experiences, or at least changes consciousness to cause intoxication (1968: 18). Robert and Jean attempt to explain that the phenomenon of psychedelic art in society is closely related to the culture of drug use. Therefore, the elements of art created are closely related to drug culture.



Figure 1. Psychedelic Art by Arlene Sklar-Weinsteins. *Between Heaven and Hell-II*. Assemblage and acrylic on wood relief. 36x50". 1966. Source: Robert E. L. Masters & Jean Houston. 1968. *Psychedelic Art*. Grove Press: USA. Pg. 76.

This form was conceived because the artist was inspired when he saw some examples of videos using *Mirror* filter. This work talks about the heady problems of the COVID-19 pandemic, full of polemics on policies in handling the pandemic, the spread of the virus, death, and betrayal. Meanwhile, the filter selection used is the authentic from Instagram. The authentic painting will be combined with the *Mirror* filter to create a video art. This work will be made in three stages, namely:

- a. Sketch
Arranging the main pictures of the painting on A5 paper and then painting is conducted on 40x40 cm paper.
- b. Visual work
Execution of the painting based on the sketch that has been made. At this stage, adjustments are also made to both visual material and ideas that can arise during painting. And finally, it is colored based on rules of colors in psychedelic artworks which tend to be flashy and bright.
- c. Filming video art
After the painting is finished, then experiment on filter and painting is carried out. With the help of the Instagram Reels feature and taking pictures using cinematic techniques on camera movements such as tilting, moving, close-ups, and other techniques to produce visual.

Artists use the camera on a smartphone as a tool to convert physical material to digital. While filters are editing tools, this process typically involves editing software. But here users only rely on Instagram features such as filters and Instagram Reels. In the final process, the artwork is converted into digital art output in the form of video art.

Instagram Reels is a feature that can be used to create Instagram Story or Feeds. In Reels function, users can add background music, brief video, countdown, filters, and more. In this experiment, the features used are countdown, a selection of *Mirror* filters, and background music entitled *Trippy* by Malave Music to add to the psychedelic atmosphere.

2. Failed Paradise by Riyanti Wisnu Setyorini Putri

This video artwork uses the chroma key technique. Chroma key technique is one of the techniques in the process of making videos or images where the subject to be photographed stands in front of a background with a single color, or a slight array of colors. The colors that are usually used are green or blue since these colors are considered to be at least similar to skin color. The green or blue portion of the background is then replaced with another image throughout the editing process where two different videos are combined into one. According to Jeff Foster,

“It was started by Walt Disney who combined images made from ink into a film that could move realistically. From there, filmmakers tried to bring the real world and the fantasy world together (2010: 3).”

And today the use of the chroma key has been widely used in films, both made in Hollywood and local-made. This is done typically to create or imitate a visual effect such as a film set.

Artists begin to see the current situation where limited access to travel causes a number of cancelled and failed plans. The desire to travel is finally channeled through the use of smartphones. *Reveal Background* filter was then released in the form of a green screen that allows users to change and customize their background. The artist added a homemade video art as a background for the artist herself by which she reacted to later with a selfie video. This work was made through two stages, they are:

a. Background video making

The artist creates a tropical forest-themed video with plastic plant properties. After taking pictures, then she went on by editing sound effects and picture effects.

b. The use of *Reveal Background* filter (green screen)

The artist uploaded the video that has been created and add the filter on it. The artist then reacted to the video by walking around the forest, and the shot transition changes where she was sucked into a hole.

This filter allows users to respond to the virtual space formed by the video. The users are invited to make changes to the background that will appear. Gestures are also presented as a form of response to the space formed by the background. Additionally, expressions will also adjust how the background is generated. Finally, a virtual walk experience is offered without the need for users to travel outside.

FINDINGS

1. Pandemic by Rizal Sofyan

Functionally, the *Mirror* filter can change images by duplication and mirror image techniques. The artist experimented on objects to see visual productions using a camera. He tried on objects in the bedroom such as mattresses, cupboards, windows, bookshelves, and others. The result is quite impressive because the images are averagely distorted that they no longer represent a factual image. The window is no longer in the form of a window, the sheet is no longer in the form of a sheet, and so on. Therefore, a new form is born from an existing form without changing its original form in the real world. It is an ability to manipulate visuals into the screen. It is a technique typically found in photo editing and visual effect applications.

In this work, the artist intends to create a work that talks about the heady problems of the COVID-19 pandemic, full of policy polemics, the spread of the virus, death, and betrayal. The shape and style selected are psychedelic art made in three stages:

a. Sketch

Mapping out the layout of the symbols and trying to explore visual possibilities obtained when using *Mirror* filters. The visuals to be presented in the painting in the next stage are the Corona virus mandala pattern which vary in size, field mode, line mode, peacock head, rainbow, Among Us game characters, shooting stars, and the writing of *Innalillahi Wainnalillahi Rojiun*.

b. Visual work

The visual work was conducted on 40x40 cm paper board using poster paint. Some adjustments were made. The peacock head was removed because it occupied too much space and interfered with the curve. Shooting stars were

left out and Among Us characters were preferred to be added instead. The writing of *Innalillahi Wainnalillahi Rojiun* was too long, hence it was changed to RIP. Finally, the term abbreviation of government's policy regarding pandemic lockdown was added.

c. Filming video art

Circular tilting from top to bottom was originally intended to be involved in the concept of capturing images. However, many visual forms produced needs specific method to convey the narration because the visuals were piled up. The artist felt that moving pictures do not really say anything about the narration. As a result, the moving technique on the camera is employed. The results were more appropriate as expected in discussing the pandemic problem narrative.

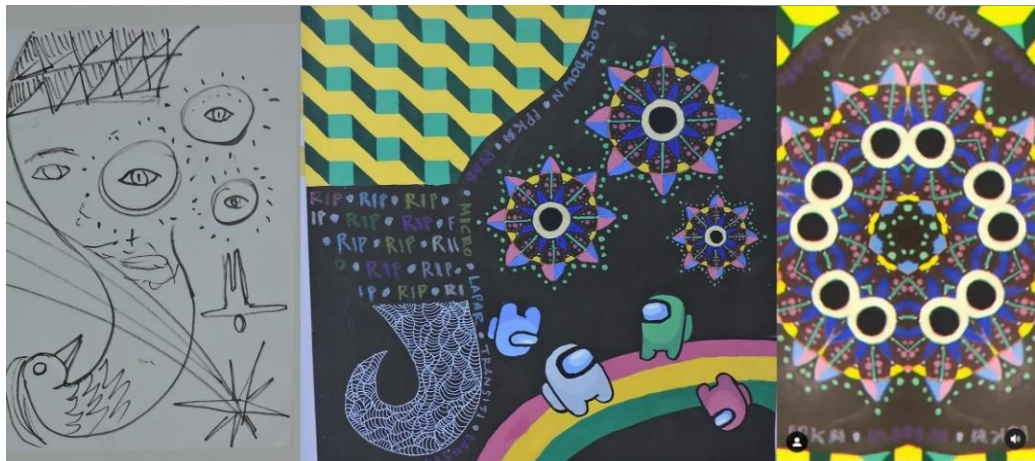


Figure 2. Creative process of Pandemic (from left to right)
Source: Personal Documents (July 29th, 2021)

After the video art was finished, there were several findings regarding the characteristics and functions of *Mirror* filter. The following are the findings from the result of using *Mirror* filter:

a. Duplication

Duplication is the first thing to look at when trying this filter. The visual object is duplicated to an existing field on the screen. Visual duplication is mirroring the image and fills space on the smartphone screen. There are six types of *Mirror* filters that can be used. They are (1) *Two Mirrors*, (2) *Three Mirrors*, (3) *Four Mirrors*, (4) *Six Mirrors*, (5) *Multiple Horizontal Mirrors*, and (6) *Multiple Box Mirrors*. For *Two Mirrors*, *Multiple Horizontal Mirrors*, and *Multiple Box Mirrors*, the visual duplication is linear-horizontal. In contrast, for *Three Mirrors*, *Four Mirrors*, and *Six Mirrors*, the visual duplication is circular.

In *Pandemic*, the artist incorporated *Six Mirror* because there were more visual productions duplicated to create a psychedelic feel. The visual result that worked included duplicating images of line and field modes, writing of RIP, and Corona virus patterns. The psychedelic nuance was created by the visual duplication of the painting. The result was a hypnotizing visual. Striking colors also support the psychedelic identity of this artwork.

The expected results were found on the visuals of Corona virus. The artist only drew three images but the characteristics of the duplication in the filter made the visuals seem more than the actual objects, especially when it was combined with camera movement by which the movement and duplication occurred to create beauty.



Figure 3. Various Mirror Filter: (1) Two Mirror, (2) Three Mirror, (3) Four Mirror, (4) Six Mirror, (5) Multiple Horizontal Mirror, and (6) Multiple Box Mirror.
Source: Personal Documents (July 29th, 2021)

b. Randomization

This random visual phenomenon is an interesting finding to elicit desires to explore different sides and parts of the painting. Sometimes, as an artist, I never thought that such a form could be created from a visual distortion of an object. Trying to highlight one area can create visual ideas. Therefore, exploration is done on each image in the painting and adjusted to which one is suitable to create a psychedelic

art which conveys a narrative of the problematic pandemic. The selected findings are the line mode, which is in the shape of DNA, the circular RIP writing symbolizes widespread grief during the pandemic, and eventually the field mode in the shape of a wall or a labyrinth which symbolizes confusion and isolation.

I did not think about these findings before. The depiction is the result of exploration from zooming, moving, and tilting the camera from side to side. Thus, I came across such image production as a result from *Mirror* filter exploration. Due to the absence of a definite storyboard and looking at this random visual phenomenon, I took advantage of it to absorb the text of each random visual and decided to select it as part of the video art.

2. Failed Paradise by Riyanti Wisnu Setyorini Putri

The *Reveal Background* filter available on Instagram (for iOS only) is a filter that simplifies the process of the chroma key technique without the need for a long editing process such as in filmmaking. The green screen background prepared allows the artist to only add a photo or video that will be presented as a background, without the long editing process.

In this work, the artist attempts to present a background video of a tropical forest as a form of paradise or vacation, but distortions are made by the effect to illustrate that it is something unreal. The movements presented are representation of a failed paradise before sinking back into the real world afterwards. The stages of work presented by the artist are as follows:

a. Creation of video background

It starts with brainstorming about the object to be recorded. Then selecting plastic plants as a form of false nature. Next, recording the details of these plants as if they were in a forest. Then, a short editing process adds distortion effects amplifying that what is recorded is something unreal.

b. The use of *Reveal Background* filter (Green Screen)

The video was uploaded with the *Reveal Background* filter. The artist recorded it in the form of a selfie, then tried to respond with gestures and expressions. Expressions such as confusion, joy, and surprise were intended to represent a journey that has not been done for a long time. It turned out that what is presented in the background are all unreal and sinking (to the real world).



Figure 4. Creative process of Failed Paradise (from left to right)
Source: Personal documents (August 22nd, 2021)

What has been found in the use of *Reveal Background* filter is that this work does not only become a visual presentation, but also has performativity value in it where the responses manifested into a form of one's sensitivity to a certain space and resulted in gestures adapting to the existing background. This is also because this filter does require the presence of a subject to activate.

DISCUSSION

Functionally, filters have interactive elements with the users. Moreover, the filters built-in on Instagram and can be used via smartphones. Users can interact more freely because it can be grasped by the hand compared to other works of art such as those in the form of installations. Karen Cham argues,

“The media based on the aesthetic approach of interactive art is a combination of perspectives from visual culture with the art-historical concept of the medium. Thus, it is able to capture different manifestations of the same material based on certain social contexts (2009: 20).”

Suffice to say that this filter phenomenon is not only a product of art, but rather a cultural response in-between the user and the filter.

In terms of visual production, it seems that filters are not inferior to new media art that employs cameras or sensors as part of material processing techniques. Filters are able to cover it all. The camera takes a picture and records an image while the filter works to manipulate the captured image.

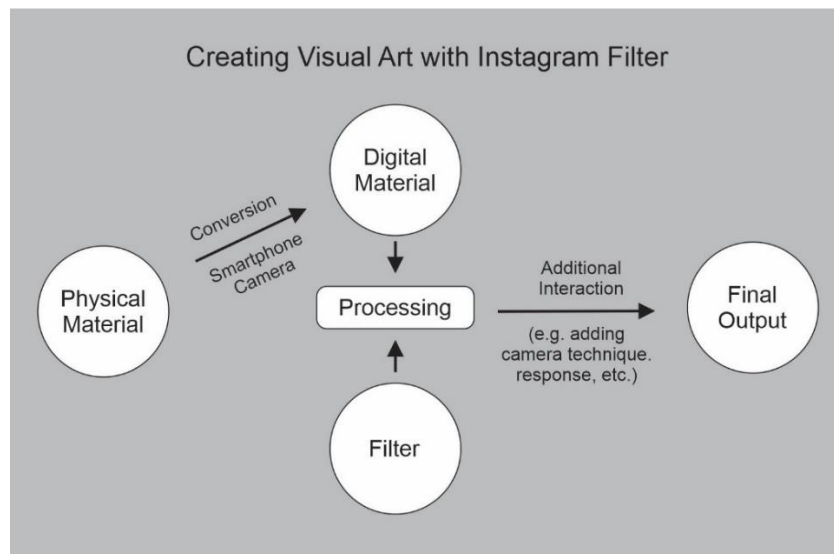


Figure 5. The Chart "Creating Visual Art with Instagram Filter"
Source: Personal Documents (August 27th, 2021).

In the process above, there is a material conversion. Visuals from works that involve physical materials (e.g., paintings made of canvas and paint) are converted into digital materials (e.g., photo or video files). Changes in material and medium indicate a new discovery in making visual art. Mark B. N. Hansen argues that this conversion is a rediscovery of a medium that may follow the general view of art that commonly deals with volume. However, this new medium cannot be reduced to a physical form (2004: 22).

These two works employed the concept of direct or instant conversion. Technically, it involves the use of camera and the Instagram application. The filter becomes a preset where it had set how the image captured by the camera will be visually changed. Hence, users do not need any additional software to do post-production because everything is already available on the Instagram application. This technology is easy to use because filters and Reels are forms of simplified editing work.

In the *Mirror* filter, with the characteristics of duplication and randomization, the artists can manipulate their own painting into a new form. Although sometimes it is necessary build a predetermined conceptual framework to be able to translate the visuals created from the *Mirror* filter, these random circumstances can also generate new ideas. Therefore, the emphasis on this filter exploration departs from conceptual matters.

In the *Reveal Background* filter which has the function of combining two videos, the artist must prepare a video or photo as the background that will be used in the filter. This video or photo is made based on the concept that will be realized by the artist. After that, the subject takes a selfie or looks for living objects that can be caught by the camera sensor. Then, the artist adjusts themselves to the background. From this, there is room for interaction which is the key to using this filter.

Perhaps the extreme thing that can be done is that an artist only needs an idea and a smartphone to create a visual art. In the first experiment involving a *Mirror* filter, the experiment was carried out by highlighting random objects. Similarly, in the *Reveal Background* filter, a professional video editing application is unnecessary. The visual result is considered interesting, especially if the physical materials have various colors and shapes. Therefore, the artists can emphasize on the idea and concept of the work and translate them through work with Instagram filter. Karen Cham expressed her opinion to show the aesthetic phenomenon of new media art as follows,

“The old Art History’s idea of an aesthetic anchored in the object is invariably tied to practice, to process, to materials. However, in a postmodern culture the medium is no longer a quality of the object. There is no object, no original, no presence in space or time, only mediation. (2009: 19).”

Visual artwork using this filter is not too different from other conceptual art. Nothing is original because the materials used are what they are. This phenomenon is also related closely to *readymade* artworks. Nonetheless, with filters involved, the materials are distorted, manipulated, colored, and transformed in such a way as to become a new visual production of the original objects.

It is possible that filters can be a part of artwork. The concept is similar to an Augmented Reality (AR) technology which has a function to display visuals when the camera highlights the artwork. The difference relies on that filter is a way to respond to artwork that involves physical materials. For example, artists may create two types of works, the first one is physical art and the second one is digital art. For the digital one, the artists submit their results through the use of filters by visitors.

Furthermore, it also needs to be noted that the filter feature is not only available on Instagram. Other applications such as *TikTok*, *Snapchat*, and others also have this feature. Moreover, various filter provided are equally diverse. The present study is an example of the use of filters on Instagram since each of the other applications has

different methods in using them. Instagram was selected because of the popularity that it has.

CONCLUSION

Filters are indeed popular as a feature on Instagram. This is because filters are practical to use, have a variety of choices, and are up to date. Therefore, users creating content are inseparable from the use of filters. However, its presence is not only used for content in general. Instead, the function and uniqueness of the filter itself can be used to create new visuals, new ideas, and new ways to enjoy art.

Creating visual art using filters involves material conversion work. With the help of smartphone cameras, physical materials are converted into digital materials. Filters serve to convert digital material into a new visual. Artists can develop their ideas and concepts during the process of using filters. Furthermore, additional interactions can be created to produce the desired visuals. For example, using cinematographic techniques, such as moving, tilting, and zooming or incorporating living creature responses with these filters.

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