

# How Technology has been utilized in artistic expression in the 20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century: The case study of Techspressionism

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# Abstract

This dissertation was written as part of the MA in Art Law and Arts Management at the International Hellenic University. The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the trajectory of the intersection of art and technology over the course of time. The research below begins with enunciating the important and pivotal role tools and materials possess in the process of art making. I, conventionally, pinpoint the shift in art practice with the invention of the Daguerreotype. Photography signalized the entrance of the Machine Age in the art space which altered the perception of artworks, revolutionized art making and transformed the way people approached art. The artist's toolbox was causing internal rift within the art world, questioning the status and value of works of art while it was also able to culturally affect communication within the societal structure. The immersion of technologies in the cultural landscape seemed to happen slowly and gradually but simultaneously all at once since they affected all aspects of society and transformed the very way people received and engaged with information.

The incorporation of technology in art has always been a controversial matter, traditional aesthetic principles seemed to be challenged, while some artist groups adapted quickly and made the effort to embrace the new medium, others rejected the new technological apparatus and everything it represented. Art movements have allowed us to perceive how artists employ certain tools and materials to aid them in their artistic expression and materialize their visions. With digital technology it becomes evident that its utilization goes beyond the point of offering aid to bring a creation to life, digital mechanisms influence and shape the very nature of the work from its genesis to its final presentation. To further understand this notion the phenomenon of digital art is studied through the guise of Techspressionism. This dissertation aims to offer an introduction to this contemporary art movement and further investigate the effects of digital technologies in art making and how it is encapsulated within the actual artworks.

Keywords: Techspressionism, technology, expressionism, digital technology, computer art

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#### Preface

The work presented has been a six month long journey, during which I had the pleasure to delve deeper than I ever thought I could, into the art world and make acquaintances with numerous artists to whom I owe the outcome of this research.

During my undergraduate studies in History and Ethnology I realized my interest and fascination in art history. Being able to dissect works of art, analyze them for their societal nuances, correlate them to historical events and studying the sociopolitical conditions in which art movements emerged from proved to be an academic field that I wished to involve myself in. Conducting in-depth academic research on a contemporary art movement allowed me to engage actively with all the aspects of art history that facilitated my appreciation for this field of study. Despite the initial intimidation, as Techspressionism had not been documented in a scholarly context and I was one of the first people to engage with the movement in that manner, it has been an opportunity for me to both learn but also test my abilities as an aspiring art historian. I hope for this dissertation to be a stepping stone, heading towards further academic research both on the movement itself but also on the integration of art and digital technology.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Themis Veleni who proposed I conduct my dissertation on Techspressionism, which proved to be an invaluable experience for me. It was actually during her class "Digitality in the Arts" that my intrigue in digital technologies and how they can be incorporated into the art practice originated. Her extensive knowledge and expertise has been both inspiring and eye-opening to me.

I would also like to thank the people that made this dissertation possible, the group of Techspressionism artists that not only made time for me during multiple meetings held on Zoom and various mail communications but also trusted me to engage with their community and present their thoughts and opinions in this research.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my parents and my friends who supported me throughout this journey, I appreciate them dearly.

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"Art may be a means for preparing man for physical and mental changes which he will in time make upon himself.<sup>1</sup>"-Jack Burnham

#### Introduction

Technology has always been associated with art and artistic expression. From using means such as oil paint to what today we call digital media, technology has been incorporated and integrated in the artistic process in order to bring a creation to life. It would be reductant to limit the term technology to just digital media and computational practices since the term encompasses various processes, methods and materials that are used to materialize an artistic concept. From this point of view, the history of art and technology would be a vast field of study that would require an extensive research into a wide range of art movements and trends to properly introduce the technical tools and materials that allowed artists of each era to differentiate themselves from those that came before them.

Artists were always eager to not only adapt to arising forms of expressions and art making but fully embrace new tools and techniques that were the product of innovation and experimentation in, often times, fields that do not directly correlate with art. Each tool is a result of its epoch, different tools offer different possibilities, pose new challenges and opportunities. The process of dissemination is what unlocks the full potential for each tool and what will eventually lead to the creation of artworks that have traces of the usage of such tools that carved their production. It is, therefore, impossible to separate those two notions since the relationship they have fostered is entwined. As new tools and techniques are discovered, artists develop their skills in asserting their will and vision on the new systems of operation. They do not just adapt to the rising conditions but aim to be a step ahead, to delve into their artistic expression and bring forward results that were never thought of before and surpass

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Jack Burnham, Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century (New York: George Braziller, 1973), 373.

the mere functional use of the tools and the initial purpose these innovative technologies were developed for.

Perhaps, the most controversial invention was that of photography. In 1839 Louis Daguerre introduced the Daguerreotype, an invention that allowed for images to be engraved on silver coated copper plates that were given a surface coating of iodine vapour. Those plates were later exposed in the camera, the image was developed over heated mercury and fixed in a solution of common salt.<sup>2</sup> While its predecessor, camera obscura<sup>3</sup> was widely used by artists to observe nature with the help of natural light passing through the lens and capturing the image of nature onto transparent paper, which allowed tracing for accurate and precise representation, photography received mixed reactions.

At first, it was embraced as an innovation, it was understood that photography was going to alter distribution and reproduction<sup>4</sup> entirely and this was a promising development for society as a whole. Many artists realized early on the aid that photography could offer them since they could explore reality in a whole different way. Photography produces permanent, stable moments of a past time, unchanging and immovable, artists could use that as a tool for their study of nature and their surrounding environments the same way camera obscura was used for centuries. Furthermore, it was predicted the photograph would release artists from portraiture, they could focus on more noble causes and explore philosophic, moral and poetic aesthetics<sup>5</sup> without being limited by what the general public wanted them to provide.

Meanwhile, a decade later, in the art world, its reception would be approached with cation and distain by many. Photography affected cultural communication<sup>6</sup>,still images of visible reality presented everything that came into opposition with the artistic principals during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that were very much based on aesthetic values

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Photographic Processes, V&A Victoria and Albert Museum, last accessed January 6, 2023 https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/photographic-processes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Lovejoy, Margot.. Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age (New York, Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2005) p.22

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid.,25

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Brown, Milton W. "The History of Photography as Art History." *Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (1971): 31–36. https://doi.org/10.2307/775631

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, Ma. and London: MIT Press, 2001.p43.

which were shaped during the Renaissance.<sup>7</sup> Photography was associated with the Machine Age, its very nature challenged traditional ways of painting and deemed naturalism without use, depicting a direct copy of nature now only took a few minutes to develop and later on a few seconds. Photography was not just a mere tool but it was a medium that was shaping and altering the perception of existing reality.

Mimesis once belonged to the painter<sup>8</sup>, the skillful way one could capture nature and apply it on the canvas determined the very value of the painting, with photography this changed. The perfect perception was now achievable in a matter of minutes, photography democratized art and the image, everyone that could own the equipment could replicate reality, the depiction of the real was not limited amongst elite art circles but became accessible and easily attainable. Middle class and lower class citizens were able to acquire portraits for a relatively affordable price and artists realized that while they were freed from this low repute task, it also meant loss of sustainable income.<sup>9</sup> It was theorized then, that man and the machine were incompatible, that photography signalized the coming of the industrial revolution, the debasement of hand skill and the glorification of the motor. Overall, it was felt that this shortcut of imitating reality removes purpose from the painter and diminishes the value of the final product.<sup>10</sup>

Walter Benjamin in the Artwork in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction<sup>11</sup> raised the issue of the aura that surrounds each artwork and how that aura is essentially being taken away by the reproducibility that is possible with mechanical means. To further explain, what he meant was that once an original piece is taken away from its secluded place it loses part of its authenticity and original magic that derived from its initial placement.<sup>12</sup> The artwork gains new meaning and associations when it is placed in books, postcards, advertisements etc. As the context changes so does the artwork as it escapes its initial reason of being, it is no longer inaccessible or allowed for limited viewing in temples or churches, the artwork gains new value and meaning. Depending

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Lovejoy, Digital currents,22

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup>.Gatti, Andrew. "Critical Reception of Photography". Andrew Gatti Photography. November 3 2015. Accessed January 6 ,2024. https://www.andrewgattiphotography.com/critical-reception-of-photography <sup>9</sup> Brown, "The History of Photography as Art History"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Lovejoy, Digital Currents, 22-25

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Brown, "The History of Photography as Art History"

the context in which is shown, it becomes familiarized within the public and internalized by culture<sup>13</sup>, as a result the cultural realm expands, enhances and becomes available to the wider public<sup>14</sup>, art has societal value and functional use, it cannot exist in a vacuum.

This rapid progression towards the Machine Age leads to two types of artist groups. The ones that refuse to let go of their traditional tools and adapt to innovations of a new era even though they can sense that the tide is turning and a new age is approaching that proposes new challenges and opportunities that will demand their adjustment. The aforementioned group includes the Cubists, the Fauves and the Postimpressionists.<sup>15</sup>On the other hand, this development could not but trigger the curiosity of Constructivists, Futurists and Dadaists who based their aesthetic around the machine and used the new medium as the message in their work. Constructivists and Futurists eagerly embraced the upcoming change, seeing a promising future in the Machine Age that would unlock an abundance of opportunities both for artists and society as a whole. Conversely, Dadaists and Surrealists used machine parts and photomontage as a way to impose cultural critique on the machine<sup>16</sup>, the commodification of art and the dehumanization industrialization would inevitably bring as it posed a threat to the hand skills of the artist and to all established values in the art market regarding the precision and meticulous execution that relies on the artist's craftsmanship.

Those two groups represent the extremes of the same spectrum, while Dadaists and surrealists take a negative approach towards the emerging technology and use it in their art as a cautionary tale to warn about the impending collapse of the social structure, constructivists and futurists use photomechanical tools to reproduce and distribute their work, they believed that the future lies in the progression of science and technology<sup>17</sup> and that becomes apparent through their works where the idealization of the machine successfully delivers this sentiment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Lovejoy, "Cultural currents", 23

<sup>14</sup> Ibid,.23

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Ibid.,36

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid,. 36

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Ibid..38

All this is to say that the groundwork for digital media does not start in the 20<sup>th</sup> century but there has been a steady and frankly nonlinear advancement towards the digital technologies that we are in possession of today.

Along with the Daguerreotype another invention was growing in parallel that laid the basis for computational technology and that was the Analytical Engine. Introduced by Charles Baggage in 1833, this invention was essentially assembled by the key elements of a modern digital computer, it could process data and execute instructions, numbers and intermediate results could be stored in the Engine's memory then the central processor, "mill",' would process the data that were inserted by punch cards and the results could be printed onto plates.<sup>18</sup>

But why is that important and how does it correlate to digital media? For the longest time it seems that media technologies and computing did not converge, they were both on a steady path of progression but never merging, media technologies evolved to be able to store images, sequences of images, sounds, and text through various material forms like "photographic plates, film stocks, and gramophone records etc.<sup>19</sup>" simultaneously "numerous mechanical and electrical tabulators and calculators were developed.<sup>20</sup>"

Subsequently by the 1890s still images are put into motion and the first movie shorts were developed that captured the attention of audiences worldwide, bewitching them and offering a momentary escape from an overbearing reality, much like today. The establishment of cinematography and its techniques becomes a key aspect in the development of computing. In 1936 Alan Turing theorized a Universal Turing Machine which would essentially behave like a film projector, the machine was to operate on reading data and instruction on tape and later write them on different locations of the tape, hence its similarity to a film projector which reads the data that the camera records on film.<sup>21</sup> It is not until 1941 when media technologies and computing start to collide when Konrad Zuse designed the world's first digital computer whose program

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> "The Engines", Computer History Museum, Last accessed January 6,2024

<sup>.</sup> https://www.computerhistory.org/babbage/engines/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media 46

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ibid., 46

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Ibid,47

code was stored in punched film which was actually discarded 35mm movie film.<sup>22</sup> This is of great importance for the future of new media, the tape that was used as storage for the binary code originally contained movie frames, media and computing finally meet. Media are now accessible by the computer and able to be translated into computer data which emerges an entire realm of new possibilities for cultural communication, the computer is no longer strictly used for scientific purposes and military purposes, it can read, process and manipulate media

To study a movement, one should be aware of the origin of the tools and means that act as the backbone of the art community, Techspressionism,-which will be analyzed in detail-, is a movement that not only depends but came into being through the digital technologies that are available today, to get to the present we will need to dive a little deeper into the history of digital art.

#### **Historical Overview**

The journey begins during the 1960s, a core decade for the growth of digital art, up until that point the focus for museums and galleries has been on exhibitions that revolve around movement and light, most honorable mentions are "Le Movement" in 1953 in Paris, organized by Denise Renee and a few years later, on March 1961 the first "International Exhibition of Art and Motion" was hosted at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam which gathered various reactions due to the conflict between Neo-Dadaists and kinetic Constructivists, thus the "Kinetic Kraze" began.

But this tendency will not last for long, technology is constantly changing and evolving, the Machine Age is being taken over by the systems and information technology current, no longer is the focus on the motor but it has shifted on the computer and processing systems exploring ways to simulate reality, experimenting with image, sound and text in multimedia productions. This shift becomes apparent during the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Eames, Charles "A Computer Perspective: Background To The Computer Age", (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990),120 Quoted in<sup>22</sup> Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. (Cambridge, Ma. and London: MIT Press, 2001).p47

New York exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1968 "The Machine: As Seen at the End of The Mechanical Age" that signalizes the rite of passage from old to new technologies. Computer graphics were first introduced to the public as an art form by Georg Nees, at the Studio Gallery, University of Stuttgart in January, 1965, this exhibition showed works produced with a graph plotter and generated by computer programs written by Nees himself.<sup>23</sup> Computer graphics were also exhibited in the Howard Wise Gallery in New York and at the Wendelin Niedlich Gallery in Stuttgart.

Digital technology is being employed in art and exhibited in museums, the mere idea alone that a computer could be used for such a function would be unfathomable at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the computer is not just a calculator, it has been removed from its strict scientific use, it gained new life and new purpose. The computer is able to process all media in the form of numerical data, in turn it can manipulate and control the translated pixels with precision and according to predetermined rules set by the artists. The computer is as much a tool as it is a medium.

Returning to the historical landmarks of digital art one cannot ignore to mention "Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering", this project was orchestrated by Billy Kluver, John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg in 1966 and commemorated art, science and technology.<sup>24</sup> Ten artists and thirty engineers collaborated and worked together on technical equipment and systems that would essentially be the main part of the artistic installations.<sup>25</sup> This collaboration, even though it produced many "firsts" both for the scientific and artistic community, was not perceived very enthusiastically by critics.

Due to the experimental technology and innovative interdisciplinary practices and processes that were not yet perfected at their time, the overall performance was not as aesthetically pleasing as the creators would have hoped, this made critics claim that artists were compromised creatively by their collaborations with engineers and scientists which affected the purity of the art they were creating.<sup>26</sup>

- <sup>25</sup> "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering," Monoskop, Accessed January 6,2024
- https://monoskop.org/9\_Evenings:\_Theatre\_and\_Engineering

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Linda Candy, Edmonds Ernest and Poltronieri Fabrizio Augusto. "*Explorations in art and technology*" (.Springer. 2018) p.3-4

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Burnham, Jack. "Art and Technology: The Panacea that Failed". In "The Myths of Information", edited by Kathleen Woodward, Coda Press, 1980

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> McCray Patrick, "Fallout and Spinoff. Commercializing the Art Technology Nexus" in "Hybrid practices. Art in Collaboration with Science and Technology in the Long 1960s" edited by David Cateforis, Steven Duval and Shepherd Steiner,71 University of California Press,2018

Nevertheless, Billy Kluver considered the event a success due to the rapport that this project created between artists and engineers. What resulted out of this collaboration was "Experiments in Art and Technology" an organization founded by Billy Kluver whose objective was to aid the collaboration between engineers and artists who wanted to have access to new technology and learn how to operate it, E.A.T also had connections to governmental and corporate entities so it was standing in a favorable position to act as an intermediary between artists and the industries they could collaborate with.<sup>27</sup> Billy Kluver claims that the main purpose of E.A.T was to facilitate a synergy between artists and engineers, a relationship that could bring forward results and products unforeseen by both parties.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore the artists can offer other specialties a perspective on these new processes and technologies that scientists, engineers and the like do not possess, this opportunity expands their understanding of these materials and prompts new questions and problems that they would not typically encounter in their line of work. To directly quote Billy Kluver, "The artists have shaped technology. They have helped make technology more human. They automatically will because they're artists. That's by definition. If they do something it automatically comes out human,<sup>29</sup>"the incomprehensible devices and science behind them are within reach through art and utilized for objectives that are to no relevance to the initial purpose these devices were built for. We are in the privileged position to properly evaluate the efforts of those artists and engineers and appreciate them for their creativity and ingenuity something that spectators of that era were not able to do because they could not possibly foresee that these collaborations would be the groundwork for the development of digital art.

A vital step towards information technology in arts was the Cybernetic Serendipity exhibition which took place at Institute of Contemporary Art in London in 1968, curated by Jasia Reichardt. The aim was to present the endless possibilities that cybernetics pose in art and to what extend computers could be used to facilitate creativity. The objective was to showcase how these new systems in information

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Burnham, Jack. "Art and Technology: The Panacea that Failed".

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Candy, Edmonds and Poltronieri ."Explorations", 6-7

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ibid,. 7

technology could be employed by artists to compose music, write poetry and create art.<sup>30</sup> The exhibition showcased computer-generated graphics, computer-animated films, computer composed music, poems and texts, painting machines, cybernetic devices as works of art, basically demonstrating how the computer can aid creativity in contemporary arts.

The computer introduces new possibilities with its infinite options regarding colours and forms<sup>31</sup>, more than that, it ignites the need for innovation in the arts. While others remained hesitant and adhered to traditional means of creations, many artists took on the challenge and engaged with the new technologies which did not only have an effect on the artworks themselves and the final products but also altered the way artists think. As Jasia Reichardt mentions in the introduction of the exhibition catalogue, the new media were utterly transforming the shape of art<sup>32</sup> and its distinct characteristics that were formed and established by traditional forms, in this way Cybernetic Serendipity does not present accomplishments but potentials that this new era in information systems would bring for artistic expression.

Computers are introduced into the context of museums with the *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* exhibition in 1970 which took place at the Jewish Museum in New York curated by Jack Burnham. As he claims, the goal of Software was for the spectators to focus their sensibilities on information systems and technology and how they affect culture<sup>33</sup>, the main objective is the interaction between viewers and the information systems in an attempt to demystify art. *Software* included various interactive installations that encouraged the viewer to participate and interact with the displays, these artworks possessed a system that is able to change within itself and this change becomes apparent by the observer.<sup>34</sup> A notable example is Han Haacke's *Visitor Profile,* a computer was gathering and processing information given by the visitors regarding questions posed by the artist and according to the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Reichardt Jasia, "*Cybernetic Serendipity. The Computer and the Arts*"5.(London, New York, Institute of Contemporary Art,1968)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Popper, Frank, "From Technological to Virtual Art",73 (MIT Press,2018)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Reichardt Jasia, "Cybernetic Serendipity" 5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Burnham, Jack, *"Software. Information Technology: its new meaning for art"* 10 (New York, The Jewish Museum, 1970)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Candy, Edmonds and Poltronieri ."*Explorations*", 16

answers, the computer was producing statistical evaluations based on the data it would receive in real time.<sup>35</sup> This exchange of information between the spectator and the machine forms an interactive relationship where the open system, –software– controls the hardware and it turn that information directs the activity of the mind of the viewer, who is able to perceive a statistical profile of the exhibition's visitor.

Burnham, in his attempt to detach the artwork from its materials,-much like conceptual art, which focuses on the underlying idea and meaning which led to the reception of the artwork in an attempt to strip it away from its materiality<sup>36</sup>-he uses *Software* as a metaphor where software and hardware gain a different semiotic meaning. Software encapsulates the ideas, the concepts, the aesthetic principles that hide beneath the materials of the art objects, the hardware.<sup>37</sup> For Burnham by presenting art via objects that are not typically used for art purposes is the apogee of experiencing art in its true, pure form, *"the machines in Software should not be regarded as art objects; instead they are merely transducers, that is, means of relaying information which may or may not have relevance to art<sup>38</sup>", in that sense the computer is both the message and the medium.* 

Burnham argues that in an information technology controlled society, where the people are constantly bombarded with messages, first-hand experiences are of little value since anything that can be seen through media carries the same weight at the first initial encounter, what is of value is the software, the information and the same applies for art. Art objects turn into information about art objects through the media, this leads us back to the disruption of privacy, as Walter Benjamin had suggested when referring to the invention of photography and how photomechanical reproduction threatens the value and the "aura" of the original<sup>39</sup>, since every version of a copy can be considered equal in status by virtue of being identical.<sup>40</sup> In this case a few decades

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Shanken Edward A.. "Art in the Information Age: Technology and Conceptual Art." *Leonardo* 35, no. 4 (2002): 433–38. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1577407.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Shanken Edward A.. "Art in the Information Age"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Shanken, Edward A.. "The House That Jack Built: Jack Burnham's Concept of "Software" as a Metaphor for Art." L.E.A Archive Issue, Volume 6, n.10 1998.

http://web.archive.org/web/20110707164500/www.artexetra.com/House.pdf

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Burnham, Jack, "Software. Information Technology", 12

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Lovejoy, "Cultural currents",5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Bentkowska-Kafel, Anna, Trish Cashen, and Hazel Gardiner, *"Digital Art History: A Subject in Transition*"6. (Computers and the History of Art Series. Bristol: Intellect, 2005.)

forward, the "original" is of little importance since reality can be simulated through the computer.

Two other big art projects that concerned themselves with post-industrial technology was *The Center of Advanced Visual Studies* and *Art and Technology*. Even though both were ambitious and aimed to foster an environment where artists with an incline to new technologies could conduct large scale projects, they both fell through. This was a side effect that occurred due to various reasons but mainly because of socio-political tensions and also the irreparable damage that the Vietnam War caused, which installed fear to the general public regarding the new technologies that could be utilized to cause such environmental destruction. Furthermore, critics theorized that up until that point the use of computers in art had not resulted into anything of artistic importance as it was only imitating what could already be replicated by traditional means. As a consequence, all these factors deterred the use of computer for artistic purposes and stigmatized it as a medium, failing to recognize the promising possibilities that the merging of art and technology could provide.

Even so, artists kept experimenting with technology and 1980s proved to be a fruitful decade for the development of art and technology. Various organizations were established that promoted the integration of technology into art, notably YLEM was founded in California, Electra, an exhibition regarding electronics into art was presented in Paris, Ars Electronica, an organization based in Linz in 1987 which has become a yearly art event and introduced Prix Ars Electronica which is an international competition for digital artists.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, important organizations are also the following: ZKM in Karslruhe, Germany, an exhibiting space dedicated to digital arts, NCC-ICC in Tokyo which facilitates events dedicated to art and technology, Advanced Telecommunications Research Institute International laboratories in the Kansai region which has led projects in art and technology and managed to develop new technologies with artists being the leading force.<sup>42</sup> Towards the end of the 80s, in 1989 Adobe releases its paint software Photoshop, which has become the most used tool in digital art today. Fast forwarding to 1991 the World Wide Web becomes public, this will provide fertile ground for net art to take roots, net artists will rely entirely on the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup>Candy, Edmonds and Poltronieri. "Explorations". p.14

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Ibid,.

internet to not only distribute their art and create artistic communities but internet will be the core space of where their art is created and is able to exist. In 1992 the first New York Digital Salon is established, that, in combination with the MIT publication Leonardo<sup>43</sup> provided an opportunity for artists to meet, collaborate, exchange ideas but most importantly keep a record of the work of artists and researchers who concerned themselves with the integration of art and technology.

The integration of new technologies especially that of the computer in the art space has certainly been challenging to say the least. Even though computer art mirrors the principals of conceptual art, –regarding its effort in dematerialization and its objective in analysing the ideas and conception of artworks–, their semiotic interpretation and the aim to question the very nature of art, –concerning how meaning emerges in art when it is liberated by the value accorded to the materiality of the art objects<sup>44</sup>–, it was deemed by artistic circles that the computer and all the rising technologies are heavily tied to their hardware components, that their materiality becomes the main idea of the work.<sup>45</sup> That is the where the line was drawn between the distinction of conceptual and computer art for the then contemporary art space.

Moreover, the technological apparatus was regarded through the lens of dehumanization and commodification of art in order to satisfy corporate interests. Many supported that the computer was a prop that did not contribute to the elevation of art, it might have introduced new methods of creation and altered the relationship between the artists and their work but the majority of art historians felt that the "repertoire of results of aesthetic behaviour has not been changed by the use of computers.<sup>46</sup>" The contemporary art landscape failed to realize then the revolution in artistic practices that the use of information technology would initiate.

Computers would offer artists a plethora of new media to explore and experiment with, digital art expands into wide range of practices and art forms that involve filmmaking, painting, printmaking, performance art etc. Digital technologies challenged traditional notions creation, promotion and distribution. Additionally, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Colson, Richard. 2007. The fundamentals of digital art (London, Springer, 2018)p. 16

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Shanken Edward A.. "Art in the Information Age"

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Frieder Nake, "In Page," Bulletin of the Computer Arts Society, London, no. 18 (October 1971): 1-2, reprinted in The Anthology of Computer Art, ed. A. Altena and L. van der Velden (Amsterdam: Sonic Acts, 2006), 59-60.

artwork itself changes its structure, it becomes an open system which no longer remains static like a traditional painting but it is able to gather information and engage with the visitor.<sup>47</sup>The viewer shapes the artwork as much as the artist does, the artist has thus become the mediator<sup>48</sup> of this new aesthetic experience with digital technology being utilized as a vehicle which facilitates the artwork's performance. For artists with an interest in technology, who understood early on that these systems are not a mere gimmick or just scientific devices limited in a lab or research institutes but devices that could enhance artistic expression, it was inevitable to not experiment with the computer as a dynamic medium. Artists gained a new sense of control over their artworks, the digital medium is interactive, participatory and customizable<sup>49</sup>, the viewer interacts with the artwork by a set of rules that have been imposed by the artist and the interaction between man and machine operates within those predetermined parameters.<sup>50</sup> As Manfred Mohr, a pioneer in computer art, mentions "The rules I invent reflect my thinking and feelings..... My artistic goal is reached when a finished work can dissociate itself from its logical content and stand convincingly as an independent abstract entity.<sup>51</sup>"

The digital medium has surely prompted for revaluation of aesthetic values and transformed the consciousness in regards to how we think about art. The convergence of art and technology questions the determined purposes and applications of technology, as it completely disrupts the conventional structure of its usage in contemporary society and explores arising artistic values that detach themselves from the mold of traditional aesthetic principles.<sup>52</sup>

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Christiane Paul, *Digital Art*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (New York, London, Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2015) page 32
<sup>48</sup> Paul, *Digital Art*, 32

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> Ibid., 101

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ibid.,102

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Candy, Edmonds and Poltronieri ."*Explorations*",

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Edward Shanken, "Historicizing Art and Technology: Forging a Method and Firing a Canon," *in Art Media Histories*, ed. Oliver Grau (MIT Press, 2007). 43-70

# CHAPTER 1

#### Techspressionism: An Artistic Approach

Digital art encapsulates a variety of new media objects that rely on the computer for production, storage and distribution but this is a rather limiting interpretation. Lev Manovich in The Language of New Media attributes five distinct principles to digital media objects. First they are numerical representations, they are composed of digital code, second these objects can be accessed individually and maintain their separate identity, for example when a picture is attached to a Word document is can still be accessed and manipulated individually as it preserves its individuality.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, they are characterized by automation, in the digital environment the computer is able to generate results using information that is already available or replicate objects by using templates or algorithms.<sup>54</sup> An additional principle is that of variability<sup>55</sup>, a new media object can exist in various versions as it is not something that is fixed, for example the same media object can be generated in various sizes and exist in multiple forms that differ from each other. Lastly, computerization manages to transcode cultural elements and concepts which in turn gain a new meaning which derives from the computer's essence of being, computer and human culture influence each other, the outcome of this fusion is a blend of human made concepts represented by the computer and the new interpretations that originate from this notion. In that sense digital art incorporates media that rely on computer processing that can range from digital photography to digital cinema, painting, literary works, digital music and so on. Digital art encompasses various toolsets and applications, as artist Victor Acevedo, a pioneer in digital art, says "digital art operates as the product of the expressive use of its technology.<sup>56</sup>"Art objects in the digital and post-digital age are inevitably shaped by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*, 49-52

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Ibid.,53

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,56

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> Victor Acevedo, e-mail correspondence, January 20, 2024

the digital language, artistic expression is impacted by digital technologies which translates in the process of art making and is palpable in the resulting outcome.<sup>57</sup>

Techspressionism, a term that marries expressionism and technology, it has its roots in New York and that is significant in its own right that will be analysed later. Colin Goldberg, artist and founder of Techspressionism conceived the term as the title of his solo exhibition in 2011. He never felt comfortable defining his work within the confines of digital art or new media art mainly because while his works do include the technological component they are available in physical form, they are hand-painted with digital overprints on top of them.<sup>58</sup> Goldberg uses computers, commercial graphics software, inkjet printers and plotters in his artistic practice much in the fashion of Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg, he is combining painting and printmaking to bring the desired result forward. As he claims "I generally create work that is not pre-planned and is a reflection of my mental and emotional state at the time of creation.<sup>59</sup>" Much like abstract expressionists, who seek the "abstract sublime" through the unification of the self and the universe<sup>60</sup>, who become vehicles for their artistic vision, Goldberg claims that Techspressionism does not utilize technology as the message but it follows in the steps of German figurative expressionism, Abstract Expressionism and Neoexpressionism as its predecessors. Techspressionism is not a movement that commemorates digital technology and is dedicated to its utilization, seeking for innovative artistic uses and results that could be generated through its usage but contrary it focuses on the human component.

Goldberg during multiple personal communications has mentioned that while he does not want to define the limits of Techspressionism, -since he wants it to become a term that can come into common use and the artists and people involved can feel comfortable using it to describe their work-, he supports that one deferential factor to Digital Art is that Techspressionism does not include works by commercial studios like animated movies or video games as they are not works that "embody convincing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Christiane Paul, ed., A Companion to Digital Art (Wiley Blackwell, 2016). p. 2

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Colin Goldberg, interviewed by author, Zoom, August 31, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Goldberg, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Edward M. Levine, "Abstract Expressionism: The Mystical Experience," *Art Journal* 31, no. 1 (Autumn 1971): 22-25, accessed December 20, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/775629

artistic intent.<sup>61</sup>". Digital art encompasses both commercial and individually made art meanwhile Techspressionism refers to personal work where it is clear that the artist has communicated their feelings and personal ideas on the "canvas".

Artist Michael Pierre Price felt that Techspressionism put into words what he does and provided the framework in which he could adhere his work, he expresses that Techspressionism has both the technological side that one can understand but also it has the expressionism aspect of art history<sup>62</sup>, he felt that this term was encapsulating his work in a way "digital art" could not. The digital approach allows space for trial and error, Price explains that digital tools enable him to go back and return to a point he was several steps before while working on a piece, something that would simply not be feasible in a traditional sense, on the computer he can alter the math and see things changing, as he puts it "the digital approach fits my sensibilities as someone with a deep connection to math and physics.<sup>63</sup>" Price was enamoured with the structure of the community when he was first introduced to it, as a movement it is not tied to a methodology or a singular through process and perspective, technology is all encompassing underneath the surface of it all but it does not cease to be designed to be handled by humans. These systems are made by humans, in a language that we can understand and decipher, aimed for human use and consumption. Computers are designed to be controlled and navigated by the human hand, they serve as a tool like any other, but as history has shown tools can cause cultural transformations, they are able to revolutionize ways of production which causes shifts in societal structure and human communication. Prime example of this is the invention of the printing press which altered the way information was disseminated and distributed forever, the same can be told for the invention of photography which utterly affected multiple facets of society, especially within the art world as we have mentioned earlier.

According to the Techspressionist manifesto —which was written by Colin Goldberg in 2014 and revised by Patrick Lichty in  $2020^{64}$ — technology is a natural extensions of us, so in the sense of an art movement the computer serves as an extension to the artist's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> "Nodes." Techspressionism. Accessed August 14, 2023https://techspressionism.com/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Michael Pierre Price, interviewed by author, November 9, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Price, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> "Techspressionist Manifesto." Techspressionism. Accessed August 14, 2023 https://techspressionism.com/

dexterities. Originally, Goldberg supported that "nothing is truly computergenerated<sup>65</sup>", as long as it is the human mind that creates the code then the computer acts as an assisting force in the resulting outcome.

Thus, technology does not exist in a vacuum and it is not independent from the intentions of its creators, technology assists us in the fruition of our objectives. Skill sets can only take you so far, especially in artistic practice, artist Lee Schnaiberg supports that "the human comes out" even when many of the artists in the community are using the same technologies. For Schnaiberg finding a space where he can be mentally and physically imbedded is important, as an analog artist who has worked with film cameras, editing machines and optical printers he claims that the analog approach that relies on human touch, on the tactile experience allows that kind of submersion into the medium.<sup>66</sup> Even in the utilization of digital technology, that being PANOart, he has managed to trick the digital algorithm and meddle analog physical movements for the desired effect. It is clear that Techspressionism allows for this wide net of people who work with different materials, technologies and practises, the interaction with the medium can go both ways, it surely affects the content itself, its creation, presentation and how it is perceived and experienced by both the artist and the audience. "Techspressionism does not always include digital art as an effect but rather as an expression which is, of course, subjective.<sup>67</sup>"

#### i. History

Officially, Techspressionism establishes itself in the virtual space in 2020. Colin Goldberg reached out to artist Oz Van Rosen -who had used the term "Abstract Techspressionism" to describe her photography work- and initiated the idea to formulate a Techspressionism artist group. The two along with artist Steve Miller, artist, educator and curator Patrick Lichty, art historian, journalist and director of the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center Helen Harrison held the first Techspressionist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>65</sup> Goldberg, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Lee Schnaiberg, e-mail correspondence, November 17, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>67</sup> Steve Miller, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 28,2023

virtual salon meetup which was conducted via Zoom. The meetup was reminiscent of the Surrealist salons of the 1920s in which artists could meet informally to socialize and exchange ideas.<sup>68</sup> During that session the definition of Techspressionism was revised and finalized, thus it was decided that Techspressionism is "*An artistic approach in which technology is utilized as a means to express emotional experience*<sup>69</sup>."

Techspressionism is currently on its 79<sup>th</sup> salon, these monthly meetings vary regarding their topics of discussion, the themes range from art and technology to philosophy and even social issues. Attendance is free and open to all who are interested in joining, discussion flows smoothly, artists are able to present their work, get feedback from other attending artists, discuss and share ideas on the presented matters and get inspired. Artist Davonte Bradley is the one who proposed that these salons should be recorded and published on social platforms so they can be accessible by other artists in an effort to broaden the community and spread the word of Techspressionism. As he shared during a Zoom meeting, he believed from the start that this would be a great experience and other people could benefit from these conversations because these kind of discussions are not something that one could regularly have access on their own unless they specifically reach out to an artist to talk about it.<sup>70</sup> Bradley supports that as long as something is shared it will eventually reach the right people who are in need of this virtual art space. Recording and documenting these salons can also aid the prosperity of the group, as Bradley claims "you just have something to look back on, how far we have come.<sup>71</sup>" This claim stands true, in an age where we witness a continuous succession of innovations, preserving an archival record is most beneficial when one wants to look back and reflect on their progress, even with the permanence of digital footprint the sheer abundance of information and content online transforms events into fleeting moments in time that for a few seconds they managed to inhabit a small virtual space we once scrolled past.

<sup>68</sup> Miller, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Colin Goldberg, e-mail correspondence, September 9, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Davonte Bradley, interviewed by author, December 7, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Ibid,.

Since its beginning the movement has had an international reach, Techspressionist nodes<sup>72</sup> are artist collectives based on region which are autonomous and selfcoordinated entities, operating as an extension of the movement and taking roots in various countries with the objective to orchestrate localized exhibitions or other events. For a node to be shaped it must include at least two artists from the same location, they can choose to be represented online or not have a virtual presence at all. Techspressionism has managed to form nodes in Brazil, Iran, Canada, France, Germany and India. The Techspressionist Artist Index on the website includes numerous artists from all around the world, the only requirement for someone to become part of the community is to, in some and any way, incorporate technology in their artistic practice. The hashtag #Techspressionism has generated 70.000 posts on Instagram something the bears witness to the fact that artists in the international community resonate with the movement.

#### ii. Memetic power

Goldberg claims that he hopes for Techspressionism to spread and self-propagate itself the way memes do. Goldberg uses the word meme in the context of memetics, which is the study of the evolution of transmission of cultural information based on the evolutionary model introduced by Darwin. The term "meme" was coined in 1976 by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book "The Selfish Gene." Dawkins defined memes as "units of cultural transmission<sup>73</sup>" that can replicate through imitation "memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation<sup>74</sup>", he further theorizes that memes are living structures that their success in replication in the "meme-pool" depends on longevity, fecundity and copying fidelity. The meme's survival depends on how acceptable it is to the population. Unlike gene mutation, memes contain cultural information that is subjected to constant mutation and arrives to the receptor in an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup>"Nodes." Techspressionism. Accessed August 14, 2023. https://techspressionism.com/nodes/

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976). 192

<sup>74</sup> Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, 192

altered form since it is susceptible to transformation.<sup>75</sup> The progression of information being passed down affects its structural integrity, this is why the meme is not able to sustain its initial structure. Each retelling modifies and influences the nuances of the initial concept because the interpretation differs according to the receiving end.

Goldberg has applied this study to the memetic spread of the image, he proposed that art objects are memetic carriers and their successful transmission depends on their value which in turn can be measured by their unicity and the object's mindshare which is defined "as the percentage of members of a human population who are hosts to any given meme.<sup>76</sup>" In simpler words, certain art objects might be reproduced and replicated countless of times due to their unicity, which in turn enhances the objects mindshare as the more times it is reproduced the more people this idea will reach, this practice preserves the artwork itself which acts as a memetic carrier and propagates the idea, the meme.

Since the very beginning, Goldberg has expressed that he wishes for artists to make Techspressionism something of their own, to just "take it and run with it<sup>77</sup>" in order for the movement to propagate itself, he does not wish to place the movement in a strict and limiting framework, hence artistic approach felt like a more appropriate way to describe what Techspressionism aims to be. A style is limiting and short lived, Techspressionism welcomes artists who utilize a wide range of tools for the desired outcome in their artistic practice, it does not set definite objectives in the process of the art making. The people involved differ stylistically and their only meeting point is that they incorporate digital technology in their works.

Steve Miller, a founding member for whom Colin Goldberg worked as a studio assistant in the 90s has used technology in a rather unorthodox way, he managed to incorporate medical technology in his works as an effort to combat the notion that painting was "dead.<sup>78</sup>" That method allowed him to revive the definition of the classical portrait, by using MRI,CT scans, x-rays etc he was able to provide an entirely new perspective on portraiture as not a mere representation of the subject but an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Ibid.,195

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>76</sup> Goldberg, Colin Adriel. "The Heredity of Art: A Memetic Perspective." Goldberg Art Journal. 2012. Accessed September 10, 2023. https://www.goldberg.art/journal/the-art-meme/#\_ftn1

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Goldberg, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Miller, e-mail correspondence

identification, by getting inside the body and compiling identification data. He has utilized technology in his practice to raise questions about science, ecology, energy, the cosmos and the particularities of the human body. Steve Miller breaks down technology throughout the centuries as a new language to revive painting, as he says *"art has always reflected the visual language of the era which is made.*<sup>79</sup>" Technology, if we were to define it as the medium has surely brought new content and arising possibilities for expression.

# **CHAPTER 2**

#### Techspressionism: Fourth wave of Expressionism?

Techspressionism can be considered a natural successor of past incarnations of Expressionism. Surely the ideological background differs greatly but the conditions in which these movements emerged from respond to the needs of their epoch. Patrick Lichty defines Techspressionism as the fourth wave of expressionism<sup>80</sup>, a notion that all founding members agree with. As art historian Helen Harrison mentioned, Techspressionism responds to the emerging need to *"adapt digital media to the expressive aims of subjective creativity.*<sup>81</sup>" Digital art includes a vast area of artistic practices, tools, techniques and mechanisms that are manifested through digital technologies, it defines an entire age while Techspressionism acts like a subset<sup>82</sup> within it. In comparison to pasts forms of expressionism though Techspressionism differs greatly.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Miller, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Patrick Lichty, interviewed by author, Zoom, October 21, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Helen Harrison, e-mail correspondence, December 12, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Acevedo, e-mail correspondence

#### i. German Figurative Expressionism

German figurative expressionism emerges in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a reaction to the state of things and desire for change, it is characterized by rejection of upper class social values and distaste for aesthetic principles that derive from state sponsored academic art.<sup>83</sup> The group of artists that identified with Expressionism aimed for social upheaval through their art, their focus was on releasing emotions and ideas that were repressed and bring forward frank, direct, assertive thoughts that are heavily tied to their nature as humans, to expose those feelings and not filter them through the refinement of academism.<sup>84</sup> As a style it is known for its distorted forms and vivid colours, bold, vigorous and dynamic brushstrokes that amplify the energy of the paintings. For expressionists it was important to be in tune with their spirituality and convey the urgency of subjective emotional experience.<sup>85</sup>

Three art groups were formed around Expressionism, Brucke in 1905, Der Blaue Reiter in 1911 and Austrian Expressionism in 1908. Die Brucke, meaning The Bridge, indicates the group's intention to act as a connecting bridge between the present and the future.<sup>86</sup> The group consisted of painters and printmakers, they adopted a bohemian lifestyle and that was depicted in their work, they genuinely believed in their ability to bring revolutionary change by rejecting well established notions of art making imposed by art academies and instead sought to capture "the essence of a subject rather than its details or specifics.<sup>87</sup>" The goal is to capture the spontaneity of the subject and evoke intense emotional response from the viewer.

Der Blaue Reiter operated within the expressionist framework as well but it was not as a tightly knit group as Brucke, founded by Vasily Kandinsky and Franz Marc this association of artists possessed diverse styles with a tendency towards abstraction and spirituality.<sup>88</sup> Austrian Expressionism focused on the depiction of the nude body, the humanistic approach of Expressionism led the artists to study the body in an effort to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>83</sup>Starr Figura, ed. *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Figura, ed. *German Expressionism* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>85</sup> ibid

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Ibid., 18

capture primal emotion and the various states of being.<sup>89</sup> Other themes included sexual imagery, thoughts on war, the human's relationship with nature, the impact of urbanization, the effort to weave through the vitality of the city life and the vast opportunities it could offer challenged by the brutal dangerous reality of the metropolis, and the alienation of the fast paced urban, capitalist lifestyle where everything is commodified.<sup>90</sup>

German expressionism is full of contradictions, idealism clashes with reality, not completely liberated as of yet of the intellectualism of academism it fights its way through these conventional notions of aesthetic principles to capture the urgency of the instinct. The aspect that underlies Expressionism and unifies the different art groups is the desire for social revolution, total upheaval of socially imposed constraints which fit the overall spirit of European consciousness of that era. Traditional social values and aesthetic norms are challenged, the artist's integration in society is questioned and greatly discouraged. The artist is gaining independence from societal ties, the focus is shifted from the external world to the internal, seeking spiritual connections, the goal is not to appeal to the masses anymore but provoke them and agitate them.<sup>91</sup>

#### ii. Abstract Expressionism

While German Expressionism is reflecting upon the anxieties and implications of the social conditions of its era, maintaining ties with the external world, Abstract Expressionism is a leap into the unification of artist and the cosmos.<sup>92</sup> The artworks are characterized by non-figurative, non-representational forms, they come to reside in the sphere of the universe where the artist is called to explore their personality in the spiritual plane of existence, they become a vessel through which the spirit operates.<sup>93</sup> The abstract expressionist does not try to imprint his personality on the canvas and allow it to dominate and take away from the painting itself. While the figurative

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> Ibid.,107

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup>Paul Vogt, *Expressionism A German Intuition, 1905-1920* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1980). 24-25

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>92</sup> Levine, Abstract Expressionism

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Ibid.,

expressionist seeks a personal identity the abstract expressionist aims to navigate through the energy of the universe and adopt a universal identity, his artwork is not his own but a manifestation of spiritual energy coursing through him and on the canvas, for that to happen the total surrender of the ego, the sense of the self has to lend its place to the cosmic experience.<sup>94</sup> Overall, American Abstract Expressionism in particular is characterized by objectivity and spontaneous creativity, it focuses on the art making rather than the ending result.

#### iii. Neo-Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism of the 40s and 50s gets overturned by Pop Art in the 60s which opposes everything Expressionism championed for. Even though Pop Art had a wide international reach we will focus on its interpretation in America where Abstract Expressionism developed and took roots. Pop artists utilized elements or irony and mockery in their imagery, they made use of mainstream icons in popular culture and elevated them to the status of fine art.<sup>95</sup> The decade of the sixties is characterized by a tendency towards impersonality, artists perfect and advance the design and layout of consumer goods, they adapt those products in their art making, changing the way these commonplace objects are perceived by the audience. Pop artists disseminate the "picture-perfect" illusion of advertisement, they separate the product from its pragmatic use and place it on a plane of existence that leaves a lot to be desired.<sup>96</sup> Life and culture of the 60s enter the art sphere, pop artists analyze products launched by various industries in an attempt to capture the reality of the era but it also serves as a critique regarding the oversaturation of the market and bombardment of images by mass media culture.<sup>97</sup> Pop art mirrors contemporary society of its respective decade, the subject matter shifts from the abstract, the inner expression, the metaphysical and intangible to the depiction of everyday life. Pop art rejects core abstract expressionism

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>95</sup> Hilton Kramer, "Signs of Passion: The New Expressionism," *The New Criterion* 1, no. 3 (November 1972): 40,Accessed January 15, 2024 https://newcriterion.com/issues/1982/11/signs-of-passion-the-new-expressionism.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Tilman Osterwold, *Pop Art* (Taschen GmbH, Cologne, 2003), 6

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Osterwold, *Pop Art*, 7

values in favor of objectivity, intellectual clarity and conceptual order.<sup>98</sup> Pop art's impressionability made it a "genre" that was easy to engage with, it was entertaining, accessible and relaxed.<sup>99</sup>

Enter the late 70s the art arena is yet again facing a transformation. Reflecting on past movements such as Pop Art, Minimal and Conceptual art of the 70s, Neo-Expressionism emerges as an antidote to the detachment, objectivity and playfulness that represented the previous decade, especially Pop Art.<sup>100</sup> Neo Expressionism gives a nod to subjective artistic expression which seemed to be suppressed in favor of the impersonal style that commanded the sixties up to early 70s. Neo-Expressionism cannot be labeled as a uniform movement, -much like Techspressionism in that regardit is surely a continuation of Abstract Expressionism but it can only be understood by studying the common elements found in the artworks by Neo-Expressionists.

immediacy and commitment to the subject matter<sup>101</sup> Neo-Expressionists are fascinated by the power of myths, sexual imagery and stereotypes around sexuality, the rough way they handled materials was deemed almost crude and vulgar by receiving audiences who were used to the clean and neat way objects were presented in artistic practices for over a decade. Neo-Expressionisms brought extravagance back into the painting surface, the canvas is used as a vehicle for exploration and depiction of the emotional state of the artist. The mysticism of the abstract, the imaginative and sensual element but also the aspect of self-realization were once again on the forefront of art making.

While Neo-Expressionism shares many of the aesthetic principles of Abstract Expressionism the thematic approach differs entirely. Neo-Expressionists did not shy away from incorporating the social and political reality in their works<sup>102</sup>that Abstract Expressionism was devoid of. The latter concerned itself with making art for art's sake, reflecting from within and collaborating with the canvas and materials to communicate

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Kramer, "Signs of Passion: The New Expressionism,"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>101</sup> Michael Brenson, "Is Neo-Expressionism an Idea Whose Time Has Passed?" *The New York Times*, January 4, 1986, accessed January 19, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/01/05/arts/art-view-is-neo-expressionism-an-idea-whose-time-has-passed.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Brenson, "Is Neo-Expressionism an Idea Whose Time Has Passed?"

the emotional condition of the artist. Art answered to itself, its means and its process, the focus was exclusively on the creative process.<sup>103</sup> Meanwhile, the former, while surely vitalizing and expressive it preserved communication with the outside world, it engaged with mass media and visual culture hence the subject matter could be personal, political, social etc.<sup>104</sup> Neo-Expressionism embraced a range of artistic styles, which becomes evident when one views artworks by the likes of Jean Michel Basquiat, Eric Fischl, Julian Schnabel, Enzo Cucchi, among others. They all employed different means and processes in their art making according to what they wished to express.

#### iv. Expressionist influence

It is rather clear that different facets of Expressionism emerged during separate time periods to respond to the needs and conditions of their respective age. *"The new need for Techspressionism was to adapt digital media to the expressive aims of subjective creativity.*<sup>105</sup>*"* says Helen Harrison, creative advisor of the group. Contemporary art is heavily informed by digital media and technologies, operating on a vast spectrum of digital art practice. Digital Art encompasses a wide range of toolsets and applications as a result of the usage of its technology, in this space Techspressionism can act as a subset of Digital Art.<sup>106</sup>

The group is greatly influenced by expressionist practice that predates them. Artist Anton Dubrovin, also known as MCHX, has experimented with graphics programs and artificial intelligence to create works but lately he has shifted to creative coding, "*Ever since my first encounter with the Color Field and Abstract Expressionist movements, I have been fascinated by the idea of colour spirituality, how different combinations of colours can induce a meditative state.*<sup>107</sup>" Dubrovin was curious to explore whether this trance-like-state could be achieved by using modern mediums, not a canvas, not a wall but the mobile phone interface, the screen. For Dubrovin technology is able to expand artists' possibilities and reduce the time required for the process of creation,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>103</sup> Marshall Fishwick,. "Pop Art and Pop Culture." *Journal of Popular Culture* 3, no. 1 Accessed January 27, 2024 (Summer 1969): 23-27. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1969.0301\_23.x.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>104</sup> Brenson, "Is Neo-Expressionism an Idea Whose Time Has Passed?"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup> Harrison, e-mail correspondence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Acevedo, e-mail correspondence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Anton Dubrovin, e-mail correspondence, December 15, 2023

he claims that new technologies allow for reinterpretation and recreation of ideas in a new context since they introduce various ways of realization.<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, artist Cristina Inciarte felt that Techspressionism captures who she is as an artist, as she uses technology to bring her abstract expressionist artworks to life.<sup>109</sup> Inciarte uses her iPad and Adobe Fresco to bring her visions forward, similar to Dubrovin she also supports that digital technology has allowed her to move freely and quickly but also create more.<sup>110</sup> Art supplies and materials are rather expensive and can limit the artist and the work they are able to produce but that is not the case with what Inciarte uses for her process. Inciarte, very much in the spirit of abstract expressionists, thinks of her work as a dialogue between her and the universe.<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, Tommy Mintz, who is an assistant professor of Photography at CUNY Kingborough Community College in Brooklyn, employs photography to explore the implications of human memory and perception and how that translates in the digital landscape.<sup>112</sup> Mintz mentions how digital tools completely revolutionized his craft by providing new equipment that enabled a different set of possibilities which differed greatly from the chemical process of developing film.<sup>113</sup> He himself, identifies more with the Fluxus art movement, what cause him to resonate with Techspressionism was the fact that this group of artists were using the same materials, methods and technologies but in completely different ways.<sup>114</sup>

Another artist that equips photography as her main art is Oz Van Rosen, a founding member as it was previously mentioned. For Oz Van Rosen stumbling upon "glitching", a process that allowed for the picture to be destroyed, manipulated, melted down into the basic colour pixels, was as profound as it was liberating. Documenting reality as it was felt rather limiting to Oz Van Rosen, the glitch application allowed her to transform the picture into a colour field, this technological ability freed her from having to portray the reality of the photograph.<sup>115</sup> In this sense she relates this creative process to Abstract Expressionism but with the digital component that is available

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Dubrovin, e-mail correspondence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Cristina Inciarte, e-mail correspondence, November 11, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>110</sup> Inciarte, e-mail correspondence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Ibid,.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>112</sup> Tommy Mintz, e-mail correspondence, November 29, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> Mintz, e-mail correspondence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Ibid,.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Oz Van Rosen, interviewed by author, Zoom, December 1, 2023

today, "maybe we are in the age of abstract expressionism where we use technology to free us from having to represent concrete or realistic things.<sup>116</sup>" For Van Rosen contemporary technology allows for artists to connect in a way they weren't able to before with traditional practices, artists tap in this collective consciousness that forms through the interconnected realm of the digital human experience.<sup>117</sup>

## Social Sculpture

Techspressionism, as previously mentioned, is not a uniform movement, it is not defined by a specific style, its' value, Helen Harrison argues, lies on the fact that it is flexible and allows for a broad range of technologies.<sup>118</sup> The best way to perhaps describe this phenomenon is through relational aesthetics. Patrick Lichty believes that Techspessionism operates as a relational project and constitutes a haven for people to discuss ideas and share work.<sup>119</sup> To better understand this notion, art curator Nicolas Bourriaud defines relational art as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.<sup>120</sup>" In this context, artworks are part of the existing reality, interpersonal interaction and participation are prioritized, the work is not enclosed within an institution or a gallery space where the role of the viewer is limited but rather the objective is to form community through dialogue and communication.

Lichty further mentions that Techspressionism acts as a container where people work relationally to one another.<sup>121</sup> Human connectivity and communication is encouraged, even in the virtual space in which it is facilitated. While the common element of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> Van Rosen, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>117</sup> Oz Van Rosen, e-mail correspondence, December 1, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Harrison, e-mail correspondence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Lichty, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>121</sup> Lichty, interview

Techspressionists is that they incorporate digital technology in their art practice it is that very digital component that produces an environment where bonds are created and the experience of participating in this space becomes the vital aspect. In this respect also applies Joseph Beuys' theory of art as a social sculpture which is a term included in the Techspressionist Manifesto. Joseph Beuys theorized that art can have a pedagogical role in society and encourage dialogue, actions and thoughts, art could include everything that is in the realm of the living reality as it is not separate from society.<sup>122</sup> Beuys' idea of social sculpture influenced artists in the 80s and 90s greatly<sup>123</sup>, the artist takes on the role of an educator, an activist, who through his work approaches the audience and communicates his thoughts. Colin Goldberg claims that he brought the idea of social sculpture into Techspressionism to introduce inclusivity within the contemporary art world in terms of specific curatorial practices that might move towards gender inclusivity, -an element thought by Renata Janiszewska-, and inclusions of artists from underrepresented areas.<sup>124</sup> Art as a social sculpture can bring social change which relies on its recipients.

Artist Renata Janiszewska, who has taken the role of the curator of the Techspressionism Instagram account highlights that there was a need for this community to be created. Janiszewska supports that the way Techspressionism is structured and the fact that its very existence relies on the virtual digital space resembles a hive mind mentality where there is a core idea and all these units come and attach themselves to the core.<sup>125</sup> As Michael Pierre Price claims Techspressionism satisfies the need for validation and self- realization, it is a movement that legitimizes the practice of artists who work with digital methods.<sup>126</sup> Price goes on to say that the body of knowledge that is attached to Techspressionism creates something solid that will hopefully establish digital art in the greater sphere of the art industry, because behind the technological component underlies the soul and mind of the artist who utilizes said technology to express emotion.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>122</sup> Cara Jordan, "The Evolution of Social Sculpture in the United States: Joseph Beuys and the Work of Suzanne Lacy and Rick Lowe," *Public Art Dialogue* 3, no. 2 (2013): 144-167, Accessed January 27, 2024 DOI:10.1080/21502552.2013.818430

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Cara Jordan, "The Evolution of Social Sculpture in the United States," 144-167

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Goldberg, interview

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> Renata Janiszewska, interviewed by author, Zoom, November 26, 2023

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Price, interview

#### Conclusions

From the invention of the printing press to that of the daguerreotype and later on the Analytical Engine, it is prominent how ground-breaking advancements in science and technology have affected multiple aspects of society and the art world could not be excluded. The emergence of art and technology went through multiple stages of progression, other more successful than others, to get to the point where it is today. The intersection of these two notions is inevitable since art mirrors and captures the evolution of societies, it reflects its progression and brings forward a nuanced representation of reality. Artists, throughout history, have managed to introduce unconventional ways in which tools that are not typically associated with artistic usage, can be employed for artistic expression. The experimental incorporation of the computer into art making has met a lot of resistance and even condemnation, often regarded as a gimmick that could not possibly compete with traditional means of creation. However, art does not exist independently, art movements respond to the conditions and needs of their respective epoch. Historically, innovation has been met with hesitance and resistance before it was embraced as transformative force, the same applies in art making. Especially regarding digital technologies, it is not just the artist's toolbox that changes, the entire mode of creation transforms, the conceptualization of the art objects gains a new meaning as they are reinterpreted through the vast spectrum of the digital age.

Techspressionism reflects the artists' urgency for expression of their emotional state through the use of digital means. As Helen Harrison claims "*Technology is a continuum and it goes back to photography, printing press and other practices*.<sup>127</sup>" Digital technology is not detached from the technological advancements that precede it, these digital components pose new tools for artists to respond to the new age in an appropriate manner, through the digital language that society has come to familiarize itself with. Artists have proved to be able to adapt and evolve alongside technological evolution, respond to challenges and be able to redefine boundaries within

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Harrison, e-mail correspondence

contemporary society. "Techspressionism is a movement for postmovement times<sup>128</sup>", perhaps we have moved onto an era that resists the very notion of movements but the need for community is still prevailing. The question that naturally occurs is how fast institutions, galleries and museums can adjust to this digital current and to a degree, forego principles of traditional aesthetics and values and instead embrace new modes of creation to a satisfactory level. Artists will always explore new paths and possibilities that arise in order to engage with their sensibilities and create new meanings in entirely different contexts. It is this very desire to breathe life and leave remnants of human activity into everything that allows art to evolve and continue to live.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>128</sup> Lichty, interview

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# Appendix

These questions were asked to artists during mail communication and interviews I conducted on Zoom. Their answers are included throughout the main body of the dissertation.

- How did you become involved with Techspressionism and how do you resonate with the movement as an artist?
- Technology has been utilized in art for several decades as it is not a new phenomenon, can you share your thoughts on the intersection of art and technology?
- 2. Do you believe that technology is able to bring forward a result that previous practices and tools were not able to due to limitations? And if so, what digital tools do you use in your artistic process and how do they influence your creative expression? Could you walk me through your creative process?
- 3. Would you define your work as "techspressionist" in nature or is just a part of it that resonates with the movement?
- How do you see the relationship between your art and the rapidly changing technological landscape
- 5. Are there any specific styles/movements or trends that have influenced your artistic expression and have made a major impact in your work and progression as an artist?
- 6. How do you see Techspressionism evolving in the future and what role do you wish to play in its development?

7. Would you like to share what are you currently working on?