

## MEDIATED IMAGINATIONS: TECHNOLOGIES TOUCHING UPON ART

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Six years ago, *Kunstlicht* presented an issue on mediality in which the complicated states of artistic media were explored.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the relevance of this theme has not diminished. In fact, the term ‘mediation’ proliferates also outside the fields of media studies and art. Particularly in the philosophy of technology, mediation functions as an umbrella term for a variety of themes connecting humans, technologies, and the world they share. Despite being a somewhat elusive concept in this field, there is a clear intention discernable behind its use: ‘mediation’ denotes an in-between, implies the interconnectedness of things. In this *Kunstlicht* issue, we therefore explore the connection between art and technology by raising the questions: How do technologies touch upon art? How do tools and technologies build a medium for the artistic imagination? And how might art—itself a medium of perception, reflection, and critique—reveal something about our technological condition?

Often, technology is set apart from artistic imagination by associating imagination with individuality, freedom, and creativity, whilst technology is identified in terms of servitude, generality, and uniformity. In the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional voices in the philosophy of technology were likely to agree with this assessment. Reading the works of Jacques Ellul, Karl Jaspers, and Martin Heidegger, one is easily led to believe that technology is inherently tied up with industrialization, automation, and the framings of mass-society.<sup>2</sup> Such narratives are still popular today, even though technology has developed, and society diversified. In light of these developments philosophers of technology began to study technology, not as an abstract concept, but in the concrete context of use.<sup>3</sup> Instead of considering technology as merely facilitating means (technological instrumentalism), or as an oppressive force (technological determinism), theories of technological mediation began to ask: how do persons relate to the world through a technology, and which practices are thereby fostered?<sup>4</sup>

The way technology, human imagination, and works of art partake in a mediating bond is illustrated by the following anecdote. The French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir reportedly stated that ‘[w]ithout colours in tubes, there would be no Cézanne, no Monet, no Sisley, or Pissarro, nothing of what the journalists were later to call “Impressionism”.’<sup>5</sup> Art scholars with an interest in the techno-historical

development of this period make good use of this anecdote. They intuit that the technological advancements preceding Modernism—such as development of new synthetic pigments, the metal paint tube patented in 1841, and the railway system—were instrumental in the emergence of what we now call Impressionism.<sup>6</sup> Whereas up until that time paint was handmade and stored ineffectively in glass syringes or parcels of pig bladder, from 1841 onwards, a variety of new synthetic colours became ready-made available, securely protected against drying out by its tin tubing. Thereby, it became easier for artists to work outside, on location, and turn the *plein-air* into their habitat. Painting out there in the wind, sun, and shadows, in nature, or amidst the activities of city-life, we can imagine that a re-appreciation of colours, techniques and themes took place—an impressionist revolution made possible by a humble metal tube!<sup>7</sup>

However, reality is more complex. For there had been a tradition of *plein-air* landscape painting preceding these innovations, and after the tube was devised, it took another thirty years before Impressionism arrived. Moreover, the impressionists did not solely rely on the new colours, but often insisted upon hand-ground pigments, combining those with the ready-made ones.<sup>8</sup> Some historians will even argue that the development of prefabricated colours was distancing the painter from his or her materials, as they were no longer able to attest themselves the quality of the product.<sup>9</sup>

Technological objects do not offer us a simple, straightforward explanation of the practices they foster. Technologies have long and complex histories themselves, their functions and uses are multiple, depending both on the materiality of the artefact, the intention by which it is operated, as well as on cultural contexts of use. Such aspects, moreover, vary over time, making the technologies resistant to generic categorization. Researchers in Science and Technology Studies have therefore specialized in describing complex networks of cultural, social, scientific, and technological interactions. They bring to our attention the agency of objects with its diverse and unexpected implications. For this reason, objects also feature prominently in this *Kunstlicht* issue, as for example the patented paint tube from 1841, (fig. 1) and a technical drawing of the stencil printer with which the cover was produced.<sup>10</sup>

Another, more phenomenologically oriented school of thought approaches the effects of technologies hermeneutically. For instance, a newly fabricated colour might not necessarily ‘cause’ anything to happen, but as a medium of artistic expression it might change the way artists conceive their work, and how they approach their subjects. How do technologies accordingly transform our relations with the world? North American philosopher of technology Don Ihde termed this style of questioning *postphenomenological*, a phenomenological take on technologies’ mediations that moves beyond the romantic technophobia often

<sup>1</sup> See: Daniel van der Poel & Jesse van Winden (eds), “Mediality”, *Kunstlicht*, nr. 32, 2011, no.3. The issue can be found online: <http://tijdschriftkunstlicht.nl/vol-32-2011-no-3-mediality/>.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: Karl Jaspers, *Die geistige Situation der Zeit*, Berlin: Walter Gruyter & Co., 1931; Martin Heidegger, ‘Die Frage nach der Technik’, in: Neske Pfullingen, *Die Technik und die Kehre*, 1962; Jacques Ellul, *La Technique: L’Enjeu du siècle*, Paris: Armand Colin, coll. «Sciences politiques», 1954.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Achterhuis (ed.), *American Philosophy of Technology: The Empirical Turn*, trans. by Robert Crease, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The approach of technological mediation has been explored most prolific in recent years by Peter-Paul Verbeek in: *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005; and by the same author: *Moralizing Technology: Understanding and Designing the Morality of Things*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> This passage comes from the memoirs of his son, Jean Renoir. English translation from Victoria Finlay, *The Brilliant History of Colour in Art*, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2014, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Commonly referred to is: David Bomford et al., *Art in the making: Impressionism*, London: National Gallery, 1990.

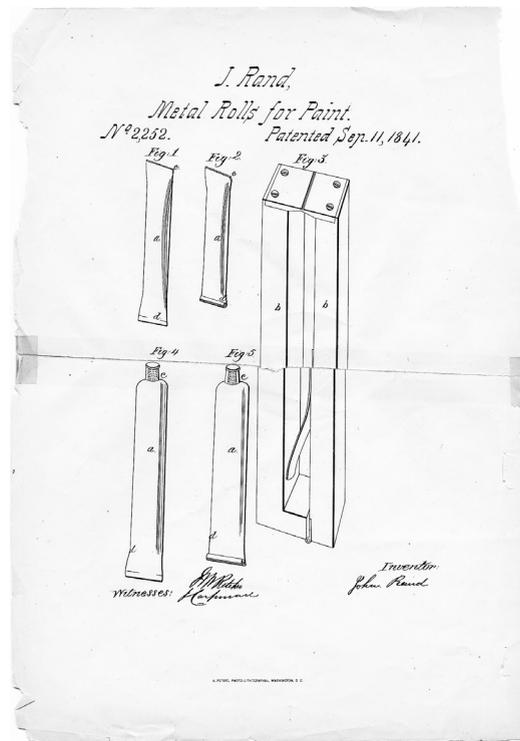
<sup>7</sup> This narrative is frequently shared (and copied) over the Internet, see for instance: Perry Hurt, “Never Underestimate the Power of a Paint Tube”, *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 2013.

<sup>8</sup> For a more critical study into this subject cf. Anthea Callen, *The Work of Art: Plein Air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-century France*, London: Reaktion Books, 2015; And by the same author: “Impressionist techniques and the politics of spontaneity”, in: *Art History*, 14:4 (1991), pp. 599-608.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Ball, *Bright earth: art and the Invention of Colour*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> John Goffe Rand patent, “Improvement in the Construction of Vessels or Apparatus for Preserving Paint &c.” U.S. Patent 2,252, issued September 11, 1841. John Goffe Rand papers, 1832-1960, bulk 1832-1873. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

→ fig. 1 John Goffe Rand's drawings for his collapsible metal tube for paint. United States Patent Number 2,252. Published by the United States Patent Office.



associated with traditional phenomenological approaches. Ihde offered a framework describing various ways in which technologies function as an intermediate. From this fourfold schema of human-technology relations many authors in this issue take inspiration.<sup>11</sup>

From these mediated points of view, art is not primarily confined by the terms of its 'medium specificity' (cf. Clement Greenberg), but instead enabled by it, in specific ways.<sup>12</sup> Technology as a medium is not 'the message' itself (cf. Marshall McLuhan),<sup>13</sup> but medium and message appear co-constitutive of one another. And not even a declared 'post-medium condition' sidesteps the mediation of technologies, as also Rosalind Krauss recognizes that only critical reflection allows us to 'grasp the inner complexity of the mediums', revealing their differential potentials.<sup>14</sup>

So the art of painting was not ushered into an era of Impressionism because of a squeezable tin tube. Yet, we reckon that even minor innovations such as these provide affordances to artists hitherto unavailable. Many other inventions must have done so in the course of history. So how does a camera, a pencil, a smartphone, a speaker, or a digital drawing program inform ranges and styles of artistic expression? Similarly, we can imagine that the appearance of new, vibrant colours might inspire artists. What other materials, tools, objects, and things do artists take inspiration from, so we might ask. And finally, like the railroad and other markers of early industrialization became an

explicit topic for artistic reflection, so today the era of the Anthropocene has been announced. The world shifts gears in the face of a third (or is it already a fourth?) technological revolution. How does this technological conditioning resonate in the work of artists?

To summarize, artistic imagination and technology are everything but separate entities. They are realized in and exist through each other. Creation by artifice is not only foundational to, and reflected in works of art, but this process is moreover exemplified and even sublimated by artists. After all, the design, use, and proliferation of technologies is itself a creative process. This intimate entwining of art and technology is what the following articles will bring to the fore.

The issue consists of three interrelated sets of articles, each approaching the relation between technology and imagination from a different angle. The first set of articles deals with how artistic imagination can potentially reveal the historical and technological background in which we live, thereby opening up a critical space of reflection. The second part of the issue concerns how artistic and design processes are shaped by the material circumstances in which they take shape, and how technologies help creating a meaningful environment for artistic expression. The last set of articles specifically deals with how new understandings of the world and possibilities for action can arise within individual relations between humans and technologies.

#### PART 1: BACKGROUNDS REVEALED

In the first article, Katja Kwastek discusses the installation *Malleable Regress* (2016) by the Dutch artist Femke Herregraven, and shows how art can be used to reveal the technological texture within which we live—or that is required for an imagined future. By envisaging the material references present in Herregraven's installation as representative of technological systems as hyperobjects, Kwastek analyses how art contributes to explorative scenarios when imagining the future of a technological system.

Stanley Kranc further explores this theme by pointing out that a large part of our technological infrastructure is not an evident part of our lifeworld, but remains always in the background. He argues that art can 'picture' this background, where 'picturing' 'situates the beholder by creating an artificial point of view that might be otherwise unavailable.' Accordingly, Kranc argues, we should not ask whether art adequately depicts a background, but rather ask who owns the act of picturing that makes the background perspectively transparent.

The (idealized) independence of art in its historico-cultural embeddedness is made visible in Amber Harper's discussion of the early twentieth century shadowfilms made by German filmmaker Lotte Reiniger. Harper's critical discussion of Walter Benjamin's concept of *Spiel-Raum* serves to reveal how Reiniger's shadow films embodied a specific conception of the historical and material understanding of the medium of film. In this way, Reiniger's shadowfilms appear in a new light as playing with the opportunities and constraints offered by both cinematic and pre-cinematic media.

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. And by the same author: *Postphenomenology and Technoscience: The Peking Lectures*. New York: SUNY Press, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", in: Francis Frascina & Charles Harris (eds), *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, London: Paul Chapman Publishing Limited, 1988, Chapter 1, pp. 5-10.

<sup>13</sup> Quentin Fiore & Marshall McLuhan, *The medium is the message*, New York: Random House, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-medium Condition*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999, p. 53.

Gabriel Paiuk further delves into the relation between art and background by examining the constitution of sound images through the lens of the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. By discussing his own sound installation *Focus* (2017), Paiuk points out that sound images that normally reside in the background can be made technically present using loudspeakers. Based on Simondon's analysis of imagination, Paiuk shows how *Focus* should be understood as an operational process involving both the organism and the affordances offered by the environment.

## PART 2: OBJECTS IN THE MAKING

While the first set of papers focuses on how art can reveal technological processes that normally reside in the background, the second focuses on artistic and design processes that are shaped in relation with technologies and objects. Mads Nygaard Folkmann frames design thinking in terms of a (neo-)Kantian schematization of a conceptual space and proposes a general framework to assess how this schematization is influenced by the tools and technologies used in design. In two case studies Folkmann shows that the interrelation between imagination and technologies is at the core of design processes.

In the context of art, the influence of technologies on imagination is exemplified in an interview with the Dutch artist Pieter Paul Pothoven. In his artworks, Pothoven focuses on the manners in which objects mediate human-world relationships within both past and present circumstances. His work is suggestive of the fact that the life of objects continually develops over time and is therefore not restricted to a particular time period or owner.

The dependence of objects and their context of use is further articulated by Rebecca Louise Breuer when discussing the project *InBetween* (2003–ongoing) by the Dutch performance artist Anja Hertenberger. Hertenberger investigated the reactions of people when wearing a camera on the front and a miniature screen on the back of her clothing. Using the conceptual pair of the smooth and the striated of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Breuer points out that the merger of art and technology in Hertenberger's artistic performance constitutes an event that creates a space in which we can reflect on the ubiquitous presence of surveillance technologies in our society.

The role of technologies and materiality in the creation of socially engaged art is further explored in an interview with the 2016 *Dr. A.H. Heineken Prize for Art* winner Yvonne Dröge Wendel. In her projects, Dröge Wendel explicates the importance of the material surroundings in which artistic processes takes place, and extends the idea of artistic authorship from the human being to its material contributors as well. Dröge Wendel, inspired by the work of Bruno Latour, discusses with us how material objects should be granted an active role in the creation of social and artistic environments.

## PART 3: MEDIATED EXPERIENCES

Our third set of papers is explicitly concerned with how new understandings and experiences of the world can arise in the relation between humans and technologies. Inspired by postphenomenology, these papers seek to analyse the various ways in which technologies allow for the creation of new forms of art and design.

This set of papers starts with a brief contribution by the philosopher of technology Don Ihde, the founder of postphenomenology. Addressing his own practice as a painter, Ihde shows that he started painting with palette knives and oil paint, while later, inspired by Andy Warhol and Gerhard Richter, he used acrylics, photographs, and overhead projectors to develop an entirely different style. He concludes that both of these styles must be understood as techno-art, that is, materially mediated by technics.

A more in-depth analysis of human-technology relations is done in the context of architectural drawing by Inger Berling Hyams. She nuances the often-heard criticism that digital drawing in architecture hampers the creativity of the architect. Based on an empirical study of the drawing practices of students in architecture, she suggests that analogue and digital drawing should not be understood in terms of some essentialist rigid qualities, but rather as different technological mediations that both open up a space for creativity and imagination.

Sebastian Schneiders exemplifies this open space in his artistic contribution *Anticipating a Trace*. Envisaging drawing as a material and haptic activity, Schneiders demonstrates that lines emerge 'in the interplay between human intentions, materials, surfaces, and the tools and bodies that make [them] happen.' The lines drawn by Schneiders beautifully show that drawing lines is not restricted by any given medium, but inevitably carry the potential to generate unpredictable pathways that trigger creativity and imagination.

Richard Lewis also explores a digital medium not traditionally belonging to artistic practice: the museum selfie. Using a postphenomenological framework, he explains how selfies—even though they require us to turn our back to museum objects—paradoxically allow for a new appreciation of museum objects. While selfies might conflict with more traditional museum experiences, Lewis shows that selfies and museums should not be understood as foreign to one another. Rather, selfies 'can empower the visitor to relate in new and personal ways with an object, ways not dictated by the museum.'

Our last contribution by Denise Petzold and Veerle Spronck turns from the relation between artists and technologies to the relation between technologies in art and the experience of museum visitors in the context of installation art. Petzold and Spronck show that technologies in installation art can better be understood as mediating the visitor's relation with the world by constituting new embodied and cognitive awareness that help experiencing what is normally foreign.

We would like to thank all the authors and artists for their interesting contributions to *Mediated Imaginations: Technologies Touching Upon Art*, helping to bring closer the too often disassociated domains of technology and art. We are very grateful to *Kunstlicht* to offer us the opportunity to be guest editors on this issue, and want to thank to entire editorial team for their hard work and detailed editorial eye.

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