The connection of technology, computers and digital media with the avantgarde movements will be discussed in the next chapter.

# Unstable Media

As the introduction mentions, we are immersed in a digital age where technology and information mediate most of our interactions. Artistic practice has not been immune to this. Around 1984, there was a pivotal point where artistic practice moved from a primarily analog to a predominantly digital practice (Moller Hansen 2023). The digital practice involves using computers but, more generally, using so-called unstable media.

This chapter will briefly summarize and define what I mean by unstable media and related terms.

Broadly speaking, “Unstable Media Art” describes a category of contemporary art that incorporates technology and digital media as integral components of artwork. Following the Unstable Media Manifesto (V2\_ 1987), a first define unstable media as follows:

Unstable media is *“…all media which makes use of electronic waves and frequencies, such as engines, sound, light, video, computers, and sound. Instability is inherent to these media.*

*Quantum mechanics has proved, among other things, that the smallest elementary particles, such as electrons, exist in ever-changing forms. They have no stable form, but are characterized by dynamic mobility. This unstable, mobile form of the electron is the basis of the unstable media.*

*The unstable media are the media of our time. They are the showpieces in our modern homes. We promote their comprehensive use, instead of the often practised misuse of these media…”*

The manifesto then goes into the possibilities of unstable media

*“…the unstable media move within the concepts of ‘movement-time-space’, which implies the possibility of combining more forms and contents within one piece of work. The unstable media reflect our pluriform world.*

*Unstable media are characterized by dynamic motion and changeability, this in contrast with the world of art which reaches us through the publicity media. This has come to a standstill and has become a budget for collectors, officials, historians, and critics…”*

### Illustration, Light-Space-Modulator

At first glance, it may seem that unstable media is related to computers and digital media. However, this is not necessary to make an unstable media artwork. Let’s take the example of the “Light-Space Modulator” (1930) by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Here is a description of the work by Moholy-Nagy himself:

*“This piece of lighting equipment is a device used for demonstrating both plays of light and manifestations of movement.*

*The model consists of a cube-like body or box, 120 x 120 cm in size, with a circular opening (stage opening) at its front side. On the back of the panel, mounted around the opening are a number of yellow, green, blue, rot, and white-toned electric bulbs (approximately 70 illuminating bulbs of 15 watts each, and 5 headlamps of 100 watts). Located inside the body, parallel to its front side, is a second panel; this panel too, bears a circular opening about which are mounted electric lightbulbs of different colors. In accordance with a predetermined plan, individual bulbs glow at different points. They illuminate a continually moving mechanism built of partly translucent, partly transparent, and partly fretted materials, in order to cause the best possible play of shadow formations on the back wall of the closed box. (When the demonstration occurs in a darkened space, the back wall of the box can be removed, and the color and shadow projection shown on a screen of any chosen size behind the box.)*

*The mechanism is supported by a circular platform on which a three-part mechanism is built. The dividing walls are made of transparent cellophane, and a metal wall made of vertical rods. Each of the three sectors of the framework accommodate a different, playful movement study, which individually goes into effect when it appears on the main disc revolving before the stage opening.*

*The first sector’s playful movement study: three rods move jerkily (since the plan of the edges and base are somewhat different) on an unbroken path. Different materials, translucent screening, parallel horizontal rods, and wire netting are mounted to the three rods.*

*The second sector’s playful movement study: found within three levels arranged one behind the other is a large immobile aluminium disc; moving up and down in front of this is a small, bent and highly-polished perforated brass disc; at the same time—between the two—a small ball is set in motion as if on a roller coaster.*

*The third sector’s playful movement: a glass rod topped by a spiral of glass. This describes, in the reverse, the movement of the pin of the large disc, whose tip touches the base made of a diagonally-arranged and sector-shaped glass disc, levitating over a reflecting circular platform.*

*This piece of lighting equipment can be used to arrive at countless optical conclusions, and it seems correct to me that the development of these attempts be continued as planned, as a way to approach the designing of light and movement.”* (Moholy-Nagy 1930)

An important point to notice here is that the Light-Space-Modulator artwork is not only the sculptural (physical) object but also how that object interacts with the space. When the “Light-Space-Modulator” is turned on, the different pieces move and then reflect the light in the room, creating abstract forms and movements over the surfaces of space where the piece is located. Since space and light on it are unstable, the “Light-Space-Modulator” was intentionally designed to embrace this instability.

The Light-Space-Modulator embraces the fusion of art and technology as promoted by the Bauhaus school. This is a connection of unstable media with the avantgarde movement.

László Moholy-Nagy (1895-1946) was a Hungarian painter, photographer, filmmaker, graphic designer, and influential figure in modern and avantgarde art. He is particularly known for his contributions to the Bauhaus school and his pioneering work in multiple artistic disciplines. The Light-Space-Modulator is considered a pioneering piece in the field of kinetic art and unstable media (The Art Story 2023).

His view on the autonomy of art and autonomous art institutions can be seen in his Bauhaus teaching. *“When Walter Gropius invited him to teach at the Bauhaus, in Dessau, Germany, he took over the school's crucial preliminary course, and* ***gave it a more practical, experimental, and technological bent****. He later delved into various fields, from commercial design to theatre set design, and also made films and worked as a magazine art director.”* (The Art Story 2023)

Also, he believed that artists should address new technologies like the photo camera.

*“His interest in photography encouraged his belief that artists' understanding of vision had to specialize and modernize. Artists used to be dependent on the tools of perspective drawing, but with the advent of the camera* ***they had to learn to see again. They had to renounce the classical training of previous centuries****, which encouraged them to think about the history of art and to reproduce old formulas and experiment with vision, thus stretching human capacity to new tasks.”* (The Art Story 2023)

He also believed that artists had the potential to challenge the status quo of modernity by embracing new technologies. *“Moholy-Nagy believed that humanity could only defeat the fracturing experience of modernity - only feel whole again - if it harnessed the potential of new technologies. Artists should transform into designers, and through specialization and experimentation find the means to answer humanity's needs.”* (The Art Story 2023)

As we can see, almost half a century before the V2 Unstable Media Manifesto, the seed of unstable media thinking was present in key figures of the (historic) avantgarde. There are several essential points to notice here. In the first place, notice that the art object produced by the Light-space modulator is not only the machine itself but the whole context in which it is placed and activated. The aesthetic object behind the Light-space modulator is not static but dynamic. This includes its interactivity with the space, time, and viewers. Such a change of perspective will be essential for our look at computer art and the avantgarde in the following chapters.