Finding the future avant-garde: the role of artist and critic in relation to the meta-object

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This paper seeks to contextualize the development of the meta-object in the presence of digital culture, examining it as a form of cultural resistance to the art institution and related systems. The meta-object, a reflexive form of the art object realized through postmodern digital culture, is shown to call into question pre-existing definitions of critical distance. Historical precedents of art as institutional resistance are examined in relation to definitions of the avant-garde and framed as developing the meta-object. The issue of critical distance is explored with regard to the meta-object through Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit* (1971), along with metacreativity and questions of future institutional resistance.

Since World War I, art has continually been used as an avenue through which cultural resistance is realized. Starting in the 1960s, resistance towards the institution of art itself began to manifest as what can be referred to as the meta-object, a specific form of the art object created through self-objectification and self-reference. This term is not new, in fact, it has been used in computer science to refer to objects that can create or manipulate other objects.[1] This meta-object is reflective of the digital culture it was created in, using abstraction and later the metacreative process to critique ideas of objecthood and push forward art practice. One such instance of the meta-object can be found in Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit* (1971), which along with other conceptualist work helps to force a reconsideration of the definition of 'critical distance' previously thought to separate an artist's objecthood from the critic's observation. The concept of the meta-object has been explored by what, at this point, can be considered a metacreative process by artists such as David Rokeby in *Very Nervous System* (1986-1990), using systems created in digital culture to simulate existence within digital culture. However effective the meta-object was at pushing forward art practice, each time it was utilized as a form of institutional resistance, the institution of art was able to co-opt and absorb these practices, legitimizing them as art object. This will be discussed in relation to contemporary work that has been shown to be successful in critiquing cultural narratives such as American Artist's *Mother of All Demos II* (2021) and *Master-Slave Flip-Flop* (2021), where the potential for meta-object exists, but is not utilized as the act of rebellion is simply an exercise where the object stays trapped within the institution. These observations provoke a question: is the meta-object alone capable of creating meaningful institutional critique in the contemporary, or has the very practice of rebellion become fully absorbed by the institution?

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[1] Kiczales, Gregor, Jim des Rivières, and Daniel G. Bobrow. *The Art of the Metaobject Protocol*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

Peter Bürger makes a clear distinction between two different postwar avant-gardes in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. The first, the historical avant-garde, is the period of art encompassing post World War I Europe (this includes the Dadaists, the Futurists, as well as the Constructivists). These movements are marked by Bürger as avant-garde due to their ability to be critical of the art institution. They are categorized as historical because they are the first movements to oppose such an institution due to the fact that the modern 'institution' itself was in its infancy.[2] Bürger further elaborates that one substantial reason these works eventually became institutionalized was due to the fact that they were only able to modify the definition of a work of art, not destroy it as a concept.[3] After the Second World War, Bürger argues, came the neo-avant-garde. He characterizes this avant-garde as being partially responsible for the institutionalization of the previous avant-garde, pointing to the use of similar aesthetics to negate the intentions of the historical avant-gardists.[4] His analysis and categorization of these movements as avant-garde is not shown to legitimize them as such, but rather to show that artists have attempted to create forms of cultural resistance since the advent of the modern art institution.

From Bürger's analysis of the historical and neo avant-gardes, a question emerges: can there exist an avant-garde within digital culture, where the art institution is accepting of 'rebellious' work? In *The Rise of Metacreativity: AI Aesthetics After Remix*, Eduardo Navas contextualizes developments such as net.art and non-fungible tokens as avant-garde in their attempt to decommodify the art object. However, he classifies them as functioning "primarily as

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[2] Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," The Art Bulletin 90, no. 4 (2008): 532, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20619633.

[3] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 51.

[4] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 57.

an institutional trope that legitimizes art as a commodifiable cultural discourse with little delay in the assimilation of new work."[5] In other words, this avant-garde is one which chooses not to resist institutionalization, which in my view is not because it does not want to, but because it does not know how. Navas discusses this type of art production as the meta-avant-garde.

Just as many powerful cultural influences in Western art come during periods of conflict, so too does technological advancement. War is certainly not something that can be rivaled by any non-violent cultural development in terms of its influence on modern technological innovation. This is not to say that non-violent catalysts can be just as culturally influential, but that significantly more resources are directed towards these ends during times of conflict.[6] Nuclear fission, the computer, and the internet are three such developments that have lasting and far-reaching effects on culture (developed in the Second World War and the Cold War respectively). The former, in its most violent capacity as the atomic bomb, served as the catalyst to end the Second World War and indirectly helped to introduce Alan Turing's computer as a social tool rather than the intricate calculator it existed as during the war.[7] Now, it would be naive to simply diagnose these developments as dictating the current culture in a vacuum. These developments are all symptoms of the culture they were created within, meant to serve the needs of that system. Namely, as Charles Gere asserts in *Digital Culture*, the computer and the internet are meant to serve a capitalist society increasingly reliant on information as the dominant focus

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[5] Eduardo Navas, *The Rise of Metacreativity: AI Aesthetics After Remix*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022), 240.

[6] Tom Nicholas. "Why Schumpeter Was Right: Innovation, Market Power, and Creative Destruction in 1920s America." *The Journal of Economic History* 63, no. 4 (2003), 1027. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3132364.

[7] Charles Gere, *Digital Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 62.

of production.[8] This notion that technological advancement comes as a symptom of culture is not unique to digital technology. In fact, the same can be said about machinery such as the silk loom as society first began to industrialize. Not only was it created to optimize the production of textiles, but the mechanism by which the silk loom operated (punch cards) was in turn able to inform Charles Babbage's analytical engine. Babbage's machine was originally meant to be used for accounting, but mathematician Ada Lovelace later observed that the machine could be 'programmed,' in turn helping to inform Turing's machine (although it seems redundant to mention that the analytical engine was created in service of societies need for the optimization of bookkeeping software, it is important to recognize). Claims regarding culture as an informant for technology can even be made for materials as ubiquitous as paper.[9]

As Western society became increasingly dependent on information, so too did Western art. In the period between 1965 and 1975, several artistic microcosms of the societal response to an increasingly digital culture now known under the wider umbrella of conceptualism emerged. Before elaborating, it is important to define exactly what is meant by 'conceptual' in a way that is plastic enough to stretch past 1975. In addition to being used to describe the movement to dematerialize the art object between 1965 and 1975 (this is how it is colloquially used among art historians), it will also be used to describe all art that will be highlighted from here onwards. This is due to the fact that the framework introduced by the 'conceptualists' of this period is reflective of the practice of art-making in digital culture, and it is not a process that was abandoned after 1975. In other words, the word 'conceptual' is not restrictive enough to be confined to the range of years presented given the similarities between the artworks highlighted.

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[8] Gere, *Digital Culture.*
[9] Mark Kurlansky, *Paper: Paging Through History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), xiv.

An artist who can be considered conceptualist by this definition is Adrian Piper. While at the School of Visual Arts in New York in the late 1960s, she detailed a move towards a consideration of "space, time, and the objects within it."[10] Being an African-American woman living in the United States during this time, this move led her to explore and question concepts of race, gender, and identity in general. One such piece that does this is *Food for the Spirit* (1971). Piper created this piece when writing a paper on Emmanual Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. During this time, she isolated herself socially while practicing fasting and yoga. During this time, Piper would photograph and film herself naked in the mirror with a personal camera and tape recorder, often while reciting passages from her reading. Each of the fourteen photos she took was then placed in a notebook also containing her annotated pages of Kant's writing.[11]

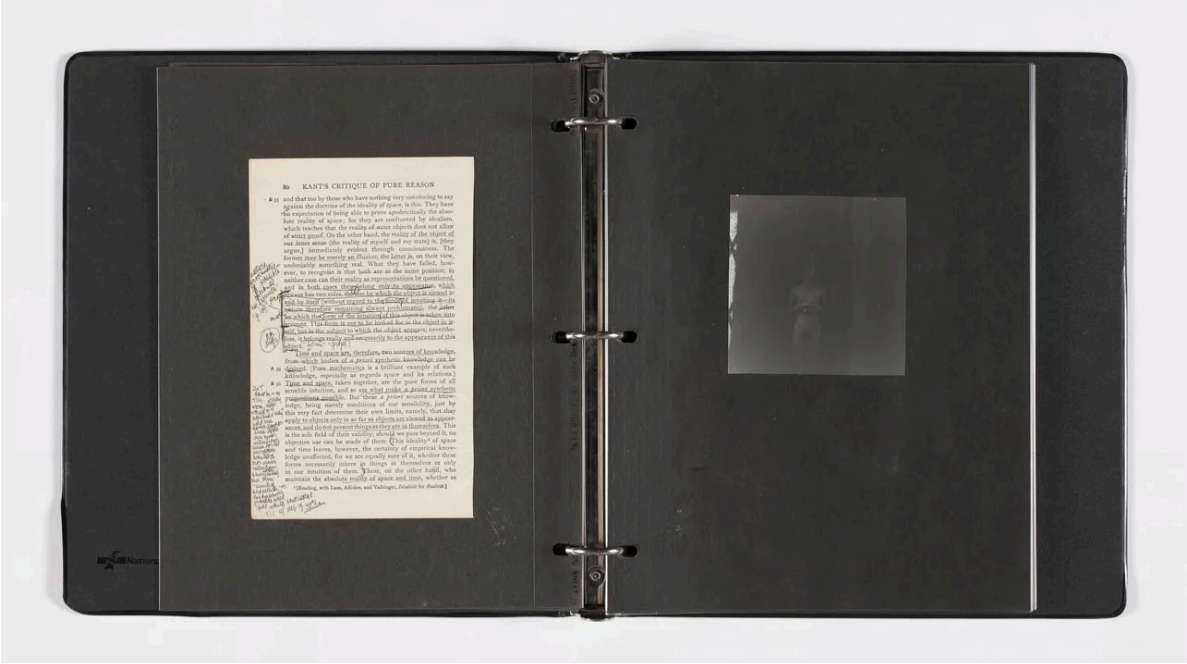

Figure 1: Adrian Piper, *Food For The Spirit* (1971). Courtesy of Lévy Gorvy

[10] Piper, Adrian. "Flying" in *Adrian Piper*, exh. cat. (Birmingham: Ikon Gallery and Manchester: CornerHouse, 1991), 23.

[11] Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer, eds., *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 197.

Piper's work can be considered conceptual because it operationalizes many methods implemented by conceptualists: she documents a performance with photographs and notes. This is something many conceptual artists did for work that did not result in material object production. Here Piper is providing, for lack of better words, food for the spirit. The title frames the work as an abstract concept rather than a physical manifestation of an art object. The inclusion of her own annotations of written word only further serves this purpose when presented in tandem with photographs of her body. The viewer is forced to consider not the materiality of the human body or words on paper, but their presence as objects. This is where Piper is successfully able to question her own objectification in relation to surrounding culture and philosophy.

Although many early conceptual artists show no material relation to the machine, their work is decidedly digital. 'Digital' is referred to not in the sense of being perceived through a screen, but in the sense that an object can be dematerialized in the first place due to a reliance on a specific set of instructions that, if not followed their work would not be successful. This is effectively what digital culture offered to the late and postmodern artist, the ability to operate on a purely conceptual basis. This is reflected in the way that digital capitalism[12] must operate in order to survive. The lifeline of digital capitalism is its ability to control and circulate signs, removing them from the signifier so they can be circulated more easily through means of abstraction.[13] It is this same abstraction that the conceptual artist makes use of in their work.

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[12] 'Digital capitalism' refers to what many historians and scholars such as Frederic Jameson would refer to as 'late' or 'postmodern' capitalism. The use of digital emphasizes its existence within a digital culture.

[13] Gere, *Digital Culture*.

Without the digital capitalist notion of the art object itself, there is no way to abstract from it. In Pipers *Food for the Spirit*, this abstraction is used to question her objecthood in an increasingly digital society. Without the digital capitalist idea of woman-as-object,[14] there is no way for Piper to question the objecthood of being a woman. Similar abstractions can also be seen in works such as Robert Rauschenberg's *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* (1973), where the capitalist concept of the material, here cardboard, is needed to make the work successful. This piece consists of a cardboard box with a threaded metal rod protruding from it, whose other end is encased in a misshapen ball of concrete. The idea of the cardboard box as a cheap vessel to store objects, allows this work to successfully question objecthood with the context of transport and exchange. The cardboard box is covered in sand and the back is painted a neon orange, reflecting a soft glow off the wall behind it. It is this glow with which he invites the audience to not only experience the piece itself, but also experience the space around the piece, making the lighting of the gallery, the walls, and most importantly the visual perception of the viewer active participants in the piece. This practice of encouraging conceptual participation was used earlier in Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) and John Cage's *4'33* (1952). The former are 'blank' canvases filled with white paint and the latter is four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. Each of these pieces forces the space around them to actively participate in the work, whether it be the noise of the audience or the dust particles in the gallery. This conceptual participation is the foundation that will help lay the conceptual groundwork for what will be referred to from here forward as the 'meta-object.'[15]

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[14] Willow Verkerk, "Reification, Sexual Objectification, and Feminist Activism," in *The Spell of Capital: Reification and Spectacle*, ed. Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 149–62, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1pk3jqt.11.

[15] Although realized after Piper's *Food for the Spirit*, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* demonstrates the conceptual basis for Rauschenberg's earlier work. It is presented here to represent a culmination of that particular practice for Rauschenberg.

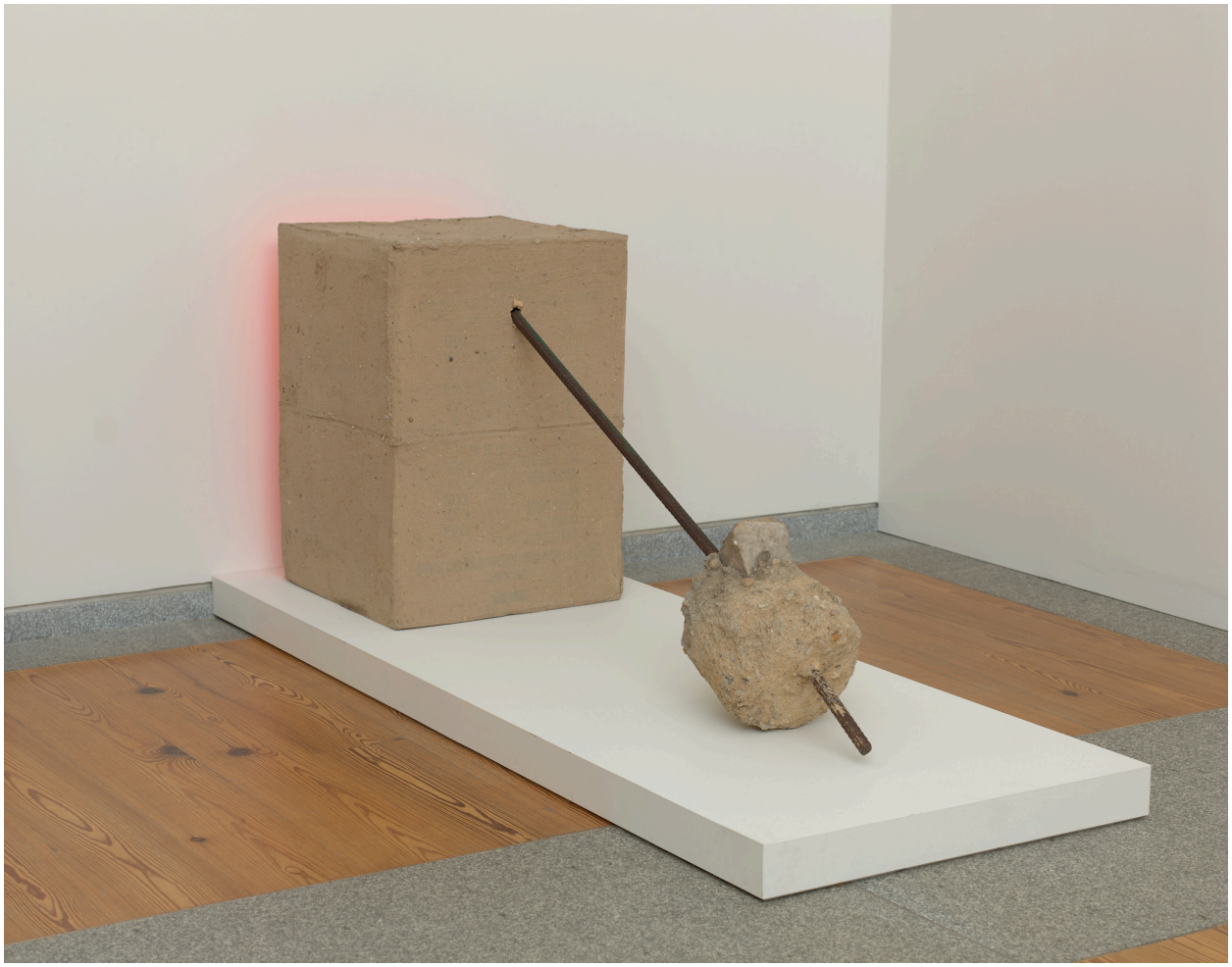

Figure 2: Robert Rauschenberg, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* (1973). Courtesy of the Portland Museum of Art.

The next step in the creation of this meta-object can be seen in Piper's *Food for the Spirit*. In this piece, Piper creates a dialogue with Kant's discussion of perception by objectifying herself as the subject of her own work.[16] This presents a conceptual framework for a discussion of the objectification of the Other, just as Piper had done earlier with works such as *Catalysis* (1970). In her words: "I experimented with my own objecthood, transforming it sculpturally as I

[16] Goldstein, *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, 169.

had other objects."[17] Where this work becomes fully successful, at least in the sense of moving art practice forward, is in how she uses herself as the object in the piece. In doing this, she not only calls on the history of objectification regarding her identity but also asks intriguing questions about the object itself, which she has asserted herself to be. The self-referentiality presented here is the key in the creation of the meta-object. Where Rauschenberg simply presented the object as a means to encourage conceptual participation,[18] acting as the artist and leaving it at that, Piper is able to critique the object itself, acting as simultaneously the artist and the critic. In this way, she is able to create a work from the point of view of the signifier, that which has been robbed in the creation of the signification. Additionally, this allows for the work to be simultaneously perceived as an artifact of the process as well as the process itself. Not only does she create the object as the artist, encouraging conceptual participation based on her handwritten analysis of Kant, but she then appropriates it as the critic, juxtaposing it with pictures of herself, now both the objectified and the objectifier. It is important to make a distinction between this practice and that of Rauschenberg and similar artists. To create the meta-object, It is not enough to just present the object in order to question objecthood or the object itself. In Piper's case, she must become the object. Here, the 'object' itself is questioning the nature of objecthood, as opposed to the 'human' (critic, artist) maintaining a safe distance. This distance between the artist and the object is not only what separates the object from meta-object, but also what separates the critic from the artist.

Piper's work is in direct conversation with Lucy Lippard's curatorial approach. Lippard held throughout her career that if art could be anything that the artist wanted, then so too could

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[17] Piper, "Flying," 24.

[18] Beatrice Johnson, "Sand Into Stone: Untitled (Early Egyptian) and the Personal Myths of Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly," Rauschenberg Foundation, 7, https://rauschenbergfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/Johnson_SandintoStone.pdf.

be criticism.[19] She created a number of works challenging the notion that one could not also be the other (See her four exhibitions *557,087* (1969) in Seattle, *955,000* (1969) in Vancouver, *2,972,453* (1970) in Buenos Aires, and *C. 7,500* (1973) in Valencia, California) and also often referred to her art as criticism. Her practice is informed by a need for reflection on works of art that challenge material form itself.

The distance used to distinguish between the critic and the artist can be referred to as 'critical distance.' In the social sciences, this is what allows for 'objective' analysis of certain cultural phenomena. In the specific case of art, it can be seen as a measurement of emotional separation when placing judgment on objects. The artist, because of their emotional investment in the artwork, is unable to maintain critical distance. The critic, because of their emotional detachment from the artwork (if such a thing really can exist), keeps this distance.[20] To further illustrate this difference between artist and critic, Roland Barthes' definition of the metalanguage and language-object can be applied. The language-object makes up the language of a first-order semiological system, one in which myth has not taken hold. This is where actions and a linguistic system can reside, where the form and concept are brought together by the artist. The metalanguage, on the other hand, is where the language-object is taken hold of and used to speak

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[19] Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, ed. Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 27.

[20] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 87, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12100qm.
This is the 'certain minimal aesthetic distance' referred to by Jameson. He makes an argument similar to Eduardo Navas pertaining to the struggle of existence for counter-cultural forms (avant-gardes) post-modernism, and focuses on arguing for the abolition of 'critical distance' as an idea. Unlike Jameson, the goal here is to reframe this definition using predefined semiotic systems rather than cast it aside in the context of new cultural developments.

about itself. This is the language of the critic.[21] In other words, the language-object (artist's language) *speaks things* and the metalanguage (critic's language) speaks *of* things. When the artist creates art, they are speaking the art. The art is the meaning of their action. When the critic observes this art, they speak *about* it, having been removed from the action of creating. The critic must maintain a 'critical distance' from the art object in order to understand it as an object from a human (non-object) perspective. In this way, the artist can become part of an object for them to critique. Now the question must be asked: should this notion of 'critical distance' as purely having to do with 'emotional attachment' be reevaluated? It seems that 'critical distance' simply refers to the judgment of that which has been objectified. This is what the meta-object does; it questions its own objecthood. In this way, it allows for the artist to maintain a certain 'critical distance' from their own work, as Piper demonstrates by using her objectification as a female minority to question the very nature of objecthood according to her own interpretation of Kant. She is able to do this by becoming the object. Once this happens, she can critique it as human (non-object) with her analysis of Kant through her own identity. In order to create the meta-object, the artist does not necessarily need to become the 'object' as Piper does. In fact, utilization of the meta-creative process is perhaps the most straightforward way to realize the meta-object, as both exist as products of digital culture.

Metacreativity, as defined by Eduardo Navas, involves replacing a portion of the creative process with a non-human element (often a machine or piece of technology).[22] In relation to digital technology or otherwise, this effectively standardizes the results of the process to be

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[21] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 114-149.

[22] Navas, *The Rise of Metacreativity: AI aesthetics after remix*, 12.

consistent but limited due to the process being made stable and reliable.[23] This result mirrors one that digital culture aims to produce. As certain aspects of production within society automated in order to optimize the production and transport of commodifiable objects and later information (e.g. steam engine, printing press, computer), the metacreative process defined here began to be used to create artwork.

As digital technology advanced, artists began using metacreativity as a tool to create the meta-object, using the act of self-reference not with themselves, but with the system. One artist who employs this practice is David Rokeby. In his *Very Nervous System* (1986-2000), he utilizes cameras, computers, synthesizers, and an image processor to create sound based on the movement of one's body in space.

Figure 3: David Rokeby, *Very Nervous System* (1993 Potsdam installation view). Courtesy of David Rokeby.

[23] Navas, *The Rise of Metacreativity: AI aesthetics after remix*, 242-243.

Here, interactivity is both physically and conceptually at play. Without the viewer present to move, there is no piece (in the same sense that without the gallery wall and the light, *Untitled (Early Egyptian)* would not exist in its full capacity). Rokeby outlines his reasoning for creating the piece to be 'a simple impulse towards contrariness,' citing the difficulties of using the computer as a medium due to its logical biases.[24] In working against the logical biases of the computer, Rokeby allows the viewer to simulate a response to the system of digital culture itself, having the piece reflect the system it was created in. This objectifies the viewer, where they can then become the meta-object by considering their place within the system and affecting it as the artist, then again acting as the critic in a continuous loop. He emphasizes that *Very Nervous System* is meant to present an intimate relationship between the viewer and the system, and should not be considered an instrument, because that 'implies a level of control which [he is] not particularly interested in.'[25] He uses the word 'system' here to describe the piece itself, but it could just as easily be used in this context to describe digital culture, as the system he created is a realization of his own experience within digital culture. The self-referentiality here not only comes with the user and their own objecthood, but also with the piece meaning to simulate the system it was created with. Here, an objectified representation of the system can be used to ask questions about objectification and objecthood within the system. In this way, Rokeby is able to turn both the system and the user into meta-object.

It is important to understand that the meta-object is an artistic luxury afforded by existence within digital culture. In art, it is a use of the act of digital capitalist abstraction against

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[24] David Rokeby, "*Very Nervous System*," http://www.davidrokeby.com/vns.html.

[25] Rokeby, "*Very Nervous System*," http://www.davidrokeby.com/vns.html.

itself.[26] In computer science, the term metaobject first emerged in 1991 in *The Art of the Metaobject Protocol* by Gregor Kiczales, Jim des Rivieres, and Daniel G. Bobrow. In this book, they introduce a new approach to programming language design for the language LISP (created in 1960). This approach was predicated on the idea that the programmer should be able to create a program that can inspect and create its own structure. In other words, the programmer is able to create their own 'blueprints' for different types of objects (not to be confused with different type systems already built into the language, as other programming languages created around the same time such as C already had this feature). Now, it is important to recognize that conceptual artists were also employing this approach to the construction of meaning from 1965 onwards.[27] In the same way that programmers were learning to use the system defined for them by digital culture, so too were artists. The first step towards the meta-object was taken by early 'conceptualist' artists such as Hans Haacke,[28] Joseph Kosuth,[29] and Rauschenberg[30] by simply questioning the object presented and the nature of objecthood itself. The next step, taken by artists such as Piper with *Food For The Spirit*, involves not only questioning the object presented and challenging the very notion of objecthood itself, but also presents a critique of an already-objectified piece of art; one where the artist can also act as critic. Further exploration of the meta-object comes with the meta-creative process, in pieces like Rokeby's *Very Nervous*

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[26] See earlier mentioned works such as Piper's *Food For the Spirit*. She is able to use the abstraction afforded to her by digital culture (digital capitalism's ability to abstract concept from form to modulate and commodify ideas as defined by Gere in *Digital Culture*) to objectify herself and create commentary not only on her objecthood but on the culture which created it.
[27] Jane Farver, ed., *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin, 1950-1980s* (New York: Queens Museum of Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

[28] See *Condensation Cube* (1963-65)

[29] See *One and Three Chairs* (1965)

[30] See *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953)

System, where the meta-object is simultaneously the user and the system created. After examining the use of the meta-object through the development of digital culture, a question still remains: is it possible to create true cultural resistance with it, incapable of being institutionalized?

To begin to attempt to answer this question, contemporary examples of widely accepted works in relation to the meta-object can be examined. Two such examples are *Mother of All Demos II* (2021) and *Master-Slave Flip-Flop* (2021) by American Artist.[31] The former is a monochrome CRT monitor attached to a computer encased in dirt with a dark black tar-like substance on the keyboard, positioned with handprints on either side of the table in the same substance. The monitor screen displays white text on a black background and the computer posesses a fully operational linux operating system. The latter is a neon representation of a circuit component otherwise known as a master-slave JK flip-flop, a useful tool for reliable data storage and retrieval in digital devices. Each of these works was met with a widely positive reception from the art institution for their critical analysis of race in digital culture.[32] However, in terms of the meta-object, there is something interesting happening as well. In *Mother of All Demos II*, Artist is not only able to question the notion of blackness in digital culture, but is able to create an object that can, in theory, be interacted with. This is important. Here the viewer is denied the interactivity and feedback loop required to realize the meta-object. This means that in this piece, the meta-object does not truly exist, only the potential for one. In practice, one cannot sit down at the computer and utilize it to create questions of objecthood within itself, as it has

[31] American artist legally changed their name in 2013, attempting to recontextualize the meaning of the words 'american artist.' Much of their work deals with issues of race within digital culture.

[32] Mebrak Tareke, "American Artist's 'Black Gooey Universe' Decodes the Tech World," *Frieze*, published 2021, https://www.frieze.com/article/american-artist-black-gooey-universe-2021-review.

been trapped in the gallery. The same presentation of meta-object potential can be seen in *Master-Slave Flip-Flop*. Here the viewer is presented with a circuit component that is not in fact a circuit component, it is simly a diagram. If the component actually existed in a physical capacity, Artist could then use it as the critic to create meta-object, and as could the viewer.[33] This is where works such as this fall short in relation to the meta-object. They remain within the gallery walls, begging to be institutionalized. This is the spirit of Navas' meta-avant-garde. The art exists as an exercise in rebellion within the institution, not as a tangible threat to the institution itself. Although an impressive use of artistic talent and critical theory, pieces like this ultimately fail to push the practice of art making forward in regards to cultural resistance. This is the failure of the meta-avant-garde. Many successful artists of this classification fail to bridge the 'critical distance' necessary to create the meta-object, ultimately limiting their ability to push forward art practice.

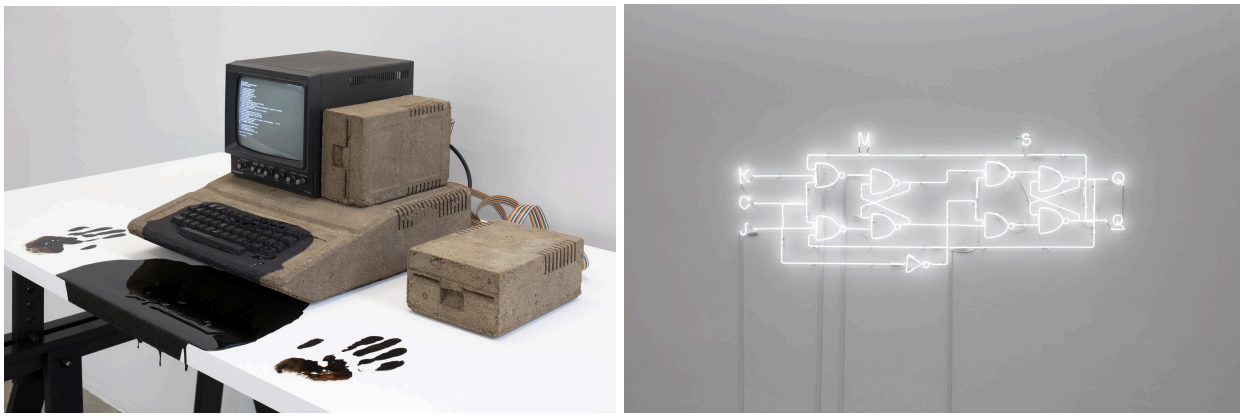

Figure 4: American Artist, *Mother of All Demos II* (2021) (Left). American Artist, *Master Slave Flip-Flop* (2021) (Right). Courtesy of American Artist.

[33] Assuming Artist would construct the component to be used.

In the future, other modes of creation and presentation should continue to be explored: interactivity, collaboration, and appropriation as mediums, in direct relation to aesthetics. Art practice as a discipline is faced with a question as it has been since the advent of modernism: can artwork that is truly rebellious to a system be created from within the confines of that system? Starting in the mid 1960s, artists began to use the abstraction afforded to them by the advent of digital culture. This use of abstraction, known first as conceptualism, was often able to question either objecthood itself or the objectification of the presented work (shown prior to 'conceptualism' in work such as Rauschenberg's). A number of artworks of particular interest post-1965 introduce the meta-object. This meta-object, a product of digital culture, is often created by acts of self-reference like in Adrian Piper's *Food for the Spirit* or through the metacreative process like in David Rokeby's *Very Nervous System*. The meta-object is able to call into question the definition of 'critical distance' and further blurs the line between critic and artist, helping to create work that is momentarily rebellious to the institution. The institution, however, has been able to absorb this work up to this point, merely allowing for the expansion of what can be considered as the paradigm of art object. In contemporary times, most successful work goes through the action of resistance fully knowing it will and allowing itself to be absorbed by the institution. When observed through the lens of the avant-garde, both historically through Bürger and more recently through Navas, we can see that utilizing the meta-object alone is simply not enough to be considered a true form of cultural resistance in contemporary art practice. Although it serves as an important tool in bridging the 'critical distance' between artist and critic, the art institution is too quick to accept and absorb both conceptually and physically rebellious artistic gestures as trends and allow them to be understood as within the paradigm of art object.

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