Automatism in visual art, past and present:

A research on the use of automatism through art movements and its continued use to present art.

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Introduction

"Arrivèe de toujours,qui t'en iras partout." ("Arrival of all time, who will go everywhere.")

This sentence is taken from the poem "A une Raison"[1] written by Arthur Rimbaud, known for his "verbal alchemy" and one of the poets that Andre Breton based his theory of automatic writing and on extent the use of automatism in visual arts.

Personally I believe that this sentence gives the essence of the conscious and unconscious mind. The unconscious has always been active even before realisation of the self[2] and spontaneously accessible.

At the point in a person's life that they become aware of the existence of the unconscious, they recognise the vastness of it and its relation to everything that defines their existence[3]. In this recognition of the existence of the unconscious and on "free associations"[4] Freudian technique is where Andre Breton founded the base for his theory of automatism and the definition of Surrealism.

In his 1st manifesto of surrealism Breton proclaimed "…pure physical automatism, by which an attempt is made to express, either verbally, in writing or in another manner, the true functioning of thought. The dictation of thought, in the absence of all control by reason, excluding any aesthetic or moral preoccupation". Including any artistic action free from any form of logic and based on spontaneous, irrational, chance, improvisation and dreams as representations of the subconscious, based on Freudian theories.[5]

Although automatism was widely introduced by Andre Breton and the surrealism movement, it was used previously throughout history. William Blake was the first that included dreams as visions for his paintings, whilst Leonardo Da Vinci's suggestion to apprentices was to explore nature and allow spontaneous associations to 'trigger' their imagination.[6]

There is also the example of watercolorist Alexander Cozens, who based his "blot drawings"[7] on "free manipulation of ink" and produced books of instruction for this method. In addition automatic methods were also used by mediums as a form of communication with the spirit world.

British painter Austin Osman Spare, a practitioner of the occult, also used automatism and based his "Sigil Theory"[8] about the self on the practice of automatic drawing.

During World War I artists and intellectual refugees in Zurich, created a group of "anti-art" and named the movement Dada.
One of the principals of Dada was art created by chance; it was the beginning of the informal recognition of automatism, although it was not to be used in its deeper psychological extent of the surrealists. Encyclopedia Britannica indicates that one of the questions asked by the Dadaists was that "if art (as Redon had realised) is not within the reach of will, how is it different from chance?" Some of the French Dada artists practiced surrealism as well, until surrealism prevailed in the mid-1920s, instigating the end of the Dadaist movement.

Surrealism expanded not only in Europe but in America, by inspiring a group of young American artists, who formed the "Abstract expressionists", experimenting with the

technique of automatism and reaching with it in an advanced level of its manipulation. The path opened to new American artists to experiment with fresh art methods.

In the years to follow around 1946, a new group formed, based in Quebec Canada, with the name "Les Automtistes", influenced by surrealism and basing their work towards automatism.
While in Europe after WWII two groups formed, similar to "Abstract Expressionists" and by maintaining the spontaneity of automatism, one under the name of "Art Informel", with one of their popular techniques "Tachism", and the other by the name "COBRA", around 1948, by the initials of Copenhagen Brussels Amsterdam. As Christian Dotremont, one of the main figures of the group wrote in 1968 "COBRA? It's like going on a journey. You fall asleep, you wake up, you don't know whether you've just passed Copenhagen, Brussels or Amsterdam."

Automatism was also used informally by individual artists in other movements of art, such as "Funk Art", which was compared with the surrealists for their vivid colors, their aggression and use of the irrational. During the 70s a group called "Neo-surrealist" formed who had fundamental differences with the surrealism of Andre Breton, as they abandoned the use of automatism in the aspect of total freedom of thought, and preferred more controlled figurative representations of the imaginary.

While approaching the 21st century it is worth noticing the use of automatism in different forms and techniques by artists around the world, including a significant part in my personal art work where consciousness and unconscious have an unbreakable, complementary relationship; automatism is used in my work in order to unveil information, memories, experiences that stay obscure in my unconscious.

In all of these movements and artists previously mentioned, as well as myself, the use of automatism has defined in a way the overall art practice and in extension the development of the art world. However there are main differences in the way that the notion of automatism is comprehended and the role that it plays in art practice, which is what I will be discussing within this paper.