

TECHNO

National Museum Zurich | 21.3.25 – 17.8.25 | Level 2 Extension Wing

Tour of the exhibition

Divided into a prologue and five chapters, the exhibition explores techno culture in all its diversity, as one of Switzerland's living traditions. It shows how music and communal dancing gave birth to an entire youth culture with social, economic and aesthetic dimensions, and traces the evolution of techno from the 1980s to the new millennium. Objects and the voices of people who were part of it all tell the story of a subculture that became a billion-dollar industry.

Prologue

The exhibition starts with an introductory look at the historical context in which the techno phenomenon emerged in the late 1980s, both in Switzerland and elsewhere. This was an era of transition from the industrial to the information society. Electrical appliances and consumer electronics were becoming more affordable, paving the way for our digital world. At the same time, the 1980s was a decade characterised by social upheaval: a video installation showing news clips of events ranging from the youth protests in Zurich to the Chernobyl nuclear disaster to the fall of the Berlin Wall highlights these developments.

Pinboards dedicated to Detroit (United States), Berlin (Germany) and Zurich show the different social and economic contexts that favoured the spread of techno. Despite their very different reasons for embracing the movement, these three cities would go on to become celebrated techno and party hotspots. In Detroit, young Afro-American DJs used techno as an expression of protest, thus revitalising the run-down inner city area beset by economic decline. In Berlin, techno flourished around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Imbued with a spirit of optimism, the city's creative scene transformed Detroit techno into the 'sound of reunification'. In Zurich, the impact of the protests staged by young people in 1980 continued to be felt, along with their demands for cultural spaces where they would be free to express themselves. Youth movements that distinguished themselves from other youth movements were looking for their own responses to conservative values and laws.

Lastly, two pieces by artist Bogomir Doring explore what techno means today. A visual study of club culture in Kyiv (Ukraine) and Tbilisi (Georgia) makes it clear that, in times of war and crisis, partying can serve as a coping mechanism and act of resistance: Kyiv's flourishing techno scene has been severely disrupted by the war and forced to reflect on the contradiction of clubbing during wartime. In Tbilisi, the Bassiani club has become a focus for LGBTQIA+ persons fighting back against state-sponsored violence and repression in addition to social prejudice and discrimination. As well as helping techno gain new popularity, social media is now changing the way people dance, as shown in a TikTok video installation.

DJ

In the late 1980s, DJs in Detroit developed the genre of electronic music that would become known as techno. The use of electronic instruments like synthesizers and drum machines – some of which are on display in the exhibition – gave early techno tracks their characteristic mechanical sound. Visitors can find out how these instruments work and check out the sounds they produce at an interactive ‘sample bar’.

By experimenting with technologies that were considered cutting-edge at the time – from traditional turntables and mixing desks right through to sound effects machines, samplers and software – DJs repeatedly stretched the possibilities of playing recorded music for a live audience. They blended tracks together to create smooth transitions that produced a non-stop, propulsive flow and hence a more intense dance experience. Vintage record cases once used by leading names on the scene show how, by making the rounds from club to club, DJs played a key role in spreading the sound.

MUSIC

Visitors can experience the musical diversity of the techno scene in a setting designed to look like a record shop. In the second half of the 1980s, producers in Detroit developed techno as a fusion of different styles such as disco, hip hop and electronic pop music. With its repetitive rhythms, synthesizer sounds, sparse vocals and fast tempo, this dance music was heavily infused by other styles of electronic music.

Techno music continued to develop throughout the 1990s, diverging into numerous subgenres including trance, hardcore, and ambient. This highly diverse spectrum of music became the sound of the 1990s.

The record shop lets visitors explore these genres by listening to selected tracks. Disc covers, magazines and posters illustrate the connections and forms of communication within the scene. They provide a first glimpse into the visual universe of techno, featuring geometric abstractions, the future of technologies and the blending of man and machine.

SPACE

A photo gallery shows how techno culture took over spaces and transformed them. Abandoned industrial buildings were turned into techno clubs, while the great outdoors and urban niches were also reclaimed as party venues.

The late 1980s saw the spread first of acid house, then techno, thanks to mobile discos and raves. In those days, venue licensing laws, fixed closing times and regulations that required new businesses to establish a need for their existence limited the places where people could revel late into the night. Alongside parties in established discotheques and cultural centres, the scene sought to create new sanctuaries of freedom and expression in illegal basement bars or in the public space.

In the mid-1990s techno transitioned from a subculture to a mass phenomenon: this was the era of monster raves, like the one at the Gugelmann industrial estate in Roggwil in the canton of Bern. Zurich's Street Parade, held for the first time in 1992, also helped techno gain both visibility and popularity. Many cantons liberalised their regulations affecting the hospitality sector, thus making it easier for lots of new clubs to open.

However, these newly created nightlife spaces were controversial, as is shown by documents such as noise prevention posters and calls to take part in dance demonstrations. While legal hurdles and conflicts with local residents and authorities imposed restrictions on venues, they also encouraged professionalisation. For the most part, these clubs breathed new life into former industrial areas. Over time this additionally played a gentrifying role, which ultimately squeezed the clubs out again.

CLUB

As visitors move into the 'Club' area of the exhibition, they hear an audio collage in which club-goers describe their own personal relationship with techno, dance and community.

Sound and video installations conjure up a clubroom atmosphere. Original objects from various techno clubs illustrate different aspects of club culture. Getting into a club often involves being checked at the door. This can be exclusionary, but it can also create a sense of community and of being in a social safe space. The difficult balancing act between inclusion and exclusion is addressed through objects such as membership cards and awareness posters.

For many, a sense of euphoria, whether induced by legal or illegal substances, is part of club-going. An HPLC unit – a mobile device used at parties for testing drugs – exemplifies the harm reduction interventions pioneered by the Swiss and the Dutch in their drug policies. In the middle of the room, another video work by Bogomir Doring shows a bird's eye view of dancefloors and invites viewers to detect patterns and interactions in the dancing throng. This work offers an unusual perspective on the phenomenon of dance and its social dimension.

Objects such as entry tickets and a box office serve as a reminder that clubs are also business establishments. As its popularity grew, the techno movement became more commercialised and began to acquire numerous sponsors. At the same time, nightlife and major events like the Street Parade were also discovered as a source of tourist income.

Last but not least, clubs are also spaces for creativity. The decor from a range of clubs shows how music, lighting and architecture come together to create new worlds. Some of the equipment and interiors from Zurich's Club Zukunft can be admired in the exhibition. When the club closes its doors for good at the end of March 2025, these will become part of the collection at the Swiss National Museum.

STYLE

The final section of the exhibition explores the visual universe of techno – from fashion to graphic design to photography – and shows how the aesthetic influence of the scene has spread far beyond clubs.

In Switzerland, techno became closely associated with graphic design. An extensive collection of flyers – ranging from self-made stamps for early parties right through to professional flyers for established clubs and raves – showcases the stylistic diversity of the scene and its development from subculture to mainstream.

Techno culture is also reflected in the fashion world. Exhibits portray the presentation of the body typical of techno and the playing around with gender roles. The eccentric and colourful outfits of New York clubbing icon Susanne Bartsch, whose parties are legendary, are also on display. Techno's influence on international fashion can be seen clearly: designs by Belgium's Walter van Beirendonck and Raf Simons and from Berlin's Ottolinger label illustrate how elements of rave culture – neon colours, wide cuts, futuristic materials – have permeated high fashion collections. Swiss designers Jenny Jost, founder of the Hi-Fish label, and Idil Vice create fashion pieces especially for the techno scene, including articles of clothing with striking prints.

Photographs capture the energy and expression of people from the techno scene. They show how individuality is articulated through clothing, make-up and dance, while at the same time documenting the scene's diversity and attempts to strike a balance between personal expression and being part of a group.

As an open culture with a fondness for experimentation, techno offers space for creative development, and the exhibition shows that many of those involved in the techno scene work in the arts and in a number of different artistic genres. One example is DJ, sonic curator and artist Sassy J, whose eclectic style is informed by sundry kinds of music and her international network.