

FOUNDATIONS

**A RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE FOUNDATIONS
OF THE AESTHETICS OF SOCIAL COMPLEXITY**

A project by Paolo Cirio

Text by Lauren van Haaften-Schick

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***Foundations* reflects on the aesthetics and history of conceptual art concerning social complexity. Jack Burnham's seminal defining of "systems aesthetics" in 1968, followed by the exhibitions *Software* at the Jewish Museum and *Information* at MoMA in New York in 1970, mark a turn in art addressing social and technological systems. *Foundations* focuses on the ontologies of conceptual art examining social fields, rather than solely the making of images, forms, or gestures driven by ideas. Informed by systems, cybernetics, and communication theories, this project reckons with today's complexity in the age of algorithms, big data, and the Internet. This study and timelines by Paolo Cirio research on the genesis of the growing intersections among the domains of art, economics, politics, law, sociology, media, and technology.**

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By Paolo Cirio

I see the project *Foundations* as a study into the aesthetics of social complexity. In framing this study, I looked at both the historical and aesthetic foundations of art that considered how information and communication systems had begun to transform the world as we know it. Beginning in the early sixties, the advancement of mass media and the first computational machines began to reorganize society. As a result, the structures of economy, politics, and culture began to increase in complexity and interdependency, forming interrelated networks of social processes and systems.

Fifty years ago saw the introduction of the first electronic money transfers, world trade agreements, real time news networks, clustering of databases, and the end of the gold standard. Around the same time, the rising of the counterculture, civil and labour rights movements were amplified by new accessible media for the distribution of information and related critical semiotic theories. Artists began to respond by questioning the shaping and configuration of

systems forming social complexity, through a variety of fields and interests, such as working with linguistic, financial, and cultural systems, ultimately expanding the conventions of modern art.

Centered around the defining of “systems aesthetics” in 1968, and the following exhibitions *Information* at MoMA and *Software* at the Jewish Museum in 1970 in New York, many connected art moments can be viewed as symptomatic of the emergence of new paradigms of social complexity. As such, the timeline published here is the result of my research into this history, and it should be read like a curated exhibition and aesthetics theory that take the form of a publication and an artwork.

During my research, I wanted to move away from the general and vague notion of conceptual art, as well as art and technology, instead looking only at art that reflected on the *social implications* of information systems. Thus, I excluded minimal art, and much of the conceptual art most often associated with artists such as Sol LeWitt, whose work

is focused more on the making of visual forms with information. I have also excluded computer art, kinetic art, and work merely concerned with science and technology as material or for the making of graphic or sound forms. This research specifically looks at the aesthetics that expanded the concerns and materials of art into the social processes forming society. The full timeline in this publication however is extended to include pivotal art moments that introduced mediums and areas of interest.

My methodology for this research consisted of looking for any component in artworks or artists' practice, exhibitions, and publications that refer to any social field or process affected by information systems, including economy, law, sociology, art, and media. This is how I then refined the final charts with a selection of key moments from fifty years ago.

The chart is my curatorial and research mental process, a network of art references that are interconnected by fields, aesthetic qualities, and similar characters. These are

for me the foundations of art that define an aesthetics of social complexity and related artist practices for the last fifty years.

Considered in retrospect, that moment of art history has a significance that goes beyond systems, technology, or dematerialization, showing us the beginning of a new phase of modernism, and yet this history is still being shaped. Inevitably, this timeline is incomplete and this project is only an initial study to delineate an aesthetics theory and history that would need more research and articulation. Meanwhile, the idea is now available to anyone, with these timelines and reflections, other forms of interpretations can further this research and theory.

**Introductory text by Paolo Cirio.
Spring 2019.**

**EXPANDING
SYSTEMS:
ART,
INFORMATION
AND SOCIAL
SYSTEMS IN
THE 1960s-70s**

By Lauren van Haaften-Schick

Radical changes in the processing and transmission of *information* in the 1960s and 70s opened up new avenues for artistic experimentation, and also introduced the reorganization of industry, finance capitalism, and governance in general. Rapid developments in computing and communication technologies made landmark innovations like space travel a reality, but also sped up transactions in banking, investment, and global trade, ushering in unprecedented frontiers of financialization.¹ New capabilities for dissemination made possible via the Xerox machine sparked a surge of challenges to established exhibition models as artists experimented with the “quick, cheap, and easy” printing and copying technology²; in parallel, the new speed and simplicity of reproduction also encouraged tighter copyright restrictions. Accelerated statistical modeling enabled a war guided by numbers, where data – and the information feeding it and which it generated – could be manipulated for political gain; simultaneously, artist-activists tabulated numbers for a very different political mission of exposing

prejudice and exclusion by art institutions.³ Protests in favor of artists' rights laws surged alongside artistic experimentation with law as medium, so that at the same time artists called for greater recognition by the legal system, they also sought to undermine and interrogate its authority.⁴ None of these layered and contradictory developments occurred in isolation, and each informed, or were informed by struggles for class, gender, and racial equality, the anti-war movement, and an overall critical interest in what *information* could mean and do. Against this backdrop, artworks, the work of being an artist, and living in the world as a working artist, could no longer be considered to be independent positions or phenomenon, but only in relation to other systems.

As Jack Burnham wrote in his seminal essay *Systems Esthetics* of 1968, the 1960s marked the transition from an “*object-oriented* to a *systems-oriented culture*” wherein change ceased to be understood as emanating “from *things*,” and instead came to be seen as generated or perpetuated by “*the way things are done*.”⁵ For Burnham, “any situation,

either in or outside the context of art, may be designed and judged as a system,” and a system may contain “people, ideas, messages, atmospheric conditions, power sources, etc.”⁶ in varying degrees of order. Here, events and objects cannot be considered autonomous, but are instead observed for their points of interaction and intersection. At the same time, as in the realm of cybernetics, systems operate by virtue of their interdependent processes, self-propelling endurance and regeneration.

In a sense, systems measure the world and reflect it back to itself. What is measured, how methodologies are conceived and deployed, and what that reflection reproduces – or suppresses – has invited (necessitated even) artistic critique and intervention. For many curators at the time, this inspired an interest in computing and emergent means of communication, and in creating exhibitions that put the limits and potentials of information technologies on display. Central examples include David Katzive’s *Art By Telephone* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 1969 where instructions for artwork

fabrication were transmitted telephonically and then also exhibited, Kynaston McShine's *Information* at MoMA in 1970 featuring artists grappling with the zeitgeist term through a variety of documentary and communication techniques, and *Software* at the Jewish Museum in 1970, curated by Burnham, for which artists were invited to test the capacities of new computing systems – often over-loading them in the process.

Many artists (who outnumber the curators and institutions in this history) deployed a systems approach by taking up the logic and language of sociological data to assess the social landscape of the art world, as in Stephen Willats' 1967 *Notice*, a quasi-manifesto proposing a turn towards “outgoing socially concerned art,” Hans Haacke's series of *Gallery Visitor's Profile* works beginning in 1971 that surveyed the lifestyles and political leanings of art-viewing audiences, and Adrian Piper's *Context* series of 1970 for which the artist collected clippings, conversational snippets, and invited the public to contribute comments on the state of the relationship between art, political movements, and the

space of exhibitions.⁷ Haacke's and Piper's works took their final form as charts, graphs, publications, notebooks, and assembled documents – the visual and material tropes most readily associated with “systems aesthetics.” And yet it is key to remember that the information these works recorded was far from static. In fact, they documented actions and social landscapes operating in real-time, which were very much alive. This reminds us too that data does not end with numbers on a page, but exists in order to record processes and conditions in their evolution. In Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's terms, such artworks expose the “active processes” and the “pervasive structure” of environments, which are typically invisible, thus providing a means of direct attention and enabling us to see and understand those processes more clearly.⁸ For these artists and theorists, illuminating those processes in the right way, in the right place, and at the right time, could have material and social effects.⁹

This strand of art investigating social systems, and its overlap with conceptual art and institutional critique, also came hand in

hand with a livened interest among artists in interrogating the economic, political, and legal systems that their artwork – and which they as artists – came in contact with once participating in the art market and cultural institutions. Robert Smithson stated in an interview in 1972 that artists were now beginning to turn their interest towards “the investigation of the apparatus the artist is threaded through.”¹⁰ Taking up Smithson’s cue, we might shift our attention away from the object of art towards that which is “beyond the frame,” to use Craig Owens’ term, leading us back to Burnham’s description that a systems approach rejects “contrived confines such as the theater proscenium or picture frame.” Rather than viewing devices such as “the frame” as an enclosure that silos our attention on the object inside it, a systems lens instead illuminates the background processes and network of relations that an artwork passes through and which its value is dependent upon. Or, as McLuhan and Fiore asserted, “no detachment or frame” is even possible in the wake of high-speed “informational media,” and its total world re-ordering, for it “involves all of us, all at once.”¹¹

But because we are all entrenched in informational and media systems – threaded through them, as it were – does that mean that we also have the ability to direct the course of their flow? For McLuhan and Fiore, “there is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.”¹² At the same time, an understanding of social and cultural change is “impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments,” or without a sensitivity to and grasp of the elements and machinations of a system.¹³ The timeline printed alongside this brief essay lists some relevant artworks, exhibitions, and publications that attempted to make sense of systems and our positions within and in relation to them, or at the very least, threw their existence into relief. The project remaining for the reader is to fill in the missing historical gaps, but more so, to pull these references into the present in order to reflect on the social systems we find ourselves threaded through today.

**Text by Lauren van Haaften-Schick.
Summer 2019.**

1 Wyatt Wells, "Certificates and Computers: The Remaking of Wall Street, 1967 to 1971," *Business History Review*; Boston 74, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 193-235.

2 Michel Claura and Seth Siegelaub, "L'art conceptuel," XXe siècle 35, no. 41 (December 1973): 156-59; Lucy R. Lippard, "Postface," in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, Reprint edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 263-64.

3 Such groups include Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL), and the Los Angeles Council of Women Artists (LACWA), among others. See generally: Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 127-172; Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

4 See generally: Joan Kee, *Models of Integrity: Art and Law in Post-Sixties America* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

5 Jack Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," *Artforum* 7, no.1 (1968): 31.

6 Burnham, "Systems Esthetics," 32.

7 See: Hans Haacke, *Framing and Being Framed: 7 Works, 1970-75* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1975), 13-58; Stephen Willats, *Notice*, 1967, typescript. <http://stephenwillats.com/texts/notice-1967/>; John Parish Bowles, *Adrian Piper: Race, Gender, and Embodiment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 137-161.

8 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Message* (New York: Random House, 1967), 68.

9 As Hans Haacke summarized in an interview from 1971, "Information presented at the right time and in the right place can be potentially very powerful. It can affect the general social fabric." Jeanne Siegel, "An Interview with Hans Haacke," in *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2000), 244.

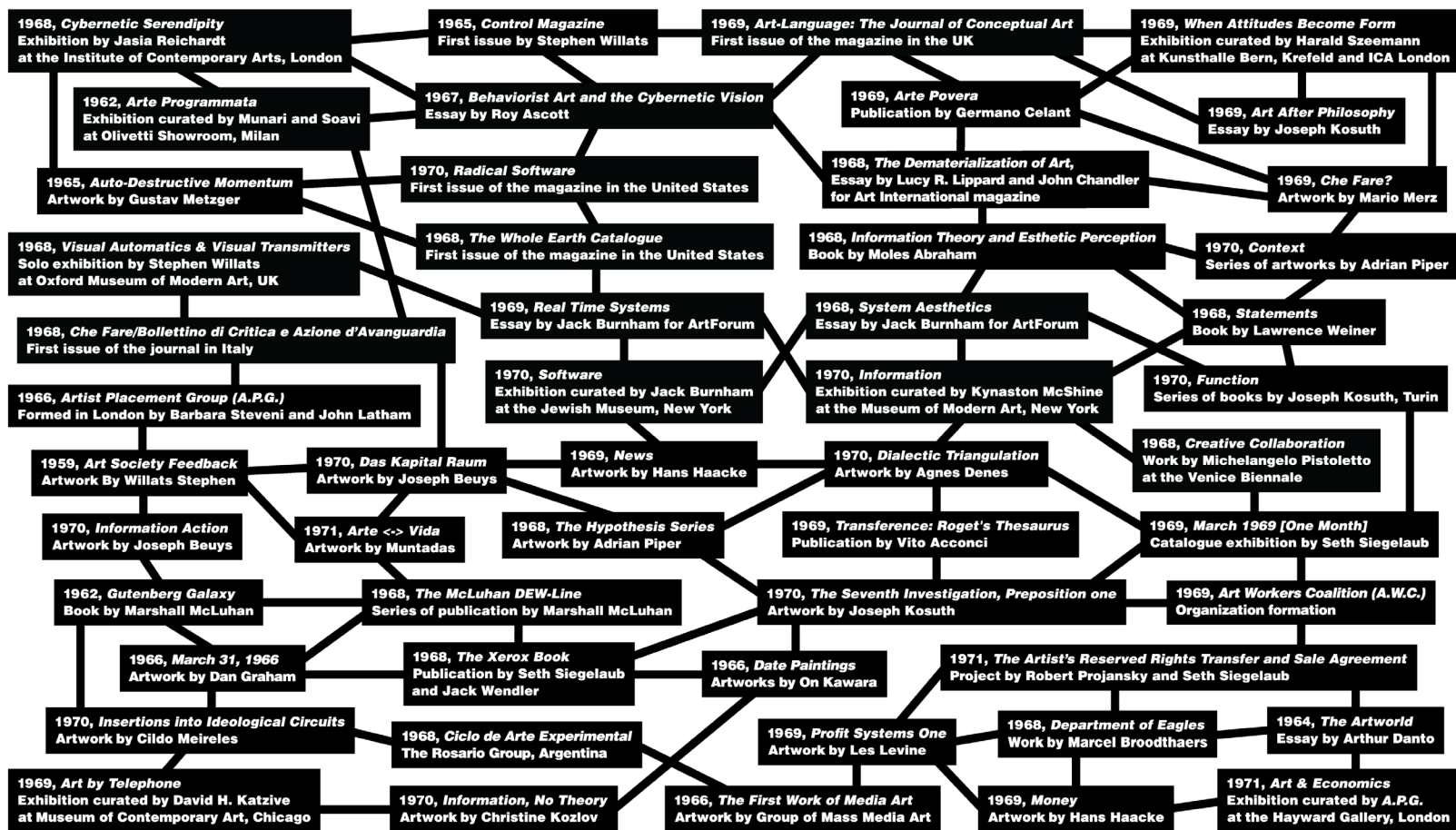
10 Bruce Kurtz, "Conversation with Robert Smithson (1972)," in *Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings*, by Robert Smithson, ed. Jack D. Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 262-69. Quoted in Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame, or Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author?'," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 122.

11 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is The Message* (New York: Random House, 1967), 53.

12 McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is The Message*, 25.

13 Ibid, 26.

TIMELINES



EXHIBITIONS

1962, *Arte Programmata*
Exhibition curated by Bruno
Munari and Giorgio Soavi at
Olivetti Showroom, Milan

1966, *Primary Structures*
Exhibition curated by
Kynaston McShine at the
Jewish Museum,
New York

1966, *9 Evenings: Theatre*
and Engineering
First performance by
Experiments in Art
and Technology (E.A.T)
at the 69th Regiment
Armory, New York

1967, *Arte Povera/Im Spazio*
Exhibition curated by
Germano Celant at La
Bertesca Gallery, Genoa

**1968, *Cybernetic
Serendipity***

**Exhibition by Jasia
Reichardt at the Institute of
Contemporary Arts London**

**1968, *Visual Automatics &
Visual Transmitters***

**Solo exhibition by Stephen
Willats at Oxford Museum of
Modern Art, UK**

**1969, *When Attitudes
Become Form***

**Exhibition curated by Harald
Szeemann at Kunsthalle
Bern, Krefeld and ICA
London**

**1969, *Number 7, Benefit for
Art Workers Coalition (A.W.C.)***

**Exhibition by Lucy R.
Lippard at Paula Cooper
Gallery, New York**

**1969, *Konzeption/
Conception***

**Exhibition curated by
Konrad Fischer and Rolf
Wedewer at Städtische
Museum, Leverkusen**

1969, *Hans Haacke*

**Exhibition of 'systems'
works at Howard Wise
Gallery, New York**

1969, *Art by Telephone*

**Exhibition curated by David
H. Katzive at Museum of
Contemporary Art, Chicago**

1970, *Information*

**Exhibition curated by
Kynaston McShine
at the Museum of Modern
Art, New York**

1970, *Software*

**Exhibition curated by Jack
Burnham at the Jewish
Museum, New York**

**1970, *Conceptual Art, Arte
Povera, Land Art***

**Exhibition curated by
Germano Celant at the GAM
Museum, Turin**

1971, *Art & Economics*

**Exhibition curated by Artist
Placement Group at the
Hayward Gallery, London**

ARTWORKS

1914, *The Network of Stoppages*

Artwork by Marcel Duchamp

1924, *Monte Carlo Bond*

Artwork by Marcel Duchamp

1956, *Cybernetic Sculptures*

Artwork by Nicolas Schöffer

1959, *Art Society Feedback*

Artwork By Willats Stephen

1964, *Invitation to Moi aussi, je me suis demandé si je ne pouvais pas vendre quelque chose et réussir dans la vie... Galerie Saint Laurent*

Artwork by Marcel Broodthaers

1965, *Auto-Destructive Momentum*

Artwork by Gustav Metzger

1966, *The First Work of Media Art*

Artwork by Group of Mass Media Art

1966, *March 31, 1966*

Artwork by Dan Graham

1966, *Date Paintings*

Artworks by On Kawara

1966, *Artist Placement Group (A.P.G.)*

Formed by Barbara Steveni and John Latham, London

1968, *Creative Collaboration*

Work by Michelangelo Pistoletto at the Venice Biennale

**1968, *Department of Eagles*
Work by Marcel Broodthaers**

**1968, *The Hypothesis Series*
Artwork by Adrian Piper**

**1968, *Ciclo de Arte
Experimental*
The Rosario Group,
Argentina**

**1969, *Profit Systems One*
Artwork by Les Levine**

**1969, *Following Piecet*
Artwork by Vito Acconci**

**1969, *Transference: Roget's
Thesaurust*
Publication by Vito Acconci**

**1969, *News*
Artwork by Hans Haacke**

1969, *Money*

Artwork by Hans Haacke

**1969, *Art Workers Coalition*
(A.W.C.)**

Organization formation

1969, *Che Fare?*

Artwork by Mario Merz

1969, *Total Positivity*

Artwork by Bernar Venet

1970, *Context*

**Series of artworks by Adrian
Piper**

1970, *The Seventh*

Investigation, Preposition one

Artwork by Joseph Kosuth

1970, *Dialectic Triangulation*

Artwork by Agnes Denes

**1970, *Information, No Theory*
Artwork by Christine Kozlov**

**1970, *Insertions into
Ideological Circuits*
Artwork by Cildo Meireles**

**1970, *Das Kapital Raum*
Artwork by Joseph Beuys**

**1970, *Variable Piece No. 70*
Douglas Huebler**

**1970, *Peripatetic Artists
Guild (P.A.G.)*
Project by Robert Morris**

**1970, *Information Action*
Artwork by Joseph Beuys**

**1971, Shapolsky et al.
Manhattan Real Estate
Holdings, a Real-Time Social
System, as of May 1, 1971
Artwork by Hans Haacke**

**1971, Arte <-> Vida
Artwork by Muntadas**

**1971, An Incomplete
Examination of the Highway
Network/User/Perceiver
Systems
Artwork and essay by Alice
Aycock**

**1971, The Artist's Reserved
Rights Transfer and Sale
Agreement
Project by Robert Projansky
and Seth Siegelaub**

**1972, *Preliminary Statement*
Text by Don Celendar for his
“movements” series**

**1972, *John Weber Gallery*
Visitors' Profile 1 and 2
Artwork by Hans Haacke**

PUBLICATIONS

1950, *The Human Use of Human Beings*

Book by Norbert Wiener

1960, *Exploration in Communication*

**Book by Marshall McLuhan
and Edmund Carpenter**

1961, *Computers and Common Sense*

Book by Taube Mortimer

1962, *Gutenberg Galaxy*

Book by Marshall McLuhan

1964, *The Technological Society*

Book by Ellun Jacques

1964, *Information Theory*

Book by Gordon Raisbeck

1964, *The Artworld*
Essay by Arthur Danto

1965, *Control Magazine*
First issue by Stephen Willats

1967, *Society of the Spectacle*
Publication by Guy Debord

1967, *The New Industrial State*
Book by J. K. Galbraith

1967, *Behaviorist Art and the Cybernetic Vision*
Essay by Roy Ascott

1967, *Notice*
Text by Stephen Willats

1967, *E.A.T. Newsletter*
First issue of the publication in New York

**1967, *The Value of Didactic Art*
Essay by Barbara Rose for
ArtForum**

**1968, *The Dematerialization
of Art*
Essay by Lucy R. Lippard
and John Chandler for Art
International**

**1968, *Che Fare/Bollettino
di Critica e Azione
d'Avanguardia*
First issue of the journal in
Italy**

**1968, *Systems Esthetics*
Essay by Jack Burnham for
ArtForum**

**1968, *The Whole Earth
Catalogue*
First issue of the magazine
in the United States**

**1968, *Art-Society System*
Essay by Victor Burgin in
Control magazine, no. 4**

**1968, *The Xerox Book*
Publication by Seth
Siegellaub and Jack Wendler**

**1968, *Statements*
Book by Lawrence Weiner**

**1968, *The McLuhan DEW-Line*
Series of publication by
Marshall McLuhan**

**1968, *Information Theory
and Esthetic Perception*
Book by Moles Abraham**

**1969, *Arte Povera*
Publication by Germano
Celant**

**1969, *Reflection on the
Technocratic Society and
its youthful opposition*
Book by Roszak Theodore**

**1969, *Utopia or Oblivion:
The Prospect for Humanity*
Book by Buckminster Fuller**

**1969, *March 1969 [One
Month]*
Catalogue exhibition by
Seth Siegelaub**

**1969, *Real Time Systems*
Essay by Jack Burnham for
ArtForum**

**1969, *Declaration of Intent*
Text by Lawrence Weiner**

**1969, *Art After Philosophy*
Essay by Joseph Kosuth**

1969, *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art*
First issue of the magazine in the UK

1970, *Money for Money's Sake*
Essay by Jean Lipman for Art in America

1970, *Function*
Series of books by Joseph Kosuth, Turin

1970, *Radical Software*
First issue of the magazine in the United States

1971, *The Structure of Art*
Book by Jack Burnham

1971, *Changing: Essays in Art Criticism*
Book by Lucy R. Lippard

BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE TIMELINES

***Information* by Kynaston L. McShine
MoMA catalogue, 1970**

***Six Years* by Lucy R. Lippard
University of California, 1973**

***Systems* by Edward A. Shanken
Whitechapel: Documents of
Contemporary Art, 2015**

**Various material from
Paolo and Lauren**

QUOTES

“Already in California think-tanks and in the central planning committees of each soviet, futurologists are concentrating on the role of the technocracy, that is, its decision-making autonomy, how it handles the central storage of information, and the techniques used for smoothly implementing social change. In the automated state power resides less in the control of the traditional symbols of wealth than in information.”

Jack Burnham in *Systems Esthetics* from Artforum, 1968

“At the basic level artists are similar to programs and subroutines. They prepare new codes and analyze data in making works of art. ...Emotionally most humanists share an instinctive antipathy for these immensely complex computer systems. Their Orwellian overtones far overshadow their conceivable use as artists’ tools. But practically, it is imperative that artists do understand them - both technically and philosophically.”

Jack Burnham in *Real Time Systems*, 1969

“Art ‘lives’ through influencing other art, not by existing as the physical residue of an artist’s ideas. The reason that different artists from the past are ‘brought alive’ again is because some aspect of their work becomes ‘usable’ by living artists.”

Joseph Kosuth in *Art After Philosophy*, 1969

“Artwork may also trigger off responses of a polemical or social kind, encouraging their audience changes in individual or group behavior by questioning preconceptions, destroying illusions by means of the shock of unfamiliar, absurd or incongruous imagery. ”

Roy Ascott in *The Cybernetic Stance*, 1968

“For the artist a move away from the inverted qualities of art today (epitomized in the abstract coding of wall painting) towards an outgoing socially concerned art offers a new potential for making politically relevant art practice. This development coupled with information drawn from modern information areas, such as psychology, communication theory, etc., leaves the artist in a position to look at such important issues as audience composition, and the relevance of concerns in art to their motivations. The idea of art as known at present could then well disappear altogether, and could be replaced by an art which structured to function as an integral part of the environment.”

Stephen Willats in *Notice*, 1967

“Information presented at the right time and in the right place can be potentially very powerful. It can affect the general social fabric. Such things go beyond established high culture as it has been perpetrated by a taste-directed art industry. Of course I don’t believe that artists really wield any significant power. At best, one can focus attention. But every little bit helps. In concert with other people’s activities outside the art scene, maybe the social climate of society can be changed. Anyway, when you work with “real stuff” you have to think about potential consequences.”

Hans Haacke in the interview on Arts, 1971

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