Expanding Systems:
Art, Information, and Social Systems in the 1960s-70s.
Text 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 introduced the reorganization of industry, finance capitalism, and governance in general. Rapid developments in computing and communications 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 technology[2]; 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 been 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.

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[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 Massage* (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 Massage* (New York: Random House, 1967), 53.

[12] McLuhan and Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage*, 25.

[13] Ibid, 26.