Mattering Information: Lee Lozano's 'Infofiction'

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It has been said that in the 1950s 'information theory looked … like the young man in a very great hurry who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions. Standard-bearers of information theory', we are told, 'were plunging into genetics, neurophysiology, sociology, experimental psychology, linguistics and philosophy'. It did not take long before artists would, in turn, plunge into information theory. By the late 1960s and early 70s, "information" had become a buzzword in the New York art scene. The word crops up in many conceptual works from the period by artists such as Hollis Frampton, Dan Graham and Christine Kozlov. Most famously, however, 'information' gave the title to a survey of new art curated by Kynaston McShine for the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. **[NEW SLIDE]** Bringing together nearly one hundred artists, mostly from Europe and the Americas, the exhibition reflected on the cultural transformations brought about by the accelerated development of communication systems. Deeply influenced by Marshall McLuhan, McShine saw the turn away from the art object and towards semiotic forms as a response to increased mobility and change, arguing that the replicability of information was well suited to artists' desire to 'rapidly exchange ideas, rather than embalming the idea in an "object"'.[i]

The emphasis on communication came across most clearly in artworks that used language as a medium, including logical propositions by Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth and Adrian Piper; instructional pieces by Barry Le Va, Sol Le Witt and Yoko Ono; and works based on measurements by the likes of Siah Armajani, Mel Bochner and Dan Graham. **[NEW**

SLIDE] Some artists used means of communication as their medium, such as in John Giorno's telephone piece or Christine Kozlov's telegram, pictured here, while others presented serial photographs documenting actions. Most of these works dissociated language from its immediate social and political context. As a result, they constructed the subject as a disembodied, information-processing entity without psychological depth, leading art historian Eve Meitzer to argue that 'the exhibition pictured a world predicated on … the total foreclosure of the real and the bracketing of the human subject'.

A notable exception is Hans Haacke's *MoMA Poll*, which directly targeted the museum's complicity in the war by asking visitors whether they would vote against New York Governor and MoMA trustee Nelson Rockefeller in the forthcoming state elections, given his failure to denounce Nixon's invasion of Cambodia that spring. Haacke's installation undoubtedly raised the stakes of anti-war protest within the museum, and contributed to MoMA's Director John Hightower's dismissal in early 1972 after less than two years in post for allegedly politicising the institution. Further, when considered together with other works in the exhibition, particularly by Latin American artists such as Hélio Oiticica, Arturo Barrios and Marta Minujín, it suggests that such a flattening of embodied subjectivity might not have been as pervasive as Meitzer suggests, or indeed as the master narrative of conceptual art would have us believe.

MoMA poll extended Haacke's work with physical and biological systems to the realm of social relations, a shift from producing artworks-as-systems to reflecting on art-as-system that parallels the trajectory of art critic Jack Burnham in the late 1960s. This is perhaps most evident in two related pieces by Haacke, *Visitors Profile* and *News* (both from 1969), shown that same autumn in the exhibition 'Software: Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art', organised by Burnham at the Jewish Museum in New York. **[NEW SLIDE]** Whereas earlier projects, such as *Condensation Cube* (1965), made the artwork permeable to its physical

environment, in these later works Haacke tested the boundaries of the art system itself, including its mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. That is, works such as *MoMA Poll* or *Visitors Profile* cast viewers as participant-observers, becoming information themselves. In Burnham's words, the point of 'Software' was 'introspection rather than inspection'.

A more intimate affair than 'Information', involving only 26 American participants, 'Software' was also much more tightly curated than McShine's loose survey. Having examined the aesthetic implications of systems theory in a series of articles for *Artforum*, in his catalogue essay Burnham attached a key word to 'communication'. The exhibition '"Software"', he wrote, 'demonstrates the effects of contemporary *control* and communication techniques in the hands of artists.'[ii] The association between communication and control references the first definition of cybernetics, formulated in 1947 by mathematician Norbert Wiener and physician Arturo Rosenblueth, and which described it as 'the field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal'.[iii] The word 'cybernetics' itself stems from the etymology of the first feedback machines, called 'governors'. However, as science historian Peter Galison has shown, the genealogy of cybernetics is in fact grounded on the perception of the enemy-as-machine in the context of the Second World War. Galison explains how Wiener's research began when he started working on an antiaircraft weapon that intended to anticipate the future positions of an enemy's aircraft in order to down the plane. Wiener's research led him to understand the soldier and aircraft as a singular, integrated system that first constructed the enemy-pilot-as-servomechanism, and progressively spiraled to encompass a whole philosophy of the human being as a purposeful machine. 'From the body', Galison writes, 'it was us more generally – we humans – whose intentions could be seen as a correlated and characteristic set of input and output signals.'[iv]

In his catalogue essay, Burnham acknowledges that the conflation of living organism and mechanical device in post-War cybernetics was a key stepping stone for computerised

attempts at improving the communication between human beings and machines. Citing mathematician and computer scientist Marvin Minsky, Burnham argues in his catalogue essay that 'we build machines in our own self-image'[v], yet what follows is a candid account of how, on the contrary, the post-War subject is made in the image of the machine, concluding that 'our bodies are hardware, our behavior is software'[vi]. Though such brash statements are tempered by musings on the need 'to think of both in unified terms', Burnham reinstates, time and again, the Cartesian dualism underpinning early cybernetics and its reconfiguration of the body as an information-processing system. From here it was only a short step for him to construct the aesthetic subject as an algorithm, as when he states, for example, that the exhibition asks 'such questions as how do electronic information-processing systems affect the psychological outlook of the average human being?'[vii] Needless to say that the mere notion of a mean or average subject implies decoupling consciousness from embodied experience, which is always necessarily situated.

By Burnham's own account, the exhibition 'Software' was far from successful owing in part to persistent technical problems. His misgivings about the humanist potential of technology would also soon give way to an outright disavowal of art-and-technology. Unsurprisingly, the analogy between software and conceptual art that gave the exhibition its title failed to catch on, given its incapacity to account for the inextricability of the aesthetic sign from its material substrate and exhibitionary context. Further, an exhibition drawing a direct link between art and technology could not help but raise eyebrows in a nation at war, where scientific and technological research was once again driven by the military-industrial complex. In hindsight, however, together with Burnham's writings on systems aesthetics, 'Software' seems important precisely for acknowledging to what extent this scientific and technological unconscious was crucial for artists working at the time, regardless of whether they used new technologies in their work. **[NEW SLIDE]**

It is to such an artist that I would now like to turn, whose texts, paintings and drawings are littered with references to science and technology, though she hardly ever even used a typewriter herself. It is unlikely that Lee Lozano would have visited either 'Information' or 'Software' despite being part of New York's art scene at the time, since she had made a point of withdrawing herself from most public art world events by then. Even so, considering the participation of her close companions and friends such as Dan Graham and Stephen Kaltenbach in 'Information', it is plausible that she was at least aware of the exhibition. Whatever role it played in her decision to title her own solo show 'Infofiction', her pun was certainly a playful nod to a concept that had come to inflect much conceptual work at the time. **[NEW SLIDE]**

The exhibition took place in early 1971 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. It gathered ten text works on A4 sheets of paper produced throughout 1969. Lozano conceived of each of these drawings as write-ups of durational actions which she described as 'Life-Art' pieces.[viii] In April 1969, she wrote in one of her personal notebooks: 'Why not impose form on one's own life the way one makes art? At least it is worth the experiment, and I'm starting now.'[ix] A few months later, she would describe these actions as 'open-ended investigations' concerned only with 'subject matter that was highly relevant to her personal survival'.

Such investigations took the form of self-directed instructions, appended by the word 'piece', which dictated the way she was to lead her life over specific periods of time. She often annotated the effects of these actions in her personal notebooks, becoming a participant-observer in her own self-transformation. She then transcribed her notes into handwritten write-ups, which tended to be similarly formatted, with the title and description of the piece followed by dated annotations and a series of footnotes organised according to her own system of colour-coded symbols. **[NEW SLIDE]** Occasionally, these write-ups are headed by

a quotation, and the exhibition or publication history of the piece is indicated in the left-hand-side margin. When they were distributed amongst friends, this is also indicated in the footer. Lucy Lippard remarked early on how these text works were fundamentally different from contemporaneous score pieces, noting: 'Unlike most "instruction" or "command" pieces, … Lozano's are directed to herself … Her art, it has been said, becomes the means by which to transform her life, and, by implication, the lives of others and of the planet itself.'[x]

Occupying a central position in the 'Infofiction' exhibition was *General Strike Piece*, a write-up of a process which began in February 1969 with the artist's withdrawal from a show organised by her former gallerist Richard Bellamy. The piece instructed her to:

> *Gradually but determinedly avoid being present at official or public "uptown" functions or gatherings related to the "art world" in order to pursue investigation of total personal & public revolution. Exhibit in public only pieces which further sharing of ideas & information related to total personal & public revolution.*

As one of the footnotes indicates, the terms of such revolution were outlined in Lozano's statement for the Open Public Hearing organised by the Art Workers Coalition that spring, in which she famously replaced the term 'art worker' with 'art dreamer'. *General Strike Piece* has often been read as setting the course for Lozano's rejection of the art world, which would culminate in her dropping out altogether in 1972. Yet as the second part of the instruction clearly shows, Lozano's strike affirms as much as it negates. What it suggests is that the personal/public investigation in which she is engaged necessitated other forms of circulation – that is, a support structure that was not driven by competitiveness and the value of art-as-commodity. In short, it shows her rebuffing museum reform to imagine other means of exchange amongst peers or, as the art speak of the time would have it, another means of 'passing on information'[xi], artistic and otherwise.

The soundtrack detailed at the top of *General Strike Piece* tells a story of its own. Lozano chose three songs from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and ordered them so that the sequence began with "'Daisy' fading in the background", in reference to the scene in which the human astronaut Dave deactivates the malfunctioning computer system HAL 9,000 by removing its memory modules one by one. In the film, Kubrick illustrates the computer's deterioration by reversing the history of artificial intelligence, with HAL performing increasingly simpler cognitive operations until he hums the popular song 'Daisy Bell'; which was, in fact, the first song sung by a computer in 1961. As much as HAL's fading voice stands in for Lozano's willful disconnection from a malfunctioning art system, though, the epic opening of the movie's main theme and the cheerful tones of the 'Blue Danube' suggest a new and hopeful beginning.

The ripple effects of Lozano's *General Strike Piece* can be felt across the 'Life-Art' pieces shown in Halifax, as well as the artist's personal notebooks, drawings and paintings. In the spring of 1968 Lozano had written to Joseph Kosuth with the idea of buying advertising space in an art magazine so that 'your ideas, piggyback as they go, would have guaranteed, fast, wide distribution'.[xii] Yet, just one year later all her efforts seem oriented against such fast and wide distribution, turning her loft into the centre stage of an investigation that, while not entirely private, was mostly concerned with embodied, interpersonal communication. Days after reading her statement to the Art Workers Coalition's Open Public Hearing, she began her *Dialogue Piece*, whereby she instructed herself to contact friends and acquaintances 'for the specific purpose of inviting them to your loft for a dialogue.' **[NEW SLIDE]** The write-up indicates that this piece was in process indefinitely, although she only documented the dialogues held until December 1969. Even so, there is little to be learned about their content, because Lozano's succinct notes only evaluate the length, intensity, pace and quality of her verbal and emotional interactions with her guests. The picture that emerges from the seven-

page log is one of information being coveted, traded, withheld, dumped or gifted. She reports that her telephone conversation with Ian Wilson 'yielded an enormous amount of information, in spite of his being adamant about not believing in "passing information"'. Of Robert Smithson she writes tersely: 'I get a lot of info out', adding in brackets: '(He wants my info.)'. Whereas Weston Naef 'allows himself to be drenched by [her] info.' Her dialogue with Lawrence Weiner, on the other hand, is 'fast-paced'. 'The "element" missing from this dialogue', she reflects, 'which happened to be present in all the previous dialogues, was love.'

An entry in her personal notebooks on 1 June 1969 testifies to a similar attempt to visualise information not as a thing but as an action or fluid in constant circulation. **[NEW SLIDE]** Under the heading 'Info Baths', she writes:

> *Deluge people with information. Douse them with info like you'd throw a bucketful of water.* […]

> *Information is so guarded & selectively withheld in this society & in this 'scene' that there must be something about giving a great deal of info that bears further investigation. (Similar to sex)* […]

> *Even if info deluge is dangerous, try it & see what happens.*

For her exhibition in Halifax, Lozano sent curator Charlotte Townsend what she called 'a prop' for *Dialogue*: a Xeroxed press release announcing a series of public conversations to be held at the School of Visual Arts in New York beginning in February 1972, with an all-male line-up of artist heavyweights, titled 'Straight Information: A Dialogue Series'. I can only imagine that such a prop was an ironic definition of what her 'Life-Art' was not. Rather than in a straight line, what Lozano humorously called her 'high-information art'[xiii] travelled in circular loops. **[NEW SLIDE]** On 19 May 1969, she wrote:

> *The* Dialogue Piece *comes the closest so far to an ideal I have of a kind of art that would never cease returning feedback to me or to others, which continually refreshes itself with new information,*

[…] which doesn't involve 'the artist & the observer' but makes both participant and observer simultaneously, which is not for sale, which is democratic, […] which can never be completely understood, […] in fact, this piece approaches having everything I enjoy or seek about art.

A 1970 review in the *Village Voice* described Lozano as an artist 'interested in systems',[xiv] and the constant reference to both information flows and feedback mechanisms in passages such as this one indicate that systems theory and cybernetics are relevant theoretical frameworks for her practice. However, I would suggest that, in placing her embodied subjectivity at the centre of her investigations, Lozano puts cybernetics to work against itself. That is, while appropriating key notions of cybernetics, Lozano's work is ultimately about was exceeds both control and communication.

In her feminist analysis of cybernetics, N. Katherine Hayles has recounted the disputed definitions of information that embattled participants at the first Macy Conference in 1946. At that meeting, the definition of information as signal proposed by US mathematicians Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener prevailed over the attempts of British mathematician Donald MacKay to write context into the picture by linking information to meaning. Introducing subjectivity was still anathema in the immediate post-War. However, years later, in 1968, a US information theorist wrote Wiener a letter revaluating MacKay's theory, in which he pointed out that whereas Shannon and Wiener define information 'in terms of what it *is*, MacKay defines it in terms of what it *does*.' To which Hayles adds:

Verblike, [information] *becomes a process that someone enacts, and thus it necessarily implies context and embodiment. […] Making information a thing allies it with homeostasis, for so defined, it can be transported into any medium and maintain a stable quantitative value, reinforcing … stability … Making information an action links it with reflexivity, for then its effect on the receiver must be taken into account.*[xv]

I can find no better way of describing Lozano's rebellion against the reification of information in New York's art scene of the late 1960s. In fact, that same year, Lozano would write: 'Once and for all, the sum of myself to date is in terms of the verb, not the noun; the act, not the word; the idea that leads to an act, not the idea for its own sake'.[xvi] **[NEW SLIDE]** Here Lozano probably had in mind a series of abstract paintings, all depicting actions, that she had realised between 1964 and 1967. However, it also prefigures the performative study of identity that she would embark upon the following spring in her 'Life-Art' series. In contrast with Wiener's conceptualisation of cybernetics as the study of self-regulating and purposeful organisms, Lozano's self-reflexive observation of changes in her perception, habits and behaviours as information travelled through her body and mind was radically open-ended.

Whereas *Dialogue Piece* offsets the self-inflicted confinement of *General Strike Piece* by prescribing interaction with others, other works in 'Infofiction' documented a more introspective analysis. **[NEW SLIDE]** Developed in parallel with both *General Strike Piece* and *Dialogue Piece*, *Grass Piece* sees her documenting the effects of 33 days of continuous hash consumption, while the companion piece *No-Grass*, begun immediately afterwards, records the consequences of withdrawal. In *Masturbation Investigation*, meanwhile, she observes herself masturbating to fantasies, images and objects over a three-day period. In these and other works by Lozano, information and feedback are inextricable from the materiality of her embodied experience. Echoing the imperative to account for the role of the observer in second-wave cybernetics, in one of the footnotes to *Grass Piece*, Lozano writes: 'I believe this piece is a good example of Heisenberg's 'Uncertainty Principle', applied quantum mechanics: <u>the act of observing something changes it</u>. The piece makes me high, not the grass.' Although scientists tell us that the 'Uncertainty Principle' does not in fact depend on the possible aberrations caused by the measuring instrument, the introduction of reflexivity in cybernetics did in fact elicit a great deal of uncertainty within the field. When discussing the work of second-wave cybernetics

theorists, Hayles argues that reflexivity is introduced at the cost of reducing the observer to a subject position devoid of psychological depth – in this way, the observer becomes undistinguishable from the system that it observes. In Lozano's 'Life Art, by contrast, the artist endures the consequences of the recursive feedback loops in her own flesh and emotions, her sense of self becoming increasingly numb, as when she writes: 'I seem to look at my life the way a junkie looks at his arm.'

'Infofiction' came soon after Lozano's solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in December 1970, where she showed eleven oil paintings depicting different wavelengths along the electromagnetic spectrum. **[NEW SLIDE]** Lozano conceived and developed the *Wave* series between the summer of 1967 and the winter of 1970, though many of the paintings were produced in 1969. Each was realised during a single, continuous session ranging from 8 to 72 hours. **[NEW SLDE]** She has said that in this series she was 'trying to combine art and science and existence', and indeed their durational and performative nature brings them close to her 'Life-Art' investigations, not to mention her use of grass throughout. The metaphor at the base of these paintings – the idea of visualising energy by turning it into matter and pigment – can then perhaps also guide our reading of the language pieces assembled in her exhibition at Halifax. **[NEW SLIDE]**

The interaction between matter and energy reappears in a journal entry from 13 August 1969, where Lozano offers the following classification:

> *Work produced is either in the form of matter or energy. If matter I consider it [...] the ash from an idea, always imperfect & disposable sooner or later. If energy, the work merely makes its contribution to the total pulsation of the life system – i.e. me – although work-as-energy can become an extended system the more it involves zapping other life systems with its pulse.*

We could then imagine the write-ups as the reverberations produced by work-as-energy as it traverses the artist-as-life-system, enabling us to see the reflection of 'the difference that makes a difference', as second-wave cybernetician Gregory Bateson famously defined information. That is, in Lozano information is not defined quantitatively but qualitatively, to the extent that it affects and transforms the subject.

Rather than ending with the dropout that would follow soon after Lozano's exhibition in Halifax, I would like to conclude by returning to two early figurative works from 1962, which visualise the coupling of the erotic and the cybernetic that runs across Lozano's work. In her diaries, Lozano wrote of the ill-designed human shape, mocking its 'protuberances, mounds, angles, hollows' and imagining perfectly spherical bodies with 'smooth reflective surfaces'. In this light, the orifices and bumps that populate her early work can be seen to speak of the impending dissolution of the epidermal boundaries of subjectivity brought about by the post-War technobody. Neither entirely introspective nor exhibitionist, her work becomes then a study of the interface between the private and the public, or rather a study of how, in the 1960s, the body was becoming increasingly fluid and porous, to psychotropic drugs as much as to information, media and, ultimately, to the incipient knowledge economy. At the same time, however, in her work there is a refusal to let her body be crushed under the weight of information – as her hilarious drawing of a typewriter fitted with a penis as paper forebodes. At a time when, as queer theorist Paul B. Preciado has claimed, bio-technological mechanisms of control are becoming more and more invisible and thus pervasive, I think Lozano's attempt to construct her own 'biopolitical fiction' gains new urgency.

[i] Kynaston McShine, 'Essay', *Information* (exh. cat.), New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1970, p.139.

[ii] Jack Burnham, 'Notes on Art and Information Processing', *Software*, New York: Jewish Museum, 1970, p.10. My emphasis.

[iii] Norbert Wiener, Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1965, p.11. Term coined in the summer of 1947 but based on research developed from 1942 onwards.

[iv] Peter Galison, 'The Ontology of the Enemy', *Critical Inquiry*, vol.21, no.1, Autumn 1994, p.264.

[v] Jack Burnham, 'Notes on Art and Information Processing', *Software*, *op. cit*., p.11.

[vi] *Ibid*., p.12. Here Burnham quotes Ted Nelson, scientific advisor for 'Software'. In a 1996 public lecture, Marvin Minsky would spell out the logical consequence of the assimilation of consciousness with software: 'A person is not a head and arms and legs. That's trivial. A person is a very large multiprocessor with a million times a million small parts, and these are arranged as a thousand computers. The most important thing about each person is the data, and the programs in the data that are in the brain. And some day you will be able to take all that data, and put it on a little disk, and store it for a thousand years, and then turn it on again and you will be alive in the fourth millennium or the fifth millennium.' Quoted in N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, p.244—45.

[vii] J. Burnham, 'Notes on Art and Information Processing', *op. cit.*, p.13.

[viii] May 1969

[ix] 24 April 1969

[x] Sarah Lehrer-Greiwer, *Lee Lozano: Dropout Piece*, London: Afterall Books, 2014, p.98.

[xi] See Patricia Ann Norvell's interview with Stephen Kaltenbach in Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp.84–87.

[xii] Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, p.184, fn.67.

[xiii] See No-Grass Piece.

[xiv] *Village Voice*, 17 December 1970, p.27, quoted in Joanna Burton, "The New Honesty: The Life-Work and Work-Life of Lee Lozano", Helen Molesworth (ed.), *Solitaire: Lee Lozano, Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Joan Semmel Synopsis*, Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2008.

[xv] P.56—57.

[xvi] Entry of 9 May 1968.